

ONE

SPIRITED SEXUALITY

Sex, Marriage, and Victorian Spiritualism

I have reason to know that the power at work in these phenomena,
like Love, “laughs at locksmiths.”

—Sir William Crookes, F.R.S.,
“Miss Florence Cook’s Mediumship”

DRAWING ROOM EROTICS

Spiritualism was sexy. From its humble beginnings in 1848, this Victorian faith of “sittings,” mediums, and spirit contact thrilled its practitioners and detractors alike and broke countless rules of decency and decorum in spite of the fact that it was nurtured and developed in the drawing rooms of the proprietous middle classes. The darkened parlor of the séance invited and embodied the disruption of the ordinary. In this world, the linked hands of the sitters violated customary barriers of age and gender, and the intimate spaces underneath the tipping tables set the stage for more than just spiritual stimulation. Faces and knees were caressed while the lights were out, gentlewomen submitted to be kissed by strangers, and the most private recesses of the past and present were exposed to the public eye. Unsurprisingly, these signs of disarray presaged the erotic tales of trysts between nubile, young mediums and their benefactors, as well as mediums’ secret nuptials and pronouncements regarding extramarital “spiritual affinities” and “free love.” In the face of all this sexual pandemonium, the men and women who engaged in these activities still moved in polite society, a phenomenon that had a significant impact on relations between the sexes and the institution of marriage.

To understand this impact, we must turn to the most titillating of all these disruptions, the receptive bodies of mediums, often young and feminine, which provided the primary channel for intercourse with the spirits. Through mediumship, musical instruments floated in the air and were played without the touch of human hands, tropical flowers filled rooms in the dead of winter, and ghosts granted spiritual advice. But the immaterial ponderings and playful antics of the long dead were not all the mediums channeled. Florence Cook, possibly the most famous medium in history, was fifteen years old¹ when she began to publicly materialize spirit body parts such as hands, arms, and faces.² She was seventeen when she first offered up her body as the venue for the stunning “full-form materialization,” the physical embodiment of a spirit manifested through the spiritual energy and, as some theorists later claimed, the ectoplasm of the medium. A medium entered a secluded space in a darkened room, and, after a few moments of the circle’s devotional singing or praying, a fully materialized “ghost” would emerge from that space, while the medium remained inside. This space was often a specially constructed and heavily curtained cabinet or recess in the room, and to ensure that the spirit was not the medium in disguise, measures—sometimes dramatic or extreme—were taken to keep her there. She might be bound to the chair within by chains or ropes; have her hair nailed to the cabinet; have a string run through the hole in her pierced ear to a weight attached outside the cabinet—she might even, in some cases, be caged. (See figures 1 and 2 for images of a spirit and materialization cabinet.) Mediums materialized both female and male spirit entities, who entered the séance to do more than give advice about living a consecrated life. They flirtatiously engaged with the sitters, tendering kisses or the chance to squeeze their limbs or feel their hips as proof of their materiality. Born into and groomed for polite society, the young women who produced these scandalous displays did so under the aegis of Spiritualism—and their behavior did far more than simply upset etiquette.

While it certainly reaffirmed many culturally conservative values in its rhetoric and sometimes figured women in socially repressive ways, Spiritualism also undermined the social structures that defined a narrow circuit of behavior for women. This “unevenness,” as Mary Poovey describes such contradictory social constructs, granted women a new kind of self-determination, a self-determination that led to many unconventional choices. In this chapter, I will look at this phenomenon through the case of one medium, Florence Cook, and through her, I will argue that mediumship provided one means of resisting gendered limitations—a form of resistance I will examine in relation to other issues in later chapters. A. J. Gabay contends that the violation of social norms was intrinsic to the medium’s behavior: “The . . . uncharacteristic and liminal—that is, behaviour which in another context would be regarded, especially

in Victorian society, as peculiar, sub-normal, or insane, was considered to be *necessary*" (210). Out of this "necessity," women could channel a ghost of any temperament or character, materialize a spirit of any disposition they desired, and embody whomever they might choose. They controlled, at each séance, what and who they would be, and, furthermore, could claim heavenly authorization for those choices—or any other choices they might make. Young women mediums like Cook lived and offered to the public a very different model of spiritual, feminine lives than most Victorian women otherwise knew. Alex Owen has pointed to the ways in which female mediumship remained complicit with the "normative"—for example, regarding women as better mediums because they were naturally more passive. Here, I will emphasize the way that these more conservative gestures made bending the rules easier. If ordinary rules no longer applied—something that was clearly true in Spiritualism—and the terms of women's identity were being undermined, women might gain access to a whole new range of behavior. Unsurprisingly, the shifts this made possible in women's identity precipitated a shift in women's roles as well, including those in romantic relationships and marriage.

Florence Cook, to whom I will turn in detail later in this chapter, was a fascinating example of this kind of gender role revision. Cook might have looked forward to a prosaic life as a schoolteacher and, eventually, middle-class and housebound wife, if she had not found Spiritualism—or if, as she reported, the spirits had not found her. This extraordinary woman (and her younger sister after her) achieved things about which George Eliot's respectable, but striving, Rosamond Vincy mostly dreamed: she was welcomed into the homes of the rich, titled, and famous; traveled extensively; became the toast of the Spiritualist press; and garnered glamorous gifts. As she remarked to her wealthy patron, Mr. Blackburn, in one of the few letters in her hand which has survived and is held in a Spiritualist archive, "Mr Luxmoore has kindly invited Mama and me to go with him for a run with his yacht. Would not it be nice? I should like it so much" (n.d. "Saturday"). Florrie, as she was called, however, longed for more than mere jewelry, financial liquidity, and yachting—and she acted on a desire she perceived in Spiritualism to achieve it. "Spiritualists," she wrote, "want something of the sort to wake them up a little. I am certain a great many people would go if the meeting were made amusing. It would not be nice to have dry speeches all the time." Cook and her spirit, Katie, certainly provided a good deal more than "dry speeches" for onlookers and readers of séance records—the two became performers extraordinaire of a strange mix of the conservative and transgressive, and Cook's remarkable mediumship, even after her scandalous "exposure," granted her access (at least for a time) not only to wealth, but to a wealth of freedoms that most genteel women found beyond their reach.

Most significantly for my discussion here, Cook virtually cast off the guidance of all but her spirit guide. Even her patron, who supported her financially for many years, was unable to make demands. She simply referred his persistent requests to her spirit guide—"I have asked Katie ever so many times about letting you sit in the cabinet with me. She says she will try what she can do but is not certain it can be done with anyone" (n.d. "Friday").³ Moreover, she frequently acted in direct opposition to the will of her husband and patron, claiming deference to Katie: "I plainly see that if I am passive and don't rebel against her authority, we shall get all we want" ("Saturday"). Her "passivity" to a female spirit, and one with whom she was intimately linked, as I will explain below, allowed her to rebel against traditional patriarchal power structures in ways that—remarkably—maintained her feminine respectability while undermining "femininity" itself. *How* this was possible requires some explanation before I attend to the details of her story.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

Spiritualism made social violations of all kinds possible and respectable because it blurred the boundaries between the spiritual and the material. Spiritualism aimed, in the views of most Spiritualists, to reintroduce the spiritual into a social climate characterized by booming economic growth and a declining religious conviction. Both critics and advocates agreed that the "rapid development of 'spiritualism' [took] place at a time when materialism had well-nigh ejected that quality from many person's minds" (*Development* 1). Spiritualism, however, did not and could not replace the material lives of the Victorians with lives in the spiritual realm alone—indeed, that would be death itself. Instead, it injected spirituality into a materialistic world and, as is aptly demonstrated by full-form materialization, the spirit into the solidly material, blurring the line between the two. The spirits' voices resounded in the physical ear, their thoughts were translated from the heavens into common ink and paper, and their ethereal forms were made flesh. One commentator aptly defined mediumship as that "extraordinary gift which enables its possessor to act as a connecting link between the spirit and the flesh" (Baker 12). The point at which the spirit ended and the flesh began proved very difficult for Spiritualists and their critics to determine, and this became the pivot for the social disordering apparent in the lives of the mediums.

The shifting boundaries between spirit and flesh made the identity of the medium uncertain, and mediums themselves acutely apprehended this fluidity. They attended to the way in which their bodies and their very identities were transformed in the act of mediumship. Elizabeth d'Espérance, another full-

form materialization medium, evocatively described the difficulty of distinguishing between herself and the spirit at a materialization séance.

It must be my own heart I feel beating so distinctly. Yet those arms around me? Surely never did I feel touch so plainly. I begin to wonder which is I. Am I the white figure [the spirit] or am I the one on the chair [the medium]? Are they my hands around the old lady's neck, or are these mine that are lying on the knees of me, or on the knees of the figure if it be not I, on the chair?

Certainly they are my lips that are being kissed. It is my face that is wet with the tears which these good women are shedding so plentifully. Yet how can it be? It is a horrible feeling, thus losing hold of one's identity. I long to put out one of these hands that are lying so helplessly, and touch some one just to know if I am myself or only a dream—if 'Anna' be I, or I am lost as it were, in her identity. (*Shadow Land* 346)

Which experiences are those of the flesh and which are those of the spirit? In which body does the medium's identity lie? Who is responsible for the reaching arms, the shared kiss, the embrace? The boundary between the spiritual and the flesh of the medium becomes indistinct, and, by virtue of this slippage, the medium cannot demarcate her own identity, locate her own accountability or intention, or distinguish the Victorian woman from the unfettered spirit. The sure boundaries of the "self" crumble in the face of full-form materialization and with them the rules that bind each identity position.

Though *Espérance* describes this feeling as "horrible," it is precisely in this place, at this site of fluid boundaries and metamorphosing identities, that I would argue change becomes possible, that whole worlds—and not just those imagined by the Spiritualists—begin to shift. Many critics have argued that in this moment of fluidity, we find the most potential for paradigmatic change. Julia Kristeva notes in *Powers of Horror* that it is the site of abjection, a painful place that she identifies by its loss of boundaries, at which the most potent possibility for new power is engaged. This concept is further illuminated by the work of deconstructionist critics. Though their theories have often been read as apolitical or nihilistic, they actually provide a means for reading a collapse of boundaries as a mechanism for social change. We can understand the deconstruction of dichotomies as a site of transformation rather than a simple loss of meaning. Jacques Derrida, in responding to questions about the political efficacy of deconstruction in *Limited Inc.*, suggests that he is interested in exploring "the link between deconstruction and the 'yes,'" rather than the radical collapse of all significance or communication many critics have assumed remains after deconstruction. He seeks to find a way in which the disruption of

binaries does not necessitate the destruction of meaning, but rather might illuminate possibilities, and, most significantly for my argument, “[intervene] in the determination of a context from its very inception . . . this is the moment of strategies, of rhetorics, of ethics, and of politics” (152). Deconstruction gives us a means of reading disruption and chaos. It examines the way that meaning might be *remade* to transcend old “determinations” and become an engine for social change. Thus, the deconstruction of the dichotomies in Spiritualism, when read through this frame, provides a space of refiguration, offering new possibilities for understanding women’s identity.

Another element of this theory illuminates the social relevance of the phenomena/study here: Derrida’s claim that “The outside penetrates and thus determines the inside” (153). He counters the notion that mainstream forces figure all the groups or movements on the periphery and suggests, instead, that the margins might determine the center. In the disruption of this inside/outside dichotomy, Derrida finds “openings.” I read “openings” as the site of possibility described above, the movement beyond the structures of the status quo to a new politics. This argument points to the way that the seeming margins of a culture like Spiritualism—particularly as they are taken up in the cultural discourse and become a part of the play of language—provide another instance of the outside’s refiguration of the inside, of the margin’s rewriting of the center.

The indeterminate boundary between flesh and spirit and between self and other, then, impacted not just the mediums, but people beyond the immediate circle of the séance. The individual mediumistic and communal séance experience became sites at which old determinations were transcended and new ideas played out. These “marginal” acts shifted Spiritualist understanding and put pressure on the shape of the mainstream notions. We might compare this to the act of matting a photograph or painting. The image in the center, which seems to be the only significant or signifying feature of the art, changes significantly based on the color, shape, and size of the matting and its layers. Without “acting” directly itself, the center bears the mark of, is shaped and colored by its margins: different aspects are emphasized and, indeed, become apparent based on the qualities of the margins. So it was with mainstream Victorian attitudes. Notions of gender roles and the cultural significance of the flesh and spirit were already contested, as voluminous scholarship on the period indicates, and Spiritualism—a seemingly marginal movement—provided a frame to bring into focus those issues, draw them out, and foster discussion and change.

REFIGURING THE CENTER

There is no question that the shifts dramatized in Spiritualism impacted private, individual lives, but they were not silent, isolated, or private events. The

disintegration and reimagining of social codes in Spiritualist circles was a public act, obsessively chronicled and publicized by both Spiritualism's opponents and its advocates. In spite of the ample British skepticism and the often darkly cynical response of the press, significant energy was channeled into the analysis of Spiritualism. Even in its more contemptuous reports (and they were almost always contemptuous), the *Times* could not but acknowledge the power Spiritualism and its mediums had gained over the public imagination. "It is pretty generally known that among the fancies of the fashionable world there is none more prevalent than a desire to hold intercourse with the spirits of the departed. A 'medium' in good repute, who, for a certain fee, will enable us to discourse with our deceased grandfathers, may be regarded as a member of a profession at once lucrative and distinguished" ("A Sitting" 9). The expansive social engagement with Spiritualism made it inevitable that Spiritualism's disruption of traditional notions would infect the public conversation, and this phenomenon becomes visible when we place the movement in the context I have provided. From Kensington Palace to the penny press, debates about Spiritualism appeared everywhere. A whole range of newspapers and periodicals, some of which lasted to the end of the century and beyond, sprang up to analyze the movement's virtues and flaws. It drew the attention of the scientific community, and even if that attention was sometimes scornful or dismissive, Spiritualism was regularly discussed. Sir William Crookes, a prominent scientist whom I will discuss at greater length below, said, "those who have turned their attention somewhat to spiritualism . . . constitute a large class in England, [even] embracing many of the nobility and gentry" (D'Albe 197). Others went so far as to say that the "public, and especially that part of it which [was] . . . from the ranks of the upper classes [was] rushing open-mouthed into [Spiritualism] as a new excitement" ("The Press" 147). Popular amateur ethnographer Charles Maurice Davies said that even his own extensive writing on the faith could offer a sense of the widespread enthusiasm for Spiritualism (257). It would perhaps be safe to say that only the most isolated could remain unaware of Spiritualism, its claims, and its scandals.

As the movement and its concerns became a part of public discourse, it became one of the voices in the conversation about women's roles in the culture at large. Disruption of identity within Spiritualism created a cascade effect that impacted notions of womanly identity and roles inside the faith and, as I will argue, outside as well. Spiritualism's assault on the permanence and rigidity of the boundaries between spirit/matter and self/other disrupted other social dichotomies that were intimately linked to its structure, like those between the mind/body, spiritual/sexual, man/woman, and man/wife [*sic*]. Many theorists have pointed out the ways in which these various dichotomies shore one another up, reinforcing the seeming naturalness and solidity of the terms.⁴ I am interested in exploring what happens when these dichotomies are undermined by practices that reveal their instability and thus disrupt the social

practices that are based on them. While Spiritualism often honored these binaries, it certainly disrupted them as well, but its means of doing so—by blurring boundaries, rather than simply violating social codes—helped secure the “respectability” of such violations and ushered these critiques into mainstream discourse and stylish drawing rooms.

Women entered the world of Spiritualism safely via the pathway of the sacred and spiritual, yet the release from the boundaries of the flesh and the self also provided a release from limitations that their own roles had formerly required. In the absence of those boundaries, many women found access to material power. Women—who were and were not themselves, who were and were not the spirit—could speak publicly and with authority on politics, social controversies, and religious dogma.⁵ They diagnosed illnesses, made unconventional life choices, and advised others to do the same.⁶ Certainly, this religiously sanctioned behavior interfered with the seamless cultural reproduction of gender codes that denied women the right to such authority. This virtual gender crossing had a profound impact on the young women mediums, and we would be remiss if we neglected to examine the ways their highly public—and perhaps even widely shared—experiences affected the social institutions that had shaped the philosophies they challenged.

I am particularly interested in the way that these disruptions transformed gender codes, marriage, and interpersonal relationships between men and women, not just for a select medium or two, but perhaps even in the culture at large by participating in the discourse surrounding spiritual and material unions. I will look at all elements of the relational terms I laid out above, from the dichotomy at the level of the individual body as it plays out through sexuality, to that at the level of the social as it appears in courtship and marriage. Marriage and romantic entanglements provide signposts across the social landscape—the former is a concrete, highly public construction and both are well-articulated processes with distinct gender roles—and for this reason they provide a means of rendering visible the consequences of Spiritualism’s revisioning. In addition, concerns about the impact of Spiritualism on gendered relationships and marriage dominated many critics’ discussions of Spiritualism, offering us evidence of the work Spiritualism did, as well as a textual conversation to explore about its relationship to social dichotomies and marriage.

SEX IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Spiritualism’s opponents did not underrate the social threat of the movement, particularly regarding sexuality and marriage. Joseph B. Rotherham, in *A Warning Against Spiritualism*, argued that experimenting with Spiritualism was like yielding to the serpent and tasting the forbidden fruit in the Garden of

Eden, and his imagery of temptation and sexual violation does not long remain metaphoric. He specifically locates the danger of Spiritualism in the notion that “‘*The marriage vow imposes no obligation in the views of Spiritualists.*’ Husbands . . . have formed criminal connections with other females, *because the spirits have told them that there was a greater ‘Spiritualist affinity’ between the husbands and certain other women than between them and their lawful wives*” (14, emphasis in original). Though this claim about the dismissal of marriage vows was certainly untrue for many Spiritualists, there were widespread concerns that interaction with spirits would destroy the sanctity of marriage by leading to material violations of vows and of the traditional relations between men and women. Significantly, Rotherham does not fear that men alone will behave with sexual impropriety. A woman too might believe that “To confine her love to one man was an abridgment of her rights” (14). He notes that “Hundreds of families have been broken up, and many affectionate wives deserted, by ‘affinity-seeking’ husbands. Many once devoted wives have been seduced and have left their husbands and tender helpless children, to follow some ‘higher attraction.’ Many well-disposed, but simple-minded, girls have been deluded by ‘affinity’ notions and led off by ‘affinity hunters’ to be deserted in a few months” (14–15). Though he provides no substantiation for his dire claim about the fate of hundreds of marriages, nor do we have any evidence that Spiritualists were more likely than other Victorians to seduce naïve young women, his blanket assurance voices a larger anxiety about the place of Spiritualist beliefs in Victorian society.

He feared that the collapse of well-founded individual boundaries would lead to the collapse of social boundaries as well, that men and women would act independently of the social limitations in gendered relationships and marriage to satisfy their spiritual or physical desires—precisely the argument I am making here. Though Rotherham voiced these notions in different terms and drew different conclusions about their value, he contends that individual decisions impact the social body. Significantly, he does not call upon the well-developed discourse of the fallen woman to express his concerns about the acts of particular mediums or adherents, but rather speaks in general terms to the movement as a whole. The slippery line between the religious acts in which these women were engaging and the material acts their bodies performed while under the influence of the spirits made it difficult to simply condemn those individuals involved, in spite of his criticisms of the faith. Women mediums, even when failing to adhere to codes for propitious behavior, remained beyond this reproach. Though mediums might come in for their share of criticism (particularly those who were labeled charlatans), they could not simply be reviled and cast off as “Eves”; they were spiritual agents with a spiritual goal. They were morally sanctified, even though they violated the boundaries that outlined genteel women’s behavior. Indeed, it was in part because of this sanctification that they could betray these boundaries without reprisal.

An anonymous author foretells the same social tragedy as Rotherham in an 1861 critique, *Confessions of a Medium*. This one-time Spiritualist finds in the faith “the darkest impressions . . . every guilty whisper of the senses, and . . . excitement, to exult in the age of license which [he] believed to be at hand” (22). Fraught with violation and charged by the thrill of unfettered exploration, the author still cannot simply condemn. In fact, the guilty whispers he hears seem to be related to the attraction he feels for a “girl of sixteen . . . a pale, delicate creature, with blond hair and light blue eyes,” with whom he has highly erotic séances. He indicates that “Chance placed her next to me in forming the [séance circle], and her right hand lay lightly upon my left” (9). When the table began to move (a common séance phenomenon), some removed their hands, but not the author or Miss Feters. “My outward consciousness appeared to be somewhat benumbed . . . but I retained curiosity enough to look at my companion. Her eyes, sparkling with a strange, steady light, were fixed upon the table; her breath came quick and short, and her cheek had lost every trace of colour. Suddenly, as if by a spasmodic effort, she removed her hands; I did the same, and the table stopped. She threw herself into a seat, as if exhausted” (9–10). The orgasmic quality of their séance—her panting breath, her mesmeric attentiveness, the dramatic climax—and the author’s participation in the event suggest an intimate attraction to the medium. Though he later refers to her as “disagreeable,” she still seems the epitome of feminine, blond, blue-eyed innocence in the text—even as her mediumistic powers develop and she begins to “prophes[y], str[i]de, sw[ear], and [smash] things” (14). She channels male spirits, downs tumblers of brandy, and publicly and rapturously throws her arms around the neck of a married gentleman in the circle while embodying a spirit. The author’s argument about this medium and the dangers associated with her behavior culminates in not just the disruption of gender codes we see here, but in what he calls the “spiritual carnival” (22)⁷—a kind of chaos of meaning that allows her and others in the circle to defy convention.

Though the medium has clearly violated decorum in her behavior, the author concludes his argument by focusing on the larger social threat this individual behavior implies, *not the medium herself*. The medium, he indicates, is at the “mercy” of the spirits (32), endowed with what he still calls “God’s best gift” (31) in spite of his dismissal of Spiritualism. The threat, for most critics, rather than being in the girl herself, is embodied in Spiritualism in general and in the “doctrine of affinities” in particular—a move that largely divorces the medium from the damning responsibility, but still allows her the liberties implied by such beliefs. The doctrine of affinities suggested that two beings might find their “soul mates” outside the bonds of marriage as their spiritual apprehension sharpened. This, for the author, is the “dangerous” conclusion to the carnivalesque transformations that took place in one woman’s mediumship. He describes the philosophy as follows: “The soul had a right to seek its kin-

dred soul: that I could not deny. Having found, they belonged to each other. Love is the only law which those who love are bound to obey. I shall not repeat all the sophistry whereby these positions were strengthened. The doctrine soon blossomed and bore fruit, the nature of which left no doubt as to the character of the tree" (26). This "fruit" evokes Rotherham's Garden of Eden metaphor, as well as his fears about a kind of knowledge that does not just change the individuals (Adam and Eve/the medium and her lover), but literally makes them the genesis of social change. He finds in the sacred space of the Spiritualistic séance a shift in the social order, a knowledge and behavior that undermines the social and civic law.⁸ Though disturbed by the transformation in the medium, the author never simply defines her as fallen, as we might expect a Victorian critic to do. The slippery ground of identity and spirituality made this kind of preemptive dismissal of a woman in converse with the angels nearly impossible.

The fears of critics and their sense of impending social shifts were not simply fantasies on the part of imaginative anti-Spiritualist doomsayers. Many young mediums discovered their spouses in highly unconventional ways and in the highly unconventional realm of Spiritualistic séances, and as some critics—Victorian and contemporary—would argue, they encountered illicit lovers as well. What is most significant, however, is not that affairs did take place or that lovers were discovered, but rather both that people *believed* this was occurring and that the mediums' reputations still remained intact. In their violation of social codes, they could not be defined as apostate; the slippage of boundaries between the medium and spirit gave mediums new freedoms, and they performed them for the public at large.

The belief that Spiritualism was associated with disruptive sexuality and the corruption of marriage fostered, in fact, the possibility that disruptive sexuality and the corruption of marriage might become salient features of the séance, even while those involved maintained their respectability. As Judith Irvine has noted, the "[c]reation of a medium's identity has as much to do with the interpretive framework of those in the medium's acting context as it does with the actual behavior of the medium" (241). By violating the mainstream understanding of identity, the medium was constructed in this interpretative framework as a woman both inside and outside the norms. Reinforced by and exploiting beliefs about séances, this phenomenon made women's ability to take on new roles, particularly as they related to their intimate relationships, possible.

FLORENCE COOK/KATIE KING

This drama seemed to be played out in the case of the most famous Victorian medium, Florence Cook (see figure 3). A young woman from a middle-class family, Cook had reached the pinnacle of Victorian mediumship in the early

1870s by regularly materializing Katie King,⁹ the spirit-world daughter of a seventeenth-century brigand turned governor of Jamaica, in “full-form.” This young spirit woman, who had a striking resemblance to Cook (see figure 4), emerged, as the Spiritualists described it, from the materiality, the very “stuff,” of Cook. Flesh of Cook’s flesh, Katie then entered the séance a thoroughly “material spirit” virtually unbound by the rules of Victorian society. A look at Cook and Katie’s early séances demonstrates the cascading boundary disruption in Spiritualism. This discussion will follow that process, beginning with those disruptions at the level of body and spirit, proceeding to individual sexual violations, and finally to the larger scale social and institutional disruptions surrounding gender roles and marriage.

From Katie’s earliest appearances, she capitalized in very material ways on the theoretical freedoms I have described above. She flirted with her sitters, kissed them, and touched them (see figure 5).¹⁰ These manipulations tantalized the circle with her materiality—proofs deemed necessary to demonstrate the way in which Spiritualism could infuse the material with the spiritual. According to George Fraser, a regular séance attender, one of the pivotal activities of Katie via Cook was displaying her body to demonstrate its materiality in order to provide a proof of Spiritualism; so Cook “under[took] to show those who visit[ed] her the very flesh and blood of the ghostly beings” (38). Even in this statement, Fraser’s attribution of activity seems to slip between Cook and Katie: whose effort, whose undertaking, *is* it to show flesh and blood? Is it Katie who materializes, but Cook who materializes her? The difficulty in fixing the actor here reminds us that the acts of one being are intimately connected with those of the other, that flesh and blood were unstable markers of both identity and materiality in Spiritualism, slippages which fostered disruptive behavior. Katie was in the habit of exposing her newly materialized flesh and making her violation of boundaries (both in terms of social codes and identity) quite clear, but it was still Cook who undertook to make this possible. Whoever was responsible, it is difficult to imagine tolerance for such behavior by any respectable woman. When Katie (or Cook) set out to prove the spirit’s physical reality, the material body thus produced by the medium and spirit violated social codes with abandon. Some of the sitters were so mesmerized by the physicality of the spirit/woman that detailed reports on Katie’s body appeared in the press. One Spiritualist remarked with satisfaction, “I could clearly distinguish every toe, and . . . [s]he lifted her dress, and we saw her bare leg a few inches above the ankle” (“Letter to the Editor” *The Spiritualist* 3, 133).

Shocking as this display might seem in polite company in a Victorian drawing room, the playfully uncovered ankle and leg weren’t all Katie showed off. Sometimes, her “robe was cut low, with short sleeves, allowing her beautiful neck and arms to be seen” (“Photographing a Spirit” 200). Her male sitters

responded enthusiastically to this exhibition. G. R. Tapp reported that Katie was “most animated and beautiful” with “long . . . shapely arms” (119). When he approached Katie at a séance to shake her hand, as she had directed him, “she took [his] right hand in hers, and passed it over the upper part of her white dress. . . . My impression (which I did not mention at the time) was that she had on only one garment” (119). Not only is Tapp encouraged to physically explore this young “spirit” woman’s bosom, he then indicates something on which he and others would later comment in greater detail—that Katie wore none of the traditional women’s underclothing. If this exchange leaves the reader in any doubt of the strange mixture of propriety and impropriety in the séance, Tapp’s final remarks, when Katie invites him to gaze upon her, indicate the level of flirtation and the violation of social boundaries associated with materialization, as well as the pleasure they elicited. “She told me to go back to my seat, and asked me what I thought of *her ‘full length.’* I said I could scarcely find words to express my gratification, and she kissed her hand to me, and walked backwards to her cabinet, holding up the shawl to peep out *roguishly*” (119, emphasis added). The erotic language here, openly and almost naïvely reported, suggests the degree to which the contravention of—or rather shift in—propriety was made possible by both exploiting and transgressing the normative in the séance. The confidence in its spiritual blamelessness allowed Cook/King and those with whom they interacted to violate middle-class social norms.

This series of séances culminated in several versions of a rather remarkable event that plays out the pathways I have described here to their logical ends: from philosophical instability (the undermined dichotomies), to individual nonconformity (such as unconventional sexual behavior), to social disruption (as it relates to marriage). Katie, on more than one occasion, participated in a strange betrothal with a séance sitter. One of her circle’s wealthier patrons, Mr. Dunphy, “inquired whether ‘Katie’ would put on a heavy gold ring, which he took off his finger and offered her. This she immediately took out of his hand and placed on her own wedding finger, saying naïvely—‘We are now engaged.’ On Mr. Dunphy subsequently reaching with his hand to receive the ring[,] ‘Katie’ allowed him to touch hers, and afterwards told him to touch her lips, which he did with his hands, ‘Katie’ imprinting a kiss upon them” (“Letter” 41). This Spiritualist marriage, an exchange of the very material (the ring and the kiss), remained “innocent” because of its spiritual elements. Still, it was a violation of social norms that echoed Spiritualism’s other violations of the customary rituals associated with matrimony. Katie’s illicit kisses led to—what would have been had she been simply a Victorian woman—socially scandalous courtships and social ceremonies. The same seemed to be true of Cook.

Since no one, not even the most certain Spiritualist believer, could tell where Cook began and Katie ended and vice versa, Cook was always

implicated in Katie's behavior. Though people staked out fierce positions, from those who thought Cook was a fraud who merely duped her sitters by impersonating Katie to those who believed Katie was generated by Cook through spirit agency, Katie and Cook were clearly physical and spiritual intimates, and the boundary between them slid. This explains in part why neither the medium nor her spirit was charged with impropriety. Not only did Katie violate social codes, but Cook, by virtue of her relation with Katie and with Spiritualism in general, defied many social codes herself and still maintained her middle-class gentility.

SOCIAL CLIMBING AND SEXUALITY

It might be easy for us simply to mark Cook as a working-class social climber who became a medium to improve her position and indulge her (class-bound) impropriety sexual fantasies, as critics like Ruth Brandon and, to some extent, Alex Owen have argued. In part 2, "Ghosts of Home," I do discuss two working-class materialization mediums who moved from very humble beginnings to relatively comfortable middle-class lifestyles—a phenomenon as important as the spirits they produced and one worthy of analysis. There is a danger, however, in assuming that all mediums were paid, working-class, public mediums¹¹ and that Spiritualism was primarily a movement in the lower orders, produced by the superstitions of a disenfranchised servant class seeking an emotional opiate, or by a wily group of tricksters on the lookout for easy cash. These notions obscure the potential significance of middle-class mediumship, but that they should appear as an unquestioned premise of much of the literature on Spiritualism is no surprise.

These class assumptions pervade Victorian narrative, as well as previous scholarship on Spiritualism and ghosts. The figures represented as most susceptible to belief in ghost stories are typically servants. Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" describes the increasing credulity encountered as one moves down the ranks in the servants' quarters: beginning with the lady's maid and child's nurse, to the head servant, James, then to his wife, Dorothy (who James "even looked down on a little . . . because, till he had married her she had never lived in any but a farmer's household" [5]), and finally to the underservant who did all the "rough work." When the lady's maid mentions strange music in the night (which we later learn is produced by a ghost), the spectrum of belief from rational skepticism to naïve acceptance is paralleled by the descending rank of the servants: James calls her a "gowk to take the wind soughing among the trees for music," Dorothy "look[s] at [James] very fearfully," and Bessy, the kitchen maid, "[says] something beneath her breath and [goes] quite white" (6). Though the ghosts in the tale are real (as in most fictional ghost stories), the distinguishing feature

of each character's class identity is her/his sensible resistance to them. When a middle-class narrator tells a ghostly tale, he must foreground the standard of middle-class disbelief and gradually persuade his audience to accept his position. The opening words of Charlotte Riddell's "The Open Door" are: "Some people do not believe in ghosts. . . . I ought to premise there was a time when I did not believe in ghosts either" (256). Indeed, as Hall and Davidoff indicate, the middle class played "a leading role against superstition, folk belief and what was viewed as rural ignorance and apathy. . . . The less educated or well traveled among the farming group might take an intermediate position in issues such as beliefs in ghosts" (286–87). In the two fictional narratives I describe, readers are expected to thrill at the possibility that ghosts are real—precisely the kind of mental experiment for which Spiritualism called in the middle and upper classes.

Spiritualism undid the class-based paradigm by reframing a belief in ghosts. Its proponents—even those in the working classes—claimed an enlightened and genteel belief in science and religion, not a return to superstitions. As one Spiritualist put it: "[T]he accounts thus handed down in ancient traditions are all irreconcilable with the established truths of modern science. . . . Spiritualism not only admits the immortality of man, and undertakes to prove it in a rational manner, but at the same time, instead of opposing or looking coldly upon science—for science is but exact knowledge as distinguished from unreliable opinion—is able and willing to consider, with just as much freedom as any of the philosophers of the day, any problems connected with the realm of nature" ([Harrison] "Forbidden" 157). Furthermore, many of the most famous investigators and proponents of Spiritualism were highly regarded figures from the upper and middle classes. Spiritualists drew from the ranks of the nobles, and even Queen Victoria held séances (Barrow 10). To identify Spiritualism as a purely, or even primarily, working-class or socially marginal movement obscures its significance and the bare facts of the case. Charles Davies, an Anglican clergyman and amateur ethnographer, published a highly popular book discussing Spiritualism in which he argued that "clergymen and scientists ought to look into any set of opinions whose professors have attained the dimensions of this body. Their doctrines have spread and are spreading. Already the Spiritualists number among them such men as Mr. Alfred Wallace, Mr. Varley, Mr. Crookes, Mr. S.C. Hall [all famous scientists of the day], etc., and are extending their operations amongst all the classes of society, notably among the higher" (236). Clearly, Spiritualism was not simply marginal or "rough." Indeed, the greater body of mediums and séance sitters described in the Spiritualist press were genteel.

Florence Cook has been described by contemporary critics as a working-class woman or a figure on the murky terrain between the middle and lower classes, a fact which has been used to explain her mediumship. Only a woman with visions of social advancement and profit, so the argument goes, would

engage in such a practice. I would place Cook, instead, solidly in the respectable middle-class world—a framework that calls upon us to understand the ways in which star-quality, full-form materialization mediumship, and not just private family séances, might be produced in the mainstream of society. More scholarship has been conducted on the working-class heroes of Spiritualism (particularly in the work of Logie Barrow), on the private citizenry that pursued an interest in the faith in their homes without the services of paid mediums (see especially Alex Owen's excellent chapter "At Home with the Theobald Family"), and the swindles perpetrated by money-grubbing, social-climbing mediums (Ruth Brandon's *The Spiritualists*) than on those genteel figures who *already* had social respectability and gentility and took some risks by being involved in Spiritualism.

Elizabeth Langland argues in *Nobody's Angels* that class status was a "fluid thing, increasingly dependent upon the manipulation of signs" (26). Class gradations were not simple, and, though there were clear rules, they are not always easy for modern scholars to apply. The Cooks, however, bore all the markers of middle-class respectability as Hall and Davidoff describe them: Mr. Cook had real property at his death, kept his wife at home, purchased a house, and was High Church Anglican. He lived in a suburb of London (Dalston, Hackney) and had a social circle that reached into other communities. Contemporaries described him as "a respectable man in some small commercial line of life" ("Spirit Faces" 513–14). Owen notes that the Cooks kept "at least one servant" (42), and according to Langland, "the middle-class household . . . by definition [in census and in social settings] became 'middle class' in its possession of at least one servant" (8). These landmarks overwhelmingly attest to the family's gentility. Florence herself served as a schoolteacher until her reluctant and remarkably deferential dismissal¹² for her Spiritualism in 1872. Davidoff and Hall argue that teaching preserved a "relatively high status" for women (293). Furthermore, Mary Rosina Showers, an unquestionably middle-class medium of about Cook's age, became one of Cook's dearest friends. Showers's mother, always conscious of rank, would not have been likely to allow a relationship that transgressed class boundaries. Moreover, Cook was popular in polite society as a medium from the beginning of her career; she did not have to earn the reception of the middle class over time, as working-class mediums often did. The open doors Cook found in society also indicate her class status. As Langland notes, "The formulaic and ritualistic manner of the call enabled women constantly to police and maintain their social borders. . . . 'You cannot invite people to your house, however often you may have met them elsewhere, until you have called upon them in a formal manner and they have returned their visit.' Because this barrier made acquaintance a highly formal matter, no interloper could easily squirrel her way into Society" (33). Had Cook not become a medium, she would almost certainly have married a middle-class gentleman—no different from what she did in the Spiritualist world. That is

not to say that she did not benefit from—or pay a cost because of—her mediumship. Rather, my assertion of her middle-class status calls upon us to reassess precisely what *kind* of benefits Cook earned through her Spiritualism.

Instead of simply gaining class advantage, Cook crossed boundaries of gendered behavior. She traveled alone in spite of her age and sex, had unchaperoned visits with men, and may have even managed a Parisian rendezvous with an admirer while still in her teens. She had relationships with and carried on a correspondence with many men, courted patrons, secretly married, and later defied the will of her husband to continue her life as a medium. It is these aspects of her livelihood and life, the social deviations at the site of gendered behavior expectations, that I wish to explore.

SCIENCE AND THE SIR WILLIAM CROOKES AFFAIR

Florence Cook's most significant extramarital relationship during this time, and perhaps Katie's most significant extramedial relationship ever, was with William Crookes, a highly respected scientist who was awarded knighthood and Fellowship in the prestigious Royal Society (see figure 6). The outlines of this relationship, at least, are present in most scholarship on Spiritualism. For my analysis, I looked at the detailed newspaper accounts in the Spiritualist press, the research reports spanning a century at the Society for Psychical Research, Crookes's published accounts of their relationship, and archival materials, including what remains of Cook's and Crookes's letters in the Emma Hardinge Britten library at a Spiritualist college outside of London. This is the story those documents tell. Cook had thrown herself on Crookes's professional mercy after she experienced what some newspapers were calling "an exposure" at the hands of William Volckman. Katie had been "seized" by a member of the circle who claimed that Katie was the medium herself in disguise. Seizure may have been the medium and spirit's worst nightmare because it undid the possibilities that lay in blurred boundaries and suggested there was no spirit/flesh indeterminacy—just one purely fleshy, purely fraudulent medium impersonating ghosts (see figure 7). It was only the tenuous line between medium and spirit that made them both significant. On this occasion, the astounded and struggling spirit was hustled back into the cabinet, and some minutes later, when the medium ordered the cabinet reopened, Cook appeared bound to her seat as she had been at the beginning of the séance. Still, doubts remained. Cook offered to submit herself to any experiments Crookes could devise to provide scientific evidence of her authenticity—and of Katie's as well. Crookes agreed, and the two began what has been considered by many critics to be a deeply intimate relationship.

Crookes was the perfect choice for mediumistic authentication. He had a remarkable professional and personal reputation. He discovered an element on

the periodic table, developed the Crookes tube (a piece of equipment that made cathode rays visible and great innovations in science possible), and had been a founder and editor of the prestigious *Quarterly Journal of Science*. He would later be knighted by the Queen for his achievements. Furthermore, Crookes was a married man with a large family who moved comfortably in polite society and the scientific world; his testimony to Cook's credibility after the "exposure" would be invaluable. Yet, in spite of what seemed his unimpeachable character, Crookes's investigations in Spiritualism were what his biographer calls the "most controversial episode in [his] life" (D'Albe 174). The murkiness that defined Spiritualism—the diffused boundaries that made so much possible for women like Cook—made dabbling in the faith potentially dangerous for Crookes.¹³ What could a scientist demonstrate in a world where the lines between spiritual and material, propriety and impropriety slid so readily? Crookes himself was aware of the potential for being "shut up in a lunatic asylum [or] . . . turned out of scientific society" should he fail to walk those lines carefully in his conduct and in the reports of his research (Crookes in Medhurst and Goldney 39).¹⁴ Indeed, many scientists avoided Spiritualism, perhaps for these very reasons, and were unwilling to face the risks that it posed. Sir Francis Galton, a famous research scientist himself, expressed this willful reluctance on the part of the scientific world in this way: "[P]eople who come as men of science [to investigate Spiritualism] are usually so disagreeable, opinionated [*sic*] and obstructive and have so little patience, that the séances rarely succeed with them" (qtd. in M&G 42). D'Albe indicates, on the other hand, that Crookes had a "happy manner" with mediums (174), that he set them at ease and made them feel comfortable in the experiments. Crookes himself noted that he "always [gave] new mediums who [came to him] their own conditions" because he believed they could not get adequate test séances until "the mediums [had] confidence in [him] and [knew] that [he would] not play tricks" (100). Though some critics have called Crookes's will to believe in Spiritualism—largely because of the death of a beloved brother—unprofessional, Galton and others in his professional circles called his procedure "thoroughly scientific" (42).

Even if we believe that Crookes made genuine efforts to maintain his scientific objectivity and a professional posture in his experiments, the murkiness of Spiritualism marked his relationship with Cook. It was not clear what was scientific and what was sexually charged, and Crookes became anxious about the representation of his relationship with Cook and Katie as well as with other young, female mediums. He wrote to Sir Oliver Lodge, "I have been so troubled by hints and rumours in connection with Miss Cook, that I shrink from laying stress on what I tried with her mediumship and rely on phenomena connected with Dan[iel] Home's mediumship when saying anything in public" (M&G 74). Frederick W. H. Myers, Lord Rayleigh, and Henry

Sidgwick, who were all interested in investigating Spiritualism, saw Crookes as “tyrannical” with young women mediums (91), and Myers actually noted in one letter that “The lion [Crookes] will not let himself be robbed of his cub [the mediums, particularly Annie Eva Fay, a young American medium],—nor the cub of his lion” (M&G 92). According to Crookes, one medium with whom he had experimented confessed to fraud, and he met with her several times to discuss it. In this situation, he became the subject of innuendo again. Crookes blamed the girl’s mother, who “found out I was meeting her daughter and fired up at it, [put] the worst construction on it. I was bound by promise not to expose Miss S. to her mother, so I refused to explain it. Probably I was wrong in this, but I could not break a promise. . . . [B]etween the mother and others I am getting the reputation of a Don Juan” (M&G 113). Crookes was not mistaken in this supposition. In a letter from Rayleigh to Myers, the former notes, “Mrs. Jencken [a young female medium] told us that Crookes always tried to prevent her giving a séance without him, and even urged her to break off definite engagements; and he definitely behaved very oddly in the manner of her marriage, so that Mr. J. will not meet him” (M&G 93). There were even stories that when Cook married, her husband took a few swings at the scientist.

In spite of what might seem a thoroughly scandalous reputation, however, no charges of impropriety “stuck” to Crookes. Though some modern critics have suggested that his scientific reputation secured his continued ability to move in polite circles in spite of his behavior, I would argue that something else lay at the heart of his indestructible respectability. The very same researchers who called Crookes a tyrant and slipped into their letters veiled suggestions of sexual misconduct also admitted that Crookes’s reasons for tyranny seemed to be related to his wish to “gain independence and secure his *scientific priority*” (M&G 92, emphasis added). Further, when mediums (such as Fay) were marked as frauds and others thought Crookes might have been involved or at least behaved with impropriety, the men who were formerly his critics rushed to his defense. Myers notes in a letter to Lodge, “I perceive now that the *manner* which influenced [some people to believe he was involved in the fraud] was only a specimen of the manner which Crookes, deliberately and very successfully, has thought it best to adopt, in order to set ‘mediums’ at ease. I do not think Crookes was [guilty]” (M&G 94). Although Crookes’s behavior might be questioned, the same individuals who criticized him simultaneously identified his behavior as blameless. While we might read this as a professional closing of ranks, they certainly did not stop short in their critique of other scientists who investigated Spiritualism, so there may have been another contributing factor. This strange paradox becomes legible when read in the frame I have provided for the freedoms achieved by the mediums themselves: one could be uneasy with the social and sexual chaos, but the same chaos made it

difficult to ascribe responsibility for seeming improprieties. Moreover, how could one interpret any behavior as blameworthy in a realm shaped by the hand of God?

Crookes, though he might seem suspect because of his relation with mediumship—perhaps, at some level, an inherently sexualized act—worked in a Spiritualistic environment of sign confusion, where the boundaries between flesh and spirit, propriety and impropriety slipped; he could not be condemned for a sexuality that was and was not present, an eroticism that did and did not exist. At one point, Crookes explicitly identified the presence of these altered states in one of his letters: “[T]here is an antagonism in my mind between *reason* which pronounces [Spiritualism] to be scientifically impossible, and the consciousness that my senses, both of touch and sight—and those corroborated, as they were, by the senses of all who were present—are not lying witnesses when they testify against my preconceptions” (M&G 146). Reason, while it might be called upon as an authenticating authority of Spiritualism, was repeatedly being undone in the Spiritualistic world. The Spiritualistic world was verified by senses, science, and reason, yet seemed to lie outside the reasonable, and this made applying normative codes of conduct difficult.

At this site of both the reasonable and fantastic, the scientific and the sexual, Crookes’s reports of his relationship with Katie, Cook’s materialized spirit, were highly eroticized but unfailingly respectable, an index of the sexual freedom I described earlier. Emphasizing the special intimacy between himself and the couple, Crookes explained that only he had keys to Cook’s private spaces during the séance and that he was granted special access to the spirit as well. Further, as Crookes explained, “Katie instructed all the sitters but myself to keep their seats and to keep conditions, but for some time past she has given me permission to do what I liked—to touch her, to enter and leave the cabinet almost whenever I pleased” (“The Last” 372). The unrestricted touching and his freedom to enter and exit the cabinet at will certainly suggest familiarity, and a familiarity with markedly physical overtones. Indeed, the free access in and out of Cook’s and Katie’s cabinet evokes a powerful sexual metaphor for access to a woman’s genitals. This “box,” Katie and Cook’s shared space, was the province of both woman and ghost, flesh and spirit. Yet Katie and Cook’s choice to allow this transgression of boundaries did not sully their reputation or make them social pariahs. In fact, the experiments with Crookes—despite intimations of sexual misconduct—secured Cook and Katie’s respectability and fame for generations to come by substantiating Cook’s mediumship and Katie’s existence.

The suspicions in this case revolved around the fact that the older, married Crookes seemed taken with the physicality of the young spirit woman in a way that would never be tolerable in polite society if she were simply human. Davies commented specifically on the Cook séances conducted under the aegis of Crookes: “the effusive Professor [had] ‘gone in’ for the Double with a

pertinacity altogether opposed to the calm judicial examination of [other scientific investigators], and with prejudice scarcely becoming a F.R.S. [Fellow in the Royal Society]" (259). According to a manuscript discussion of Cook and Crookes by C. D. Broad, a prominent researcher of Spiritualism in the 1960s whose papers are held by the Trinity Library at Cambridge, Spiritualist James Enmore Jones complained that Crookes "made himself very active every time 'Katie' appeared; physically and unscientifically hampering all her movements . . . stooping down to, or with face almost touching, the face of 'Katie'" (30). Yet, like Cook, Crookes never faltered under a public charge of impropriety—who could impugn him for being fascinated with a ghost? He raved about Katie's beauty and remained beyond reproach, just as the medium and her spirit did: "[P]hotography is inadequate to depict the perfect beauty of Katie's face, as words are powerless to describe her charms of manner. Photography may, indeed, give a map of her countenance; but how can it reproduce the brilliant purity of her complexion or the ever-varying expression of her most mobile features?" (373). In Katie's last séance appearance, Crookes's enthusiastic discussion of Katie as a virtually human woman, very like Cook, illustrates the inevitable blurring that was a product of Spiritualist notions—even when an ethical report on his behavior depended on a firm statement of Katie's spiritness: "Katie never appeared to greater perfection, and for nearly two hours she walked about the room, conversing familiarly with those present. On several occasions she took my arm when walking, and the impression conveyed to my mind that it was a living woman by my side, instead of a visitor from another world, was strong" (*The Phenomena* 106). That Katie was a woman, but a spiritual creature, and her medium, likewise, was a woman, but a spiritual creature, made possible Crookes's and Cook's transgression of the social order.

Crookes's detailed and minute explorations of both their bodies read like a blazon, not a scientific analysis, suggesting how loosely Victorian social codes were applied to the expectations for his behavior: "Katie's neck was bare last night; the skin was perfectly smooth both to touch [!] and to sight, whilst on Miss Cook's neck is a large blister, which under similar circumstances is distinctly visible and rough to the touch"—clearly, Crookes was on fairly intimate physical terms with both the spirit and the young woman—"Katie's ears are unpierced, whilst Miss Cook habitually wears earrings. Katie's complexion is very fair, while that of Miss Cook is very dark. Katie's fingers are much longer than Miss Cook's, and her face is also much larger. In manner and ways of expression there are also many decided differences" (*The Phenomena* 107). Manner and expression receive awfully low billing in this scientific discussion of the medium and spirit. Instead, we hear primarily about the lovely and not very ethereal bodies of both spirit and woman.¹⁵

This disruption of boundaries and social codes in Spiritualism fostered and authorized a special physical intimacy between Crookes and his two subjects. When walking arm in arm with Katie in her last séance, Crookes

describes feeling so overcome with the sense that she “was a living woman” that he confesses to experiencing “so strong a temptation to” grab Katie that it “became almost irresistible” (106). The disregard of propriety in the expression of an intimacy usually confined to a married couple is evidenced not only in Crookes’s vocalized desire to grab Katie, but also in Cook’s and Katie’s willingness to submit to such investigations and even *request* them from Crookes. These moves suggest significant things about the way in which the social codes had been altered by the new epistemological structures of this faith. In the disruption of self/other (was it Katie or Cook Crookes beheld?) and body/spirit came an equivalent and correlated disruption of social codes associated with sexuality and interpersonal relations. Crookes and Katie/Cook could grasp one another in highly eroticized ways with impunity. Crookes’s discussion evidences his attention to Katie’s physicality and the way in which sexual codes were bent to facilitate his engagement with her: “[I felt] that if I had not a spirit, I had at all events a lady close to me, [and I] asked her permission to clasp her in my arms, so as to be able to verify the interesting observations which a bold experimentalist [Volckman, who seized Katie at the ‘exposure’ séance] has recently . . . recorded. Permission was graciously given, and I accordingly did—well, as any gentleman would do under the circumstances. [Volckman] will be pleased to know that I can corroborate his statement that the ‘ghost’ (not ‘struggling,’ however) was as material a being as Miss Cook herself” (106). This remarkable commentary indicates that, in spite of his own reference to the social codes that would ordinarily be in place with a lady, he could violate them—they do not hold with the medium and her control. Thus, he proceeds to grab Katie—as, he explains, any gentleman offered permission in such a situation would do—and finds her not only a willing partner, but as “material a being as Miss Cook herself.” To be sure, no “gentleman” would request such a liberty with an unmarried eighteen-year-old woman of no relation. Furthermore, even the most avid supporters of Spiritualism, who believed devotedly that it was not the body of the medium before them being “grabbed,” still argued that it was the “stuff” of the medium’s body that supplied the spirit her temporary earthly home, later calling it the medium’s “ectoplasm” or a material manifestation of her vital physical energy. One sitter explained that the spirits “build the form, partly from the circle, but chiefly from the medium; and that the vitality or magnetism is taken entirely from the medium: in fact that a very small portion of the original Miss Cook . . . remains in the cabinet” (Bird 85). He also indicated that, if the spirit was grabbed, “by the laws of gravitation, the remaining atoms left in the cabinet would rush unperceived to the centre of attraction, and, in spite of the spirit operators, the whole of the medium would stand in the place of those elements that were extracted from her for the production of this beautiful manifestation, and the medium totally unconscious of what had happened” (85). Clearly, even if there was no chicanery, Cook was grabbed along with Katie.¹⁶

In a letter to Charles Blackburn, Cook's patron, Crookes explained his methods with Katie and Cook in language that might stun a modern reader. He describes a series of test sésances conducted after Cook's marriage to Edward Elgie Corner, but without Mr. Corner present. Crookes's remarks would seem charged with sexual innuendo even in isolation from the material already offered: Corner, he indicates, had "given [him] the fullest permission to experiment to [his] heart's content with his wife provided [he did] not allow strangers to be present and [did] not publish her name." The events he records at these sésances have much the same erotic quality. In one instance, a spirit "hand . . . came to [him when he] was sitting outside the cabinet, took something out of [his] pocket, and taking it into the cabinet put it into Mrs Crookes' lap." The references to Crookes's pants pocket, the unnamed object, and his wife's lap are suggestive of an amatory exchange, an exchange that clearly emerges from and depends upon the presence and influence of the spirits and their medium. In the same letter, Crookes assured Blackburn of Cook's power in these events and indicated that when he entered Cook's cabinet he did "not despair of getting a full form." This language, evocative of erection, becomes even weightier when we imagine the scientist examining the body parts that emerge from the cabinet. "I asked if I might take hold of the hand. Permission being given I felt it all over, squeezed it and traced it along to the wrist, arm, etc." What remains unsaid in the "etc." has been filled in, by many critics, with the fact that Crookes escorted Cook (apparently by himself and after changing his own travel plans) to Wiesbaden in the next week. Though Cook's new sister-in-law, Nina Corner, was present on this trip, it must have afforded a great deal of opportunity for the medium and scientist to commune.

Many critics have argued that Crookes and Cook had an intimate sexual relationship that violated her innocence and, finally, both their marital vows. Her identity as a medium, so these arguments go, had granted her access to Crookes's home and bedroom and had maintained her reputation by serving as a cloak for their unethical behavior. Much of the foundation for this position derives from two reports made to the Society for Psychical Research by F. G. H. Anderson: the first in 1922 and the second in 1941. In the 1922 statement, Anderson claimed to have had a sexual affair with Cook (then, a married Florence Corner) in the late 1890s. Twenty years later, he elaborated on his earlier report by bragging about a host of other sexual conquests and describing Cook as an acknowledged nymphomaniac who had seduced him. The most striking supplements to the earlier report are also the most frequently cited and the most difficult to explain. He claimed that she had confessed to having had an affair with Crookes and to having been a fraud in her mediumship. Both his 1922 and 1941 statements were unsolicited and made not to anyone personally connected with the parties in question, but to a scholarly research society. If Anderson made these "confessions" in the interest of truth,

why did he withhold the most vital information—the fact of Cook’s fraudulence—until the second confession, twenty years after the first and a remarkable forty years after the purported affair? Regardless of whether we recognize these reports as reliable, my interest in them comes from the fact that most researchers have uncritically accepted his claims, based, I would argue, on their assumptions about Victorian mediumship. Cook, in their view, could easily (even naturally?) have been a nymphomaniac in spite of her movement in the most polite circles.

I contend that the case is much more complex than this. Whether or not Crookes and Cook had an affair, they openly violated social codes, and Cook gained a freedom of movement unknown to most married or unmarried women. Regardless of the terms of their personal relationship, both were capable of crossing social boundaries without raising brows in their elite social circle or undermining their commitment to their spouses.¹⁷ Though we will never know for certain whether the two were lovers, we do know that Cook and Crookes’s relationship lasted beyond the time of her (for a time, *secret*) marriage to Corner, who had been a regular sitter in her circle. While both a single and married woman, Cook lived under the roof and in the private rooms of the Crookeses. She defied the social norms that would have compelled her to live in her husband’s home, and she continued her performances for Crookes.

Cook was expected to retreat from the Spiritualist world following her marriage, but she resisted this traditional practice of withdrawal from public life—along with her husband’s will—and named Spiritualism the authority for this move. Shortly after her marriage, an announcement appeared in the *Spiritualist* newspaper lamenting her loss to the public. Her primary patron, Charles Blackburn, remarked, “of course now that she is married [she] is no more amongst us” (83). A letter from the editor in the same issue also indicated that the new Mrs. Corner was expected to remain by her husband’s side: “She is now on her way round the Cape to Shanghai, in a ship of which her husband, Captain Corner, is commander” (Harrison “Florence” 83). In spite of the belief that women should terminate any public life after marrying, we should not be surprised at this point to learn that Mrs. Corner did not stay at home and become a domesticated wife, but continued to conduct séances, even when her spouse objected.

In a letter to Blackburn, she explains, “By giving séances I am acting in direct opposition to the will of my husband. All our differences have arisen from my refusal to give up Spiritualism. . . . Not that I should obey his wishes . . . for he married me knowing I was a medium and always said before we were married that he would never attempt to stop séances” (n.d. “Monday”). Though it is certain that Victorian women occasionally defied the will of their husbands, it is extraordinary that one should do so with such unapologetic self-assertion—and this independence extended beyond her husband to the other men in her life. Cook would not “be controlled by anyone with regard

to what I shall say or do in connection with séances. . . . My present intention is to sit when and where I like." Regardless of the social codes, regardless of the seeming power and authority of others, Cook had the ability to make starkly unconventional decisions—both in body and spirit. Crookes reported that when Florence's intended, then husband, Corner was present at séances, the gentleman did not fare as well as Crookes. When Corner entered Cook's cabinet, the hands that appeared did not coyly remove things from his pockets, but rather "handled [Corner] rather roughly" (Letter to Blackburn September 15, 1874). J. C. Luxmoore indicated that this produced significant tension between Crookes and the apparently impotent Corner, who responded by giving Crookes "a very good thrashing." Crookes took out a summons for assault, though he never appeared in court (M&G 119). It is no wonder, then, that Corner's niece spoke of his futile hostility for Spiritualism in the head note to the archival collection of family letters (including Cook's) that she left to the Emma Hardinge Britten Library. She said her "Uncle Ted was most antagonistic to Spiritualism always despite all he saw & heard & experienced!" (Dixon). It would seem that Corner sacrificed almost all of the traditional authority over his wife to her faith in Spiritualism.

Cook practiced these freedoms not only for Crookes, though the Crookes séances were the most famous. The Rev. William Stainton Moses, a famous medium himself, was able to get a rousing response from Katie and Cook and described an encounter with the two as follows. He had requested to have evidence that the medium was capable of "elongation," a test used most famously with Daniel Dunglas Home (a medium who remained remarkably free from charges of fraud and who condemned the dishonesty of many of his peers). In Moses's unpublished notes of the séance, collated by R. G. Medhurst, he explains: "I placed my feet upon Miss Cook's feet, and my hands were put upon her head. I felt her extend considerably, but I said I should like to be more certain. Katie then took my hands and placed them on Miss Cook's waist. I still kept my feet on hers and I distinctly felt the body elongated under my hands. I make every allowance for *exaggeration from being in the dark and from excitement*, but I believe I am within the mark when I say that *the elongation was to the extent of at least 4 inches*. It was repeated 3 times at my request. Mr. Harrison wished to feel it, and Katie said she would try, but could not do so much as she could with that great Medium (myself). He has *enormous power*, she said: greater than any one" (Moses, emphasis added). The expectation of elongation not only seems erotic, but Moses's excitement in the dark, his experience of elongation, and the references to his enormous power—a power that other men do not have—are all equally suggestive and reflective of Katie's and Cook's liberties with Moses. The list of Cook's apparent social violations could continue with men like G. R. Tapp, Henry M. Dunphy, J. C. Luxmoore, William Oxley, and Charles Blackburn, who all admired and touched the beautiful spirit and her medium. Indeed, both Katie and Cook enthralled with

their beauty and charm, and both behaved in ways that seemed at odds with propriety, but remained honorable.

Cook continued performing as a medium throughout her life and traveled freely over much of Europe. She even began, later in her career, to accept money for her services, but without losing her genteel status.¹⁸ Cook is an extraordinary test case, but she was not alone. Many mediums traveled independently, received vast incomes far beyond their ordinary means, visited patrons and investigators with no other chaperone than their spirit controls, achieved fame and fortune, and gained access to the homes of the most elite. The life of a medium had challenges, to be sure, but it was a life much more unfettered than that of the typical Victorian lady.

CONCLUSION

The chaos generated by the Spiritualistic disruption of these social dichotomies was not simply liberatory for the women involved. There were potentially negative repercussions. In test séances, mediums were bound to a chair in a darkened cabinet, often with leather straps, chains, and padlocks, to await the arrival of the spirits. Cook's hair was fastened to the floor with nails and her body was searched ("Spirit Forms and Faces" 133). Like sacrificial virgins, the mediums were surveilled and controlled prior to the séance in ways that exceeded the social limits. The excess of containment here throws into relief the stark sexual behavior of both the medium and the spirit. This seeming resistance to women's freedoms, highly erotic in and of itself, set the stage for the dramatic unbinding of both the spirit and the medium and powerfully illustrated a resistance even to the most material restraints and the assault on the social codes. Another event that demonstrated this level of social code slippage, and one that I discuss in greater length in chapter 4, was the "spirit grabbing" described above. In this activity, a sitter (who, in every publicly reported instance I encountered, happened to be male) physically and forcibly "grabbed" the materialized spirit, sometimes throwing her to the floor, in hopes of exposing the medium herself in disguise. The assumption in spirit grabbing was that the spirit was *not* a spirit, but a Victorian gentlewoman. Remarkably, this means that the grabbers believed themselves to be physically assaulting genteel, teenage women—frauds to be sure, but young women and gentlemen's daughters nonetheless. Described by others present at Katie's seizure by Volckman as a "gross outrage," the seizing took the character of a rape in the arguments of Spiritualist supporters. At any other drawing room social, a young middle-class lady could expect to be safe from such an assault, but in the world of Spiritualism, the rules had certainly changed. As one supporter of the spirit and medium said, critics sometimes "forget that, even if a spirit, she is clothed in a natural form, and subject to what I term, for want of a better word, the inconveniences of materialisation" (Lux-

moore 491). Clearly, along with the boons that accompanied these murky boundaries came the “inconveniences” of being a material creature in a Victorian world, perhaps a part of the “horror” *Espérance* describes. There is no denying that Spiritualist mediums sometimes saw the new liberties work against them. Still, the freedoms they achieved and exploited are worthy of scholarly interest and investigation.

Spiritualism and mediumship made possible a different way of conceiving of relationships between men and woman, including sexual relationships, because they fragmented the social dichotomies and allowed for the reconfiguration of bodily and feminine subjectivity. These fractures often occurred at the site of female sexuality and splintered, in their wake, social formations, including an understanding of women’s identities and marriage. This is evidenced in the suspected improprieties between young unmarried mediums and their (frequently married) researchers, such as Florence Cook and William Crookes, but also in the vexed marriages of women mediums themselves. How could a husband demand that his wife stop performing séances when the spirits have commanded that she shall? How could a husband compel his wife to avoid a researcher or patron, even when rumors began to circulate about impropriety intimacy, if the medium reported that the spirits found their relationship just and proper? The marriages of women Spiritualists, from the shining lights in the Spiritualist firmament to the faithful adherents in the ranks below, were reconfigured by these sex and power dynamics of mediumship. Marriage was even being rewritten by Spiritualists from “outside” the institution. Women who would ordinarily have been considered piteous spinsters gained social notoriety and lived fairly glamorous lives under the auspices of Spiritualism.¹⁹ In this context, marriage might even begin to appear an unnecessary encumbrance on a woman’s energies.

Though other critics, most notably Alex Owen, have discussed the decline of full-form materialization mediumship as women gained a broader range of movement (234), they have not articulated the way in which this marginalized religious faith may have played an integral part in altering larger social structures. They have not recognized that full-form materialization mediumship may have made itself obsolete by participating in a shift of the codes that made increased sexual freedom less a subject of spectacle and more a part of the norm. I want to assert a connection between what Owen calls the “social and [the] psychic realities” (234) to point to the ways in which this highly public and highly publicized movement may have shaped new conceptions of feminine sexuality and marriage. Victorian mediums were doing more than locating and carrying on conversations with the angel in the house; they were channeling her to reshape their lives.

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