FRAGILE SPECTRES: HOW WOMEN OF VICTORIAN BRITAIN USED THE OCCULT AND SPIRITUALIST MOVEMENT TO CREATE AUTONOMY

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Introduction

This project began with an interest in witches. The stretch from witches to mediums may seem like a large one, or not, but regardless this project ended in a place that was not expected. Before this project, I had never ventured into an archive; before this project, I had yet to travel overseas on my own; and before this project I was not aware of the absolute tenacity that many Victorian women possessed. What began as a study of women's ability to adapt to the numerous pressures and changes that society and patriarchy have placed upon her since the beginning of society, ended with a conclusion that women were not simply adapting to the changes they were faced with; they were thriving, they were taking control, and they were taking center stage. Throughout this project, it was stunning to find source after source tearing away at what I considered to be cultural and societal norms of the Victorian period.

Throughout this project, "occult revival," "spiritualism," and "spiritualist movement" are used liberally, but are not interchangeable. The terms "occult revival," and "occult" are used to refer to a surge of belief in the supernatural, and the practices that followed. These practices were often considered to be scientific in nature in the beginning, such as Franz Mesmer's use of mesmerism, which became the basis for using trace in medical environments and then in private parlors. The "occult" and the "occult revival" refer to a broad trend in Victorian Britain where the people, who were subjected to new cultural revolutions, industrial, religious, and scientific in nature, were faced with a cultural crisis. No longer could scientific advancements remain separate from religion, which struggled to maintain a traditional outlook while its followers were confronted with the discoveries like Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

The occult revival encompasses several different breakaway movements and societies that were at their height from the mid- to late-nineteenth century, approximately from 1840-1890. During these fifty years, "ghoulies, ghosties, and things that went bump in the night" simply grew in popularity, and those who claimed to communicate with them flourished. Periodicals, novels, and personal correspondences were saturated with mentions of haunted buildings, the scientific evidence for the existence of spirits, and the latest popular medium conducting a public séance. The rise of printed material during the industrial revolution and its continuous growth in the nineteenth century allowed these sources to be available to a larger audience than ever before.

But this audience was ready and waiting in the Victorian urban centers, specifically London. This project focuses specifically on the occult revival in London during the Victorian period. London's growing population lent to the spread of ideas and publications. This made London's occult revival a distantly thriving culture that grew and was maintained for a longer period than other occult movements in Britain, such as in Manchester or even farther north to Scotland. The occult culture in London was distinctly London's, and the occultists who maintained this revival did so with London serving as the stronghold.

Another frequently mentioned term is "spiritualist," "spiritualism," or "spiritualist movement." Spiritualists were followers of spiritualism, and more broadly, the spiritualist movement, which was at its height while the occult revival reached its peak. Founded in 1848, spiritualism began with two American women who claimed they communicated with the dead using a table and "rapping," sending and receiving messages through a series of knocks. According to historian and biographer Patricia Clarke, "Spiritualism drew on the theories of

mesmerism developed by Franz Anton Mesmer and on Swedenborg's theory that it was possible to unleash the powers of spirituality by communication with the spirit world. It embraced a belief in the continuity of personality after death and that people with psychic gifts, usually known as mediums, could facilitate communication by direct voice contact, automatic writing and in other ways."[1]

Prominent spiritualists like Arthur Conan Doyle believed that the Fox sisters began what became known as the Modern Spiritualist Movement, a breakaway from the broader occult revival. Spiritualism made its transatlantic journey to Great Britain in the 1850s. Similarly, the Theosophical Society, which was co-founded by Madame Helena Blavatsky in the latter half of the nineteenth century, was another installment of the occult revival, inspired by eastern religions and Buddhism. For this reason, "occultists" and "occultism" can encompass both spiritualists and theosophists and other forms of occult traditions formed in this time, but the named, separate traditions developed their own circles of followers who often mingled with one another, and developed their own codes of conduct.

Up to this point, a range of scholars have dedicated their research to Victorian Britain and the position of women in Victorian society. The role of women in the occult revival, however, and their impact on the greater culture of Victorian Britain, has been largely ignored in British nineteenth century scholarship. Recent scholarship on the British Victorians and their culture includes the work Susie L. Steinbach, who wrote *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth Century Britain*, in 2012. Steinbach dedicated several sections to

[1] Patricia Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa! A Life of Rosa Praed, Novelist and Spiritualist* (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1999), 1-10.

Victorian women, but the occult revival is not mentioned. Recently, William C. Lubenow's *Only Connect: Learned Societies in Nineteenth Century Britain*, published in 2015, discussed the importance of the diffusion of knowledge which took place in urban societies like London. In these environments, the creation of university clubs and learned spaces promoted the dispersal of knowledge which included the information and literature that fueled the occult revival. However, Lubenow's book does not address the role women played in the creation of these spaces, or the role the occult revival played in the formation of learned societies.

Scholars addressing the occult revival in a British context include Antonio Melehi, *Servants of the Supernatural: The Night Side of the Victorian Mind*, published in 2009. Additionally, Alison Butler's work, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic: Invoking Tradition*, published in 2011, focused specifically with the origin, rise, and fall of the occult revival in nineteenth century Britain. Women's role in the occult revival within gothic and Victorian literature is represented in Jill Galvan's 2010 work, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919*. *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, by Alex Owen in 2004, observes the role of femininity and the rise of spiritualism, but does not consider the greater cultural implications of female involvement in the revival. Her follow-up research, *The Place of Enchantment*, focuses on the study and practice of magical societies from 1880-1914, observing the changes that occultism underwent from the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries before the First World War. Other scholars have contributed to the discourse of the occult revival through articles, such as Julian Holloway, who discusses the importance of space to spiritualists and the séance.

Additionally, this project has consulted numerous primary sources, in the form of publications, periodicals, journals, private writings, and autobiographies. Occult and spiritualist newspapers, such as *The Medium and Daybreak* and *Light* were mined heavily for primary sources that formed an everyday spiritualism. While many of the scholars discussed above have contributed to the discourse of this topic by bringing new primary sources to light, this project is steeped in nineteenth century documents, and the words of Victorian women, in a fascinating way that attempts to bring the middle-class medium's motivations to moving into this new space between the private and the public sphere. This project was intended to find the day-to-day correspondences of female occultists, spiritualists, and mediums in London and the surrounding area to create a broader understanding of their incentives, and their strategies, to achieve a sense of independence.

This thesis argues that the occult revival, specifically the Modern Spiritualist Movement, provided women with physical, emotional, and spiritual autonomy in a variety of ways. To illustrate this argument, this project is organized into six main chapters. The first three chapters are meant to provide context regarding place, time, and people. The chapter that follows this introduction discusses Victorian London, and why this city was so crucial to the development of the occult revival, the spiritualist movement, and the women who lived there as mediums, and the contribution the city itself made to Victorian women's search for independence. The second chapter discusses Victorian women and the culture surrounding "true womanhood," and how the spiritualist movement was able to take prescribed Victorian ideals of womanhood and provide women with power while still perceiving them as weak and keeping them within the home. The third specifically discusses how women turned to mediumship, who became mediums, how they

advertised their services, and their motivations for sharing their abilities within London.

The last three chapters are case studies of specific women who used the occult revival and the spiritualist movement to move toward independence and autonomy. The first, Georgiana Houghton, was a medium and artist who displayed her "spirit drawings" in an art gallery, available to the eye and the scrutiny of the London public. The second, Rosa Campbell Praed, was an Australian immigrant to London at the height of the spiritualist movement, and used the occult revival to further develop occult fiction, a niche of gothic fiction, to become a best-selling occult author. The last, Emma Hardinge Britten, was an editor, administrator, and medium, who contributed greatly to the distribution and publication of occult literature and the development of mediumship as a regulated profession within London. As a spiritualist lecturer, she often traveled throughout Great Britain and the United States to speak on the "truth" that was spiritualism and its followers.

Each of these women serve a purpose for the argument presented. They are unique to their own lives, thriving in different ways in Spiritualist London, at different times, throughout the occult revival's height. While each of them chose different paths, research has found two things connectimg these three women together: first, that while each of them achieved a certain level of fame within their spiritualist circles, they still came from rather humble beginnings; and second, that each of these women withstood a devastating amount of loss throughout their lifetime, often becoming the last living member of their immediate family. While these women developed an air of exceptionality about themselves separately, together, they create an affectionate story that is representative of the many mediums in London during the Victorian

period.

The following chapters are intended to illustrate that women of the Victorian period were culturally perceived as fragile specters and temples of Christian morality, and yet still physically frail and mentally impressionable. However, this generally accepted cultural norm is rebuilt in the wake of the occult revival and the spiritualist movement by the women who were expected to remain corseted, mentally and physically, during London's Victorian era.

1. The Spiritualist Movement in London

A sense of place, people, and period is crucial to any historical context. This chapter is an attempt at understanding the inner workings of nineteenth century London, one of the oldest and most vibrant cities of the Western world. A short history of London is intended to illustrate just how tenacious and vibrant the city and its inhabitants have stood against struggles throughout history, and by the beginning of the modern era, advanced into modernity through thought, science, and technology. Without the intellectual strides of the eighteenth century, the occult revival of the nineteenth century would not have been sustainable.

The London that emerged by the eighteenth century was riddled with contradictions. On one hand, it developed and surged into the modern age with boundless energy, circulating information as never before in its history, creating an environment of scholars, thinkers, philosophers, scientists, and those who turned to the developing modern age as a testament to human progress. On the other hand, this energy and the opportunities it generated did not come readily available to everyone; London existed as a beacon of wealth, knowledge, and enlightenment, yet coincided as a locus of extreme poverty, disease, and vermin. These two Londons endured into the nineteenth century.

The eighteenth century descended on Londoners who were full of intellectual inquiry. From this point onward London began developing into a modern city, inspiring artists, writers, philosophers and scholars. However, this also gave way to a feeling of ambivalence. A series of eighteenth century revolutions, religious, scientific, and social in nature, found a home in London. At its very core, London became a place of questions. Simultaneously, it also became

a center for many answers. New ideas and their followers flourished. Londoners came face-to-face with new scientific theories and religious changes. Under these social pressures, some even questioned the existence of God, and sought answers in new concepts that relied on evidence rather than faith. The line between religion and science became distinct. Geoffrey Nelson stated, "Up to the eighteenth century there had always been a close relationship between science and religion, and it is only in the last two hundred years that it has been possible to draw clear distinctions between them."[2]

The Enlightenment took center stage in London during the latter half of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Londoners, mostly men of the middle and upper classes, met in groups to discuss just about anything – history, politics, philosophy, science – in public spaces, such as the intellectual salon or the newly popular coffee houses. Places such as these became paramount to the spread of ideas. Societies, clubs, and literature spread words and ideas to each end of the city.

As the public sphere grew, so increased the consumption of coffee. This led to a coffee house movement in England's biggest cities. England's first coffee house opened in 1650 in Oxford; London's in 1652.[3] London became famous for the many coffee houses it retained, many of them in proprietors' basements or in the parlors of their homes.[4] Politicians, intellectuals, and writers flocked to their closest coffee house and brought with them their latest ideas. Clubs and societies formed within these walls. Questions and answers became the staples of coffee house conversation. Historian John Barrell claims, "Coffee houses were public places,

[2] Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 133.
[3] Brian Cowan, "The Rise of the Coffehouse Reconsidered," *The Historical Journal* 47, no.1 (2004): 21.
[4] Ibid.

in the sense that anyone—anyone, at least, above a certain station in life—could enter them. But precisely because they were public, in this new sense of generally accessible, they were also places … regulated by a particular notion of the private."[5]

In the nineteenth century, the coffee house evolved into the gentleman's club, reserved for the upper-middle classes. These clubs were later housed in their own buildings, separate from coffee houses, and were often dedicated to men of certain professions. But this change of location did not limit questions and conversation; according to Liza Picard: "If you felt like talking, you could find kindred spirits there; if not, you can read in the usually excellent library without having to listen to the domestic tittle-tattle that might assail you at home."[6] The middle and lower classes, including merchants, kept to their coffee houses, and there were several in London that survived from the eighteenth century.[7]

Few places in history bring forth such romantic imagery as Victorian London. Images of the Thames River on a foggy morning, couples strolling arm-in-arm, ladies with lacey parasols, horse-drawn carriages and couriers in top hats and coattails, often spring to mind. This romantic vision of London does not align with the harsh reality of the Victorian city. During the nineteenth century, the streets of London boasted a loud, crowded populace, with pungent odors and yelling spectators. Children ran in the streets while carriages came to a jolting halt; women clung to the arms of their suitors in a desperate attempt to avoid blocked gutters; boys stood in Piccadilly Circus, shouting headlines and selling newly printed papers for a shilling. No matter

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[5] John Barrell, "Coffee-House Politicians." *Journal of British Studies* 43, no. 2 (2004): 211.
[6] Liza Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City 1840-1870* (London: Orion Books, Ltd.), 2005. 127-128.
[7] Picard, *Victorian London*, 128-129.

who you were, living in London meant that during most months of the year the Thames reeked, even after indoor plumbing made its debut in the city, operating by 1864.[8]

The experiences of an industrialized Victorian London varied greatly and depended on a variety of factors, including class, race, religion, gender and opportunity. Londoners of the upper and middle classes saw a different London from those in the working classes or the destitute. Society corseted women, both literally and figuratively, to a life predominantly within the home. Reputations often preceded social interactions, and to lose one's reputation proved much easier than earning it.

There is no question that inquiries into occult practices began well before the nineteenth century in London. The occult can be defined as supernatural, mystical, or magical beliefs, practices, or phenomena. In London, these included anything from secret societies, cults, belief in an ability to contact the afterlife, or the practice of magic. These manifestations of the occult began on the fringes of society, whether unintentionally or by choice. Simultaneously, and perhaps as a seeming contradiction, many occult practitioners still believed in the existence of a Christian God. London had acted as a site of witch hunts and superstition as early as the eleventh century; prior to the Victorian era, many Londoners held a belief in the occult, while most did not practice it.[9] However, as the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment held a vice-like grip on London society into the nineteenth century, what Londoners once considered the work of the Devil gradually became the work of science.

Why did spiritualism and the occult, and the movement's followers, grip London so

[8] Picard, *Victorian London*, 1-10.
[9] Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 106.

tightly during this time? Understanding the nature of nineteenth century London is essential to answering this question. By the time spiritualism made its transatlantic voyage from the New World, many of London's inhabitants were desperate to understand where they went after they died. The clash between religious faith and scientific inquiry was thick in London's air by the early nineteenth century. Scientific theory had some Victorians questioning the validity of the Christian Church and the need for faith. This decline in belief extended beyond numbers – beyond bodies sitting in pews on Sundays, and the social value of attendance. There is no way to measure quantitatively whose faith suffered, and whose did not. However, what can be inferred – by looking at the words of those who struggled with the English Church's explanation of an afterlife – is that London's social environment played a hefty part in the decline of traditional Christian faith.

The shift from the occult as malevolent to the occult as science is most evident in the popularity of mesmerism in Victorian London. Early Victorians credited mesmerism's most famous advocate, Franz Mesmer, not as the creator of mesmerism, but rather as a scientist who unlocked a naturally occurring force created by God.[10] Mesmerism found its way to London in the late eighteenth century, following its earlier expressions in Paris and Vienna. In the nineteenth century, the Victorian medical field re-created it under the term "hypnotism," which became popular in medical, spiritualist, and psychological practices. Considered a medical phenomenon at first, Victorian doctors, such as Dr. John Elliotson (1791-1868) at University College London, practiced mesmerism during the early Victorian era, and practitioners flocked

[10] Fred Kaplan, "'The Mesmeric Mania': The Early Victorians and Animal Magnetism." *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 35, no. 4 (1974): 691-702.

to London to open their own practices.

Later, in conjunction with the rise of spiritualism, mesmerism found its way into the Victorian home. Non-medical supporters of the practice such as writers Chauncey Hare Townsend (1798-1868), Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873), and Charles Dickens (1812-1870) practiced on friends and family in their London homes.[11] Additionally, most of the nineteenth-century literature which discussed, defended, or refuted the practice of mesmerism as a science or medical treatment, such as *The Mesmerist's Manual*[12] and *The Mighty Curative Powers of Mesmerism*,[13] were published in London. The uniqueness of Victorian occultism is the distinct qualities that separated and blended scientific inquiry and faith, such as the use of science - mesmerism - by spiritualists to contact the dead. This exceptionality shone its brightest during the mid-nineteenth century. Additionally, historian Janet Oppenheim claimed that this counter-culture movement was available to more than just the upper classes, "Spiritualism and psychical research were never monopolized by any one class of British society."[14]

Prominent spiritualists, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, later placed the Modern Spiritualist Movement's beginning in 1848, in the town of Hydesville, New York, with the Fox sisters, Leah, Margaret, and Kate.[15] In his comprehensive narrative, *The History of Spiritualism*,

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[11] J. Jeffrey Franklin, "The Evolution of Occult Spirituality in Victorian England and the Representative Case of Edward Bulwer-Lytton," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, eds. Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012): 124.
[12] George Barth, *The Mesmerist Manual* (London: H. Baillière, 1851).
[13] Thomas Capern, *The Mighty Curative Powers of Mesmerism* (London: H. Baillière, 1851).
[14] Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
[15] Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism, Volume One* (New York: George H. Doran Company,

Conan Doyle described what he named "The Hydesville Episode": "It was in one of these, a residence which would certainly not pass the requirements of a British district council surveyor, that there began this development which is already, in the opinion of many, by far the most important thing that America has given to the commonwealth of the world."[16]

Spiritualism made its transatlantic journey in 1852, when an American lecturer, Mr. Stone, came to England with Mrs. Maria Hayden (1826-1883) to speak on animal magnetism, later known as mesmerism.[17] According to historian Geoffrey K. Nelson, there were mediums who lived and worked in London before Mrs. Hayden's arrival, such as Georgiana Eagle, but previous occult demonstrations did not generate as much public interest as Mrs. Hayden's visit. During her time in England, she spent most of her time in the city of London at a residence on Queen Anne Street and, "gave many private demonstrations of mediumship."[18]

Nineteenth century spiritualists looked to New York to find a common date for the beginning of the Modern Spiritualist Movement, but without London it could not be studied because the city's uniqueness allowed a separate occult culture to take root and flourish. Occult culture and spiritualism are not interchangeable terms; the occult is a physical practice, like mesmerism, while spiritualism is a personal belief. Many spiritualists engaged in occult practices, such as séances or mesmeric trances, but this was not universal. Charles Maurice Davies, an Anglican clergyman, spiritualist, and author, stated, "It may possibly strike some persons as strange that Spiritualism should be classed among the religions of London, however

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1926), 60-61.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism,*150-151.
[18] Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society,* 89.

unorthodox. They have been accustomed to associate this subject only with dancing tables and locomotive furniture in general… but to a very large number of persons indeed, Spiritualism is in the most solemn and serious sense a religion."[19]

According to literary scholar Mark Morrisson, a majority of occult culture took place in private, and was "based upon pre-modern, pre-print cultural roots of occultism, upon the authenticity of the hand-written, secretly circulated wisdom."[20] While occult and spiritualist practices in London were often held in the privacy of a person's home, London's ability to generate and move information to massive numbers of people held strong. The public forum, and the minds it brought together, continued to be the lifeblood of inquiry into the nineteenth century. This community of sharing ideas strengthened when print culture married with the rise of "public opinion" discourse in the nineteenth century.[21] Occultists determined that in order for the movement to take part in the public discourse, ideas had to be accessible outside of the privacy of the home.

England's population had grown to twenty-two million people by the mid-nineteenth century; of these, 54 percent lived in cities. London's population by the mid-nineteenth century was nearly three and a half million people.[22] This spike in urban living aided the spread of ideas due to London's dramatic population increase and a rise in printed periodicals, which became the easiest and most efficient way to spread a message. The purpose of these periodicals evolved

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[19] Charles Maurice Davies, *Unorthodox London: Or, Phases of Religious Life in the Metropolis* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1876), 303.
[20] Mark S. Morrison, "The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival: Esoteric Wisdom, Modernity and Counter-Public Spheres," *Journal of Modern Literature* 31, no. 2 (2008): 2.
[21] Morrison, "The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival," 3.
[22] Picard, *Victorian London*, 73.

throughout the century, but the essentials remained the same; first, to spread the word regarding the ideals, beliefs, and motives with which Londoners identified; second, to engage support for the occult and spiritualist organizations and groups, however novice or mature, in and around London; and third, to authenticate and validate occult knowledge and information by exposing it to the criticism and interrogations of the public sphere.[23] While there grew to be many examples of occult periodicals, within the occult and spiritualist community, *The Medium and Daybreak* and *The Two Worlds* became the most popular. Both periodicals were published in London.

The Medium and Daybreak varied its publication frequency. Most commonly, however, the periodical was published fortnightly, with editor James Burns, and later, James Burns, Jr., at the helm from 1870 to 1895. It advertised itself as "A [Weekly] Journal Devoted to the History, Phenomena, Philosophy and Teachings of Spiritualism," and sold for a penny from the streets of London. According to John Patrick Deveney, a contributor to the International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals, and a current member of the Theosophical Society, *The Medium and Daybreak* catered to middle and working class interests. Frank Podmore, English writer and member of the Society for Psychical Research, has claimed that it had the largest subscription of occult periodicals in Britain.[24]

The publication and movement of occult information by word of mouth, advertisement, publication, and so on, particularly in the case of the spiritualist movement, made London a hub of occult activity from the mid-nineteenth century to the fin-de-siècle. In so doing, London created an occult culture of its own, separate from the works of American spiritualists or

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[23] Morrison, "The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival," 4.
[24] The International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals, "Periodical: *The Medium and Daybreak: A Weekly Journal Devoted to the History, Phenomena, Philosophy and Teachings of Spiritualism.*"

European occultists. London fostered an intellectual environment that demanded different opinions and ideas, and it was thus instrumental in molding British occult culture into something distinct and unique.

The Medium and Daybreak, *Two Worlds*, and other occult periodicals were introduced to the London public as a means of gaining support for the revival, namely the abilities of mediums and mesmerists, and the belief that loved ones could be contacted after death. Once a Londoner was willing to seek out more information on the newly minted occult experience, there were several options available. Occult spaces became accessible in many forms, depending on which periodical, or which new idea, a Londoner identified with. For example, many individuals demanded occult experiences grounded in the scientific method and evidence; many of these people looked to the university or hospital lecture hall, where regular demonstrations of mesmerism and hypnotism were open to the public.

This was certainly the case for Dr. John Elliotson and Jane and Elizabeth O'Key. Dr. Elliotson, mentioned previously as a practitioner of mesmerism, was a physician at the University College London. He began using mesmerism as a treatment for nervous disorders among his patients. Two of those patients, sisters Jane and Elizabeth O'Key, were willing mesmeric subjects. Placed under mesmeric trances, the girls could change their personalities, singing and dancing under the direction of Dr. Elliot. The treatments of the O'Key sisters were made available to the London public eye in medical demonstrations.[25] These pseudo-scientific examples served the non-religious, practical members of the occult community.

Other Victorians were seeking a more religious experience. With a booming population,

[25] Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2009), 39-54.

tight quarters and dangerous jobs, it was not unlikely for a Londoner to become ill with cholera, become infected influenza, or be killed on the job. With the high population came a high mortality rate. Many who saw a medium advertised, or read a pamphlet on the basic beliefs of spiritualism, thought that maybe they could contact a member of their family, or a friend, who had died. These individuals were seeking spiritual enlightenment outside of the Anglican Church. Spiritualism and the Modern Spiritualist Movement aided Londoners searching for a deeper religious meaning.

The first "Spiritualist Church" could be found in 1868 on London's King William Street. The services were delivered by Mrs. Emma Hardinge Britten, a medium and prominent member of London's spiritualist community.[26] There was disagreement among spiritualists whether the Spiritualist Church and the Anglican Church were different sects of Christianity. Many chose to follow spiritualism in place of Christianity, while others viewed spiritualism as an addition to Christian beliefs.[27] According to historian Alex Owen, however, "Many believers did not join local associations, remaining, perhaps for financial as well as personal reasons, in a private circle."[28]

Among those who came to the occult movement for science or religion were the "freethinkers" – individuals who bought a pamphlet or periodical and sought further information on the occult, or who found tranquility at the nearest society or institution that housed Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The History of Spiritualism*, or Emma Hardinge Britten's *Nineteenth Century*

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[26] Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, 145.
[27] Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, 144-147.
[28] Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 25.

Miracles.[29] London held the greatest concentration of occult societies in Britain during the nineteenth century.[30] Occult periodicals were packed with names of societies and organizations. These societies were instrumental in bringing together like-minded people, similar to the efforts of London's thriving coffeehouses in the eighteenth century. These occult organizations could be found throughout London. Some examples include: the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain, founded in 1872 in London's West End; the College of Psychic Studies, founded in 1884, but moved to its current location in South Kensington, London, in 1925 under the leadership of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; and groups such as the British National Association of Spiritualists, brought together in 1873.[31] However, even the data found on memberships to these organizations or periodicals do not tell the full story. Many working-class spiritualists could not afford the dues required for membership of a society, or the price of an occult subscription. In fact, many preferred to practice occult culture in the privacy of their own home.[32]

The spiritualists and occultists of nineteenth century London acknowledged the uniqueness of the city and understood that these new ideas would be circulated, received, questioned, and accepted. Spiritualists, mediums, hypnotists, and other supporters of this distinctively British occult revival came to London because even while their practices or beliefs might not be believed entirely, they were still an object of fascination. This captivation among the London public brought many opportunities, particularly for women, who most often served as mediums in séances, or were the subjects of mesmerism or hypnotism, like the O'Key sisters.

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[29] Emma Hardinge Britten, *Nineteenth Century Miracles: Or Spirits and Their Work in Every Country on Earth* (New York: Lovell & Co., 1884).
[30] Oppenheim, *Other Worlds*, 49.
[31] Oppenheim, *Other Worlds*, 53.
[32] Oppenheim, *Other Worlds*, 49.

London was the most popular place for séances, shows which involved hypnotism, or demonstrations of spirit activity, whether in the home, in a hospital, or in a theatre. Women were instrumental to these demonstrations of the occult. The occult movement in Britain, specifically in London, granted them a sense of autonomy and independence in a society that otherwise deemed them incapable of engaging within the public sphere.

2. The Lady and the Medium: Spiritualism and Women in the Nineteenth Century

To look at the women studied in current work, context is crucial. It is paramount to understand what life was like for Victorian women, in both their domestic and public lives. How women moved within and outside of their homes in the nineteenth century contributes greatly to understanding their need for spiritualism, or involvement in the occult revival. This also illustrates how women used spiritualist beliefs and practices, such as mediumship, in both spaces. The spiritualist movement did not seek to eradicate Victorian ideals of gender or private and public space; instead, it used those ideals to provide its followers with a sense of independence. This was particularly true for women, whose essential role within the spiritualist movement provided them with a greater sense of autonomy than they would have been granted in wider Victorian society. For the purposes of this study, this chapter generally discusses the lives of middle class women, who made up a large part of the spiritualist movement.

Victorian society became highly gendered. Throughout Queen Victoria's reign, which began in 1837 and ended with her death in 1901, the place and importance of women was constantly changing. While the monarch was indeed a woman, Victoria held extremely conservative values towards the place of women, and was outspokenly opposed to women's suffrage.[33] Additionally, the relationship between genders, how men and women interacted with each other and among each other, was changed and challenged throughout the Victorian period. Gender roles – in this case, the overtly soft and angelic female and the blatantly masculine male – was accentuated and considered to be a societal ideal.[34]

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[33] Susan Elizabeth Mary Jeune, Baroness St Helier, DBE, "Victoria and Her Reign," *The North American Review* 172 no. 531 (1901): 333.

[34] Lydia Murdoch, preface to *Daily Life of Victorian Women* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2014), xxvi.

The public and private spheres were by no means created during the Victorian period, but the time did resurrect a more conservative model of these two spheres. The private sphere, which encompassed the home, was inherently domestic and was ideally kept by women. During the nineteenth century, caring for the home represented higher society and financial security. This was particularly important to the growing middle class, who considered an "angel in the house" to be a marker of status.[35] This movement to conservatism within British culture can be considered a disservice to the women of the nineteenth century, who had been active members of a revolutionary society barely a generation before.[36]

With this system in place, a woman's proper role only involved domestic affairs, and included her home and her family. This sphere of the mid-nineteenth century, later termed by historian Barbara Welter as the "cult of true womanhood," defined a true woman as one who held "four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity."[37] Only through these attributes could a woman gain her rightful place in society, as a devout wife and mother. M. Jeanne Peterson considered these women to be the "angel in the house," a woman who was close to God, who kept her family close to God, and also who provided her husband and children with a heaven-like home away from the outside world; physically, she was expected to look, act, and speak with the softness of an angel.[38]

Defined only by her relationship with men, the mid-nineteenth century woman was the

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[35] M. Jeanne Peterson, "No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984): 677.
[36] Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 170-173.
[37] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly,* 18, no. 2 Part 1 (1996): 152.
[38] Peterson, "No Angels in the House," 677-678.

charge of either her father or her husband. Marriage became the ultimate foundation that defined a woman's role in society. "One of the earliest manifestations of the inequality of marriage was the concept of couverture."[39] Couverture, defined by historian Eleanor Flexner as "civil death,"[40] meant that a woman received no personal rights after marriage. This included property rights, legal rights, earned wages, divorce, and custody rights. Many mid-nineteenth century women entered this arrangement with little argument, taught that their place as wife and mother consolidated them as true women. According to Peterson, "The angel became… a model for all ranks of Victorian women."[41] However, the model of True Womanhood could only be fully embraced by the middle and upper English classes.

The idealistic model of the True Woman was effectively a vehicle of oppression for Victorian women. While certain aspects of a woman's life, such as class, economic status, religious affiliation, age, among other things, could determine a woman's comfortability during her lifetime, the movement from daughter, to wife, to mother were celebrated phases of a woman's life determined not by herself, but by others. Single women and widows exercised more freedom in society from married women,[42] but marriage was essential to a woman's prosperity and safety.

Additionally, the formation of the home as the private sphere, however painted as a sanctuary from outside anxiety, confined women and discouraged them from participating in public discourse. However, this idea can only be applied to women of the middle class and

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[39] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 152.
[40] Eleanor Flexner, *A Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Atheneum, 1998), 7-8.
[41] Peterson, "No Angels in the House," 678.
[42] Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, 3.

upward; most working women were not confined to the home because they were forced to work in order to provide incomes for their families. In this aspect, the experiences of Victorian women varied. Particularly in nineteenth century London, industry was essential to the city's economy. With the growth of factories, London's middle class also grew. However, for every class, the home became an essential to Victorian life. "By the time Victoria ascended to the throne in 1937… home and family had become central values of the expanding middle class."[43]

The beginning of the spiritualist movement, or more broadly, the occult revival, can be traced to late eighteenth century with the introduction of mesmerism. In 1773, Franz Mesmer and a Jesuit astronomer, Father Maximilian Hell (1720-1792) opened a clinic boasting the healing abilities of what Mesmer termed "animal magnetism." A basic treatment involved the subject ingesting an iron concoction while Mesmer attached magnets to the subject's stomach and legs, facilitating an "artificial tide" meant to give the fluid of the body a direction and therefore curing physical ailments.

Many medical professionals considered Mesmer's new techniques to be quackery. However, there were many influential supporters of mesmerism in Victorian society, particularly in London. In 1853, a publication titled *Table Moving by Animal Magnetism Demonstrated: With Directions How to Perform the Experiment* described the difficulties of mesmerism and the medical profession:

> The theory of "Animal Magnetism," and its application to disease, has, notwithstanding the opposition it has met with from the Medical Profession, forced its way despite of adverse interests, and obtained for itself a high position. A "local habitation," in the shape of the "Mesmeric Infirmary," has now for some years existed, and this institution

[43] Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, 73.

> numbers amongst its Vice Presidents, The Earl of Carlisle, Baron Goldsmid, Monckton Milnes, Professor De Morgan, and Dr. Whately, Archbishop of Dublin. Thus embracing amongst its supporters the first Logician and first Mathematician of the age.[44]

Mesmer's "discovery" was not accepted by the medical profession until Dr. Elliotson, a medical professional, introduced it to University College London in the 1840s. Mesmer could put his patients into a trance, and most of the patients seeking his help were women. For Mesmer, and for many other mesmerists, women were essential to the trance process. Many mesmerists and later, spiritualists, believed that it was women's fragile nature that made them susceptible to trances and supernatural communication.

Generally, most mediums in Victorian Britain, specifically London, were women. Literary scholar Jill Galvan argued in her monograph, *The Sympathetic Medium: Female Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919*, that the development of communication technologies directly associated women with mediums of communication. These jobs were some of the few opportunities that became open to women as respectable employment in the mid-nineteenth century, "…mediating jobs enjoyed a respectability at a time when women's social and gender status were closely intertwined."[45] Clerk work was considered respectable for the lower middle classes. According to Galvan, as the vocations of typing, telegraph operating, telephone operating rose and became characterized as a feminine vocation, so too did the concept of feminine channeling in the occult.[46] By 1900, 13 percent of U.S. telegraphy positions were filled by women; in Britain, women represented over a quarter of all

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[44] Anonymous, *Table Moving by Animal Magnetism Demonstrated: With Directions How to Perform the Experiment* (London: John Wesley, 1853), 4.
[45] Jill Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Female Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 7.
[46] Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium*, 4.

jobs in the Post Office in 1880. In 1890, 64 percent of United States stenographer-typists were women.[47] In Britain, "the number of women telegraphers rose more rapidly, reaching more than a quarter of all spots by 1880."[48]

The concept of communicating with the "other side" became viewed as a feminine vocation not long after the communication sector was characterized as feminine. As such, while most middle class women did not work in the communication industry, they were still viewed as communicators. Communicating with the departed souls was seen by spiritualists and occultists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as another form of communication, supported by technology and pseudo-science which had emerged during the Industrial Revolution.

However, this dependence on women as communicators also developed a power dynamic between men and women, particularly in the early years of mesmerism and trance. *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance*, by Dr. Amy Lehman, focused on the spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century through the lenses of theatricality and performance. Observing the experiences of popular mediums and spiritualists of the time, Lehman attempted to answer the question, "Were Victorian women empowered or victimized by the theatre of trance in which they performed?"[49] Lehman endeavored to show how the trance state, linked with the metamorphic opportunities of theatre, provided prospects for Victorian women to "speak, act, and create"[50] separate from the limitations of the private sphere of Victorian life. According to Lehman, this power dynamic left women as the victims of male doctors who used them as test

[47] Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium*, 5.
[48] Jill Galvan, "Feminine Channeling: Technology, the Occult, and Women's Mediation of Communications, 1870-1915," (doctoral dissertation, University of California Los Angeles, 2001), 6.
[49] Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance*, 3.
[50] Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance*, 4.

subjects.

Elizabeth O'Key is an example of this power struggle in the early years of mesmerism. Lehman observed the story of Elizabeth O'Key from a performance perspective; she asserts that Elizabeth and her doctor, Dr. John Elliotson, served as actors in the medical theatre of mesmerism.[51] O'Key, a sixteen-year-old housemaid suffering from epilepsy, was admitted to the University College London Hospital in the summer of 1838. According to Lehman, "In the hypnotic or 'mesmerized' state the normally subdued girl sang, danced, told jokes and generally entertained the fascinated audiences who had gathered to see the lecture/demonstrations of the effects of mesmerism."[52] O'Key remained a pivotal piece in the advancement of mesmerism as a medical practice.

Towards the mid-nineteenth century, the dynamic between mesmerists and their subject began to tip in favor of the subject. Mesmerism had moved outside of the medical examination room and into the private homes of Victorians, and communications were entrusted with the medium, who was often female. Spiritualists based their ideal system around the belief of life after death, and based those principles in the proof found in séances. Spiritualism held its roots in the lower and working classes, ingrained in the crisis of faith that characterized the nineteenth century, but spiritualism transfixed the middle class into the mid-nineteenth century.

Séances were often conducted in the home, and as such, the domestic sphere served as both a private and public space. This idea was embraced by middle class women, who could now conduct business in the parlors of their homes, because mediumship had become an acceptable form of income for women. According to Murdoch, "Female mediums claimed

[51] Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance*, 39.
[52] Ibid.

freedoms that in most cases were otherwise denied to women: sexual liberties, as well as an authoritative voice to offer counsel on matters ranging from marriage to politics, and the material benefits associated with money, fame, travel, and access to the elite."[53]

Many spiritualists believed in equality between the sexes; while men held an obvious advantage in Victorian society, spiritualists also held that women, who were still inferior due to their fragility, were equally important to society. Helena Blavatsky, a co-founder of the Theosophical society and a leader in the theosophical movement[54], wrote in her periodical *Lucifer*:

> A palace can hardly be raised on a quagmire, nor can any higher race of man become evolved on our globe without the most radical changes in the current ideas of the nature of womanhood, changes wholly alien to the entire school of materialistic thinkers. The shame of the past has been the mud in which womanhood has been engulfed; whatever the base depths of human life were, woman sank in the lowest, and for the reason that she was regarded as a purely relative being, whose supreme mission it was to produce offspring, good, bad, or indifferent, or to minister with or without the excuse of offspring to the gratification of the passions of men.[55]

And in *The Progressive Thinker,* a weekly spiritualist newspaper based in Chicago:

> Self-abnegation, subserviency to man —whether be father, lover or husband—Is the most dangerous that can be taught or forced upon her whose character shall mould the next generation! She has no right to transmit a nature and a character that is subservient, subject, inefficient, undeveloped – in short, a slavish character, which is either blindly obedient or blindly rebellious, and is therefore set, as is a time-lock, to prey or to be

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[53] Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, 67.

[54] Theosophy and the Theosophical Society are a breakaway from spiritualism; while many of the ideals remain similar, theosophy is grounded in a more Eastern-religion approach, drawing on ancient Egyptian and other Middle Eastern religions. A fascination with the east was a common cultural development in the nineteenth century due to a ride in British imperialism in the East, including in China and India.

[55] Helena Blavatsky, "The Future of Women." *Lucifer* 7, no. 38 (1890): 121.

preyed upon by society in the future![56]

While many spiritualists strove for equality of the sexes, the Victorian ideals of home and family were not lost on the spiritualist movement. According to Alex Owen, "The ideology of home and family, representing social stability, decency, and morality prevailed in the spiritualist camp… In this climate the spiritualist appeal to the moral and spiritual superiority of women found renewed purchase."[57] The home provided a safe, warm space to perform séances, which became important to the spread of spiritualism. Bringing non-spiritualists to séances and engaging in communication with departed souls was often considered irrefutable evidence of life beyond death. According to Julian Holloway, "the séance would usually start with a prayer, singing of hymns, or the playing of the piano, then progress to the communication itself."[58] Arthur Conan Doyle, famous author of the Sherlock Holmes novels and an avid spiritualist, wrote detailed notes of a séance he attended in a London home on October 25, 1896, during which the medium communicated with a departed classmate:

> We asked if she could see the North Pole. She said she could, that it was on land, and that there was no object in reaching it. We then asked her where the sphere was which she inhabited. She answered all around the earth. We asked her if she had any knowledge of the planets. She said she had. We asked her if Mars was inhabited. She said it was, and by people much the same as Earth. They were intellectually more advanced than we. The Canals were artificial for the purpose of irrigation. Spirits from Mars came into the same sphere she was in. There was no pain in the next world, but there was anxiety. They were governed. They took nourishment. There was no sleep, and no pain. She had been Catholic and was still Catholic but had not fared better than

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[56] Helen H. Gardener, "Plain Facts for Women to Consider," *The Progressive Thinker* 7 no.184 (1893): 1.
[57] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 39.
[58] Julian Holloway, "Enchanted Spaces: The Séance, Affect, and Geographies of Religion," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96 no.1 (2006): 184.

the Protestants.[59]

The séance space was extremely important to the process of communication. Historian Julian Holloway asserted that the séance space was, in fact, the most important element of spiritualism and the spiritualist movement. This placed a great deal of importance on the medium herself. Holloway stated, "Women as mediums in nineteenth-century Victorian society continually negotiated an empowered/powerless duality. To most sitters, a temporary suspension of normative ideologies was on offer via the transgression of discourses of sexuality and desire."[60]

Again the medium is being associated with victimization, and yet empowered at the same time. Mediums became victims because by communicating with the dead, they gave up their own autonomy and took on someone else's; however, the séance, taking place in the private sphere, and often within the home, is entirely controlled by the efforts of the medium. The medium is crucial to the communication process, for without her, the physical evidence of life after death that spiritualists longed for was not possible. Furthermore, the séance space was suspended between Victorian ideologies; the medium, within the home, is subjected to the public through the practice of the spiritualist séance.

For many spiritualists, food served an important purpose to the practice of spiritualism and the séance. In the Victorian period, as well as throughout British history, the preparation of food was associated with women. According to Marlene Tromp, food became "a means for women to gain a voice in the faith, but, more significantly, to gain spiritual control and authority

[59] Arthur Conan Doyle, Information derived at a séance, 25 October 1896, Arthur Conan Doyle Papers, 1867-1970. Reference Add MS 88924/4/14. Archives and Manuscripts, British Library.
[60] Holloway, "Enchanted Spaces," 183.

while successfully operating under the aegis of womanly propriety."[61] A woman did not need to be a medium in order to provide food for a séance.

For women who did not consider themselves gifted with mediumship, food preparation was another outlet of autonomy. The use of food was something that all women, not just mediums, could engage in. The consumption of food during a religious experience, as a séance was considered to spiritualists, can be compared with the consumption of the Eucharist during communion in the Catholic faith; in the same way, food during a séance was intended to nourish the soul of those physically and sometimes, those only present spiritually.

In *Miss Wood in Derbyshire: A series of Experimental Seances Demonstrating the Fact that Spirits Can Appear in the Physical Form*, W.P. Adshead compiled a book of séance experiences. During one of these séances, the medium is taken over by a spirit named Pocka, who demands nourishment to continue speaking with the members of the circle:

> For about ten minutes "Pocka" chatted with us as merrily as during the former part of the séance; then came a change. Gradually the voice became weaker, the speech slower. In tones some what like those of a peevish child, the control said, "Me hungry; me want something to eat." Immediately pockets were searched for anything in the shape of food. An apple was placed in the hand of the medium; this was devoured at once; another apple was dispatched as quickly. Then some biscuits and an orange were given to her, but these failed to satisfy, for the plaintive cry still came from the lips of the medium, "Me hungry; me want some to eat." On being told we had nothing more to give, she seemed much distressed, and in still fainter tones said, "If me don't have something to eat me die, and you put me in de grave again.[62]

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[61] Marlene Tromp, "Eating, Feeding, and Flesh: Food in Victorian Spiritualism," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, eds. Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), 285.

[62] W.P. Adshead, *Miss Wood in Derbyshire: A series of Experimental Seances Demonstrating the Fact that Spirits Can Appear in the Physical Form.* (London: J. Burns, 1869), 28-29.

Spiritualists often expected spirits to manifest in homes. This was the case for John King, a spirit who often manifested himself in the home of a Mrs. Barry, a medium. Francis G. Herne, a fellow medium, described the spirit of John King drinking ale in *The Medium and Daybreak* in 1870:

> We sat down to supper, the lamp burning brightly as usual. Joint King, the spirit who often manifests there, announced his presence by raps, and he was invited in a jocular way to partake of supper. He declined. Then he was offered some wine, chicken, tongue, beef, and jelly, all of which he refused; but when listed to have some ale, he assented… a glass of ale was placed under the table by the servant, in full sight of all present, and the party proceeded to supper, with the ale-glass under the table. No one moved. When the servant returned to the supper-room, Mrs. Berry asked the spirit, "John, have you drunk the ale?" "Yes," was the reply. Then she said, "Look under the table, and see if the ale has been taken." The servant was closely watched in this operation, and the ale was found to be all gone, except a sip in the bottom of the glass! The white drugget which covered the carpet was quite dry, and no evidences of ale being scattered were observable.[63]

Food played a fundamental part of the séance, as shown above; and since food preparation in the home was a normal responsibility of Victorian women, and a séance often took place within the home, it was a happy marriage between the ideals of Victorian womanhood and spiritualist practices. Food preparation provided women within the séance a power that was usually considered a domestic responsibility. This was also evident in the structure of the séance within the Victorian home.

At the very center of the séance experience was the medium. The medium was responsible for channeling the dead and departed, and most of them were women. She was

[63] Francis G. Herne, "A Remarkable Manifestation – Spirits Drinking Ale." *The Medium and Daybreak* 1 no. 23 (1870): 183.

responsible for guiding the séance, the spirit, and those present. She was also accountable for acquiring the evidence of life after death that the spiritualists and occultists needed to gain more believers. Victorian culture, which idealized the frailty of women, was utilized and exploited to fit spiritualist ideas. The fragility that Victorian women experienced made them more vulnerable to physical, emotional, and spiritual influence. With this logic, women's weaknesses were made for mediumship, and their softness could be turned into physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual autonomy.

3. Middle Class Mediums: A New Vocation for Victorian Women

Work for women during the nineteenth century was growing, but limited. Many women found work in factories and shops, while others found themselves as telegram operators and domestic servants. Industrialization and growing middle class made this development possible, and many women took advantage of the new prospects available to them. The occult revival and spiritualist movement also grew with these urban developments; the nineteenth century saw a move from mostly agricultural living to mostly urban living,[64] and with those people, came new followers and new ideas. This influx of people invigorated a new economy and a new movement. Middle class women found themselves faced with a new vocational opportunity: mediumship. This un-professionalized profession provided women in the spiritualist movement with the means of gaining not just spiritual, but financial autonomy.

During the mid-nineteenth century, industrialization resulted in a larger urban population, a larger middle class, and more opportunity for work. Prior to the nineteenth century, work for women was extremely limited. While the jobs that were considered suitable for a Victorian woman was still restricted, "It has been calculated that there was an increase of 33 per cent in the jobs open to women in the two decades 1851-71, but in the same period men's employment increased by 67 per cent."[65] Many of these women were employed as domestic servants and factory workers.

The growth of factories coincided with the growth of the textile industry, another socially acceptable vocation for Victorian women. "From the beginning, industrial production depended

[64] Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, 206-207.
[65] Picard, *Victorian London*, 307.

heavily on child and female labor…In 1835, women made up 54 percent of the cotton industry workforce in the United Kingdom. By 1901, the proportion of female workers increased to 63 percent."[66] The growth of the middle class allowed for an increase in textile production, and more people were able to buy goods.

With the growth of a textile economy, the growth of shops also took place, and shop assistants were also considered acceptable vocation for the Victorian woman. Liza Picard stated, "The Society for Promoting the Employment of Women encouraged women to be clerks, telegraphists, shop assistants and nurses…"[67] Women got paid less than men doing the same work; men who worked as copying clerks in London made a 1£ a week, while women only make 30 shillings.[68]

According to historian Lydia Murdoch, "For millions of women in the Victorian period, work was a central fact of life… out of a total population of over 10 million women and girls, there were 18 private literary secretaries, 213 telegraph service workers, and 259, 074 cotton manufacturers… while the largest single group listed 644,271 domestic servants."[69] Domestic servitude was the most possible means of making an honesty wage. "In 1851 there were over one million women and girls working as servants in England and Wales, one out of every four working women, nearly one-tenth of the entire female population. The growth of the commercial, industrial middle classes sparked a parallel growth in domestic service positions."[70] Despite the fact that work was a part of life, women's work in urban centers was infrequent,

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[66] Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, 175.
[67] Picard, *Victorian London*, 306.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, 171.
[70] Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, 183

underappreciated, and grossly underpaid.

"The Victorian debates about middle-class women and work focused primarily on whether single women should work and, if so, which occupations were deemed suitably respectable."[71] Single women of the middle class were often regarded as failures, unable to do the one thing that society had deemed universally acceptable – marry. For this reason, single women were often regarded with suspicion within Victorian culture, but politically, they retained more rights than their married counterparts. "…the 1851 showed there were half a million more women than men in Britain. It also revealed that a million women remained unmarried…"[72] These women were often suspended between personal independence and a society that viewed them with distrust, simply because they were without the company of a man. Many unmarried women in the spiritualist movement became mediums, and many did not marry for the duration of their lives (see Georgiana Houghton). According to Joan Perkin, however, "people found it hard to believe that woman remained single from choice."[73]

Spiritualism and other occult practices saw immense growth during the Victorian period, particularly from the mid-nineteenth century onward. The growth of urban centers, particularly London, allowed for the spiritualist movement to flourish. Spiritualists became interested in proving their beliefs through séances, and séances were only as good as the mediums who conducted them. An anonymous writer to *The Medium and Daybreak* described the ideal medium in 1876:

The medium, through whom they have been produced, is a lady of what may be termed

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[71] Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, 192.
[72] Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 153.
[73] Ibid.

> the lower middle class. She has received a very ordinary education, and cannot, in any sense, be considered professional, aa she does not advertise her remarkable medial powers. Her seances are confined to a very limited number of persons, mostly personal friends, and the whole of her seances are given without fee or reward of any kind.[74]

Most female mediums were of the lower middle and middle classes. This is because, as the anonymous writer suggests, many mediums performed their work without monetary compensation. Women of the working or poor classes could never afford such a luxury in the unforgiving atmosphere of Victorian London. According to Alex Owen, "…spiritualists agreed and argued that it was essential for mediums to have some secondary occupation, the assumption being that private mediums would be busy with domestic duties."[75] It was not required that mediums also be spiritualists; some were occult enthusiasts, theosophists, or simply believed in their abilities. However, the overwhelming majority of mediums during the Victorian era were spiritualists. It was a common belief among spiritualists that anyone, regardless of class or background, could be a medium. According to religious historian Mary Farrell Bednarowski:

> Since gender was not a prohibitive factor for mediumship, many of the mediums were women. The Banner of Light for April 15, 1876, printed a list of Spiritualist lecturers around the country. Out of a few less than three hundred, 127 were obviously women's names, among them Lizzie Doten, Emma Hardinge Britten, Nettie Colburn Maynard, Victoria Woodhull, Cora L. V. Scott Tappan, Mrs. Livermore, and Mrs. Severance. None of their names appears in standard… religious histories, but all of them are familiar to persons who have done research in nineteenth-century Spiritualism.[76]

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[74]"Marvelous Psychological Phenomena," *The Medium and Daybreak* 7, no. 317 (1876): 258.
[75] Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 56.
[76] Mary Farrell Bednarowski, "Outside the Mainstream: Women's Religion and Women Religious Leaders in Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 no. 2 (1980):

In *How to Become a Medium*, the author encourages the reader that everyone is capable of mediumship. Since mediumship was one of the most important pillars of mediumship, it asserted that if anyone could be a medium, anyone could be a spiritualist:

> Inherent in every man and woman lie dormant powers of mediumship, which under proper training may be developed to that degree which will make communion with spirits possible. We believe that none are entirely destitute of these powers. It has been thought and taught that those possessed of mediumistic powers were exceptions among men, peculiar persons, set aside by God, and possessed of that which for others was unattainable; but this is a mistake; each and every man and woman possesses in some degree mediumistic possibilities.[77]

Some mediums would advertise their services in local spiritualist and occult papers. These periodical subscriptions, such as *The Medium and Daybreak*, sold for 1d. (one penny).[78] A section of *The Medium and Daybreak* was dedicated to advertisements of goods and services. Here, advertisements for mediums in the London area could be found. Many mediums listed their personal addresses, where they performed their services; most mediums listed the services they provided. Some listed their rates, and a few, like Caroline Pawley, offered their services for free:

> MRS. HAGON, Magnetic Healer. Ladies attended at their Residences. — 21, North Street, Pentonville, near Caledonian Road.
>
> CAROLINE PAWLEY, Writing, Speaking, Healing Medium. By the desire of her

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[77] James A. Bliss, *How to Become a Medium: Rules for Development and for the Forming of Spiritual Circles* (Boston: The National Developing Circle, 1885), 3.

[78] *The Medium and Daybreak* 7, no. 301 (1876): 257.

Guides, no money accepted. — Letters sent first, with stamped envelope for reply. 33, Bayston Road, Stoke Newington Road, N.

MRS. KATE BERRY, Magnetic Healer, 94, Maida Vale, W.

MISS GODFREY. Medical Rubber,[79] and Mesmerist, 31, Robert Street. Hampstead Road, N.W.[80]

Additionally, fellow female spiritualists and other like-minded women could place ads for housekeeping, companionship, or lodging:

WANTED by a middle-aged Lady (a Spiritualist), a Situation as Companion or Housekeeper, to a Lady or a Widower, where a servant is kept. Thoroughly understands housekeeping. Can read aloud, and not as amanuensis. No objection to travel. For particulars apply to R.W., care of Mrs. James Burns, 15, Southampton Row, W.C.[81]

Mediums also used these outlets to advertise potential séances. While *The Medium and Daybreak* catered mostly to its London audience, it also advertised the work of other potential séances throughout Great Britain:

SEANCES AND MEETINGS DURING THE WEEK, AT THE SPIRITUAL INSTITUTION, 15, SOUTHAMPTON ROW, HOLBORN. Thursday, November 23, Seance by Mrs. Olive, Trance-Medium, at S o'clock, Admission, 2s. 1d.

Tuesday. November 20, Seance at Mrs. Main 's, 321, Bethnal Green Road, at 9. Admission Free.[82]

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[79] According to *The Theory and Practice of Human Magnetism*, by H. Durville, translated from French, and published by the Psychic Research Company in 1900: "Rubbing is a strong or weak friction exercised upon a part of or the entire body, either with the hand alone or with a brush, glove or cotton cloth. It is also the action of passing the hands on the body, parts of the body, or in exercising a delicate pressure, a sort of gentle massage."

[80] The advertisements for Mrs. Hagon, Caroline Prawley, Mrs. Kate Berry, and Miss Godfrey can be found in *The Medium and Daybreak* 15, no. 769 (1884): 826.

[81] "Special Notice," *The Medium and Daybreak* 15, no. 761 (1884): 703.

[82] "SEANCES AND MEETINGS DURING THE WEEK," *The Medium and Daybreak* 3 no. 138 (1872): 460.

> SEANCES IN THE PROVINCES DURING THE WEEK. Friday, November 22, Liverpool Psychological Society, at Mrs. Bohn's Temperance Hotel, 6, Stafford Street.
>
> Hagg's Lane End, 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. Trance-Mediums, Mrs. N. Wilde and Mrs. R. Hudson.[83]

Séances were the medium's workspace. In the same way that a laboratory is pertinent to a scientist's development, so too is the importance of the séance room to a medium's development. While some mediums did not charge for their services, generating enough support and notoriety was vital to a medium's work. The best way to attract customers and keep them was to provide them with the best service. This service was the séance. Female mediums particularly were at a great advantage, performing séances in the parlors and rooms of their own homes. These spaces were familiar to the medium and unfamiliar to new clientele. In *How to Become a Medium,* the perfect "seance room" is defined:

> If possible the seance room should be used for no other purpose than for holding sittings in. It should be well ventilated and lighted, and as pleasantly situated as possible, and the more there is added to it in the way of pretty furniture and tasteful decorations the better. Plants which are in a flourishing condition are very appropriate and refining in their influence, as are also fresh flowers, but sickly plants, or withered and decaying flowers, are to be excluded from the seance room. The temperature should be comfortable, say about 78 [degrees] Fahrenheit, and as far as possible closeness of atmosphere should be guarded against.[84]

The perfect lighting is described:

> During sittings, the light should be subdued and softened as much as possible, that no

[83] "SEANCES IN THE PROVINCES DURING THE WEEK," *The Medium and Daybreak* 3 no. 138 (1872): 464.
[84] James A. Bliss, *How to Become a Medium*, 4.

> direct or reflected rays may injure or interfere with the manifestations, and all metallic substances should be excluded from the room.[85]

A list of adequate materials for both spirits and mediums is provided:

> A piano or organ adds to the beauty of the room, besides furnishing the means for the employment of music when available, which is always a great help towards the establishment of good conditions. Writing materials should also be handy, that the circle may not be disturbed in order to obtain them. The seance room should be well aired out once every day in order to keep the air as pure as possible, and in all other ways should be kept neat and cleanly, for spirits delight in and can work best in good surroundings.[86]

And the most appropriate "time of sitting" is offered, including proper sitting etiquette, and what to do if members of the circle are late:

> The morning and the evening hours are the most appropriate for sitting. When an hour has been decided upon, make your sitting come at that same hour of the day invariably. Let nothing but urgent necessity cause you to miss sitting at the appointed hour. Be punctual. Consider it your duty to invariably keep your appointment with the spirits at the chosen seance hour, for spirits are unfailing in *their* punctuality, and you should emulate their fidelity. Admit of no interruption while sitting, unless absolutely necessary — not even to admit tardy members of the circle.[87]

The séance itself was also important to interest "inquirers" and gain new followers. What was considered irrefutable evidence of spirits' presence was enough to convert Victorians to spiritualism. Similar to prophesizing in the Christian religion, séances were spiritualists way of proving life after death. Sitting on the private and public sphere, séances were often, but not always, open to the public. This was also a way for mediums to gain new patrons. Many

[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

spiritualist papers and books often reach out to "inquirers" and encourage them to attend séances:

> If you wish to see whether Spiritualism is really only jugglery and imposture, try it by personal experiment. If you can get an introduction to· some experienced Spiritualist on whose good faith you can rely, ask him for advice; and if he is holding private circles, seek permission to attend one to see how to conduct seances, and what to expect. There is, however, difficulty in obtaining access to private circles and, in any case, you must rely chiefly on experiences in your own family circle, or amongst your own friends, all strangers being excluded.[88]

The séance was spiritualism's way of enlightening the Victorian people to the truth of life after death. This placed a great deal of importance on the quality of medium. If a medium was suspected to be fraudulent, she not only lost her reputation and her patronage, but she was one of many reasons that spiritualism was still observed with a suspicious and critical eye in Victorian culture. "A Lifelong Spiritualist" expressed their discontent in the publication *Mysteries of the Seance and Tricks and Traps of Bogus Mediums*: "When Spiritualists learn to take care of their true and honest mediums, and kick out of their organization all the fakes and their assistants, then will the cause stand some show for recognition by the world, and the intelligent ones who know its truth will not be ashamed to be classed among its members."[89]

From this expression, there is reason to believe that there was often friction between spiritualists, "true and honest" mediums, and "fakes." After all, if a medium is found to be a fake, they could take the name of their assistants and the work of spiritualism down with them. During the height of spiritualism, there were multiple organizations that investigated the validity

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[88] M.A., "Advice to Inquirers," *The Conduct of Circles* (The London Spiritual Alliance, Ltd., sometime after 1884), 1.
[89] A Lifelong Spiritualist, *Mysteries of the Seance and Tricks and Traps of Bogus Mediums* (London: Lunt Bros., 1903), 2.

of mediums and séances, based in London. Some of these included the London Dialectical Society,[90] the College of Psychic Studies,[91] the Society for Psychical Research,[92] and The Ghost Club,[93] all founded between 1860 and 1885. These organizations were essential to molding the reputation of spiritualism by seeking out duplicitous mediums, psychics, spiritualists, and occultists. Mediums were imperative in maintaining the reputation of spiritualism while investigations took place, and their own work not only affected their own livelihood, but the work of other spiritualists as well. Spiritualists and other mediums wrote on how to determine a true medium from a fraudulent one:

> In order to watch a "medium" with any show of success, one must not go into his presence with the idea that he knows how the fraud is perpetrated, for by so doing he disarms himself to a great extent. Go, keep your mouth shut and eyes open. You cannot expose his methods of procedure at home with paper and pen, without having visited him in his lair and, ninety nine times in a hundred, not then exsept you have a hundred times greater knowledge of magicians and magician's tactics than most of those who star the dime museums throughout the country as Wizards of the Wand.[94]

While spiritualism and the occult were growing in popularity in Victorian Britain, the movement itself still experienced backlash from communities, organizations, influential people and even other religions. Just as spiritualists had periodicals like *The Medium and Daybreak* and numerous publications by well-known mediums like Georgiana Houghton, Emma Hardinge

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[90] Founded in 1867 in London, England, to "investigate the phenomena alleged to be Spiritual Manifestations." (Report of the Committee, 1871).
[91] Founded in 1884 in London, England.
[92] Founded in 1882 in London, England.
[93] Founded in 1862 in London, England, with its roots at Cambridge's Trinity College for paranormal investigation and research.
[94] Harry Price and Eric J. Dingwall, *Revelations of a Spirit Medium*. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1922), 16.

Britten, or even Arthur Conan Doyle, so too were there publications speaking out against spiritualism and its followers. In *The Case Against Spiritualism*, Jane Stoddart provided a solid ground against fraudulent spiritualists and mediums:

> When a Spiritualist tells us that he receives messages from discarnate human beings through the medium and the medium's "control" certain questions immediately arise. "Of what nature are these messages? What have you learned from them? How affected is your judgment of this world and the next? Are likely to help mankind in its upward progress?[95]
>
> We are living in a transitional epoch, and faith alone can support the soul as it beats the prison bars, knowing not how or when the sentence of its liberation may be spoken.[96]

Deceitful mediums supported this backlash against spiritualism. Many spiritualists moved within their own spiritualist circles, and often it was difficult for a non-spiritualist to gain access to these private groups. Newcomers were usually welcomed, but eyed with suspicion when investigations into mediums and spiritualists were at their height. In order to attract other spiritualists, spiritualists often placed ads in spiritualist papers for tenants or housekeepers in order to find like-minded people, as we saw in the ads above. Mediums interacted with other mediums, sharing their techniques, leading séances together, and even reporting on the success other mediums' séances:

> To the Editor.— Dear Sir,— Experienced Spiritualists are almost unanimous in opinion, that one of the greatest difficulties encountered in connection with Spiritualism is to receive satisfactory evidences of spirit identity. Now in the mediumship of Mrs. Hall… the most stupendous and irresistibly convincing proofs of spirit return are furnished continually… With your kind permission, Mr. Editor, I will briefly and concisely

[95] Jane Stoddart, *The Case Against Spiritualism* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), 109.
[96] Stoddart, *The Case Against Spiritualism*, 137.

> enumerate a few facts and incidents… I have only recently become acquainted with this lady, but I possess many grateful remembrances of her kindly and disinterested disposition, and I would thankfully bear my testimony to one of the most convincing phases of medial manifestation, ever developed in the history of our movement.[97]

However, a medium could be another medium's toughest critic; some, like Emma Hardinge Britten, became well-known for establishing guidelines for mediumship, and traveled to lecture fellow spiritualists and new comers on mediumship and how to investigate frauds.[98] Unlike some spiritualists, Britten believed that only one in seven people can exhibit gifts of mediumship:

> All persons are subject to spirit influence and guidance, but only one in seven can so externalize this power as to become what is called a medium; and let it ever be remembered that trance speakers, no less than mediums for any other gift, can never be influenced by spirits far beyond their own normal capacity in the MATTER of the intelligence rendered, the magnetism of the spirits being but a quickening fire, which inspires the brain, and, like a hot-house process on plants, forces into prominence latent powers of the mind, but creates nothing.[99]

Instructions on proper ways to conduct séances and circles, along with publications on how to become a medium, how to expose fakes, address newcomers, and report on the work of other mediums created a spiritualist professionalism within the practice of mediumship. Among the middle class, mediums were the most popular. To be a medium was a luxury that most working class women could not afford; while mediumship did offer women spiritual, mental, and

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[97] "Spirit Identity - Mrs. Hall's Mediumship," *The Medium and Daybreak*, 15 no. 761, (1884): 691.
[98] Emma Hardinge Britten, "How to Investigate Spiritualism; Or Rules for the Spirit Circle," *Two Worlds* 1 no. 1 (1887): 14-15.
[99] Ibid.

financial autonomy, it also required a great deal of prior financial stability. While many mediums made money leading circles, publishing how-to books, and lecturing on the importance of mediums and spiritualism, they were often supported by family or patronage.

Middle class mediums found themselves wedged between private and public life, between financial and spiritual autonomy, and between "true" mediums and frauds. Even without financial compensation, the medium was a pillar of the spiritualist community, and a cornerstone in spiritualist belief. The medium was impertinent to finding life after death, and the female medium was most suited to do this based on the Victorian female's physical fragility. Middle class mediums within the spiritualist movement and the occult revival were able to take the ideals of Victorian womanhood and made their physical frailty their spiritual strength.

4. Finding New Life in Art: Medium and Artist Georgiana Houghton

One notable spirit artist, and her environment, will be discussed to demonstrate how women became capable of creating independence within London's occult revival. Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884), a classically trained artist, Spiritualist, and medium, rose to Spiritualist fame in 1871, when she opened an art gallery of her own art in the heart of London. These works, brought together with watercolor, pencils, and acrylics, were inspired by the spirits with whom Houghton claimed she could communicate.

Around the time that Houghton was beginning to pull herself into the most intimate of spiritualist circles, death and mourning had taken a new and important place in the lives of the everyday Victorian. Along with London's exploding population, so too was the mortality rate, due to the city's cramped conditions. While attending a funeral for a friend or a family member had become a common occurrence, funerals became laden with societal expectations. According to Jen Cadwallader, "The funeral trade in the second half of the nineteenth century was marked by its materialism… even the average middle-class affair involved a great deal of show and expense."[100]

With a high mortality rate and a new emphasis on materialist funeral practices, the development of spirit photographs, and spirit art, is unsurprising.[101] Spirit photographs were an extension of the post-mortem photograph; the deceased person pictured, however, is not there physically. Instead, their spirit, or soul, is captured using a camera. Similarly, with spirit

[100] Jen Cadwallader, "Spirit Photography Victorian Culture of Mourning," *Modern Language Studies* 37 no. 2 (2008): 14.
[101] Cadwallader, "Spirit Photography Victorian Culture of Mourning," 16.

drawings, the spirit is brought to life instead through pencils and watercolor, the physical representation of their spirit brought to life with shapes and colors on paper.

The first spirit photograph, taken in Boston in 1861 by William Mumler, called upon two growing Victorian practices – post-mortem photographs and spiritualism.[102] Post-mortem photographs became extremely popular during the Victorian era, due to the high mortality rate and the new, cheaper invention of the camera, which allowed family members to immortalize their departed loves ones in photographs. It was especially popular with the loss of children. The dead in these photographs, regardless of age or gender, are often dressed impeccably well and in new clothing. Even with this emphasis on material goods, Cadwallader has written, "Viewing the materialism surrounding Victorian death as a mere show of social status belies the real feelings of grief, the profound sense of loss experienced by mourners."[103]

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, several years after Mrs. Hayden's visit to London from New York in 1852, spiritualists and occultists found a strong foothold in this city of ideas. This was supported by several London-based occult periodicals and the formation of multiple spiritualist, occult, and medium associations and organizations, many of which were also based in London. Prior to the 1870s, most of the communication between the spirits and those channeling them was performed through what historian Alex Owen refers to as "spirit voice" or writing.[104] However, by the time Houghton picked up a drawing pencil around 1860, the spiritualists of London were looking for more than just attention – they were seeking physical, tangible examples of spirits' power.

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[102] Cadwallader, "Spirit Photography Victorian Culture of Mourning," 16.
[103] Cadwallader, "Spirit Photography Victorian Culture of Mourning," 15.
[104] Owen, *The Darkened Room*,41.

The palpable examples of the occult came in many forms, including spirit-inspired art pieces and spirit photographs, both considered artwork in the nineteenth century and today and both used in Houghton's mediumship. According to Karl Schoonover, "Early spirit photographs rarely portray the psychic medium at work; these images do not seem to require a professional human channel to produce apparitions. Instead the camera serves as "medium" in both senses of the word, not only rendering the image of a person posing for a portrait but also materializing the impression of a ghost hovering above."[105]

Religion is often credited with permeating into other aspect of human culture. While many Londoners of the nineteenth century hardly considered spiritualism, or any of its occult counterparts, a religion, spiritualist ideologies still made their way into Victorian culture, noticeably in Victorian art. Many artists active in the nineteenth century, including members of the well-known Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, attributed spiritualist ideologies and practices to their artistic inspiration.[106] Simon Grant, an art historian and Marco Pasi, a historian of Hermetic philosophy, wrote, "Many artists were inexorably drawn to the ethereal and tantalizing world of spirits… The most prominent was Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), who had first attended séances at the house of Houghton's friends."[107] When Rossetti's wife and muse, Elizabeth Siddal, died in 1862, he organized séances in his Chelsea studio and "constantly felt her presence."[108]

"Spirit drawings" became popular in séances during the mid-nineteenth century, when

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[105] Karl Schoonover, "Ectoplasms, Evanescence, and Photography," *Art Journal* 62, no. 3 (2003): 33.
[106] Simon Grant and Marco Pasi, "'Works of Art without Parallel in the World:' Georgiana Houghton's Spirit Drawings," in *Georgiana Houghton Spirit Drawings*, eds. Ernst Vegelin van Claerbergen and Barnaby Wright (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2016), 12-13.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.

mediums began to create drawings while communicating with a spirit. "Typically, the mediums who produced these works would ascribe their authorship not to themselves, but rather to the spirits who they claimed were guiding their hands while in a state of trance or sometimes even in full consciousness.[109] While Houghton's claim to spiritualist fame could be found in the artworks she produced, she was by no means the first spirit artist, or the most well-known. A fellow medium and spirit artist, Anna Mary Howitt, was also in connection with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and members of the middle class artist circle.

Anna Mary Howitt's parents, William and Mary Howitt, were prominent members of the Spiritualist community, in London and elsewhere in Britain. Anna Mary Howitt often produced spirit drawings on tracing paper with watercolor.[110] Art historian Rachel Oberter has written, "In 1856, this professional artist turned spiritualist medium set aside the oil paintings she had been submitting to the Royal Academy and devoted herself to drawings and watercolours executed in Spiritualist trances… a drawing had to translate the intangible ideas of spirits into the concrete, visual language of humans."[111]

Unlike Howitt, Houghton was a middle-aged, unmarried woman with no prior knowledge of spiritualism and the occult prior to 1860, other than what was commonly known. Houghton's efforts in the spiritualist community did not come to the forefront of what became known as the "Modern Spiritualist Movement" until she was a middle-aged woman or older, and many of her experiences did not differ from those of other middle-class women, until she placed her own

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[109] Grant and Pasi, "'Works of Art without Parallel in the World.'" 13.
[110] Rachel Oberter, "'The Sublimation of Matter into Spirit': Anna Mary Howitt's Automatic Drawings," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, eds. Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012): 333.
[111] Ibid.

artwork on display in London in 1871. Like many other women in nineteenth century Britain, Houghton's life was marred by the deaths of multiple siblings and her father.

Georgiana Houghton was born to Mary Ann and George Houghton on April 20, 1814, in the Spanish Canary Islands. She belonged to a middle-class merchant family that often found itself in financial distress. Literary scholar Sara Williams wrote:

> While this was the reality for thousands of middle-class women across Britain in the nineteenth century given the limited 'appropriate' employment opportunities, this spinster's life was far from staid or prosaic, and through her involvement in London Spiritualist circles Houghton became a forerunner in the movement, tirelessly promoting her unique spirit drawings and bringing the first spirit photographs in England to the public's attention. [112]

The Canary Islands had been a trading hub for her wine merchant father, but Houghton spent most of her life living in and around London. In 1826, Houghton's older brother Cecil died at the age of thirteen; in 1841, her older brother Warrand died; in 1845, her younger brother Sydney also died. Finally, in 1851, Houghton lost her beloved younger sister Zilla. A classically trained artist, Houghton gave up her artistic talents following her sister's death, too devastated to create.[113]

In 1859, Houghton met a Mrs. Marshall, a known medium, through her cousin. She described attending her first séance with Mrs. Marshall in her memoir, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance*, first published in 1881, "in a short time the [table] raps came, and the various manifestations, now so well known, filled me with astonishment."[114] By 1861, Houghton began

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[112] Sara Williams in introduction to *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance* (UK: Victorian Secrets, 2013), 5.
[113] Williams in introduction to *Evenings at Home*, 1.
[114] Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance* (London: Trubner & Co., 1881), 1.

to use her artistic gifts and connections to draw under the influence of spirits. According to Grant and Pasi, "As Houghton's artistic experiments began to be known within the spiritualist community, her reputation grew."[115] Houghton began to produce a collection of spirit drawings, showing them to her family and friends in her personal circle. Soon enough, Houghton had enough spiritualist admirers to have weekly private séances in her home, presenting her gifts to fellow middle-class artists.[116]

Houghton was unique to many mediums and spirit artists of the nineteenth century for several reasons – the first, because she was middle-aged, forty-seven years old by the time she began to draw with spirits' influence. By contrast, Anna Mary Howitt was thirty-two. Additionally, Houghton was unusual because she remained unmarried. While Houghton may not have reflected the popular, or well-known medium of the nineteenth century, she did reflect the nature of mediumship for the British middle-class masses.

Houghton's visions were not unique, and when placed into a broader context of nineteenth century spiritualism, her spirit drawings were nothing out of the ordinary for British spiritualists. Houghton was also one of the many spiritualists in the nineteenth century who advocated for the compatibility between spiritualism and Christianity.[117] Houghton considered herself to be a very devout Christian, which is obvious in *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance*. Many of her artworks were held together with extremely Christian themes, such as her paintings *The Eye of God,*[118] *The Sheltering Wings of The Most High*,[119] and *The Portrait of the Lord Jesus*

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[115] Grant and Pasi, "'Works of Art without Parallel in the World,'" 14.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Grant and Pasi, "'Works of Art without Parallel in the World,'" 18.
[118] Georgiana Houghton, *The Eye of God*, 1862, watercolor and gouache on paper laid on board with pen and ink inscription, 366 x 456 mm, Victorian Spiritualists' Union, Melbourne, Australia, in *Georgiana Houghton Spirit Drawings*, 82.

Christ.[120]

Houghton did not represent the ideal medium, but instead signifies an opportunity presented to many nineteenth century middle class women in the spiritualist and occult movement; unmarried and middle-aged, who turned to mediumship as a means of income, autonomy, or both. In *The Darkened Room*, Alex Owen wrote that, "Even a truly domestic medium like Georgiana Houghton, a middle-aged spinster who lives a sequestered life with her elderly parents, experienced an astonishing change in her life when she took up spiritualism and discovered that she could make 'spirit drawings.'"[121] In 1836, Houghton's father died, and she and her mother were left to fend for themselves in London. From 1861 to 1870 and possibly longer, Houghton generated income and fame from within London's spiritualist community as a medium through her spirit drawings.

Houghton's drawing developed a distinct style, which matured over the course of a decade between 1860 and 1870. "At the beginning we can it is easy to recognise shapes of plants, flowers and fruits, which is confirmed by the titles of the works."[122] These ghostly representations, however, were not representations of actual flowers or fruits, but instead represented the shapes, colors, and designs of the spirit that is inspiring, or entrancing her. Houghton describes this in the original catalogue which accompanied her exhibit in 1871: "With a birth of a child into earth life, a flower springs up in the spirit realms, which grows day by day

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[119] Georgiana Houghton, *The Sheltering Wings of The Most High*, 1862, watercolor and gouache on paper laid on board with pen and ink inscription, 237 x 326 mm, Victorian Spiritualists' Union, Melbourne, Australia, in *Georgiana Houghton Spirit Drawings*, 82.
[120] Georgiana Houghton, *The Portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ*, 1862, watercolor and gouache on board with pen and ink inscription, 326 x 237 mm, Victorian Spiritualists' Union, Melbourne, Australia, in *Georgiana Houghton Spirit Drawings*, 82.
[121] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 67.
[122] Grant and Pasi, "'Works of Art without Parallel in the World,'" 15.

in conformity with the infant's awakening powers."[123]

This artistic expression is recognizable in her works *Flower of Zilla Warren*, dated August 31, 1861,[124] and *Plant of Zilla Rosalia Warren*, dated April 8th, 1862.[125] These works, muted in comparison to the brightly colored *The Eye of God* or *The Sheltering Wing of the Most High* painted in 1862, are illustrations of Houghton's sister, Zilla's spirit. Perhaps most fitting is that the first spirit drawings composed by Houghton were inspired by the spirit of her sister, whose death had devastated Houghton to the point of abandoning her art. In 1865, The Royal Academy in London accepted two of Houghton's works for display, but they were never shown.[126] In 1869, Houghton's mother, Mary Anne, and her younger brother George died. That same year, Houghton's beloved nephew, son of her departed sister Zilla, died when the *SS Carnatic* sank off the coast of Egypt at Shadwan Island.[127]

Houghton opened her art exhibit in the New British Gallery at 39 Old Bond Street in London in 1871. The exhibit opened during the summer and remained open for four months. From May 22nd to September 22nd, 155 pieces were put on display for the public, a collection of ten years' worth of talent and spirit; some pieces she even procured back from her supporters.[128] According to Grant and Pasi, "Houghton hung the works herself, and decided on prices, with the

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[123] Georgiana Houghton, *Catalouge of the Spirit Drawings in Watercolors, Exhibited at the New British Gallery, Old Bond Street. By Miss Georgiana Houghton, through Whose Mediumship They have been Executed* (London: W. Corby, 1871), 8.
[124] Georgiana Houghton, *Flower of Zilla Warren*, 1861, watercolor and gouache on paper with pen and ink inscription, 326 x 237 mm, private collection, in *Georgiana Houghton Spirit Drawings*, 82.
[125] Georgiana Houghton, *Plant of Zilla Rosalia Warren*, 1862, watercolor and gouache on paper laid on board with pen and ink inscription, 326 x 237 mm, private collection, in *Georgiana Houghton Spirit Drawings*, 15.
[126] Grant and Pasi, "'Works of Art without Parallel in the World,'" (Footnote 71), 23.
[127] Sara Williams in introduction to *Evenings at Home*, "A Brief Chronology," 16.
[128] Grant, and Pasi, "'Works of Art without Parallel in the World,'" 18.

help of her "unseen friends"."[129] News of her exhibit spread throughout the spiritualist community in London, and many flocked to Old Bond Street to see the works for themselves. Houghton described preparing for the exhibition and shopping for an opening night dress a decade later, in *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance*:

> Although I may now, at a distance of ten years, look calmly back at that season of actively prepatory work, it was a time of considerable excitement, and the question of the dress I was to wear on the day of the private view, was by no means an unimportant one… when the time came that I could spare a day to visit Oxford Street and Regent Street, vain was my quest; the pattern of stars was out of vogue, and only some dreary, faded looking silks were in the deeper recesses of some of the shops.[130]

Houghton's exhibit, however, was met with mixed feelings from the public, even from London's spiritualist community. One reviewer from *The Examiner*, wrote in May of 1871:

> It seems, however, that the latest effort of the spirits has been to execute a series of 155 coloured drawings by the hand of Miss Georgiana Houghton, an especially favored medium… and we are not at all sure that they are not worth a visit… We do not wish to speak too harshly. And it does not follow that because we do not believe Miss Houghton, Miss Houghton herself does not believe the spirits. But it is a duty, either to protest against such ribaldry and folly as that which we have described, or else to pass it over in contemptuous silence.[131]

At their core, Houghton's works were uniquely different from the art that was being produced during the latter half of the nineteenth century. According to Grant and Pasi, "Such

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[129] Ibid.
[130] Houghton, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance*, 72-73.
[131] Appendix B in *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance*, "Miss Houghton's Spirit Drawings," *The Examiner* (1871): 534-535.

vitriol was unsurprising at a time when the gallery-goer was more likely to see paintings by the Pre-Raphaelites, and the most radical art being painted in London was works such as Whistler's *Nocturn: Blue and Silver – Chelsea* and Monet's *Thames below Westminster*."[132]

Many, including Houghton and her circle of spiritualist artists and peers, considered the exhibit to be a failure. This judgment, however, can be reconsidered depending upon perspective. The exhibit itself was funded by Houghton, and drained all her savings. The paintings she put on display were meant to mystify, but also projected to sell. Houghton sold only one of her works during the four months they were on display, sending her into financial destitution. Some of Houghton's friends gathered just enough money to help her through this financial downturn. Grant and Pasi commented, "From a purely financial point of view, the 1871 exhibition was a failure."[133]

Money, however, was not Houghton's only goal. While the exhibit did not do much for her in terms of spirit work, it did help to place her in the public sphere as an artist. Houghton had been dissatisfied with showing her art to just her close friends and her spiritualist counterparts, often in the rooms of her own home, or the homes of her friends. She not only wanted to make a name for herself as a medium, but also as an artist. This exhibition was groundbreaking because Houghton, a middle-aged woman, medium and spiritualist, was determined for the rest of London to see her works, even though the style and context of her works did not compliment the art of the time.[134] While Houghton may not be considered unique in her life as a spiritualist or as a medium, she was unique because she took her work outside of

[132] Grant and Pasi. "'Works of Art without Parallel in the World,'" 19.
[133] Grant and Pasi, "'Works of Art without Parallel in the World,'" 20.
[134] Ibid.

the private parlor and onto Old Bond Street, in central London.

Not long after Houghton's exhibit closed, she was introduced to Frederick Hudson (1818-1900) by a Mr. and Mrs. Guppy, a prominent couple in London's spiritualist circle.[135] Hudson was a contemporary of William Mumler, who claimed he discovered spirit photography in 1861. Together, Hudson and Houghton collaborated to develop spirit photography, with Houghton serving as a medium, and Hudson capturing the spirits who came to her. The Houghton Hudson Album, a collection of spirit photographs, chronicled some of Houghton and Hudson's major projects between 1872 and 1873. Grant and Pasi wrote, however, that eventually, "suspicions were raised about the authenticity of Hudson's photographs, which indirectly also affected Houghton."[136] Houghton continued to fight for the validity of spirit photography, but parted ways with Hudson because the integrity of his photos were called into question.

In the Houghton-Hudson album, the photos present evidence of spiritual presences. In her own handwritten words, Houghton campaigned for the existence of spirits and their activity. Beside most photos is Miss Houghton's penmanship, describing the spirit who had visited and their loved one. One of these photos, a picture of Houghton herself, has her seated with the spirit of Salome looming above her, "the wife of Zebedee." Houghton claims that Salome had inspired her "as pen and ink" in 1862, and complimented her, "high spiritual gifts accorded these days to women."[137]

In 1872, one Houghton's artworks, *May It watch over you*, was removed from the Dudley

[135] Sara Williams in introduction to *Evenings at Home*, "A Brief Chronology," 16.
[136] Grant and Pasi, "'Works of Art without Parallel in the World,'" 21.
[137] The Houghton-Hudson Album, 8.

Gallery in London, and the Royal Academy rejected several other works. Two years later, she became a member of the British National Association of Spiritualists, but Dudley Gallery refused her again. Her younger brother Charles died in 1878, and her elder sister Marianne died in 1879. With her artwork becoming less fruitful and much of her family dead, Houghton became preoccupied with mediumship, photography, and writing into the 1880s.

In 1881, Houghton published the first series of her autobiography, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance*. This autobiography revealed a decade of working as a spiritualist medium in London, including personal correspondences with other members of London's spiritualist circle, and her work as an artist and photographer.[138] That following year, the second series of *Evenings at Home* was published.[139] In the same year, she published another book, *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye. Interblended with Personal Narrative*, which included more spirit photographs.[140]

Madame Helena Blavatsky, a well-known medium and co-founder of the Theosophical Society, reviewed Houghton's *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye* in her occult periodical, *The Theosophist,* in April 1882:

> The most remarkable feature, in the book under review, is its illustrated plates. In their intrinsic value, the miniature photographs are perfect. They do the greatest honour to both the talent of the artist and the perseverance and patience of the author required of

[138] Houghton, *Evenings at Home*.
[139] Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance* (Second Series) (London: E.W. Allen, 1882.)
[140] Georgiana Houghton, *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye. Interblended with Personal Narrative* (London: E.W. Allen, 1882).

her, before she could achieve such fine results. As "Spirit" photographs, however, they allow a large margin for criticism, as they leave everything unexplained, and the figures are by no means satisfactory.[141]

Georgiana Houghton died on March 24, 1884, in Kensington, London. She was 69 years old. After her death, she and her art were remembered in the spiritualist community for a while; some remembered her more fondly than others. Her artwork was forgotten before her written works, and was shipped to Australia with no clear explanation as to why.[142] On April 11, 1884, *The Medium and Daybreak*, a spiritualist periodical, announced her death to the community:

> This well-known Spiritualist passed away on the morning of Monday, March 24th, nearly seventy years of age, after having lain for several weeks in a hopeless state from paralysis… she was unconscious and incapable of action… Miss Houghton had such a strong hope in being able to complete her literary task by the publication of another volume… But Miss Houghton in addition to being a most remarkable medium, was a very public-spirited woman, and her name and influence in the Cause were known far and near... we have to regard her as one of our very earliest contributors and correspondents. In all other public phases of the Movement she was equally active.[143]

Only a year later, however, *The Medium and Daybreak* again addressed the memory of Houghton in an anonymous section entitled "The Dangers of Dogmatism in Mediums," where un-named public spiritualists are able to ask questions regarding spiritualism and the occult. In the July 10, 1885, issue the inquirer asks the writer of *The Medium and Daybreak* just how

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[141] Helena Blavatsky, "Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye, by Miss G. Houghton. London: E.W. Allen, 1882," *The Theosophist*, 3, no. 7 (1882): 179-180.
[142] Grant and Pasi, "'Works of Art without Parallel in the World,'" 21.
[143] "Georgiana Houghton," *The Medium and Daybreak*, 15, no. 732 (1884): 234.

authentic Houghton's work really was, because she continued to believe in a Christian god while working as a medium. The inquirer, nicknamed "Truthseeker," wrote,

> According to the authoress of this work, the Creator permits Spiritualism merely as a further development of Christianity... l could afford to laugh at all this, but for the fact that Miss Houghton is apparently supported in her dogmas and assumptions by the archangels, angels and high spirits whom she asserts to have visited her.[144]

In response, *The Medium and Daybreak* replied, in part:

> It is equally foolish of our correspondent and others to attach the slightest importance to Miss Houghton's dogmas, simply because she was a drawing medium, and was subject to omens of a remarkable kind. Be men and women, think for yourselves, and, by doing so, pray for and deserve the assistance of the Spirit-world, and you will be saved from darkness and perplexity in the life that now is, and much regret and toil in the life to come. Let us strive for *freedom* from all mundane dogmas and influences![145]

Aspects of Houghton's life have made her into a passing figure in the occult and spiritualist movement of nineteenth century Britain. She was not a poster child for the spiritualist movement, because she came to it later in her life; she was not a young, beautiful medium, like the movement often showed; and she was unmarried, turning to mediumship and her artwork as a means of income for herself and the remaining members of her family. Her life was met with indifference, her works considered by many to be banal, and her memory was often considered controversial by many in the spiritualist community.

As a woman of the Victorian era, Houghton used the Spiritualist movement in several ways in order to achieve her own personal autonomy in London society. After her introduction

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[144] "The Dangers of Dogmatism in Mediums," *The Medium and Daybreak* 16, no. 797 (1885): 437.
[145] Ibid.

to mediumship and spiritualism in 1859, she spent most of the 1860s making a name for herself as a medium and, eventually, as a spirit artist. Mediumship, at this time, had become an acceptable means of earning an income, and Houghton took advantage of this exponentially, supporting herself and other members of her family on income she earned as a medium.

Houghton, who wanted to be well-known as both a medium and an artist, overstepped a very important boundary within the spiritualist community. Mediumship became an accepted form of income for women, but these women could most often be found in private spaces. By revealing her private medium artwork to the public eye, Houghton developed a reputation of distaste within the spiritualist community that only soured over time. However, Houghton was still a very important actor within the spiritualist movement. Time has softened some of her most controversial moments, and brought her artwork back to light. Houghton's work as a medium was well known in the spiritualist community, particularly in London, amongst the middle class.

Unique to this, also, is Houghton's spinster status. Most women of nineteenth century Britain married at least once over the course of their lives. While Houghton may have had several opportunities to accept a marriage proposal, she remained single her entire life. Many of the mediums working in London were married, and many of them were actually famous as a couple (Such as Mr. and Mrs. Guppy) both as mediums in London and in the spiritualist community. Houghton, by contrast, relied on her own talents to channel spirits, though it was common to perform séances in the presence of friends or family.

Even more unique, however, is Houghton's art exhibit in London. This moment in her life is so unique because while being a medium was mostly acceptable in private spaces (i.e.

parlors, private homes, or clubs) here was a woman who dared to bring her work into the public eye, in the form of her own personal artworks. In this moment, Houghton was unlike the average medium, and while her exhibit nearly ruined her financially, she still accomplished an amazing feat – a Victorian woman, putting her own spiritualist artwork in the public sphere when her mediumship was largely only accepted in private. This, largely, is how Houghton created autonomy for herself as a woman and a spiritualist.

5. Medium, Editor, and Inspiration: Emma Hardinge Britten and the Spiritualist Movement

There are very few women who can compare to the life and work of Emma Hardinge Britten (1823-1899) who, at a very young age, recognized her talents for mediumship. Discovering these talents early on, Britten spent an entire lifetime building a career around her mediumship and in the service of spiritualism through travel and publication; she was the editor of multiple occult periodicals, including *The Two Worlds* and *The Unseen Universe*; she also authored two books on spiritualism, *Modern American Spiritualism; A Twenty Years' Record of the Communication Between Earth and the World of Spirits*[146] and *Nineteenth Century Miracles: Or Spirits and Their Work in Every Country on Earth*.[147] Though the majority of spiritualist and occult periodicals were edited by men, Emma Hardinge Britten challenged this by becoming editor of three occult periodicals and continuously contributing to occult discourse through spiritualistic speeches and publications. As editor, she broke the medium mold, but as a lecturer, she spoke for thousands of women within the movement, both in the United Kingdom and the United States.

In addition to her publication efforts, Britten traveled extensively throughout the United Kingdom and the United States, giving lectures on spiritualism and mediumship, and even became an advocate for women's rights. She gave sermons on spiritualism in the first "Spiritualist Church," on King William Street in London. A native of London, Britten is the only individual studied in this work whose spiritualist beginning was also located where she was

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[146] Emma Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism; A Twenty Years' Record of the Communication Between Earth and the World of Spirits* (New York: Chez l'auteur), 1870.
[147] Emma Hardinge Britten, *Nineteenth Century Miracles: Or Spirits and Their Work in Every Country on Earth* (New York: Lovell & Co., 1884).

born; her imminent success in adulthood began with the opportunities that London had to offer earlier in her life.

While many mediums' careers did not extend past their own city or even their own country, Britten's efforts took her around the world to discuss the joys of the spiritualist movement. Her work on behalf of spiritualism not only provided her with financial autonomy, but with a spiritual autonomy as she traveled throughout the United Kingdom and the United States. This also placed her directly in the public eye, calling into question the Victorian ideal of women's place, while playing on the spiritualist ideal of still having the medium in the home, unpaid for her gifts.

Born as Emma Floyd in London, Britten's talents for mediumship began very early. With a gifted voice and a love of music, she was consistently the center of everyone's attention; however, her childhood was not a happy one. In her autobiography, Britten wrote: "I fancy that I was never young, joyous or happy, like other children; my delight was to steal away alone and seek the solitude of woods and fields, but above all to wander in churchyards, cathedral cloisters, and old monastic ruins."[148] In the periodical *The Medium*, Britten's childhood was accounted for, describing the young Emma as "the terror of her nursery attendants, and the problem of all who knew her. It seems probable that hereditary influences were prevalent in this child's nature."[149]

Many of her characteristics, including her spiritualistic ones, she gained from her father, a sea captain. Britten lost her father at the "very tender age" of eleven, and it was this loss during

[148] Emma Hardinge Britten, *Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten* (London: John Heywood, 1900): 3.
[149] Britten, *Autobiography*, 4.

her childhood that was "instrumental" in preparing her for the work she would do later in life.[150] Britten recounted the loss of her father in her autobiography, and stated, "I am quite sure I suffered the bitterness of death when my good father, to whom I was passionately attached, passed away from earth."[151] Without her father's care, Britten understood very young that she "was compelled to depend upon her own talents for subsistence."[152] In order to provide for herself and what remained of her family, Britten trained as an opera singer. During her time as a performer, she climbed London's social ladder; her gifts as a musician "threw her into the society of persons far above her in rank,"[153] and she continued to study music and opera in Paris. Later, Britten's speaking and mediumship allowed her to support herself and her mother. Instead of conforming to what was considered the ideal medium, or one that did not accept a form of payment for her work with spirits, Britten advocated for the right to a living. "Mediums like Emma Hardinge Britten argued that 'if my mediumistic gift is the one most in requisition, it is no less worthy of being exchanged for bread than any other', but some spiritualists considered it almost immoral to place a price upon a blessed gift."[154]

According to a the *Medium* article cited (but not named) in Britten's autobiography, however, her time in Paris was an unstable one: "…she [Britten] became impelled to rise from her bed in profound sleep, climb tremendous heights, traverse the wintry streets, preach, recite, and enact fearful scenes; very often the somnambulist would utter wild cries and screams…" the consequences of this strange behavior cost Britten her voice, and her dreams of singing

[150] Britten, *Autobiography*, 4-5.
[151] Britten, *Autobiography*, 5.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 56.

professionally were forcibly relinquished. Britten then became a pianist and composer, borrowing a pianoforte from a musician friend, Pierre Erard (1796-1855), nephew of Sebastian Erard (1752-1831), a renowned harp and pianoforte builder in Paris.[155]

As a pianist, Britten again came in touch with her spiritualistic gifts. She referred to herself as a "magnetic subject," and could play any music that her audience desired with a "wave of the hand" above her head, or an unspoken request from the audience. She claimed that this gift, so "rare and ill understood" made her a unique performer, frightened her friends and family.[156] Her mother consulted a doctor, and worried that unless these episodes ceased, "it would either end in permanent lunacy or death."[157] Following her surrender of her musical and clairvoyant talents, she returned to England and took to the stage, becoming an actress at the Adelphi and other London theatres. Britten struggled to retain work, and often had to rely on the patronage of men and theatre owners, forcing her to become dependent on what she referred to as "my millionaire enemy's *kind* protection."[158]

Britten and her mother boarded the ship *Pacific* and sailed for America in 1856. Upon arriving at their friend's home in New York City, Britten recalled, "my poor mother and I sat down to gaze into each other's faces with pitying glances, then to shed bitter tears… and finally to dry our tears and pledge ourselves to act out the new life before us…"[159] A theatre manager implored Britten to make the journey to New York; once there, Britten determined that knowing

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[155]"History of the Pianoforte," *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 24 no. 482 (1883): 200-202.
[156] Britten, *Autobiography*, 6.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Britten, *Autobiography*, 7.
[159] Britten, *Autobiography*, 12.

the manager in person was enough to send her back to England in spite of his "offers of an engagement," if she had the means to return.[160]

In spite of this clash with the theatre manager, Britten was "received most graciously" by her "Western audience, and became the subject of warm complimentary notices from the various New York papers."[161] However, the degradation she suffered at the hands of her theatre manager was not enough to keep her on the stage; Britten, trapped in a contract, was unable to find work, and her manager forced her into "comparative idleness." At such a young age, Britten's livelihood suffered at the hands of her manager, and began to harken towards women's rights. According to Owen:

> Emma Hardinge Britten… had spent her youthful years in America where she had faced hardship and abuse in the cause of women's rights and abolitionism. This woman had the ability to fill halls with anything from 1,500 to 3,000 people, and in 1859 was telling her American audiences that the time had come for women to claim social, religious, and political equality with men. Her arguments were not directed against the institution of marriage; indeed she represented its usual Victorian consequence – motherhood – as a vital aspect of female fulfillment. Rather she was objecting to the qualified notion of marriage and domesticity as women's rightful – and, for middle-class women, often only available – sphere.[162]

Britten's stance on women's rights and women's place, both in the private and the public spheres, would escalate with her growing popularity throughout the 1870s and 1880s. Spiritualists turned to Britten's final word on the place of women within spiritualism. Britten often spoke for women within spiritualism and within the early women's rights movement of the

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[160] Ibid.
[161] Britten, *Autobiography*, 13-14.
[162] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 31.

nineteenth century. Her platform, which reached thousands of people, helped her to remain a major player in the women's rights movement, in the United Kingdom and America. In a rather prophetic address in 1859, Britten delivered a lecture in Boston, and stated,

> Woman! Regard thy place in the history of the past, and thou wilt see that the Divine hand has led thee, step by step, as he has led thy companion, not as thou dost suppose, beneath the pall of degradation and obscurity, but precisely where thy foot should have been planted. Men and women! You know that the elements of change, when they rise to the surface, appear in bubbled on the ocean, or in fires from the volcano, - all protend that a change is at hand, that a transition state in society is being passed through… Learn from the signs of the times, that the subject of Woman and Marriage now agitates society with a power that portends a mighty change.[163]

Most Spiritualists supported Britten's belief that "women were most fitted to healing, teaching, and motherhood because these nurturing activities were the ones most likely to fulfill their 'moon-like love,' and 'star-like beauty'."[164] Britten described the natures nineteenth century women and demanded that they be shown the respect they rightfully deserved, especially while in the home. According to Owen, even while Britten called for respect for wives and mothers in the private sphere, she was still met with some backlash; even while Britten defended "'the place and mission of woman', and a commitment to women's rights, spiritualists still identified closely with the image of the 'precious little woman'."[165] She was also critical of marriage, and argued that, "with marriage presented as the only viable option, there was 'but one mission… open to women – that of being laid on the counter for man to choose as toy or

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[163] Emma Harding Britten, *The Place and Mission of Woman. An Inspirational Discourse*, (Boston: Hubbard W. Swett, 1859), 3.
[164] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 113.
[165] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 39.

ornament'."[166] However, while Britten was an advocate for women's rights throughout the late nineteenth century, she denounced the free-love movement beginning during this period, particularly amongst the middle class.[167] In this way, Britten supported the position that while spiritualists often twisted Victorian ideals, there were still cultural expectations, even within spiritualism. It was important to spiritualists like Britten that their promotion of the spiritualist movement did not mean they supported vagabond or liberal sexual behavior. Britten described this free love cultural fad as a "dangerous but widespread epidemic of popular thought."[168]

It was also in New York that Britten was further exposed to the concepts of séance and mediumship; a married couple among her friends in the city "excited my equal surprise and horror by perpetually talking of their intercourse with 'Spirits of the dead,' whom they represented as being all alive again, and behaving very much as if they were on the most intimate terms with the people of the earth they had quitted."[169] Britten had been a member of an occult circle back in London, where she served as "ghost seer." With this new encounter in America, Britten began to understand the gifts she had become familiar with, but could never explain. She exclaimed, "…whilst I had ever been a 'Ghost seer,' and accustomed to hear mysterious voices, I never could connect such sights and sounds with the 'Spirits of the dead.'" [170]

It was also on this night that Britten was escorted to her first American séance with a Mr. Ranney, "a worthy Canadian gentleman, who was one of the much dreaded 'Spiritualists,' to a

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[166] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 32.
[167] Estelle B. Freedman, "Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America: Behavior, Ideology, and Politics," *Reviews in American History* 10 no.4 (1982): 204-205.
[168] Britten, *Autobiography*, 178.
[169] Britten, *Autobiography*, 15.
[170] Ibid.

place wherein," where she was promised she "could learn the truth of what he alleged…" She described her experience in detail, at a séance on Canal Street:

> I found myself in a dismal ill-furnished room, where a number of commonplace looking people were sitting round a wooden table, watching with seemingly deep interest its heavy and incessant rockings to and fro. Although this "Circle room," as I was informed, was a public one, and open to any strangers who paid the stipulated fee at the door, my companion whispered to me that the party was in the midst of receiving a communication from "the Spirits," and we must wait quietly where we stood until it was completed, when no doubt we should be invited to join the circle.

This experience, along with a visit to a New York City medium, Mrs. Kellogg, confirmed Britten's understanding of spirits, and her abilities to speak with them. She asserted, even while she had served as a medium in circle in London, that her abilities had called her to this moment. In later writings, she explains that her abilities had been with her from a young age, but spiritualism provided her with the knowledge on how to use them:

> The Spiritual gifts that are normal to mediumistic individuals from birth may change and alter during earth life, but never wholly depart, and as this was happily my own case, and I was "born a witch," as some of my public opponents have politely informed the world, I have experienced many changes, though no actual loss of mediumistic unfoldment, throughout a long and busy career.[171]

To her recollection, she began to develop as a medium on Wednesday, February 19th, 1856. On this day, the ship that she and her mother had come to New York on, the *Pacific*, was due to come back into port. Britten had remained friends with the crew of the ship, but it did not come in on the evening it was supposed to. Britten recounts that evening with her mother in

[171] Britten, *Autobiography*, 2.

their home, her first experience with spirit:

> At last, at my mother's suggestion, I consented to sit at the table, with the alphabet we had provided turned from me and toward her, so that she could follow the involuntary movements of my finger, which some power seemed to guide in pointing out the letters.
>
> In this way was rapidly spelled out, "Philip Smith, ship 'Pacific.'
>
> For a few moments this mode of manifestation ceased, and, to my horror, I distinctly felt an icy cold hand laid on my arm; then, distinctly and visibly to my mother's eyes, something pulled my hair, which was hanging in long curls; all the while the coldness of the air increasing so painfully that the apartment seemed pervaded by arctic breezes.
>
> After a while, my own convulsed hand was moved tremblingly, but very rapidly, to spell out: "My dear Emma, I have come to tell you I am dead. The ship 'Pacific' is lost, and all on board have perished; she and her crew will never be heard from more."[172]

Commenting on Britten's process as a medium, Owen has written that: "Emma Hardinge Britten in a state of trance often felt herself 'to be two individuals': one whose lips were 'uttering a succession of sentences, sometimes familiar to me, oftener new and strange', and the other 'an onlooker and occasional listener'."[173] This can be seen in her first experience as a medium, where she is both herself and entranced to communicate with someone else, such as with Phillip Smith's spirit.

The *Pacific* never made it back to port in New York City, for as Britten, Mrs. Kellogg, and other mediums in the city had predicted, the ship and its crew was lost at sea and never heard from again.[174] From that evening on, Britten claimed that visits from spirits came frequently.

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[172] Britten, *Autobiography*, 32.
[173] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 124-125.
[174] Britten, *Autobiography*, 34.

She began automatic writing, and spoke to the spirits like she did her living friends. J.J. Morse (1848-1919), a medium of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, harkening to her role as both an actress of the theatre and as a medium, stated in her autobiography, "Unexpectedly—nay, almost unwillingly—called to her high office, as Embassadress to the Unseen World, Emma Hardinge Britten played her part in the world drama, and filled it nobly and well."[175]

Britten speaks of her abilities as constantly evolving, changing, and merging into different forms of mediumship, "…with the exception of boisterous physical manifestations, or that which I coveted beyond all else—a medium for raps— it is impossible to name a phase of mediumship through which I did not pass, and in which I was not exercised." She occupied her time in New York by visiting every medium and spiritualist she could find, and attended every circle she knew of.[176] While Britten was developing her medium abilities in the late 1850s, she was also submitting stories to *The Spiritual Age*, which were published.[177]

Britten aided law enforcement with cases, and claimed, "…I was frequently visited by detectives, whilst other mediums who were baffled in difficult cases of enquiry generally sent their investigators to me."[178] Britten prided in herself the ability to name the spirits she conversed with, a skill that was not allotted to all mediums in New York. She developed a good reputation as a "wonderful test medium" in the city, but she attributed this praise to the spirits she

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[175] J.J. Morse in preface to *Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten* (London: John Heywood, 1900): vii.
[176] Britten, *Autobiography*, 35.
[177] Molly Youngkin, "A 'duty' to 'tabulate and record': Emma Hardinge Britten as Periodical Editor and Spiritualist Historian," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 49 no. 1 (2016): 53.
[178] Britten, *Autobiography*, 36.

channeled, and stated, "I may venture to say they were no more wonderful to my sitters than to myself; for, with each fresh sitting for strangers, I was more and more astonished at the power, genius, and cleverness of the modes in which the Spirits identified themselves…"[179]

During the occult revival and throughout the nineteenth century, while most mediums in the spiritualist movement were women, most of the occult and spiritualist periodicals were founded by men. Britten challenged this by contributing, editing, and beginning her own periodical contributions to the occult revival and the spiritualist movement. Historians Molly McGarry, Robert Mathiesen and Ann Taves have all characterized Britten as the first "historian of spiritualism."[180] Britten's "historian" status has been researched, criticized, and re-researched again; however, her contribution to nineteenth century occult periodical literature is one of massive dedication. Britten was editor for three occult and spiritualist periodicals during her lifetime: the American *Western Star* (1872), and the British *Two Worlds* (1887-1892) and *Unseen Universe* (1892-1893).[181] Literary scholar Molly Youngkin argued that Britten constantly promoted her own work, both within periodical and book publications, and that this incessant self-promotion should be observed in the context of "women's broader struggles to carve out spaces for themselves in a male-dominated journalistic tradition."[182]

While in New York, Britten got her first experience with occult periodical publications. From 1854 to 1856, she assisted John H. W. Toohey and Horace H. Day, members of the Society for the Diffusion of Spiritual Knowledge in the publication of *The Christian Spiritualist*,

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[179] Britten, *Autobiography*, 41-42.
[180] Youngkin, "A 'duty' to 'tabulate and record,'"49-50.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Youngkin, "A 'duty' to 'tabulate and record,'"55.

published weekly. Horace Day was one of Britten's "warmest and kindest" friends and "well known in New York as the founder of large india-rubber works."[183] *The Christian Spiritualist* was an attempt to organize American spiritualism using a top-down approach, with professionals and intellectuals serving as members of the Society for the Diffusion of Spiritual Knowledge. *The Christian Spiritualist* allowed Britten to become familiar with periodical publication and make a name for herself as historian of spiritualism.

The first mention of Britten and her extraordinary abilities was published in *The Banner of Light* in 1858. By the early 1860s, Britten was traveling the east coast of the United States and was discussed in European occult periodicals.[184] This profession as historian was further developed in 1866, when Britten began promoting a two-volume "history of spiritualism in America," and wrote the first volume from 1867 to 1869 while she was in England.[185] In 1868, she gave a crucial lecture in Glasgow, Scotland, entitled "What is Spiritualism?" Here Britten begins to not only work as a writer and editor, but as a contributor to the definitions of nineteenth century spiritualism and what it means to be a spiritualist. This did not apply to the practice of mediumship, but to the religion and practice of spiritualism more broadly. In her lecture, Britten stated:

> Spiritualism, if considered in its religious sense, belongs to no age, no country, no special class of mind. It is the acknowledgement of a Spiritual origin of all things; the unfoldment of those mystic ties that bind the soul to its author; the opening of the page of that grand and occult revelation which discloses to us the nature, quality, possible destiny, and absolute relations of the human soul to immortality. We do not, therefore,

[183] Britten, *Autobiography*, 39.
[184] Youngkin, "A 'duty' to 'tabulate and record,'" 53.
[185] Ibid.

> propose to speak of Spiritualism in this grand and universal light to-night, simply of its specialty as a modern movement.[186]

Modern American Spiritualism was published two years later in 1870, and emerged a comprehensive history of the Modern Spiritualist Movement in America. According to Yougnkin:

> Taves confirms that Britten's most significant contribution to the existing body of spiritualist histories was her attention to the preservation of records, arguing that she adopted the methods of a "church historian," who focused on the individuals and groups involved in the development of a church or movement, rather than following the methods used by Howitt and Peebles…[187]

Emma Hardinge married William Britten, a spiritualist from Boston, that same year; her first solo editorial venture, as creator and editor of the *Western Star*, allowed her to grow further in the world of journalism and periodicals. In the *Western Star* and *Banner of Light*, she consistently promoted her longer works, like *Modern American Spiritualism*. "Britten's use of history in the *Western Star* is clearly influenced by her interest in promoting both volume of *Modern American Spiritualism*… the fact that Britten also serially published chapters from the unpublished volume of *Modern American Spiritualism* shows her continued commitment to carving out a space for herself…"[188] After Britten left the *Western Star*, she would not go back to editing for fifteen years; instead, she chose to contribute to the spiritualist discourse through monograph-style histories.

Britten traveled to Australia to lecture in 1878 and 1879, giving a series of lectures in

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[186] Britten, "What is Spiritualism?" (Glasgow: H. Nisbet), 1868. 8.
[187] Youngkin, "A 'duty' to 'tabulate and record,'"54.
[188] Youngkin, "A 'duty' to 'tabulate and record,'" 57.

Melbourne over the course of ten months.[189] She and her husband served as spiritualist missionaries while Britten continued to lecture. The topics of her lectures were entirely left in the hands of her audience. As she recalled later, "I allowed a committee of the audience to choose the subjects of my lectures, the origin of all religious faiths as taught in various ancient lands was almost always presented as their choice."[190] Before leaving Melbourne, Britten was "requested" by "several scholarly men" to publish the lectures she presented while in the city.[191] In 1879, she published *The Faiths, Facts, and Frauds of Religious History: A Treatise in Ten Sections*, a book based on the lectures she gave while traveling through Australia.[192]

In 1879, Britten returned to the United States, before leaving for the United Kingdom in 1881, continuing to lecture on spiritualism and promote her own works. She used the platform of other periodicals to reach her audience. "In the July 30, 1881 issue of *Light*, she announced that she was writing a "compendious history of the great MODERN SPIRITUALIST MOVEMENT as it has transpired ALL OVER THE WORLD in the nineteenth century."[193] By 1883, *Nineteenth Century Miracles* had gone to press.

In 1887, Britten became the editor of the *Two Worlds*, a spiritualist periodical that focused on the effects of spiritualist beliefs based in Manchester, England. According to J.J. Morse, "For five years her abilities were unstintedly expended in the Editorial chair of 'The Two Worlds,' which paper rapidly sprang into public favour under her care."[194] *Two Worlds*

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[189] Britten, *Autobiography*, 103.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Youngkin, "A 'duty' to 'tabulate and record,'"60.
[193] Ibid.
[194] J.J. Morse in preface to *Autobiography*, viii

emphasized the importance of history within the spiritualist movement. This emphasis, of course, played to Britten's advantage. Here, she grew into a position as both spiritualist editor and historian. Owen wrote:

> Towards the end of the 1880s a rival to the London presses appeared in the form of the highly successful *Two Worlds*, which was published in Manchester. Under the editorship of the talented and well-known medium, Emma Hardinge Britten, *Two Worlds* adopted a progressive and crusading stance which won it an enthusiastic readership among provincial and reform-minded spiritualists.[195]

While Britten was the editor for *Two Worlds*, she continuously contributed to the literature of the occult revival and went to great lengths to professionalize the influx of mediums that was in London during the late nineteenth century. In 1887, she published "How to Investigate Spiritualism; Or, Rules for the Spiritualist Circle," where she described the proper environment and behavior of a private séance, as well as tips for how to spot a fraudulent medium. One of her many regulations for the spiritualist circle was the allowance for automatic drawing or writing. She stated:

> If a strong impression to write, speak, sing, dance, or gesticulate possess any mind present, follow it out faithfully. It has a meaning if you cannot at first realize it. Never feel hurt in your own person, nor ridicule your neighbor for any failures to express or discover the meaning of the spirit impressing you.[196]

While Britten's editorship was praised throughout her time at *Two Worlds*, she was forced to leave in 1892, when "the journal's board discovered that her husband had been

[195] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 24.
[196] Britten, "How to Investigate Spiritualism; Or, Rules for the Spiritualist Circle," 2.

involved in inappropriate business practices while serving as its president."[197] While she may have left *Two Worlds* amidst scandal, Britten was editor of a new periodical only two months after she left *Two Worlds*, the *Unseen Universe*, her final contribution to occult periodical literature. In the *Unseen Universe*, Britten focused even more clearly on the history of spiritualism, and even published a section entitled "Historical Spiritualism" once a month. When Britten discontinued the *Unseen Universe*, she cited a lack of funds and a calling to write her autobiography, which was later published in 1900.[198]

Emma Hardinge Britten died on October 2, 1899 due to a "total collapse of health and energy."[199] For her, spiritualism had not just grown into a religion but a way of life, and she had a crucial hand in the development of spiritualism for thirty years as she spoke and wrote. The tragic loss of her father at the young age of eleven characterizes her with the mediums studied here; devastating loss is the thread that bonds many mediums of the late nineteenth century together. According to James Robinson, "In all lands wherever Spiritualism is known the name of Mrs. Britten is held in the highest reverence. She inspired many persons who had lost the Eternal Hope and could not think there was a future life."[200] Britten's three editorial positions in occult periodicals, accompanied with multiple public works on the history of spiritualism, and her numerous lectures given all over the world, make her one of the most traveled, most involved women of the spiritualist movement. Britten's involvement in the spiritualist movement provided her with a sense of spiritual, physical, and financial autonomy that can be attributed

[197] Youngkin, "A "duty" to "tabulate and record,"" 66.
[198] Youngkin, "A "duty" to "tabulate and record,"" 68.
[199] James Robinson, *Noble Pioneer: The Life Story of Emma Hardinge Britten* (Manchester: WORLDS Publishing Co., 1901), 14.
[200] Ibid.

directly to her gifts as a talented and popular medium, and her involvement in the Modern Spiritualist Movement.

6: Rosa Campbell Praed: Theosophy, Feminism, Authorship, and Autonomy at the Turn of the Century

The occult revival found its way into British literature beginning in the early nineteenth century; however, occult-inspired works of fiction became popular later, once a solid occult and spiritualist following became established. Most of these occult fiction pieces were published in and around London; many occult authors, including Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873), Charles Dickens (1812-1870), George Du Maurier (1834-1896), Marie Corelli (1855-1924), and Rosa Campbell Praed (1851-1935) focused their operations there during the late nineteenth century.

Praed's life is yet another example of deep suffering; born in colonial Australia, her family was vulnerable to diseases and physical attacks; medicine was scarce, and she watched her frail mother raise her children in a sickened state. The suffering she and her family endured in Australia became internalized until she began writing. She was married unhappily to a husband who was unsupportive of her spiritual endeavors. Praed came to the spiritualist movement after she left Australia and moved to England, becoming engrossed in theosophy, and socializing in the same London circles as its influential members, Madame Helena Blavatsky, Annie Besant, and Henry Steel Olcott.

It was in this environment that Praed was exposed to the concept of occult fiction, even though she had built spiritual foundations for herself in the Australian bush. Through the occult novel, Praed forged both spiritual and physical autonomy for herself, ignoring her husband's unaccommodating grumbles and supporting her own luxurious lifestyle with the money her

books generated. However, it was not until she divorced her husband and met Nancy Harward in 1899, that she found true spiritual autonomy and happiness.

Praed's relationship with Nancy, and the resulting novels like *Nyria*, are the true lynchpin to Praed's importance to the occult revival in nineteenth century London. Using Harward as her medium, Praed played with concepts of the occult, reincarnation, and past lives. It is only until Praed began her relationship with Harward that Praed's novels consistently held onto occult themes. With the help of Harward and *Nyria*, Praed accomplished full spiritual and physical autonomy in a literary world that only just began to accept women as writers. This autonomy would not have been possible without occult fiction, the occult revival, or the creation of theosophy; in the same vain, occult fiction, the occult revival, and theosophy would not have flourished in the same way without Praed.

Nineteenth century British literature saw the establishment of the gothic novel, and so much of the popular fiction in the late Victorian period became rooted in the gothic and the supernatural. Occult fiction grew as a genre while spiritualism and other occult groups established themselves in Britain. This new wave of fiction found its home in movements of popular fiction, which separated itself from literary tradition, where gothic fiction often resides. Literary scholar Andrew McCann wrote that because occult fiction filled a niche in the nineteenth century literary world, it was a detailed reflection of late Victorian society; this was because occult fiction, as popular fiction, was written based on what readers and audiences wanted to read at the time. [201]

[201] Andrew McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4.

McCann asserts that there is a difference between works of popular fiction and works of literary tradition. In *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain*, separating "the tension between instrumentalized conceptions of literary culture… and the alterity that disturbs them… and how the experience of the occult intersects with the development of popular literary aesthetics at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries."[202] The tension that accumulated between what readers considered traditional and popular works of fiction became even more distressed as women began to move into the literary zeitgeist of the nineteenth century, without a pen name or anonymity. What was once a man's profession and practice slowly began to open up to women, without risking a woman's reputation.

In Britain, the nineteenth century brought literary change. Literacy and greater access to print media rose from previous decades. (source) These new developments in British literature allowed for women to create their own literary space within the traditional fiction. However, this fresh outlook was not made available to women readily. Both writing and reading literature had been a male-dominated enterprise. In their groundbreaking work, *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*, literary scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote that the pen was often considered a physical symbol of masculinity. A man who lost his ability to write was not considered to be a man at all.[203]

The nineteenth century was the first time that female authorship did not have to remain predominantly anonymous.[204] This new avenue of enterprise did not come without its share of

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[202] McCann, *Popular Literature*, 3.
[203] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 3.
[204] Ibid.

struggles; a great number of nineteenth century British men, authors or not, believed that women had no place in literature. Gilbert and Gubar write that in the nineteenth century, male sexuality was the essence of literary power, and women were subjected to a "schizophrenia of authorship" that characterized female literature of this period.[205] Inspired by this literary counterculture, female authors throughout the nineteenth century, i.e. Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Marie Corelli, and Rosa Praed were forced to view themselves as literal and figurative monsters as they struggled with their new means of autonomy.[206]

With female authorship becoming more pronounced, and the occult revival taking hold of nineteenth century Britain, women in the occult and spiritualist movements were faced with a new outlet of autonomy. Occult fiction became a new way for women to become involved in the new romantic and gothic movements that were sweeping through popular literature. Not only did mediums become authors of fiction, but mediums were the objects of fiction as well. Women as medium characters is discussed in literary scholar Jill Galvan's book, *The Sympathetic Medium: Female Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919*.[207]

Studying female involvement in channeling through literature, Galvan observed the "distinct feminine trope" which arises within nineteenth century literature and by extension, nineteenth century culture.[208] Galvan argued that due to the changes in technology from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, women became associated with communication technologies and, by extension, associated with mediumship. Galvan's research observed these

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[205] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 69.
[206] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 21-23.
[207] Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium*.
[208] Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium*, 2.

patterns from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Grant Allen and May Cote's *Kalee's Shrine* (1886) and Marie Corelli's *The Soul of Lilith* (1892).

Rosa Campbell Praed wrote fiction, and as a medium, was an object of fiction herself. Her parents were some of the first colonists in New South Wales, and she was born in the Australian bush in 1851.[209] Patricia Clarke, Praed's biographer, wrote: "All her life Rosa was conscious of the special nature of her childhood as a daughter of early pioneers… It was to give her the authority to write about the emotional impact of the Australian bush…"[210] As a new and ambitious author, Praed wrote about her unique experiences in her biographical works, *Australian Life in Black and White: Sketches of Australian Life* (1885) and *My Australian Girlhood: Sketches and Impressions of Bush Life* (1902). When Rosa later left Australia for London, her memories of her life in Australia intensified with time.

Much of Praed's childhood was riddled with complications; her father, Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior, repeatedly moved them farther north in Australia to colonize, even while his wife, Matilda, was pregnant; Matilda feared death each time she had to give birth, since there were no doctors to be found in the bush. Clarke wrote, "As they traveled, Rosa saw her mother (not yet thirty and pregnant for the sixth time) as a vision of fragility…"[211] En route to Hawkwood, Praed's mother was stricken with sandy blight, a disease of the eye caused by flies. Clarke described the disease as "so intensely painful that it drove sufferers mad and sometimes made them blind."[212] For a year, Praed's mother was forced to live with bandages over her eyes.

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[209] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 7.
[210] Ibid.
[211] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 13.
[212] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 15.

The stress of Praed's childhood returned to her in "phantasmagoric visions," and her time in the Australian bush with Aboriginal tribes awarded her a deep appreciation for spirituality. Praed's early exposure to the spiritual traditions of the native peoples of Australia fostered an early belief in the spiritual and the supernatural.[213] It was Praed's mother who fostered an encouragement in literature, and she implored her young daughter to write. Matilda encouraged her children to begin a monthly periodical called the *Maroon Magazine* to stoke their creativity, of which Rosa was a star contributor of poems, plays, and stories.[214]

By the time Praed took the journey from Australia to London in 1876, she was an established writer, unhappily married and with two children. Her writing granted her a level of popularity by the time she reached England; and through the 1880s and 1890s, she would make a home for her literary work in the newly established popular occult literature. Some of her fiction included *Nadine: The Study of a Woman* (1882), *Affinities: A Romance of Today* (1885), *The Brother of the Shadow: A Mystery of Today* (1886), and *The Soul of Countess Adrian: A Romance* (1891).[215] These works drew on the gothic and romantic literary traditions of the nineteenth century while also playing with the popular trends of death and the supernatural. The occult periodical *Golden Gate*, published in San Francisco, California, praised Praed's *Affinities* as one of the best "psychical novels" in 1886.[216] *Affinities*' leading male character is a psychic vampire based on a fellow nineteenth century author, Oscar Wilde.[217]

One of Praed's literary colleagues was Marie Corelli, who authored the best-selling *The*

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[213] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 19.
[214] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 23.
[215] McCann, *Popular Literature*, 115.
[216] J.J. Owen, *The Golden Gate*, 3 no. 22 (1886): 7.
[217] McCann, *Popular Literature*, 28.

Soul of Lilith (1892) and *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895). Nicola Diane Thompson described Corelli's work of the 1890s as "New Woman Fiction," in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*.[218] Praed, who never truly reached the level of popularity that Corelli did, can also be considered a contemporary of "New Woman Fiction," with much of her occult work grounded in the perception and treatment of women during the turn of the century, where Victorian gender ideology began to clash with the concept of twentieth century modernism. According to Damien Barlow, re-evaluation of Praed's stories by feminist historians bring forward "feminist romantic tradition occupied with the position of women (particularly in relation to marriage), and questioning the overtly masculinist and nationalistic discourses…"[219]

While Praed's novels never out-sold Corelli's, the two authors were often compared throughout the 1880s and 1890s. When Praed's influence in British popular literature began to diminish into the twentieth century, Corelli's began to increase. While the aesthetics of Praed's and Corelli's novels were decidedly similar, the two women differed in one dramatic way: Praed was an avid believer in the occult, spiritualism, and theosophy, while Corelli simply wrote to fill a gap in popular literature. The deterioration in Praed's fame was true within popular fiction, but she remained a major contributor to occult fiction within occult, spiritualist, and theosophical circles well into the twentieth century. For example, the *Theosophic Messenger* lists Praed's *Body of His Desire: A Romance of the Soul* under "Theosophical Books of Concern" in their issue printed in November of 1912.[220] Her most thought-provoking publication in the current

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[218] Nicola Diane Thompson, *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[219] Damien Barlow, "'My Little Ghost-Save': The Queer Lives of Rosa Praed," *Australian Literary Studies* 17 no.4 (1996): 1.
[220] "Theosophical Books of Concern," *The Theosophic Messenger*, 14 no. 2 (1912).

context, *Nyria*, was not published until 1904.

In the space of five years, Praed published five novels and had secured publication for a sixth. In 1885, three more of her manuscripts were published; many of these works were dedicated to her life in Australia and the troubles her family had faced. *Affinities: A Romance of Today* was Praed's beginnings in occult authorship. According to Clarke, "In *Affinities*, Rosa entered a new field, portraying in fiction the impact of the new wave of occultism and theosophy on London society."[221] By this time, Praed was dependent upon her writing to support an "expensive way of life."[222]

Praed's works became influenced by the ever-growing presence of theosophy in late nineteenth century Britain. Theosophy was another break away from the occult revival that drew much of its ideology from spiritualism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Literary scholar Gauri Viswanathan has written,

> Theosophy emerged in the nineteenth century as a spiritual movement more compatible with science than Christianity was. Theosophy 's self-positioning between science and religion grew out of its interventions in the debates over mind and matter, which pit the monistic view that mind is matter against Christianity's body-soul dualism.[223]

McCann wrote that Praed's "persistent interest in reincarnation, in narratives of spiritual evolution and in a cosmopolitan cultural sensibility all evidence an ongoing orientation that was broadly congruent with that of Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant,"[224] both of whom were

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[221] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!* 79.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Gauri Viswanathan, "'Have Animals Souls?': Theosophy and the Suffering Body," *PMLA* 126, no. 2 (2011): 441.
[224] McCann, *Popular Literature*, 118.

co-founders of the Theosophical Society in 1875 in New York. "Early Theosophy"[225] concerned itself with "investigations into the esoteric and the occult."[226] The later theosophical movement focused on the promotion of what Blavatsky considered to be ancient spiritualities, particularly influenced by the rise of orientalism in the nineteenth century and her time in India. Theosophy began in America, and grew into the occult revival of Great Britain. According to Helena Blavatsky, writing in *The North American Review* in 1890:

> In England, a country where theosophy has to work up-hill more than in any other place, three years ago there was but one solitary branch – the "London Lodge" of the Theosophical Society, with about 150 members in it. Since the arrival of the present writer in England, and the establishment of the " Blavatsky Lodge," in June, 1887 (which has now upward of 300 members and associates), twelve branches of the Theosophical Society have been established in various centres of Great Britain, and the number of members is daily increasing.[227]

Praed was a part of this growing community of theosophy in London during the late nineteenth century. Clarke stated that the influence that Theosophists Henry Steel Olcott and Madame Helena Blavatsky had on Praed, and the teachings of the theosophical movement complimented her spiritual beliefs, developed among Aboriginal tribes in the Australian bush.[228] On May 24, 1884, Rosa implored Olcott, a prominent member of the Theosophical Society, to make an address on the theosophical movement at her London home in Talbot Square.[229] The

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[225] See Stephan Prothero in "From Spiritualism to Theosophy: 'Uplifting' a Democratic Tradition," who explains that "Early Theosophy" can be considered the time from when Theosophical Society was created in 1875, to 1878 when Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Blavatsky leave New York for India.
[226] Stephan Prothero, "From Spiritualism to Theosophy: 'Uplifting' a Democratic Tradition," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (1993): 198.
[227] H.P. Blavatsky, "Recent Progress in Theosophy," *The North American Review* 151, no. 405 (1890): 178.
[228] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 83.
[229] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 80.

event generated a great deal of curiosity among Londoners, and became a smashing success due to Praed's ability to attract attention.

Praed's attraction to theosophy and its teachings would deepen throughout her life, but she would also use her belief in theosophy to influence the way that she wrote, particularly in fiction. *Affinities* was the first of Praed's novels to be obviously influenced by her work in the London theosophical movement and "…explored many manifestations of psychic forces, from mesmeric influences, clairvoyance, events foretold in dreams, to astral body experiences…"[230]

McCann wrote that where Praed's fiction was concerned, "a medium is only as good as the spirit she channels."[231] In 1901, Praed published *As a Watch in the Night: a Drama of Waking and Dream in Five Acts*, a novel that explored Praed's fascination with reincarnation and past lives.[232] The concept of reincarnation, that a soul lived multiple lives at different times, was a staple belief in the theosophical movement. Clarke stated:

> *As a Watch in the Night* was written when Rosa was still working through her interpretation of reincarnation… It is remarkable that at the time she is writing this novel, the first in which she directly explored a reincarnation theme… Rosa was to meet a woman who could in a trance state describe vividly and at great length a previous incarnation in Rome.[233]

This woman was Nancy Harward. Born Annie Harriet Amelia Harward, she had been interested in spiritualism and mysticism for most of her adult life. Born in India to two English-born parents, Harward spent her adolescent and early teenage years in India when the

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[230] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 83.
[231] McCann, *Popular Literature*, 5.
[232] McCann, *Popular Literature*, 139.
[233] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 162.

Theosophical Society was gaining a foothold in the east.[234] When under a trance, Harward was able to recount a past life of the Roman slave Nyria, "a slave to Julia, wife of Flavius Sabinus, daughter of Titus, Roman Emperor from 79 to 81 AD..."[235]

Praed was told about Harward's gifts by Alfred Percy Sinnet, and the two met in October 1899; on November sixth, Harward left her parents' home, aged thirty-five and unmarried, to live with Praed, newly divorced from her estranged husband Arthur Praed, in London.[236] Praed considered Harward her "twin soul," and with her help, Praed began publishing strictly theosophical, spiritual, and occult-themed books.[237] While Harward was under trance, Praed took copious notes of her life as Nyria. According to Clarke, Harward's behavior was the tell-tale of a *Schizophrenic* personality, but for Praed, her belief in reincarnation supported the idea that Harward truly was Nyria, the slave girl from ancient Rome.

Praed believed that she also had experienced a past life in Rome as a woman named Valeria, daughter of Emperor Vitellius, who appeared as Nyria's mistress in her story.[238] Valeria, loved by Nyria, had been ultimately betrayed her in their shared past life. Throughout her life, Praed believed that these actions of betrayal during her Roman life were the reasons why all of her children suffered in her current life. Praed's daughter, Maud, had been born deaf in Australia, and had to be institutionalized in England. Her oldest son was killed in an automobile accident; her second son was killed by rhinoceroses in 1925; and her youngest son committed

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[234] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 163.
[235] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 165-166.
[236] Barlow, "'My Little Ghost-Save'," 4-5.
[237] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 168.
[238] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 169.

suicide while suffering from cancer in 1932.[239] The happiness that Praed felt knowing Nancy came at the cost of her children; Maud, in particular, was filled with resentment over her mother's relationship with the medium. Over the course of their relationship, Praed believed that she had known Harward in several past lives, strengthening their bond.

Nyria, first published in 1904 and again as *The Soul of Nyria* in 1931, was the crown jewel of Praed's collection of occult fiction and reincarnation novels. The historical novel "reinforced Rosa's reputation as a novelist who could surprise."[240] In the 1904 preface, Praed spoke directly to her readers, explaining the context of *Nyria* and how came the book to be. She wrote:

> TO MY READERS.
>
> My friendship with Nyria has been one of the most interesting experiences of my life, and I think I may say the strangest; for sorely it is not given to many that they should hold converse with a being who lived in the flesh nearly two thousand years ago. Yet such is Nyria's extraordinary claim, borne out by historic corroboration of the events she describes, by a multitude of confirmatory details which she gives, and by the evidence of her own life-like individuality, as she revealed it to me during an intimate intercourse of many months.
>
> Startling as the statement may seem, it is no less true that the whole story of Nyria has been told me by—what shall I say? an entity?—a ghost?—a discarnate or reincarnate soul?—I know not how to call her—to whom is due a series of incidents and portraits which when they touched history I have carefully verified, and which I firmly believe my own imagination would have been incapable of originating. My readers must, however, judge Nyria for themselves. I

[239] Raymond Beilby and Cecil Hadgraft, *Ada Cambridge, Tasma and Rosa Praed* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1979), 36.
[240] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!*, 176.

> can only frankly assure them that her story is no invention of mine, but a life-record of which I am the transcriber. In this sense, it is a human document rather than an historical novel.[241]

While Praed does not mention Harward by name, she does describe the medium as, "a girl of mixed nationality, shy, reticent, modest and unselfish, a child of nature, lacking in education, half puzzled, half frightened at the mystic tendencies in herself of which she was always loth to speak."[242] *Nyria* was praised by the theosophical community as proof of reincarnation. In *The Theosophical Review*, Theosophist Annie Besant praises Praed's work, and stated:

> It means the assertion of either reincarnation, or of what is called "spirit-control "; and the length of time which has elapsed since the earth-life described makes the latter hypothesis improbable. Mrs. Campbell Praed does a useful service to a true psychology in the book of which she styles herself the adapter, not the author.[243]

It is important, however, for the popularity of this book not to be over-stated. Even among Theosophical circles, *Nyria* was not a sold-out volume, even at the height of its popularity. "Nyria's story was never accepted sufficiently for it to be included in books detailing examples of reincarnation."[244] This was because while many Theosophists, spiritualists, and occultists believed Praed's story, it was still generally accepted as a historical novel, and not as history itself. In *The Occult Review*, edited by Ralph Shirley, the case of *Nyria* is used to discuss the validity of reincarnation:

While she was living the life of Nyria in imagination it was impossible for the lady in

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[241] Rosa Campbell Praed in preface to *Nyria* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1904), vii.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Annie Besant, "Out of the Past," *The Theosophical Review* 34, no. 202 (1904).
[244] Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa!* 177.

> question to realize that she was in reality in modern England and not in Julia's garden on a spur of the Aventine or on the steps of Valeria's terrace. The illusion of the return to another life in an earlier incarnation seemed to be as complete as it could possibly be—so much so that the narration of the story was gravely interfered with by Nyria's fears lest she should betray the Christians or her adored mistress by some indiscreet statement to Mrs. Campbell Praed.[245]

Nyria contributed to the occult revival in a great way, particularly for the Theosophical movement. For many Theosophists, Harward's recounting tale was proof that reincarnation was a universal truth, and for those who were less convinced of Nyria's authenticity, Praed still contributed to the ongoing discussion of reincarnation well into the twentieth century. The relationship that Praed had with Harward was based in their theosophical beliefs and grounded in what they believed were the past lives they had shared together. Damien Barlow wrote, "Praed and Harward understood their love for each other through the discourse of theosophy, which not only fostered their relationship but gave it a language, [and] a theoretical base…"[246] Praed and Harward lived together for twenty-eight years; when Harward died, Praed enlisted the help of another medium, Hester Dowden, to find that Harward and Praed had shared fifteen past lives together.[247]

Praed's writing took a new and interesting turn toward the occult in 1899 when she met Harward, and this began her journey within the occult revival as an occult author. Through her relationship with Harward and a new-found literary niche, Praed developed further spiritual and physical autonomy for herself into the twentieth century that she had not yet experienced, in

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[245] "The Case of Nyria," *The Occult Review* 21 no. 6 (1915).
[246] Barlow, "'My Little Ghost-Save'." 5.
[247] Colin Roderick, *In Mortal Bondage: The Strange Life of Rosa Praed*. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1948), 166.

Australia or in her estranged marriage. Praed contributed greatly to the discourse of the occult revival through the publication of *Nyria* and later, *The Soul of Nyria*, and aided in pushing theosophy, occult fiction, and the revival into the twentieth century.

Conclusion

This work has explored the cultural contributions that women, both generally and specifically, provided the occult revival and the spiritualist movement in London during the nineteenth century. Observed in occult periodicals, personal papers, autobiographies, and secondary sources, the lives of these women were reconstructed and brought to life in order to find the day-to-day contributions that these women made to the occult and spiritualist community.

The importance of place is inimitable in this project's context. Its purpose was to show that the city of London served as a cultural hub for spiritualism and the occult, becoming the epicenter for this countercultural movement, offering occult societies, clubs, and private homes and spaces to support occult and spiritualist ideals and spread these ideas to the public using magazines, periodicals, advertisements, and word of mouth. This bustling urban center provided the perfect environment for occultists and spiritualists, particularly women, to exercise spiritual, physical, and financial autonomy in the Victorian metropolis. Londoners, given the city's growing population, experienced a crisis of faith as religion and science began to clash; ideals were deconstructed and recreated; and Victorians searched determinedly for a system of belief which complimented faith, science, and equality.

Occult and spiritualist women were provided with a new vocation and a different way of life. For most women, this new venture was the practice of mediumship, a marriage of faith and science, and the successor of eighteenth century mesmerism. Mediums were crucial to the development of the occult and spiritualism in the nineteenth century, because it was their task to provide inquirers with the proof of life after death, evidence that spiritualism's doctrine was the

true path that Victorians should take.

The association of women with communicative technology, as discussed by Jill Galvan, was a cultural phenomenon that complimented the pillars of spiritualist faith. This placed the medium, and the woman (who was the ideal medium), at the center of spiritualist belief, with the medium acting comparatively with a priest who is divinely inspired with the messages of spirits. This emphasis within the occult of woman as divine interventionist or spiritual leader was in direct contrast with the culturally normative expectation that women were too fragile to participate extensively in mainstream Christian religious practice. While women's fragility was still culturally acceptable within spiritualism, it was reworked to empower women in the occult because it was exactly the fragility of women that allowed them to contact spirits, which was essential to spiritualist doctrine.

The medium developed throughout the nineteenth century, and became more and more professionalized in the spiritualist movement as publications began to hit the occult presses of London. The ideal spiritualist medium was not supposed to accept money or goods for the exercise of her gift; however, when this ideal is further observed, it can be seen that mediums did indeed charge money or exchange goods in return for their services, such as healing, rubbing, private and public seances, lectures, and other works.

In the same vein, the concept of the medium, which provided Victorian women with new possibilities both inside and outside the home, also became limited to the growing English middle class. The Victorian culture which was steeped in the definition of the private and public spheres follows through the spiritualist culture. The "angel of the house" also found its way into

spiritualist circles, but once again it was deconstructed and recreated. While there are a handful of examples of women traveling throughout the United Kingdom and other parts of the world, the majority of mediums performed their gifts in the privacy of their own houses, or the houses of their close friends. For the most part, spiritualism was a closed social circle and therefore extremely intimate. The private space of the home became the séance space, and this space became sacred as spiritualism develops. Throughout the nineteenth century, the private parlor space becomes public, and the idealistic angel of the house became a fallacy, specifically within occult and spiritualist circles. The struggle of working class and working poor women did not allow for them to become an ideal medium; further, their lack of a sacred space ostracized them from taking advantage of the same opportunities that were awarded to middle class spiritualist women.

Georgiana Houghton, Emma Hardinge Britten, and Rosa Praed are all unique in their experiences with spiritualism, but representative of the opportunities provided to middle class mediums during the occult revival and the Modern Spiritualist Movement. The thread that bonds these three women together was their devastating familial loss, and their mediumship. How these women used mediumship differed; for Houghton, it provided her with physical and spiritual autonomy and inspiration, opening a personal art gallery as an unmarried Victorian woman and draining her personal savings to present her artistic gifts following the deaths of multiple family members, including her beloved younger sister Zilla; for Rosa Cambell Praed, the occult and theosophy provided her with physical, spiritual, and financial autonomy, as she moved to London to become an occult fiction writer, a best-selling author, and a devout theosophist; for Emma Hardinge Britten, this revival gave her the opportunity of spiritual,

physical, and financial autonomy as she used her mediumship gifts, her lectures, and her periodicals to aid in the growth of the spiritualist movement and provide financially for herself and her family after her father's death. These women and the middle class mediums that are talked about generally in Chapter 3 do not share the same stories; however, while their motivations may have differed, their convictions remained the same.

The occult revival and the spiritualist movement provided women with several approaches to obtaining autonomy at its height during the nineteenth century. By first looking at elements of the movements, such as the location and the cultural norms surrounding these women, and then looking at mediumship itself and how it provided them with a professional outlet, we took a very broad look at the Victorian ethos and then applied this to a number of representative women who contributed to Victorian culture. By upholding core Victorian values and adjusting them to better serve the spiritualist movement, women such Georgiana Houghton, Emma Hardinge Britten, Rosa Praed, and all those who fell in between, helped to create a cultural movement and determine their own lives.

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The majority of primary source material is dated from the early nineteenth century to 1904 (when *Nyria* is published) and secondary source material was published from 1905 to present scholarship. However, some material published after 1904 is grouped with primary source material, because it was written in the context or discourse of the occult revival or the spiritualist movement. However, sources like Arthur Conan Doyle's *History of Spiritualism* (1926) is considered a secondary source because it discusses the history of the movement rather than its current status.

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