

THE SPIRITUALIST MOVEMENT AND ITS ADVANCEMENT  
OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

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*A Spiritualist circle in 1848 New York.* The medium had the total attention of William Lloyd Garrison and the group of other prominent reformers who congregated around the seance table. She patiently recited the alphabet, waiting for the resounding rap of a spirit striking the wooden walls of the seance room, her cue to start at “a” again. Her audience believed the knocks to be the work of the spirit of a recently deceased Abolitionist comrade of theirs. The tension in the room was palpable as they translated the letters into words and then a sentence. The raps had spelled out “Spiritualism will work miracles in the cause of reform.”<sup>1</sup> And indeed, the Spiritualist movement, which arose in 1848, reached a high point in the mid-1850s, and slowly petered out through the 1890s, was ideologically intertwined with the reform movements of the 1850s and 1860s, and shared some overlapping leadership. The two most dominant reform movements of the time in the United States were abolition and the Women’s Rights movement, but many other reforms were touted by the reformers of the time, including temperance, communitarianism, phrenology, mesmerism, as well as several other reforms of diet, dress and medical

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practice. The Spiritualist movement was tied up in all of these movements, but it had an especially strong connection to the women's rights movement. The Spiritualist movement, as essentially detrimental as it was to the rational basis of the women's rights movement, did in fact advance the cause of women's rights.

The close connection of Spiritualism to the women's rights movement can be established by Spiritualist ideology's championship of women's rights, which created a situation whereby all who believed Spiritualist ideology had then to believe in women's rights, as well as the overlap between the Spiritualist leadership and the women's rights leadership. Spiritualists, indeed, bore the brunt of public resistance to women speaking in public for the women's movement since female trance mediums led the way for women to be accepted as public speakers.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. In order to understand the Spiritualist movement's effect on the women's rights movement, we must first understand Spiritualism. Spiritualism, the practice of communication with the dead, has existed since Ancient Rome, and quite possibly before. But in spite of precedents for Spiritualism, there was no Spiritualist movement as such in the U.S. until the mid-nineteenth century. This Spiritualist movement was born in 1848 in Hydesville, New York when two young sisters, Katie and Margaret, began to communicate first with the spirit of a soldier who supposedly haunted their house, and then with other spirits, and publicized their abilities through demonstrations. The birth of the Spiritualist movement cannot, however, be solely attributed to the Fox sisters; they were a small act in a small town in a nation filled with numerous acts based on magic and/or superstition. It was not at all obvious, at its inception as a sort of magic act in Hydesville attracting increasing attention for the lack of evidence cynics could find that it was a ruse, that it would develop into a movement, much less a movement which championed the individual autonomy of women.<sup>2</sup>

After its inception, the Spiritualist movement became split among those who were the logical heirs of the Fox sisters' act, the fraudulent mediums and entertainment acts who appealed to the

less educated, and vested Spiritualism with no particular religious significance, and those who unwittingly adopted Spiritualism and gave it an ideological backing all their own—the reformers. This paper focuses on the reformers, since they gave Spiritualism its feminist flavor, although the Spiritualist movement found adherents in many parts of society.

In antebellum America, a series of ideas for the reform of society circulated among a group of upper-middle class, largely Northern, citizens with the time and energy to devote to reform. For the purposes of this paper, let us abbreviate, and call them reformers. Likewise, the network of social ties that bound them together, causing them to exchange reform methods and ideas, will be referred to as “the network of reformers.” The foremost reform effort at the time was, of course, the abolition of slavery. The immorality of keeping persons enslaved drew many into that particular reform movement. The first women’s rights advocates became reformers because of their involvement in abolition. It was their treatment within the abolitionist ranks that caused Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Martha Coffin Wright and their friends to organize the Seneca Falls Convention, which was attended by people who were for the most part already involved in the abolition movement. For those involved in both movements, Spiritualism represented both another reform to be promoted and a way of sustaining themselves through the difficult task of convincing the American people to join with them to reform society. It is this task that brings us back to the seance table, and the spirit rapping out his reassuring message that spiritualism will advance the cause of reform.

The beginnings of the Spiritualist movement (1848 to 1851)

The modern Spiritualist movement has its implausible beginning in 1848, in Hydesville, New York, a small town near Rochester, far removed from the revolutions and tumult that characterized the year. The impoverished little town of Hydesville

was even far, fundamentally if not geographically, from another historically significant event of the year in upper-state New York—the women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls. The Foxes, a husband, wife, and their two daughters, thirteen-year old Maggie and eleven year old Kate, lived in a two-room house on the edge of Hydesville. Over the course of a long New York winter, the Foxes had been plagued by loud knocking noises, and on the night of March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1848, they sent their daughters to bed early to make up for their lack of sleep over the previous nights, only to hear more noises emanating from upstairs. The parents crept up the stairs only to see young Kate begin to question an unseen presence, which responded in rapping noises. This display prompted the Mrs. Fox to ask if the unseen presence was in fact a “disembodied spirit.” With those three definite raps that responded, the modern Spiritualist movement was born. Friends of the Foxes flocked to their house to investigate the phenomenon. The Fox sisters began to give demonstrations daily. Once the Foxes developed a format that convinced spectators of the validity of the raps that followed the sisters wherever they went, news of these miraculous occurrences spread by word of mouth.

Amy and Isaac Post, the leaders of a fringe Quaker sect that withdrew from the mainline Society of Friends in order to become more involved with abolition, had a previous acquaintance with the Fox family. When Kate Fox sent the Posts a note that she had contacted the spirit of the Posts’ recently deceased daughter, they became immediate converts to Spiritualism.<sup>3</sup> They conducted seances with their house guests, who included some of the Posts’ influential Abolitionist friends, like Abigail Kelly, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Henry C. Wright, and Fredrick Douglass. Witnesses to the Post household saw chairs and tables fly across rooms for no apparent reason, even outside the context of seances, indicating the existence of spirits who could move physical forms (now called poltergeists). From the Posts’ friends, news of Spiritualism and the possibility of communication with the spirit world spread through the network of reformers stretched across New England.<sup>4</sup> It was the beginning of a more permanent

cleavage in the Spiritualist movement between people who adopted Spiritualism as a reform movement and those who did not.

It was only when Andrew Jackson Davis and his followers allied themselves with the Fox sisters that American Spiritualist ideology coalesced. At its conception in Hydesville, the communication with spirits did not necessarily carry any religious weight by itself. Although spirit communication could be seen as anathema to Christianity, for most followers it presented no great contradiction. Communication with the dead was isolated in their minds from their Christian faith, and had no religious implications until Andrew Jackson Davis gave it some. Andrew Jackson Davis had spent 1843 through 1847 touring as a trance speaker and clairvoyant healer, amassing a series of followers. Davis used the principles developed by Antoine Mesmer and his disciples in 1770s France, also known as mesmerism, to induce his hypnotic trances.<sup>5</sup> The practice of mesmerism was a large trend at the time in America, frequently known as “animal magnetism” because it was attributed to the magnetic fields in humans. Mesmerism was later incorporated into Spiritualist belief due to Davis’s work; mediums would engage in hypnotic trances as a way of contacting the spirits. But let us return to Davis’s first Spiritualist experience in 1847. He had retreated to a house in Poughkeepsie, New York to engage in private trance meditation. In a deep meditative trance, he encountered a spirit in his meditation who he believed to be Emmanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century Swedish religious pioneer. Davis claimed Swedenborg as his spirit guide and went on to lecture and write extensively on his encounters with the spirit world as a Spiritualist. Davis made Swedenborg’s work essential to Spiritualist ideology through his early association with the Fox sisters.

It should be noted that Swedenborg’s philosophy had been instrumental in many reform movements in the 1840s, most notably Transcendentalism and the New Church as well as “many antebellum fads” like “mesmerism, clairvoyant medicine, marriage reform, ‘free love’, and communitarian experimentation.”<sup>6</sup> Like all of the other movements that derived from Swedenborg’s

work, the American Spiritualists felt free to make their own interpretations of Swedenborg's work. American Spiritualists believed in Swedenborg's conception of a cosmic order centered around spirits, even if they did not necessarily believe his "Diagram of Spiritual Spheres." American Spiritualists believed everyone should be able to contact the spirits and encouraged a breakdown in the rigid hierarchy Swedenborg established for the living and the spirit world about who should be allowed to contact whom.

But the people who flocked to the Fox household in 1848 were not largely reformers; they were the locals curious about the "spirit manifestations," not Swedenborg. They sought entertainment if not spiritual solace. Once convinced of the Fox sisters' legitimacy, many took up Spiritualism—the belief in the possibility of communicating with the spirits, not the ideology, which later grew up around it. In the words of Ruth Brandon, "It became quite normal for people who had participated in spiritual conversions through the mediumship of the Fox sisters to discover that they, too, could produce raps and thus communicate with the next world."<sup>7</sup> Spiritualism expanded outwards from the Fox household in ever-expanding circles, eventually enveloping Rochester, where popular sentiment on the Fox sisters compelled them to move in 1849. By the summer of 1850, the Fox sisters had gained enough renown for Horace Greeley, editor of *The Tribune*, to underwrite their trip to New York City. Seance circles had formed and paranormal phenomena sprung up as far north as Canada and as far west as St. Louis.<sup>8</sup> Spiritualists accounted for the very sudden, very rapid rise in paranormal activity by the belief that there was a "great outpouring of spirit upon America."<sup>9</sup>

Although no statistics exist on the spread of Spiritualism, some conclusions may be drawn from primary sources commenting on the spread of Spiritualism. LaRoy Sunderland, a Boston abolitionist and Spiritualist, recorded that in 1850, "there was not one family known throughout the New England states, where responses from the spirit world had been made to questions put by mortals," but that by mid-1851, the opponents of the movement could object to "a thousand mediums, witnessed in every state."<sup>10</sup>

Since most of these opponents were probably from the upper-middle class, they probably included in their reckoning only the mediums seen among the upper-middle classes, ignoring the rapid spread of spiritualism among the uneducated classes. Joseph McCabe, who would compile a database of thousands of cases of Spiritualism during the very brief resurgence of Spiritualism after World War I, estimates that after 1855, there were around fifty thousand mediums in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

The people who flocked to the Spiritualist cause were usually people who had previous connections to the network of reformers who spread themselves thickly across New England and New York State with sizable clusters in big cities, and thinly across the rest of the country, with holes in the Deep South. They tended to be committed to reforms such as abolition, women's rights, temperance, communitarianism, phrenology, vegetarianism, dress reform, and mesmerism.<sup>12</sup> For the most part they were from liberal new varieties of Christianity such as Universalism, Quakerism, Swedenborgianism, Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, and Rationalism. Some scholars have theorized that many of these reformers were attracted to Spiritualism because they were so disheartened by the failure of the other reforms which they campaigned for.<sup>13</sup> The spirits must have provided solace for many a discouraged reformer—if they could not succeed in their reforms, then surely they welcomed reassurance from the spirits that their efforts were in the right. And indeed, history leaves us a few anecdotes that point to this conclusion. For example, in 1853 William Heywood gave a talk to a colony of reformers in which he promised his audience that “pure and good” spirits were working with them, and would correct for their “repeated stumblings.”<sup>14</sup> However, no real pattern of motives can be established at this point.

So now that we have gathered some information about the early Spiritualist movement, we can proceed to the connection of Spiritualism to the women's rights movement, but not before a brief interlude on Spiritualist practices. The spirit haunting the Fox sisters established a precedent for the methods used to communicate with the living. Initially, the spirit would respond to

a yes or no question by rapping in affirmative, but as more and more people flocked to visit the Fox sisters, the thirst for more than yes or no answers from the spirits grew. Isaac Post, the Quaker follower of the Foxes, came up with the method of spelling out the alphabet so that the spirits could rap in response to a letter and thus spell out sentences. The methods that mediums used soon evolved beyond primitive raps. Mediums would deliver their messages from the dead in a “trance state,” or else use their voice as a conduit so that their words and tone of voice resembled that of the deceased. Some mediums were “writing mediums,” who used their hands to channel the deceased, writing in the handwriting of those they channeled.

### The appeal of Spiritualism to women

In an era when infant mortality was high and birth control unavailable to the majority of women, most mothers lost their children, frequently in infancy. Spiritualism, with or without the Spiritualist movement’s ideology, held incredible appeal to bereaved mothers.<sup>15</sup> It offered them the opportunity to communicate with their dead children. Many, if not most, of the converts to Spiritualism began their affiliation in an attempt to contact their dead children, relatives, or friends.

Spiritualism did not just offer the ability to transcend the deaths of loved ones. Once lured into the seance room by the opportunity to talk with their deceased loved ones, bereaved mothers and others new to Spiritualism received word that Spiritualism’s sole meaning is not simply communication with the dead—it is proof that no one ever dies! When an individual dies, Spiritualists held, they do not die but ascend to higher planes of being, from which they can watch and communicate with the living as well as reacquaint themselves with the dead.

Spiritualist ideology explicitly rejected the Calvinist belief in election, which held that God preordained who would be saved and who would not. Many women who became Spiritualists grew

up with Calvinist preachers who painted a gory picture of Hell from the pulpit every Sunday and knew that according to Calvinism, most of their adored children would end up there. Spiritualist ideology also explicitly rejected the Methodist doctrine which, while more receptive to free will than Calvinism, held that only an individual's personal conversion experience would save them from eternal damnation in Hell. For a mother mourning an infant who had never had the opportunity to be saved, this offered little more consolation.<sup>16</sup>

Spiritualist ideology rejected the existence of Hell. Andrew Jackson Davis assured his followers that the first three spiritual spheres, which Swedenborg had interpreted as Hell, were in fact very chaotic levels of Heaven. Instead, drawing on Swedenborg's work, many Spiritualists depicted the afterlife as consisting of six spiritual spheres, which each soul ascends up as it achieves the next level of spiritual purification. However, the defining character of the Spiritualist conception of eternal life is the lack of pain. There is no death and no suffering. Several Spiritualist novels depicted eternal life as a sort of pastoral vision of heaven, and most of the time, when asked, mediums speaking for the spirits would answer that in the afterlife, it is eternally summer. They promised that children who died young would be preserved forever in "summerland" in a state of pure innocence and take care of each other until their mothers came to join them. Surely this is a picture that appealed to bereaved women and mothers everywhere.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps intended her Spiritualist-themed book *The Gates Ajar*, the "gates" of the title being the gates which separated the living from the dead, published in 1870, to comfort "the bereaved wife, mother, sister, and widowed girl." It revealed that at death, the gates of heaven would open, allowing the deceased to meet their dead relatives and friends again. The sheer popularity of this view is indicated by the fact that *The Gates Ajar* sold one hundred and eighty thousand copies within a year.<sup>17</sup>

## Spiritualist ideology about women's rights

Believing the Spiritualist movement's ideology meant believing that women both possessed souls and had sovereign power over them. Therefore, while not all feminists were Spiritualists, all of the adherents to Spiritualist ideology advocated the women's rights movement.

Many spiritualists believed that anyone, regardless of status, education, or sex, possesses some degree of mediumship, i.e., ability to receive communications from the spirit world. Everyone, they believed, can receive religious knowledge from the spirits. They frequently held that people did not even have to be conscious of their communication with the spirit world to receive religious knowledge from the spirits. Since current beliefs held that women were more passive than men, and thus more receptive to outside influences, including spirits, people were more inclined to believe women who claimed to be in contact with the spirit world than men. People were especially more inclined to believe younger women, even as young as nine or ten, interpreting the aura of innocence which surrounds children at that age as proof of their untainted piety and undeceptive nature. Spiritualism came to be more centered around women than any other religion at the time partially because more women were receiving communiques from the spirit world than men.

In a practice redolent of Quaker meetings, the Spiritualist ideal for church services held that everyone in attendance, including women, should be able to participate. This model contrasted with mainline Protestant and Catholic church services, characterized by a male clergyman alternately preaching to his silent parishioners, male and female, and leading them through prayers. In these churches, women could only sit still and be silent. In a spiritualist church, women could participate on an equal footing with men, making announcements and even holding services.

However, within the sweep of American religious history, the role women played in Spiritualist churches is not as significant

as the role that they played as mediums in seance circles.<sup>18</sup> First, there were very few Spiritualist churches. Most Spiritualists continued to attend the church that they had belonged to before embracing Spiritualism. Even in areas where there were enough Spiritualists to form a congregation, Spiritualists frequently borrowed the chapels of Universalist or Unitarian churches for services. Second, Spiritualists generally assigned more significance to the more private circles, which normally consisted of about twelve individuals, than to general congregations.<sup>19</sup> Members of a circle were supposed to be well acquainted and at ease with each other in order to form a more harmonious whole.<sup>20</sup> Seances occurred in private homes, meetings in chapels. Seances, in other words, were private religious gatherings, of more significance to the participants than public congregations. And more circles were led by female mediums than by male ones. Third, and most significant, although women were allowed to take part in congregations, it was only in the position of medium that they received total, unimpeded control over religious teachings. Although most seances began with hymns and prayers, and ended with the same, the body of the seance was devoted to religious teachings, which came through the most likely female medium. It was the first time in United States history when an identifiable group of women were accepted as religious leaders outside of the microcosm of the family.<sup>21</sup>

It should be noted here that in spite of their differences with traditional Christianity, including the central role that they assigned women, with a few exceptions most Spiritualists practiced Spiritualism as an essentially Christian religion. Although many outside the movement attacked it as anti-Christian, most Spiritualists did retain a belief in salvation through Christ. Most Spiritualist services and seances began and ended with Christian prayer.<sup>22</sup> In fact, many religious Christians asked mediums to channel the Biblical prophets in order to receive answers to their religious queries from Moses, Joseph, and others.

Since they believed women to have the same rights as men, the foremost cause championed by all who believed Spiritualist

ideology was women's rights. Spiritualist ideology held that every human possessed a soul, and had a perfect right to control over their soul, both in this world and in the next. Spiritualist ideology also held that everyone has some degree of ability to channel the dead, i.e., be a medium. Both of these beliefs combined to create a religion/ideology with a pronounced emphasis on individual inspiration. Spiritualists felt that women, half of all humanity, had been deprived of their right to control their own persons by the ties of church, state, and society, and the situation had to be rectified to allow women that freedom. At Spiritualist conventions, women's rights were not simply one reform plank in a platform, they were the needed reform. One convention attendee expressed general Spiritualist sentiment when she said, "woman's freedom is the world's redemption."<sup>23</sup>

Spiritualist reformers were universally abolitionists, since they ascribed to African Americans the same individual moral autonomy they ascribed to all people. Spiritualist reformers differed from other abolitionists in their placement of women's rights as a primary goal along with the abolition of slavery. For most abolitionists, woman's emancipation was only one in a series of reforms that were subordinate to the abolition of slavery. The disbandment of slavery was their primary goal; other goals, including women's rights, could be compromised in its pursuit. The rift between the abolitionists who believed women's emancipation to be a concession and those who did not would eventually result in the separation of the women's rights movement from the proponents of better treatment of (male) African Americans during Reconstruction.

Spiritualists who adhered to Spiritualist ideology and those who did not

The possibilities of spiritualism intrigued many people, but only a small percentage of those learned and accepted all of the ramifications which the Spiritualists saw in communication

with the dead.<sup>24</sup> For the purposes of this paper, a division has been made between those who believed in Spiritualist ideology, those who saw the ramifications, and those who simply believed in communication with dead, but did not accept those ramifications. In reality, of course, the division between the two was not so cut and dried. Although all Spiritualists by definition believed in communication with the dead, the degree of their acceptance of the rest of Spiritualist ideology varied. Most spiritualists believed in Mesmer's work, even if they didn't believe in Andrew Jackson Davis's, or in some of Swedenborg's visions. Some Spiritualists accepted Spiritualist ideology about a woman's right to individual moral sovereignty, some only accepted it to a certain degree, believing that some reform of women's legal rights was necessary, but beyond that women should stay in the house, and some Spiritualists, normally the less reform-oriented, believed that women were served quite well by the existing social order.

A schism developed between the literate, upper-middle-class adherents to Spiritualism and illiterate, lower-class adherents. The upper-middle class had access to literature about the ideology of Spiritualism as well as Spiritualists in their social circles who were well versed in the ideology; the illiterate, most likely, did not. Many rural poor and urban laborers supported Spiritualism. Of course, since very few of them were literate, they did not leave many records. Only an incredibly patient scholar could search for what records do exist of Spiritualism among the illiterate. Jon Butler did. Ann Braude cited Butler's work, which indicated "there may indeed have been a substratum of non-Christian folk practice among Americans of both European and African descent that connected Spiritualism with earlier occult beliefs."<sup>25</sup>

Southern whites tended to associate the Spiritualist movement with abolition, for good reason, but they also associated Spiritualism, as communication with the spirits as opposed to Spiritualist ideology, with blacks as they believed blacks to be passive, receptive, and guilelessly religious. These stereotypes could only have been confirmed by whatever remnants of African animist religions some slaves had maintained.

### The extent of the Spiritualist movement

Spiritualists, by their very nature, opposed any Spiritualist organizations, which they believed to be detrimental to each individual's freedom to achieve personal enlightenment through the spirits. Later, when Spiritualism was in decline in the 1870s, a national organization of Spiritualists did spring into existence, but it only indicated the decline of Spiritualism. However their early aversion to organization did not prevent them from other means of meeting other Spiritualists and sharing ideas. Spiritualists published periodicals, pamphlets, even books. Impromptu local groups, usually people within the same circle, would organize conventions and publicize them through advertisements in Spiritualist periodicals. As a result of the lack of any centralization in the Spiritualist movement, gauging their precise numbers becomes rather difficult, but records left behind from all of their other activities, as well as by outside commentators, allow for a picture of the scope of the movement. Although most Spiritualist magazines were to prove neither long-lived nor widely circulated, from the movement's conception in the last years of the 1840s to its decline in the 1890s there were about twenty or thirty magazines in circulation at any given time.<sup>26</sup> Spiritualist conventions of varying sizes and locales abounded throughout the 1850s and 1860s, excluding the war years. In the early 1870s, the meetings began a downward spiral from the conventions featuring inflammatory speakers and controversial new reforms to a camp-meeting format featuring Spiritualist amusements and more subdued speakers. Since many of the people who attended these meetings were not Spiritualists, their attendance is not indicative of the number of Spiritualists.

## Breaking barriers against women speaking in public

Any woman seeking to speak in public in the first half of the nineteenth century encountered very strong general opposition from U.S. society. The clergy, which was very influential, led the opposition to any woman seeking to speak publicly, citing both Biblical injunctions against women taking the pulpit and Victorian beliefs against women venturing outside of their sphere. Male secular leaders followed the clergy's lead, blocking women from speaking in public for those same reasons. They argued that the Biblical injunctions in *I Corinthians* ("women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says" 14:34) and *ITimothy* ("I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent" 2:12) extended not only to the pulpit, but to any public speech.<sup>27</sup> Thus any woman seeking to speak had first to defend her right to speak in public before even touching on the issue she intended to speak on. The barriers against women speaking in public presented obvious problems not only for women's rights activists, but women reformers of every stripe. However, prior to the Spiritualist movement, very few women challenged these conventions.

The Grimke sisters, Sarah and Angelina, were the first women to present a substantial challenge to these conventions. They sought to speak on abolition during the 1830s, but before doing so were forced to first defend their right to speak in public as women, which they did in the strong, reasoned arguments which characterized the Grimkes' rhetoric. They decided to base their arguments totally on the content of the Bible, since they were barred from speaking on Biblical grounds. Their arguments derived from the bias they believed the members of the male establishment who translated the New Testament harbored as well as the instances in the Bible when women did speak publicly. The Grimkes continued to speak publicly where they could, defending both their right to speak and the rights of women and African Americans. In response to the Grimke sisters' repeated resistance

to directives that they not speak, the Massachusetts Congregational clergy issued a pastoral letter attacking female reformers, clearly directed against the Grimke sisters. The letter criticized them on the grounds that “when she assumes the place and tone of man as a public reformer, our care and protection of her seems unnecessary; we put ourselves in self-defense against her; she yields the power which God has given her for her protection, and her character becomes unnatural.”<sup>28</sup> The Grimke sisters’ fight only illustrates the difficulty of fighting the resistance to women speaking in public, although their example would pave the way for abolitionists Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, and Ernestine Rose to speak in public in the 1840s.<sup>29</sup> Later, in the 1850s, the Grimke sisters, who were already in the practice of talking to spirits, would convert to Spiritualism, although they confined their public appearances to speaking on abolition and women’s rights.

Women spiritualists were the first group to break these restrictions against women speaking publicly *en masse*. Their work paved the way for women’s rights reformers to speak publicly, although the practice of women speaking in public, even in a trance, continued to be controversial through the 1860s and 1870s, and even beyond. The clergy and conservative elements continued to condemn women who spoke publicly, as well as the men who rented auditoriums to them, and the people who attended lectures given by women. Many newspapers would not even mention a speech if a women gave it.<sup>30</sup> But when the first female trance speakers began to speak in the 1850s, even they, who supposedly were vehicles for others, encountered opposition, but by the 1890s, when women feminists booked to speak in a given town, they were most likely greeted with opposition to the movement(s) they represented, not their position on the podium.

Spiritualist Conventions—At the intersection between Spiritualism and Women’s Rights

Women’s rights advocate and anti-slavery militant Parker Pillsbury recorded that “I am just returned from attending one of

the largest and most important Reformatory Conventions ever held in this or any other country...The most numerous class in the audience was the spiritualists...most of the two or three thousand in attendance found Spiritualism and radical reform a harmonious combination and felt well satisfied with a program that interspersed trance mediums with speakers on women's rights, abolition, and free trade."<sup>31</sup> Pillsbury's remark indicates the marked intermingling of Spiritualism and other reforms at reform movement gatherings. And the opposite was true as well. Spiritualist gatherings frequently featured speakers campaigning for other reforms aside from Spiritualism, even aside from the reforms which Spiritualist ideology mandated: women's rights and abolition.

Women who could not speak in any other forum were allowed to speak on the Spiritualist platform. Most women on the Spiritualist lecture platform chose to speak in a trance state, like trance speakers Charlotte Beebe Wilbour, Lizzie Doten, Cora Hatch, Achsa Sprague, Emma Hardinge, Emma Jay Bullene, and Anna Henderson.<sup>32</sup> At any given stop on the Spiritualist lecture circuit, the women speakers spoke in a trance state while male speakers on the circuit largely did not, which only played into public views about the essential passivity of women.<sup>33</sup> The actions of the women on the platform were not at all passive. They spoke loudly and persuasively. Of course, their audience explained their ability by their possession by forces more aggressive, and therefore masculine, than they. Trance speakers were apparently very effective speakers. Unlike other speakers on the Spiritualist platform, who gave prepared speeches, they spoke extemporaneously on whatever seemed the issue of the day, frequently at the prompting of the audience. Their presentations were dramatic, often taking more of a stream of consciousness format than one of clear, reasoned arguments. Descriptions of audience reactions to trance mediums frequently used the words "entranced" and "spell-bound." The other speakers on the Spiritualist platform, or indeed any other platform, did not have this same power to transform their audience. At one point, Susan B. Anthony, plagued by her wooden

speaking style, wrote to Elizabeth Cady Stanton “Oh dear, dear! If the spirits would only just make me a trance medium and put the right thing in my mouth!”<sup>34</sup>

### Spiritualist leaders who were also women’s rights leaders

Most of the feminists traditionally studied in women’s history courses were not Spiritualists. Susan B. Anthony made a pragmatic alliance with the Spiritualists at the beginning of her career, which she later withdrew from for similarly pragmatic reasons when she sought to give the women’s rights movement more universal appeal by downplaying its initial connections to other reform movements. Her letters reveal that she personally would come to envy the faith that Spiritualists had towards the end of her life.<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton never came to a final judgment on the validity of Spiritualism, even though she appreciated the contributions of Spiritualists to the women’s rights movement. In the Quaker-reformer social circles in which Lucretia Mott moved, she encountered many Quakers who incorporated Spiritualism into their belief system, although the demonstrations she saw never fully convinced her. The Grimke sisters are the exception to this pattern. Though they never publicly admitted to it, their deeply private faith, not only in God, but also in the spirits, would sustain them through all of the contempt that they encountered throughout their public and private lives. Sojourner Truth as well, who devoted her substantial energies to gaining rights for women and African Americans and won a place in the feminist pantheon on the strength of her single “Ain’t I a woman” speech, converted to Spiritualism towards the end of her life.

The story of Mary Fenn Love Davis is illuminating. In her youth, she agonized over her Calvinist faith, constantly berating herself for sinning and terrorized by visions of Hell. Later, she married Samuel Love, took his name, and produced two children with him, only to have a reverie wherein “the all pervading love of the infinite Father” was revealed to her. She fled her repressive

marriage, cast off the religion of her childhood, and became a Spiritualist. Mary Fenn Love became a popular speaker on the Spiritualist lecture platform who lectured on both Spiritualism and women's rights. She helped Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organize the first New York State Woman's Rights Convention in 1853. Her efforts attracted the attention of reformer Andrew Jackson Davis, and she became his second wife. Together they became an inimitable team, fighting for Spiritualism and other causes as they toured.

### The decline of reform-driven Spiritualism

The 1860s brought the Civil War, during which Spiritualist conventions stopped, circles disbanded, and the substantial energies of the Spiritualists were redirected towards the war effort. After the war, the Spiritualists returned home, and resumed their pre-War practices, except that now they now had to contact those whose place at the seance table was now empty. Immediately post-Civil War, renegade women's rights proponents who had once been Garrisonians split with the Garrisonians over the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment. They did not see women's suffrage as something that could be bargained away as the Garrisonians clearly did. In response to this slight, as well as in the process of becoming more palatable to a broader spectrum of people since their earlier allies had abandoned them, women's rights proponents redefined their goals. Where they had once championed a broad series of corrections in legal and social behavior designed to give women more rights, they now pushed the single issue of suffrage.

By the 1870s, the restriction that women speak in public only if speaking for others than themselves was not a factor. Although many of the women who began their public careers as trance mediums continued to lecture in trances, they also began to lecture out of trance.

The ideologically motivated branch of the Spiritualist movement was undermined in the 1870s and 1880s both by

declining support for their cause and a tendency towards organization. The formation of the American Association of Spiritualists undermined the influence of both mediums and women within the Spiritualist ranks.<sup>36</sup> In 1871, Victoria Woodhull, an ostentatious Spiritualist with a questionable past, who, along with her sister Tennessee, was the first woman to run a Wall Street firm, drove a final nail into the already ailing Spiritualist movement. She used the 1871 American Association of Spiritualists national meeting as a nominating convention in her bid for the presidency. Woodhull caused irreconcilable divisions within that branch of the Spiritualist movement with her campaign, as it caused a number of prominent Spiritualists to begin attacking each other.<sup>37</sup> The general Spiritualist movement was similarly undermined by a series of exposes written by former mediums as well as by cynics who investigated bogus phenomena. Kate Fox, one of the Fox sisters whose raps began the Spiritualist movement, now in her forties, alcoholic, impoverished, and deprived of her two children by the courts on the grounds that she was unfit, revealed that she and her sister had caused the raps by cracking their toes against the floor. The Spiritualist movement had begun as a childish prank.

From the 1870s to the 1890s, instead of serious Spiritualist conventions, featuring lectures on reforms as well as Spiritualist dogma, Spiritualist gatherings featured “picnics and camp meetings” and Spiritualist entertainments. Normally, however, in what almost amounted to a nod to their radical past, the organizers “found slot for suffrage between entertainments.”<sup>38</sup> Aside from a brief revival after World War I among those who lost someone in the war, Spiritualism eventually degenerated into parlor games, especially in the form of the “planchette,” a board containing the letters of the alphabet used to communicate with the spirits, later known as the Ouija board.

## The exclusion of Spiritualism from feminist history

Given that Spiritualism did play a significant role in the spread of feminism, it is curious that most feminist histories ignore the movement. Perhaps the absence of Spiritualism from mainstream histories is the result of their absence from the first standard history of the Women's Rights movement ever written, the first three volumes of *History of Woman Suffrage*, edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage.<sup>39</sup> The first three volumes, compiled over a period stretching from the mid-1870s through the 1880s, may have excluded Spiritualism unwittingly, or because most local feminist historians who sent contributions to Stanton, Anthony and Gage's effort chose to ignore the Spiritualists. That is, however, highly unlikely, given that all three authors had lectured at Spiritualist conventions, and the elder two, Stanton and Anthony, knew that much of the audience at early Women's Rights Conventions had consisted of Spiritualists. It is more likely that the exclusion was purposeful. In the 1870s and 1880s, the Women's movement, having parted company with the Garrisonians, sought to appeal to a wider spectrum of women by downplaying their liberal roots.

Eleanor Flexner, who would write *Century of Struggle*, the definitive feminist history used during the 1970s, based her research on the full six-volume *History of Women Suffrage* and the papers which Lucretia Mott, Stanton, Anthony, Carrie Chapman Catt, Alice Paul and other members of the by now established suffragette pantheon left to the Library of Congress and Smith and Radcliffe Colleges.<sup>40</sup> Since late in their life both Anthony and Stanton would modify their papers, crossing out some parts of letters and even burning others (a few years of Stanton's papers had already been burnt when her house caught on fire) which they thought could be detrimental to future women activists, Flexner most likely did not find many references to the spiritualists. Since Flexner's work would then serve as the basis for further work in the history of the Women's Rights movement, it is not surprising that

the Spiritualist movement has been missing from most standard histories of the movement.

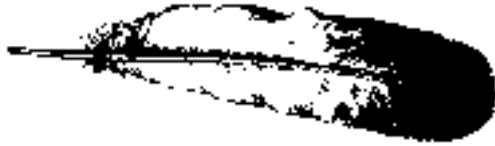
### Conclusion

It may have surprised the reader to find that the Women's Rights movement, for all of its rational, Enlightenment impulses—the complex logical arguments stemming from the assumption that men and women are equal, the drive to rational reform, even a founding document, the *Declaration of Women's Rights*, signed at Seneca Falls, based on the *Declaration of Independence*, a direct result of Locke's work—was associated with such an irrational, quasi-religious movement. It could be said that Spiritualism empowered women to free themselves from religious and other constraints society placed on women. It is certainly the case in Mary Fenn Davis's life, and possibly the Grimke sisters'. But that would be an extreme simplification. Many women came to Spiritualism because they were already involved with liberal denominations or Quakerism, or through their contacts in the network of reformers. Embracing Spiritualist ideology, however, meant embracing women's rights, surely a revolutionary step to take for a woman confined by the dictates of her society. Many opted to use Spiritualism simply as a way of comforting themselves after the loss of a loved one.

Some steps of progress for women's rights came through avenues that would seem detrimental to its advance. Women trance speakers were accepted onto the pulpit because their mediumship confirmed the Victorian belief in the essential passivity and receptivity of women, yet trance mediums pioneered the way for women to give public lectures. Henry James captured this essential quandary in his novel *The Bostonians*, a less-than-flattering comment on the women's rights movement. Only when her father puts her into a trance can Verena Tarrent, a shy, weak girl, give fiery lectures on women's rights, and once her father ends the trance, she resumes her subservient position. Spiritualism in

general, with its emphasis on questionable proofs of the afterlife, obscure philosophies, and individual communication with spirits, seems an odd ally for a movement dedicated to proving that women are capable of conducting themselves rationally, contrary to the beliefs of the time.

And yet it was. Although the Spiritualist movement was by no means the reason the women's rights movement was able to achieve the recognition that it did, it was one of the factors that contributed to the rise of the women's rights movement in antebellum America. When suffragettes came together in the 1910s to try to gain the vote, they drew on a history of activism that stretched back to the 1840s, as did the feminists who formed the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Although Spiritualism may have been struck from that history, it did play a part in shaping it.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ann Braude, Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth Century America (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1989) p. 17

<sup>2</sup> "Individual moral autonomy" is Ann Braude's phrase.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Goldsmith, Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) p. 31

<sup>4</sup> Braude, p. 17

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Brandon, The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1983) p. 11

<sup>6</sup> Bret E. Carroll, Spiritualism in Antebellum America (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) pp. 25-26

<sup>7</sup> Brandon, p. 15

<sup>8</sup> Joseph McCabe, Spiritualism: A Popular History From 1847 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1920) p. 47

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41

<sup>10</sup> Braude, p. 22

<sup>11</sup> McCabe, p. 88

<sup>12</sup> Carroll, p. 4

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102

<sup>15</sup> Braude, p. 17

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37

<sup>17</sup> Goldsmith, p. 211

<sup>18</sup> Braude, p. 82

<sup>19</sup> Carroll, p. 130

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129-134

<sup>21</sup> Braude, p. 82

<sup>22</sup> Carroll, p. 130

<sup>23</sup> Braude, p. 57

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26

<sup>27</sup> Donna A. Behnke, "The Right to Speak Publicly," in Religious Issues in Nineteenth Century Feminism (Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1982)

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22

<sup>29</sup> Braude, p. 90

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 70-71

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 65, 85

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 85

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 97

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 196

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-167

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 170-171

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 196

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 81

<sup>40</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois, "Eleanor Flexner and the History of American Feminism," in Woman Suffrage & Women's Rights (New York University Press: New York and London, 1998)

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