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The Impact of the Female Medium's Cultural Authority in Rhoda Broughton's Ghost Stories

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Introduction

<1>In Victorian Spiritualism the female medium broke the boundaries between spirit and matter as she hosted séances in the parlors of Victorian homes and held performances for public spectators. This female figure, who was considered more “passive” and, therefore, better suited for spiritual matters rather than male mediums, had the ability to perform full-form materializations before sitters, as Marlene Tromp notes in *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (23). She could also summon spirits to “rap” their yes-or-no answers, when fellow séance sitters posed questions. During these performances, the female medium would continuously “bend the rules” of social norms, such as touching the body parts of male and female sitters, while remaining complicit within the structure of Victorian society (Tromp 23). Famous female mediums in Britain, like Florence Cook and Madame d’Esperance (also known as Elizabeth Hope), even profited economically from their performances and ascended in social status. Spiritualist women, including clairvoyants and mesmerists, not only obtained power over the supernatural (e.g., spirits and ghosts), but also in Victorian society (e.g., through their actions and behavior) despite their marginalized status.

<2>The interesting cultural authority of the female medium also influenced women writers of the Victorian ghost story, such as Rhoda Broughton. Broughton, who was secretly known as “a skeptical dabbler in the lucrative Victorian market for ghost tales” in the 1870s, depicts the female medium as a subversive figure of Victorian femininity. Despite scholars knowing little about Broughton’s stance on Spiritualism, Broughton’s ghost stories coincidentally were serialized in the *Temple Bar* and *Pall Mall Gazette* alongside cultural debates of British Spiritualism, as Joellen Masters asserts in “Haunted Gender in Rhoda Broughton’s Supernatural and Mystery Tales” (222-23). Broughton’s exposure to Spiritualism, I contend, influenced her depiction of the female medium in her later ghost stories, such as “Behold! It was a Dream,” “The Man with the Nose,” and “Betty’s Visions.”

<3>In this paper, I argue that the female medium not only subverts Victorian feminine ideals of docility, domesticity, and sexuality, but also becomes a “voice” for the marginalized, as depicted in British women writer’s ghost stories. Firstly, I explore Spiritualism’s influence on the Victorian ghost story and indicate that both the movement and genre were marginalized in Victorian society. Secondly, I examine how the feminization of the Victorian ghost story during the 1850s transformed the genre into a space of expressing the cultural fears and anxieties of Victorian women. Lastly, I argue that the female medium in Broughton’s “Behold! It was a Dream,” “The Man with the Nose,” and “Betty’s Visions” transgresses the boundaries of the

self/other, the spiritual/sexual, and the spirit/matter to subvert the oppressions of Victorian femininity and, instead, grant cultural authority to marginalized women.

Spiritualism's Influence on the Victorian Ghost Story

<4>Spiritualism is a movement that believes in the communication between the living and the dead. According to Janet Oppenheim in *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914*, the movement erupted in Great Britain during the 1850s, notably after the Fox sisters heard “rappings” beneath their floorboard in Hydesville, New York in 1848 (11). The movement grew in popularity until the end of the century as Spiritualists were dedicated to affirming the “afterlife” of the supernatural through acts of table-rapping, mesmeric performances, the channeling of spirits, and clairvoyant premonitions. Perhaps the most alluring aspect of Spiritualism was its accessibility for Victorians; Spiritualists came from different backgrounds of gender, class, sexuality, dis/ability, and social status. In “Ghosts, Spirits, and Scholars: The Origins of Modern Spiritualism,” Kenneth D. Pimple asserts that the commonality between all Victorian Spiritualists was the mere anticipation of communicating with the dead:

Any spirit could be summoned from any sitting room. These were the qualities essential to making Spiritualism both comforting and compelling, for now people could be assured that their departed were still ‘alive’ and happy, and that the living had solid hope of eternal life. (80)

In an age of high mortality rates Victorians were comforted by receiving a rap from a deceased child, spouse, or loved one, which acknowledged that there was life after death. Victorians, regardless of their background, would assemble into the séance circle and wait for the summoned spirit to appear or rapping to be heard.

<5>Spiritualism, as a countercultural movement from the margins, complicated certain religious and Enlightenment beliefs, including the development and professionalization of science. Science became an exclusionary field that praised male dominance and intellect thought. Notable works like Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) argued that feminine qualities such as intuition were “dismissed as ‘characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilization” (Richards 119). Sigmund Freud's locution that “biology is destiny” also bred masculinist assumptions that pervaded Victorian society. Thus, the “lower races” of women, people of color, and the working class were silenced into the margins.

<6>Spiritualism's transformation of the *ghost* into a *spirit* emphasized its agency and interaction with the living, which is depicted in the late-Victorian ghost story. In “Ghostly Hands and Ghostly Agency: The Changing Figure of the Nineteenth-Century Specter,” Jennifer Bann notes:

Spiritualism's contribution to supernatural literature was not limited to the séance and all of its trappings; it helped subtly transform the figure of the ghost, from the less-than-human apparitions of earlier narratives into the more-than-human characters of the later nineteenth century. (665)

The ghost, then, was re-created into a figure of capability in the Victorian ghost story. Bann also declares “the rapid spread and popularity of the spiritualist movement in the mid-nineteenth century contributed a new model of the ghostly to supernatural literature—influenced by the active, powerful figures of the séance room—the specters of the ghost story changed” (664). Andrew Smith, in *The Ghost Story, 1840-1920: A Cultural History*, agrees that “the culture of spiritualism played an important part in shaping a language of spectrality which in turn informed literary representations of ghosts” (97). Ghosts were now seen as figures of agency that sought revenge for various acts of oppression, marginalization, and repression in the Victorian ghost story.

The Importance of the Victorian Ghost Story

<7>The Victorian ghost story, which soared in popularity in Britain from the 1850s to 1900, portrays the opposing conflicts of belief and disbelief, as well as certainty and skepticism, in an age of rapid development. Cynthia Wilkey argues in “Both Sides of the Looking Glass: Faith versus Science in Victorian Great Britain and America,” that Victorians not only “engaged in cultural battles to determine the meanings, values, and relationships among science, faith, and religion,” but also questioned “the uncertainties of maintaining class, race, and gender domination in a fast-changing environment that challenged older notions of appropriate power relations” (180). The ghost story, in particular, expresses the threat of Britain’s vast technological, social, and economic changes (such as industrialization) to past religious beliefs and lifestyles from the Romantic era.

<8>The Victorian ghost story mainly depicts the tension between ghosts and the living, in which Luke Thurston calls “the curious relation between host and guest” in *Literary Ghosts from the Victorians to the Modernists: The Haunting Interval* (3). One interesting connection between the host and guest is the struggle for power and control; that is, in most cases, the ghost seeks to reclaim “a little of the power and freedom that circumstances denied them” in British society (Briggs 183). The genre, then, expresses the return of repressed horrors, fears, and anxieties that haunt the living. Typically, ghosts themselves represent the silenced and the marginalized and serve as a mouthpiece to express these anxieties. In her article “The Ghost Story,” Julia Briggs notes that “ghost stories often deal with the most primitive, punitive, and sadistic of impulses, revenge being one of the commonest motifs present in the form” (182). Ghosts, through their literal disembodiment, seek retribution for wrongdoings committed by the living.

The Feminization of the Ghost Story

<9>Ghosts are not the only figures that attempt to reclaim power within the Victorian ghost story; often, women seek to reclaim their agency as well. During the 1850s the ghost story became a more feminized genre. In “Uncanny Stories: The Ghost Story as Female Gothic,” Diana Wallace argues “the ghost story as a form has allowed women writers special kinds of freedom, not merely to include the fantastic and the supernatural, but also to offer critiques of male power and sexuality which are often more radical than those in more realist genres” (57). Women writers expressed concerns of domesticity, the ideals of Victorian femininity, otherness, and confinement (issues that they could not discuss openly in other genres) through the supernatural figure of the ghost. Historically, according to Wallace, early women writers of the

ghost story focused on the Gothic themes of the Bluebeard story and “the motif of the haunted house,” which was adapted from the traditional Female Gothic (58). By the 1870s women writers like Lettice Galbraith, George Eliot, and Broughton turned to the female medium, rather than the ghost, as the mouthpiece of women’s cultural anxieties in the Victorian ghost story. Unlike the persecuted, victimized heroine in early Female Gothic, the female medium in the “feminized” Victorian ghost story asserted her supernatural authority and reclaimed power for Victorian women.

The Female Medium’s Authority in Victorian Spiritualism

<10>Victorian women in Britain played the pivotal roles of medium, clairvoyant, and mesmerist, serving as intercessors between the living and the dead. Curiosity drew in sitters and skeptics alike, as mediums materialized spirits, translated rappings, and delivered “messages” from spirits through automatic writing. Oftentimes, mediums violated Victorian social norms and boundaries, such as bodily touch and male authority, through their performances. Florence Cook, one of the most famous mediums in Victorian England, “virtually cast off the guidance of all but her spirit guide,” including her patron and husband, by declaring that her spirit, Katie, refused to comply with their demands (Tromp 24). Cook was able to undermine demands from male authoritative figures without suffering from the repercussions of her bold actions. Sitters and skeptics were much more fascinated by her ability to communicate with the dead and materialize into Katie, rather than reinforce the Victorian rules of proper femininity.

<11>While hosting séances, embodying spirits, and relaying premonitions to the audience, female mediums were expected to transgress spiritual and physical boundaries. This ability—that is, to fluidly and simultaneously embody the spiritual (e.g., the spirit) and the material (e.g., the body)—gave mediums much greater agency than other Victorian women, who were expected to adhere to feminine ideals. The ideal Victorian woman was submissive, quiet, self-sacrificial, and moral; she served the roles of dutiful daughter, nurturing caretaker, and gracious wife. Victorian women were also expected to adhere to strict moral and religious codes of conduct, which the “spirits” of female mediums dismissed altogether.

<12>Female mediums, as well as other Spiritualist women and believers, subverted Victorian feminine ideals by turning to Spiritualism because it “undermined the very social structures that defined a narrow circuit of behavior for women and . . . a new kind of self-determination. . . that led to many unconventional choices” (Tromp 68). Mediums, clairvoyants, and mesmerists constantly challenged Victorian binaries of the self/other, spiritual/sexual, and spirit/matter, which “[revealed] the instability of these oppositions, and thus, [disrupted] the social practices that are based on these notions” (70). Thus, women were drawn to mediumship because this role “provided one means of resisting gendered limitations” such as docility and domesticity (Tromp 22). As an example, Cook “was welcomed into the homes of the rich, titled, and famous: traveled extensively; became the toast of the Spiritualist press; and garnered glamorous gifts” through her famous mediumship career (Tromp 23). She defied the domestic roles of daughter and wife by establishing a career in mediumship. Cook’s success emphasizes the medium’s ability to subvert Victorian ideals of femininity while profiting from it.

<13>Broughton's ghost stories highlight the subversive power of female mediums, as each protagonist rejects the restrictions of Victorian femininity. Dinah, Elizabeth, and Betty in "Behold! It was a Dream," "The Man with the Nose," and "Betty's Visions" possess clairvoyant and mediumship skills that allow them to undermine the Victorian feminine behaviors of submission, docility, and domesticity. Each woman encounters an "anxiety" of female selfhood, then taps into her supernatural authority to transgress the boundaries of her sex and control her circumstances. Broughton's ghost stories portray "female sensibility with the numinous and telepathic, an attitude further popularized by the period's enthusiasm for Spiritualism, which promoted women's singular aptitude for mediumship and mesmeric healing" (Masters 223). I argue that Dinah's "bad" dream, Elizabeth's mesmeric-induced visions, and Betty's deathly premonitions challenge the Victorian notion of femininity while claiming their selfhood.

<14>In most of Broughton's ghost stories, marginalized, "odd" women push the boundaries of their sex, who "[construct] distinctly female communities based on their shared dreams, spectral alliances, and domestic disturbances and betrayals" (Masters 223). In "Behold! It was a Dream," Dinah Bellairs is a clairvoyant spinster who dreams about the murder of her friend, Jane Watson, and her husband in their marital bed. Elizabeth, a newly married woman in "The Man with the Nose," experiences hallucinations about a man "with a *nose*" (emphasis in original) chasing after her while on her honeymoon in Europe (Broughton, "Man" 22). In "Betty's Visions," Betty Brewster experiences premonitions throughout her life—starting in her childhood—that predict the deaths of her uncle, female cousin, mother, father, and finally herself. All three women live on the margins of Victorian society due to their non-normative characteristics: Dinah is an Irish spinster; Elizabeth is a (seemingly) sexually experienced, newlywed; and Betty is a peculiar, isolated woman. Each protagonist possesses the ability to alter her circumstances, such as channeling "unnaturalness," possessing fluidity, and transgressing the boundaries of social norms.

Possessing "Unnaturalness"

<15>Mediums possessed certain characteristics in order to have the ability to channel spirits and communicate with the dead. In other words, mediums were *supposed to* violate social norms through their otherness. Tromp argues "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" (23). Dinah's "otherness" as a spinster reveals the cultural anxiety that spinsters were "a potentially phantasmal league, a self-perpetuating threat to Victorian family and social stability, as well as to a masculinity integral in shoring up both" (Masters 226). In "The Victorian Theory of Spinsterhood," Rosemary Auchmuty asserts that spinsterhood lacked "respect that was granted to the wife and mother who occupied a recognised [sic] place in society and carried on its ideals" (45). The myth and reputation of the spinster, which developed during the Victorian era, still pervades Western culture today, as society views spinsterhood as undesirable. However, as Auchmuty notes, single women in Victorian England "could administer and control their property, if they had any, and sue and contract," which highlights Dinah's agency and autonomy outside of the Victorian family unit (41).

<16>Elizabeth's hallucinations and hysterics make her an "unnatural" woman at the end of "The Man with the Nose." At first, Elizabeth's husband (who remains unnamed) describes her as the

idealized Victorian woman, when she “[lifts] her little brown head and her small happy white face” after deciding the location of their honeymoon (Broughton, “Man” 17). Elizabeth, then, experiences uncontrollable, violent episodes during their honeymoon when she repetitively sees “a man with a nose” following her. During one of her hallucinations, her husband discovers that she is “standing beside [his] bed; the extremity of terror on her face, and her fingers digging themselves with painful tenacity into [his] arm” (Broughton, “Man” 21). Elizabeth’s hysterics occur more frequently throughout the short story, as the husband fails to diagnose her condition.

<17>Betty’s clairvoyant visions make her ghostly and unnatural, as well. Throughout the ghost story Betty’s gaze is “wide open, yet unseeing as those of a somnambulist” as she predicts the death of her loved ones (Broughton, “Betty’s Visions” 77). Betty is considered abnormal beginning in her childhood. She does “not [cry] at all, remains rooted to the doorstep, silent and still” unlike other children (Broughton, “Betty’s Visions” 72). She is constantly referred to as “unnatural” by her father, while her mother firmly denies it. Their dispute about Betty’s abnormality reveals the anxiety of female otherness in Victorian society. Betty does not meet the socially accepted expectations of Victorian femininity—even as early as childhood—and, in consequence, is accused of unnaturalness. To maintain normalcy Mr. Brewster ignores his daughter’s strange behavior, while Mrs. Brewster “has forgotten also Betty’s strange speech” after Betty predicts the death of her uncle (Broughton, “Betty’s Visions” 74).

Possessing Fluidity

<18>Mediums were “fluid vessels” that embodied spirits of the dead. Specifically, female mediums moved fluidly between the material and the spiritual, as “the boundary between the spirit and the flesh of the medium became indistinct, and, by virtue of this slippage, one could not demarcate the medium’s identity, locate her accountability or intention, or distinguish the Victorian woman from the unfettered spirit” (Tromp 69). Martin Willis, in *Victorian Literary Mesmerism*, agrees that “those with a sensitive, imaginative and perceptive character who suffer from disordered nerves but also maintain a purity of both body and mind” possessed clairvoyant abilities (148). With this fluidity mediums challenged “the boundaries of spirit and matter, self and other, mind and body, spiritual and sexual, man and woman, and, lastly, man and wife” through their performances (Tromp 70). Thus, mediums easily slipped in and out of identities, especially if they embodied and materialized into spirits.

<19>In “Behold! It was a Dream” Dinah escapes domestic confinement through her “fluid” positionality in Victorian society. She does not reside within the traditional Victorian family unit, which allows her to escape the rule of a domineering husband. Dinah is a friend *within* the domestic sphere, yet she is *without* simultaneously. As a spinster, she has far more mobility and agency than her married friend, Jane. Jane must adhere to her husband’s desires, whereas Dinah maintains her autonomy. Ironically, Dinah’s marginalization grants her more freedom than married women.

<20>Elizabeth slips between the identity of an inexperienced, new wife and the identity of a sexually active, single woman in “The Man with the Nose.” Broughton highlights Elizabeth’s transition into marriage as constrictive and anxiety-inducing. According to Sharon Marcus in *Between Women*, sexual exploration was much more permissible for Victorian women before

they entered into a marriage (59). Elizabeth's trip to Ulleswater as a single, young woman reveals the ambiguity and secrecy of the sexual lives of Victorian women. At the beginning of the short story Elizabeth tells her soon-to-be husband that she met a male mesmerizer who thought she would be "such a good medium" (Broughton, "Man" 18). The man then asks to "mesmerize" her alone (Broughton, "Man" 18). Wilkey notes that the deeply sexual act of "the male mesmerist entrancing the weaker female seemed to reinforce nineteenth-century gender conventions," yet "mesmerism. . .also transferred power to the mesmerized" (184). Her fiancé angrily questions her about any previous "mischief," but Elizabeth does not remember her encounter with the mesmerizer and "answers meekly" while kissing her husband's hand "in timid deprecation of [his] wrath" (Broughton, "Man" 18). Elizabeth's ability to blur the lines between the sacred (the act of marriage) and the profane (sexual acts), as well as the material (the body) and the spiritual (the mesmeric encounter) her fluidity as a form of agency and freedom.

<21> Betty's literal body represents the connection between the body and spirit in "Betty's Visions." After each death the spirit of a deceased family member touches Betty on a different body part. Her Uncle John "[touches] her on the shoulder as he [passes] by," while her cousin Rachel "[touches her] on the knee" (Broughton, "Betty's Visions" 73-7). Mrs. Brewster touches Betty "on the foot," whereas the spirit of her father touches her "on the head" (Broughton, "Betty's Visions" 84-9). In these interactions, Betty moves simultaneously between the material and the spiritual, making "the identity of the medium uncertain" (Tromp 24). Her ability to blur the lines between the material and spirit, then, grants her supernatural authority, just like Dinah and Elizabeth in Broughton's other ghost stories.

Transgressing Social Norms of Victorian Femininity

<22> Possessing "unnaturalness" and fluidity allowed female mediums to transgress social norms of Victorian femininity, even though "female mediumship remained complicit with the 'normative'" (Tromp 23). In other words, these women were granted supernatural authority over their circumstances by complicating the separation of Victorian society. For example, a medium worked within the private sphere (e.g., séances in the parlor), while simultaneously performing in the public sphere (e.g., performances and shows). Mediums were often "dutiful" daughters and wives in the home, while also maintaining a public career and earning a living. The female medium became the figure of subversion for Victorian women writers like Broughton. In the following sections of this paper, I trace how Dinah, Elizabeth, and Betty channel their clairvoyant abilities to transgress the boundaries of the self/other, moral/sexual, and spirit/matter.

<23> Dinah's dream of murder in the domestic sphere transgresses the distinction between the self/other in "Behold! It was a Dream." Firstly, the binary of the self and the other collapses in terms of Victorian femininity. Jane represents the ideal Victorian wife; she is a newly married woman who lives an "exclusively bucolic, cow-milking, pig-fattening, roast-mutton-eating, and to-bed-at-ten-o'clock-going life" with her husband (Broughton, "Behold!" 31). She essentially adheres to the Victorian expectations of marriage and domesticity. As mentioned, Dinah's spinster status "others" herself in Victorian society, which is further highlighted in her visit to Jane's farm. Dinah's presence in the Watson's home produces a cultural anxiety of the Other entering the space of the (Victorian English) self.

<24>Dinah's "bad" dream exemplifies the anxiety of otherness in the domestic sphere. In her dream, Dinah sees that Jane is "first attacked — taken off in [her] sleep — for [she was] lying just as [she] would have lain in slumber, only that across [her] throat from there to there. . . was a huge and yawning gash" (Broughton, "Behold!" 37). The horrific "gash" (as known as a vulgar term for "vagina") is a symbol of the loss of Jane's virginity as bloody and terrifying. The slitting of Jane's throat also represents the loss of her autonomy in the domestic home. Jane no longer has a "voice" in her marriage since she is submissive to her husband. Furthermore, Jane's "otherness" as a woman exemplifies her husband's anxiety of femininity within the Victorian household.

<25>Robin Watson's mistreatment of Dinah also reveals the anxiety between the self and the other. Watson adheres to the accepted notions of the self in Victorian England, especially the belief in rationality and masculinist assumptions that Victorian men rule over women. After hearing the dream, he belittles and scorns Dinah's "unaccountable instinct" (Broughton, "Behold!" 39). He even taunts Dinah "to prove the truth of [her] vision" to him and Jane (Broughton, "Behold!" 39). Watson is induced with anxiety by Dinah's dream and spinster status because of her "invasion" into the domestic sphere and close proximity to the self.

<26>The cultural anxiety of the Other troubling and harming the self is actualized later in the ghost story. Jane and Watson, after Dinah leaves their home, are found dead in their bed. Dinah reads the news about their death in the newspaper and discovers that the male murderer is Irish, in which "to no other nationality could such a type of face belong" (Broughton, "Behold!" 38). Britain's anxiety of the Other stems from the history of imperialism and colonialism. The Irish man entering a Welsh home depicts the constant worry of the Other encountering the self. In the case of the Watsons, their anxieties are no longer psychological but an *actualized* reality. Through the prediction of the Watsons' deaths in her clairvoyant dream, Dinah depicts the vulnerability and transgression of the boundary between the self and the other.

<27>Elizabeth's hallucinations allow her to transgress the boundary between the rational/emotional and the moral/sexual. Eventually, her sexual expression challenges her husband's morals, who represents the rational male figure in Victorian society. Despite his anxiety about marriage ("I have got over it; we have both got over it, tolerably, creditably; but after all, it is a much severer ordeal for a man than a woman") he nonetheless enters their marriage and adheres to Victorian moral duty (Broughton, "Man" 19). The husband also relies on rational thinking to explain Elizabeth's hysterics in their bedroom. He declares that their trip to the museum in Brussels "to visit Wiertz's pictures" causes Elizabeth's nightmare (Broughton, "Man" 21). While Elizabeth argues that a man "with a nose" is chasing her during their honeymoon, the husband ignores and blames her feminine nervous temperament instead of acknowledging her sexual anxiety.

<28>Elizabeth's positioning next to the bed reveals her anxiety about sexual intercourse with her husband. She yells the phrase "tighter, tighter" which perhaps alludes to sexual fantasies of bondage and submission. Elizabeth's assertion that "the man with a nose" is in the room chasing after her also represents Elizabeth's anxiety of sexual transgression. She tells her husband, "I felt myself pulling strongly away from you — going to him; and he — he stood there always looking" (Broughton, "Man" 23). In "Sensational Ghosts, Ghostly Sensations," Nick Freeman agrees that

“the husband refuses to recognize the man with the nose as a genuine threat, and persistently denies his wife’s sexual aspect, with the result that he cannot compete with his rival’s hypnotic power” (197). Elizabeth’s “pull” toward the man with the nose, as well as her attempt to *resist* that pull, reveals the blurred lines between the rational/emotional and the moral/sexual.

<29>Elizabeth’s hysterical episodes, then, help her escape the dreaded fate of domesticity. Near the end of their honeymoon, Elizabeth is reminded of her specific duties within marriage. Her husband ignores Elizabeth’s hysterical fears when she asks him to stay with her instead of taking care of business matters, and he commands her to “write [him] a long letter, telling [him] every single thing that [she does, says, and thinks]” as a way to control her actions (Broughton, “Man” 27). Elizabeth, when threatened with not only sexual passivity but also domestic passivity, eventually disappears from her husband. She alludes to her escape when she tells her husband “I feel as if your going now would be the end of all things” (Broughton, “Man” 27).

<30>The husband, after discovering that Elizabeth is gone, learns that she was reportedly last seen with “a dark gentleman, with a peculiar physiognomy which has been so often described, and on the opposite seat a lady lying apparently in a state of utter insensibility” (Broughton, “Man” 30). Elizabeth’s state of “utter insensibility” (which can be interpreted as a female orgasm) reveals her triumph over sexual passivity in favor of sexual freedom before ever entering the actual domestic sphere with her new husband. Interestingly, the man with the nose remains a spectral figure throughout the short story for good reason. Freeman poses the question of whether “the man [is] a former love, the mesmerist who calls her back from respectability. . . or is he instead a projection or embodiment of Elizabeth’s conjugal anxieties, who emerges in her confused transition from girl to wife?” (198). The ghost story’s ambiguous ending highlights the loose boundaries between the rational/emotional and the moral/sexual, in which Elizabeth’s escapes the doom of an anxiety-ridden marriage.

<31>In “Betty’s Visions” Betty challenges the boundary between the spirit/matter, which disrupts the stability of the Victorian family unit. Betty’s visions of “second sight” serve as “prophetic, elevated” acts throughout the short story and prophesy the eventual collapse of the family in Victorian society, as Pamela Thurschwell argues in *The Victorian Supernatural* (89). Betty’s premonitions allow her to communicate with the dead as she “lies between life and death” as a ghostly, human figure (Broughton, “Betty’s Visions,” 90). She taps into this power to straddle between the dead and the living in order to control her circumstances, since Betty has limited autonomy. She is the domestic caretaker of her ailing mother and father, then becomes the caretaker of her husband and children. Broughton darkly alludes to the generational cycle of Victorian feminine expectations continuously in “Betty’s Visions.” When deciding on a name for their daughter Betty asks her husband, “Will not it make a great confusion having two Bettys?” (Broughton, “Betty’s Visions” 92). He disturbingly replies, “If we have six daughters they will all be Bettys!” (Broughton, “Betty’s Visions” 92). Betty, as well as all her real (and imaginary) daughters, are all conflated into one figure of domesticity. However, her premonitions of death free her from the constraints of the Victorian home and family unit.

<32>Betty is a literal death angel in the house who brings death to most members of the Brewster family. Her premonitions clearly reject the feminine ideals of docility and submission, as Betty asserts her authority as a female seer. Betty’s death in her last vision collapses the entire

Victorian family unit, which, I argue, reveals the anxiety of motherhood and domesticity. Moments before her death, she is transformed into a ghostly figure “in her cool white gown against the porch” (Broughton, “Betty’s Visions” 92). Already, Betty’s transformation challenges the distinction between spirit and matter. Her husband, just before he finds her dead, thinks that Betty “has gone up to dress for dinner” (Broughton, “Betty’s Visions,” 94). In the final scene of the ghost story, her husband anxiously finds “a great white sheet drawn over [her body], and beneath the sheet an outline” (Broughton, “Betty’s Visions” 94). The image of Betty’s lifeless body collapses the divide between the spirit and matter. Betty is both spirit (a ghost) and matter (her lifeless body) simultaneously. Betty’s dead body reveals her husband’s fear of the collapse of the Victorian family. Perhaps more disturbing is the ghostly presence of the dead child lying next to her—in which both deaths represent the escape from domesticity and femininity in a horrific manner. Betty’s clairvoyant abilities grant her supernatural authority and freedom but at a detrimental cost.

The Importance of the Female Medium’s Influence on Victorian Society and the Ghost Story

<33>The female medium, as I argue, points toward the cultural authority of those not only on the margins of Victorian society but also in the Victorian ghost story. Through séances and performances female mediums established their own control and authority over the spirits of the dead. In *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide*, Vanessa D. Dickerson notes that these women “were regarded as being open to ‘higher truths,’” which granted them power within Spiritualism (31). Despite their marginalization, Spiritualist women sought an alternative means to create their own knowledge and power through mediumship, clairvoyance, and mesmerism.

<34>The popularity of Spiritualism, as well as its subtle subversion of Victorian social norms, created opportunities for Spiritualist women to “voice” their authority between the living and the dead. R. Laurence Moore, in his article “The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America,” agrees that “mediumship, whatever the seamy sides of its practice, offered the possibility of transforming a miserable life into one that brought happiness for oneself and not infrequently for others” (221). In other words, women who were doubly marginalized, either by their status of gender and sexuality or gender and class, used mediumship as a means to obtain economic stability and autonomy.

<35>The cultural impact of the female medium had quite an effect on not only Victorian society, but also Victorian literature and ghost stories. Broughton’s three ghost stories highlight the female medium’s power to push the boundaries of Victorian expectations, while expressing their anxieties. In “Behold! It was a Dream,” Dinah’s horrific dream comments on the feminine anxiety of domesticity and masculinity as a clairvoyant spinster. In “The Man with the Nose,” Elizabeth’s hallucinations reveal the anxiety of sexual passivity and repression with her triumph of escaping the domestic union of marriage. Finally, in “Betty’s Visions,” Betty’s premonitions highlight the anxiety of the collapse of the Victorian family unit. All three female protagonists search for selfhood and escape the confinement of Victorian domesticity in various manners. Thus, Broughton depicts the ingenious subversion of the female medium in Victorian society.

<36>Examining the cultural authority of the female medium remains vital to the future of Victorian literary scholarship. This figure highlights how marginalized voices in Victorian society sought power of their own through subversive, idiosyncratic means. As demonstrated in this paper, the female medium gains control over spirits, while lacking control over her property, civil rights, and body in Victorian society. She also profits from performances and séances in a society that expects her to remain exclusively in the private sphere. In other words, the female medium defies Victorian expectations of femininity through her supernatural abilities.

<37>Perhaps, most importantly, is the examination of the female medium herself; analyzing the impact of the female medium “decenters” Victorian scholarship’s focus on normalized society and the Victorian literary canon. If scholars turn more to figures like the female medium, we will be able to hear the stifled, marginalized voices of the Victorian past in future research – as Broughton champions in her ghost stories.

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