

## The Meeting of Psychoanalysis and Feminism in the Study of Mediumship<sup>1</sup>

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Review of *Trance speakers: Feminity and authorship in spiritual séances, 1850-1930*, by Claudie Massicotte. Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. Pp. 268. Hardcover. \$110.00 ISBN 978-0-77354-992-0

In this richly illustrated and thorough review of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature on Spiritualism, Claudie Massicotte, Assistant Professor of theory and criticism and Director of Interdisciplinary Studies at Young Harris College, explores the deep interweaving of Spiritualism and the feminist movement, with a focus on the Canadian context and, more particularly, the phenomenon of trance speaking. Combining feminist and psychoanalytic interpretations of hysteria and mediumship, Massicotte argues that Spiritualists' séances offered mid-nineteenth and early twentieth-century women a powerful means of expression and authorship in an eminently patriarchal society that saw them as naturally devoted to domestic life.



Throughout the pages of *Trance Speakers*, the author explores the complex interrelation between the rise of modern Spiritualism and a series of political, religious, and social changes taking place at the time (from the expansion of Protestantism to the emergence of suffragist and other libertarian movements) to demonstrate that Spiritualist practices disturbed “familiar ideas held in dominant religious, political, and social institutions,” thereby allowing Victorian women “to adopt a discursive position that questioned traditional ideas about gendered roles and abilities” (p. 5). Usually performed by women, trance mediumship became, in Massicotte’s view, an instrument of social change, an alternative vehicle of expression and empowerment through which they could overcome sexual inequality by speaking in public (even if attributing their words to a spiritual source), exercising religious leadership, and producing mediumistic phenomena of interest to distinguished men of science, among them many of the earlier psychical researchers. According to Massicotte, trance speaking “questioned

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the meaning of the voice as a system of expression of the self. As a complex figure of agency, the medium commands her audience to ask: who is allowed to speak? ... And how does gender identity affect the modalities of speech?" (p. 7).

In chapter one, *Historical Context: Séances and Mediumship in Canada*, the author reviews the early history of Spiritualism with emphasis on the Canadian context. Here, Massicotte not only expands on her hypotheses regarding the functions and meanings of mediumship to late 19th century Canadian women but also offers an original account of the historical underpinnings of Canadian Spiritualism. She presents data derived from old censuses and surveys of religious affiliation in Canada in which she analyzes the prevalence of Spiritualism in the country. Of particular interest is her observation that the spiritualist ideas and beliefs were less widespread and less institutionalized in Canada than in the United States. The Canadian Spiritualist movement "grew largely through transnational exchanges and travels across the border" (p. 22). This was particularly evident in the case of Kate and Margaret, the Fox sisters, who, despite the fame gathered in the United States, were originally from Canada. The sisters returned to their homeland on several occasions, during which they also held séances, thus inspiring other Canadians to establish spiritualist home circles, as it was the case with the English-born Canadian writer and settler Susanna Moodie (1803-1885). Massicotte argues that the old surveys of religious affiliation in Canada did not address the private character of many of the spiritualist practices. Among those who attended spiritualist séances were Catholics and Protestants who did so either on a regular basis or sporadically as an entertainment activity or in times of mourning.

In chapter two, *Framework: Interpreting Mediums' Discourses as Unconscious Communications*, Massicotte explains in more detail her theoretical integration of psychoanalytic and feminist approaches to account for mediumistic experiences. How to reconcile the expressive and empowerment functions of mediumistic practices with the fact that these women were not necessarily aware of such psychosocial implications, but instead attributed their own accomplishments in writing, speaking, and healing to the spirits? In contrast to previous authors, who avoided subjectivity and emphasized the role of general cultural and social factors in the relation between spiritualist and feminist ideals, Massicotte takes mediumistic experiences and the mediums' life histories into account, using a feminist reinterpretation of psychoanalysis and the unconscious as her framework of analysis. Such reinterpretation "demanded redefining discourse to encompass not only what was spoken, but also what remained silenced" (p. 61). Similarly to "hysteria," in which sexual and moral conflicts that could not be spoken were expressed as symptoms, mediumistic trance offered these women the possibility "to give voice to their inner revolt against their marginalization in the social order, yet only through the apparent fragmentation of their sense of self" (p. 62). However, unlike the "hysterical condition," mediumship is best understood as an attempt to construct "a new structure to legitimate the manifestation of women's voices" (p. 63).

In chapter three, *Healing: Mediums and Medicine*, the role of women in spiritual healing practices is further explored. Massicotte discusses how spiritualist conceptions contributed to the emergence of alternative methods of treatment that confronted medical orthodoxy. This historical process is interpreted by the author as a response to men's predominance in the medical field. Through their mediumistic abilities, spiritualist women developed an expertise in metaphysical and alternative forms of treatment that placed them in a privileged condition otherwise denied by Victorian society. A similar argument is advanced and expanded by Massicotte in chapters four, *Writing: Mediums and Literary Creativity*, and

five, *Speaking: Mediums in the Public Sphere*, in relation to authorship. In her view, automatic writing and trance speaking contested “phallic representations of authorship” (p. 116), the traditional humanist notion of self, embedded in a “patriarchal ideology,” the “fallacy of a unitary, all-powerful ‘I’” (p. 117). Through spirit writing and trance speaking, women were allowed to adopt radical and progressive positions on social issues, sometimes in favor of women’s rights, while simultaneously attributing the responsibility of their discourses to the dead. This also permitted them to preserve their identities as Victorian women, thereby avoiding the retaliation that would fall upon them if they assumed direct authorship.

In chapter six, *Performing: Mediums, Science, and the Speaking Body*, Massicotte establishes an interesting parallel between dermographism, a form of urticaria sometimes observed among hysterical patients at the *Salpêtrière* hospital – where Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) gave many of his lessons – and the phenomenon of ectoplasm observed in spiritualist séances. The author develops the notion of embodied subjectivity to defend the hypotheses that “both the hysteric’s dermographic skin and the medium’s ectoplasmic séances... present a transformation of the body’s surface into a speaking organ” (p. 155). While “hysterics” had their skin transformed into a malleable surface where physicians could inscribe words and forms at will, experimenting with many possibilities, the physical mediums could produce a series of strange substances and materialized forms that defied current scientific knowledge, attracting the attention of eminent researchers, whose experimental controls reproduced much of men’s influence over women. In both cases, women’s bodies symbolically expressed their submissiveness combined with their attempts to overcome patriarchal control. In this sense, Massicotte argues that mediumship was more successful a strategy than “hysteria,” as it gave spiritualist women the possibility of attaining at least some control and independence through the messages and commands of the spirits.

One can dispute the extent to which Spiritualism has been effective in effecting social change or whether it has served only as a means of reproducing the existing, conventional social structure. Massicotte herself recognizes that her framework of analysis cannot be readily generalized to all cases of Victorian mediumship. In many occasions, “mediumship tended to offer highly individualized solutions to [women’s] desires, anxieties, and socio-political contexts rather than generalized platforms for social reforms” (p. 11). Although avoiding reductionist interpretations of mediumship in terms of fraud and psychopathological symptoms, Massicotte nevertheless rejects spiritualist explanations of the afterlife as possible frameworks of analysis, focusing instead on the socio-historical and psychoanalytic implications of mediumistic practices.

Massicotte’s work is an invaluable source of information on the history of spiritualism and mediumship in Canada. Her theory of Victorian mediumship as unconscious rhetorical strategies, although not entirely original, is well-grounded and substantiated by many illustrative cases, rigorously analyzed. It can hardly be doubted, after reading her book, that the relations between spiritualism and feminism were substantial. Despite some exaggerated claims (such as the definition of automatic writing as a response to “phallic representations of authorship”), her psychoanalytic interpretation of the cases is quite convincing and sheds light on the psychosocial aspects of mediumship.

However, there are also significant limitations in Massicotte’s framework of analysis that merit some consideration here. First, the expressive and empowerment functions she ascribes to mediumship are not restricted to Modern Spiritualism but have been part of the long history of possession trance

in different cultures (Bourguignon, 2004). Similar psychodynamic functions are also observed among men (e.g., Lewis, 1989; Maraldi, 2014). Second, the involvement of women in these or similar practices is ancient, and many contemporary surveys identify women as more religious and open to the paranormal (e.g., Kennedy, 2003, 2005; Rice, 2003). To date, no theory has been able to fully account for the enduring gender differences in reports of mediumistic and other anomalous experiences, either biologically or socially. Considering these two facts, the feminist and historicist view of Spiritualism, although contributing to our understanding of the political and social factors involved in the emergence, maintenance, and molding of such practices and experiences, seems unable to account for cross-cultural and cross-temporal similarities.

Finally, the fact that mediumistic experiences can be explained psychologically or sociologically does not necessarily invalidate a possible parapsychological explanation for some cases. On the other hand, such analyses may inform parapsychologists of social and unconscious motivations underlying mediumistic experiences, crucial both to alternative explanations of survival (such as the super-psi hypothesis) and to the understanding of the psychological mechanisms implicated in purportedly mediumistic communications (Maraldi, 2014).

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