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The Politics of Trance: Victoria Woodhull and the Radical Reform of Platform Mediumship

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Trance mediumship was a popular form of entertainment and potential source of spiritual education for audiences throughout most of the nineteenth century. Performing in trance began with public demonstrations of mesmerism in which a mesmerist would put a subject into an altered state of consciousness using a series of hand motions. Encouraged by the tales of Edgar Allan Poe in which entranced subjects forestalled death and reported visions of the afterlife, audiences came to expect amazing supernatural feats at these demonstrations. ([1]) In the 1850s, trance performance blossomed into a national obsession with the rise of spirit mediumship. Like the mesmeric subjects before them, a host of mostly female mediums began performing in a similarly dissociative state except that they claimed to be possessed by the spirits of the dead. Mediums would take their place at a rostrum or platform, fall into trance, and then follow their audience's prompts in answering questions on science, philosophy, and religion in the voice of their possessing spirits. A panel then judged—based on what the medium had to say—whether the spirits had truly spoken through the medium or not.

One of mediumship's most infamous and colorful platform performers was the women's rights advocate and free love radical Victoria Woodhull. ([2]) In addition to her mediumship, she was the first woman to run for president, operated the first woman-owned stock brokerage, and wrote for a newspaper she ran with her sister, *The Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*. Woodhull fit all of these undertakings into the space of about five years in a public career that burned brightly before flaming out. She arrived fairly late to trance performance, giving her first spirit-inspired lectures in 1870, and she made significant alterations to the frame of the performance to suit her purposes. Whereas traditional trance mediums foregrounded the spontaneity of their performances in making the case that their lectures were directly inspired by a supernatural source, Woodhull read from notes that her spirits had helped her to prepare in advance. These notes touched on questions of politics, sex, and marriage at a time when her fellow mediums had begun to turn their attention to more metaphysical and religious questions. While other mediums were discussing the nature of God and the fate of the soul, Woodhull was arguing for a woman's right to divorce her husband and to vote.

The content and form of Woodhull's spirit-inspired lectures were deeply intertwined. To borrow from anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, the standard trance performance was transformative in that it sought to close the gap between the visible world of the performance and the invisible world of the spirits, rendering the spirits actually present in the body of the medium. ([3]) By contrast, Woodhull employed a more transportive style in which she did not bring her spirits into the room but rather suspended her audience's disbelief in them long enough to make the case that they were the true origin of her ideas. She employed a kind of Brechtian theatricality insofar as she performed in a way that raised her audience's awareness that they were experiencing an event that had been planned in advance. I argue that this gave her spirits plausible deniability in the face of her radical ideas while she maintained enough of their supernatural presence to give weight to the politics she espoused. At a time when audiences were still fairly new to hearing a woman speak about her own ideas, this style of platform speech allowed her to shift the audience's focus from seeking proof of a supernatural presence to an engagement with terrestrial social and political principles. By making her human influence more palpable in her spirit-inspired performances, Woodhull was able to use trance mediumship as a platform to deliver a this-worldly message about sex and gender and to espouse a progressive vision for the future. Unfortunately for her, this performance strategy also gave her little cover in the face of the controversies she stirred up and ultimately led to her undoing as a national public figure.

A Brief History of Trance Performance

Trance as a genre of performance began with demonstrations of mesmerism. In 1836 and 1837, the French-born mesmerist Charles Poyen, inspired by Franz Anton Mesmer's experiments in magnetic trance, traveled New England with his mesmeric subject, Cynthia Gleason. Poyen demonstrated his ability to put Gleason into a deep trance by passing his hands from her shoulders to her hands and argued that this trance was a means of curing disease and relieving pain. ([4]) The inability of observers to wake the mesmeric subject or somnambulist was an important feature of the demonstration. Gleason was subjected to sounds and sensations intended to rouse her like smelling agents, feathers, and the firing of a pistol, but only the mesmerist, Poyen, could bring her back to consciousness. ([5]) Mesmer, who invented the mesmeric technique in eighteenth-century France and demonstrated it at the French court, believed that this deeper state was achieved through the influence of the mesmerizer's magnetic power over a fluid inside the subject, but nineteenth-century American mesmerists tended to understand mesmerism as a purely psychological act.

Practitioners discovered that mesmerized subjects could access dimensions of knowledge not ordinarily accessible to the conscious subject. The fact that the somnambulist was unconscious but still able to communicate allowed their observers to peer into the hidden depths of the mind. Mesmerists developed a popularly disseminated idea that "the 'deeper' levels of consciousness opened the individual to the qualitatively 'higher' planes of mental existence." ([6]) Historian Robert C. Fuller describes audiences, investigators, and practitioners marveling at the unconscious subject's ability to perform feats of "telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition." ([7]) Gleason, for example was able to identify

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objects held behind her when Poyen asked her to allow her mind to “leave the brain” and “come out of the body.” ([8]) Academic psychology was only in its infancy and would not properly address the concept of the unconscious until the 1880s, leaving mesmerists to define the mesmerized state as a possible opening onto transcendent realms of knowledge.

By the 1840s, trance had become the subject of a growing public fascination. In 1845, Edgar Allan Poe published “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” about a man at the point of dying who is kept from death while spending months in a mesmeric trance. Poe may have been inspired by watching “the Poughkeepsie Seer,” Andrew Jackson Davis, perform a lecture while mesmerized. ([9]) In 1847, Davis published *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*, transcribed while he was in a trance state. Davis was building on the precedent set by Poyen and Gleason as well as the example of eighteenth-century Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg. ([10]) While entranced, Davis claimed to be able to enter a state like death and travel to other dimensions of being, namely the “Spirit World” where he was educated on the nature of existence. ([11]) Davis struggled to achieve popular recognition in the first years of his career, but he soon became a pivotal figure in the further development of trance performance because of his involvement with American spiritualism.

Modern spirit mediumship began as a popular religious movement and form of entertainment on March 31, 1848 when the Fox family first communicated with a series of mysterious taps sounding throughout their home in Hydesville, New York. Sisters Kate and Margaret Fox spoke to the taps as if the taps could hear them and persuaded the disembodied intelligence producing the taps to repeat sounds and count on their cue. ([12]) News of the mysterious taps spread and soon the sisters became national celebrities, touring the country performing “rapping séances.” The Fox sisters’ mediumship became the prototype for physical mediumship which focused on physical manifestations of spirit communication like tapping sounds, tilting tables, and eventually materialized spirit bodies while Davis paved the way for a new genre of public speaking done in the voice of the spirits of the dead. By arguing in his *Principles of Nature* that he was able to visit a spirit world while in trance, Davis had presaged mediumship by over a year. ([13]) And so when spirit mediumship captured broad interest via the Fox sisters, he quickly attached himself to the movement, becoming a leading proponent and practitioner of what came to be called trance or platform mediumship. In this way, the spiritualist movement appropriated mesmerism’s trance state, replacing the mesmerist’s influence with the spirits of the dead and offering those spirits as the explanation for the trance subject’s superhuman understanding.

As a male performer, Davis was an outlier. While there were male trance speakers, most public demonstrations of trance communication were performed by women. Women were thought to have spiritual “sensitivities” and considered to be natural outlets for spirits to communicate through. In her feminist analysis of historical spiritualism, Ann Braude points out that, “[i]n mediumship, women’s religious leadership became normative for the first time in American history.” ([14]) In the mid-nineteenth century women were discouraged from speaking publicly but the performer’s effacement by her spirits created an opening. As Braude argues, the fact that these women spoke as their spirits and not as themselves eased social tensions and made their performances more permissible. ([15]) A potentially threatening form of border-crossing defined the practice of mediumship. Mediums crossed the line between the living and the dead and, in the case of female mediums, gender lines. To deflect any censure that might come from violating these taboos, the medium put the focus on her spirits. The more the spirits could become co-present with the audience through the performance, the less challenging these transgressions became.

Placing the focus on the relative reality of the spirits emphasized the audience’s critical role in judging the performance and enhanced the impression that trance was for entertainment. Mediums sought to prove themselves like circus performers attempting a daring feat or magicians performing a baffling illusion. After a short introduction, often including a prayer and hymn, the medium would take center stage channeling one or more spirits who would proceed to address the crowd. Usually, this central lecture or discourse was followed by a question-and-answer session. Here was where the critical, entertainment function was most apparent. The historian R. Laurence Moore describes how mediums were evaluated:

They invited the audience to choose a jury from among themselves that would in turn select a topic of discourse for the medium. Announcing the subject to the medium, the audience then gave her a few moments to enter trance. Once in a trance, she would proceed to talk, usually for longer than an hour. The address constituted the test of her powers. ([16])

The topics chosen for trance lectures tended to be scientific (chemistry, physics, naturalism, or agriculture) or philosophical, theoretically beyond the medium’s knowledge and intellectual capacity. From the audience’s perspective, this assured that the medium would have to rely on the spirits in order to adequately address the topic at hand.

Not only the content of mediums’ speeches but also the style of their delivery was necessary to persuade audiences. Trance mediums had to mitigate the impression that the performance being given was theatrical in the sense of being scripted or otherwise rehearsed. Historian Simone Natale argues that trance allowed mediums to connect their performances with the “dreams, illusions, and artistic inspiration in the automatic actions of the brain and perceptual organs” which lent them a quality of authenticity for nineteenth-century spectators. “An aesthetics of creative absorption” gave the performance a feeling of spontaneity and detracted from any sense that the medium was carefully executing a trick to fool the audience. ([17]) According to theatre scholar Alice Rayner, the “theatrical occasion” is “a repetition of the loss at the edge of or alongside consciousness.” ([18]) What is lost is full conscious awareness of an originary moment that was never there in the first place. Theatre raises the audience’s awareness of the gap in time between the moment of perception and the subsequent conscious reflection on an experience. It emphasizes the fact that the meaning of the originating event—in this case, the medium’s grand spiritual revelation—is always contingent on the humans who process and interpret it. In so doing, it “returns the event to its original condition of passage and persistence, of being unrecoverable and a repetition.” ([19]) Trance mediums fully dissociated and in so doing sought to deny any repetition in their performances by performing their spirits as immediately present. While their display was theatrical in the sense of being performed on a stage for an audience, it also sought to deny its own theatricality—in Rayner’s sense of the word—by framing the performance as wholly spontaneous.

Theatricality was particularly fraught in the mid-nineteenth century. Mediums traded on their authenticity—the promise not to be faking the spiritual intelligence they claimed to channel—but actors carried a stain of inauthenticity wherever they went. In his seminal study of anti-theatricality, Jonas Barish argues that Romanticists accused theatre artists of being insincere. Lord Byron, for example, had a penchant for closet drama because he felt that production “not only trivializes plays and introduces irrelevancies, it desecrates; it defiles the artistic integrity of the original script.” ([20]) For Byron, his poetic vision was most pure in the interior of his own mind, and the more it became exteriorized, the more it was subjected to the inherent profanation of expression. This attitude was likely spurred by a growing tension over actors’ melodramatic performance style which was often highly theatrical, as opposed to the more natural ideals of the Romantics. According to David Grimsted, actors had to move quickly from role to role often with little or no rehearsal time and so the actor “almost had to have a set of mannerisms ready-made with which [s]he could embellish any character.” ([21]) Barish argues that the rising attitude among audiences and actors through the Romantic period was that the theatre “threatens to sap [actors’] authenticity, and its inescapable artificiality must be combatted with all the naturalness at the artist’s command.” ([22]) These were the seeds that would ultimately blossom into Konstantin Stanislavski’s system for psychological realist acting at the turn of the century.

The Traditional Trance Medium

)For trance mediumship’s more successful performers, audiences discovered their authenticity in the gap between their humble and unsophisticated origins and the knowledgeable and sophisticated performances they gave for their audiences. Women were regarded as less worldly and informed, making their spirit-inspired revelations on scientific and philosophical questions all the more amazing. Many mediums’ performance of self had focused on their lack of education and skill. Trance mediums wanted spectators to believe that they were not capable of performing their spirits’ messages without otherworldly intervention. The impression they created was that they were not clever enough to fake their spirits, and so when the spirits communicated complex theological or scientific truths through them it was more plausibly supernatural because the medium lacked the knowledge and skill to pull off the spirits’ level of understanding and erudition on her own.

As a teenager, Cora Scott Richmond, one of America’s most prominent trance performers, succeeded in persuading the chemist James J. Mapes—who received “marvelous scientific answers” to the questions he put to her spirits—and this spring-boarded her to national attention.

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([23])Richmond, born in 1840 near the town of Cuba in Allegheny County, New York, moved with her family to Wisconsin where she was raised on a farm. Her biographer, Harrison D. Barrett, described her as "in no way different from other country girls, reared and educated as country girls are." ([24]) She discovered her mediumship before she was ten and began trance speaking when she was only eleven, giving up school at the age of twelve to devote herself full-time to trance performance. ([25])Nettie Colburn, best known as the medium who served Mary Todd Lincoln, was sick for much of her childhood in Hartford, Connecticut, so much so that she received almost no formal schooling. After learning of her mediumistic power at a séance, she began trance speaking in 1856 at the age of fifteen. ([26]) Both Colburn and Richmond had no vocation or training outside of mediumship, and according to the ethos of the day, weren't worldly enough to fool a crowd of men.

To further erase themselves in favor of the spirits, mediums often described themselves as absent for the spirits' performance. Trance writer and medium Achsa Sprague fell ill with rheumatic fever at the age of 20 but after seven years made a full recovery and credited her health to the intervention of the spirits. ([27]) She went on to become a spirit-inspired poet and trance lecturer until her death in 1861. In her trance-written poetry, Sprague described her first days as a medium in "The Angel's Visit:" "Enrapt, like one inspired of old, / Forth from her lips such teachings rolled, / Till lost to self the voice would say, / 'Tis Angels speak to you to-day. / This form has languished long in pain, / But we have given it life again..." ([28]) In her poem, Sprague referred to herself in the third person as "this form" which became "lost to self." It wasn't Sprague who lectured but rather the angels or spirits addressing her audiences directly using her voice. In 1897, Cora Scott Richmond published an account of her "Psychic or Supermundane Experiences" describing what happened to her when she entered the trance state. She said, "while passing into this state I experience no physical sensations that are describable; a sense of being set free, of passing into a larger realm." ([29]) She traveled to another metaphysical plane, meeting spirits and encountering "visions of surpassing loveliness that no language, no gift of art, even with genius portraiture, could describe." ([30]) Like Sprague, Richmond's spirits performed the work of speaking to her audiences while Richmond's consciousness was elsewhere; receiving a mystical education in the spirit world.

Through these various techniques of self-effacement, the medium sought to literally become her spirits in the presence of the audience, but in order to fully realize this metamorphosis, the medium had to shut down the audience's critical gaze. If the audience was watching and listening in order to question whether a spirit was truly present then the spirit could only ever half emerge during the performance itself. And so, despite the fact that mediums were evaluated by a panel of jurors and critiqued in the newspaper, they argued that when the spirits spoke in performance, their speech was beyond what the performance could convey and so beyond human judgment. ([31]) Achieving this transcendence was the work of several decades. In the early days of her mediumship when Richmond was seventeen years old, she concluded a speech in Newburyport, Massachusetts by saying, "We think this will be conceded by all minds who reason from the strict rule of philosophy and of logic. We think it must be conceded by all who view the human soul as being the child of Deity, by all who claim to worship a heavenly Father and a divine God." ([32]) In other words, her message could be validated with human rationality if the humans in question had a spiritual basis to their understanding. Three decades later, she asserted that the spirits, communicating from beyond the limits of time and space largely resisted being encapsulated within the terrestrial confines of the language, let alone performance. Her spirits said that "[r]evelation proceeds from the unknown, the absolute, to the known; from the boundless, limitless, to the limited, the relative, the enchained." ([33]) Their "enchained" revelations, given through Richmond, were incapable of teaching any of the most significant truths about the spirit world: "No external thing can reveal God. The Soul alone, being of the nature of God, perceives God. Nothing can teach that there is God." ([34])

Richmond's effort to move her spirits further and further beyond the limits of human understanding may have been a response to a culture increasingly hostile to trance performance. While trance mediumship succeeded, for a time, in capturing an American audience, by the 1870s, it began to suffer from a rising prejudice against the value of altered states of consciousness among proto-psychologists. In the decade after the Civil War, conscious control or will became a major feature of psychological thought in America. In his *Principles of Mental Physiology*, the influential neurophysiologist and ardent critic of spiritualism W. B. Carpenter devoted an entire chapter to the significance of the will. For Carpenter, our judgments, beliefs, and worldview are governed by a controlling will which consciously selects the ideas that best suit our perspective: "[t]he records of 'absence of mind' afford abundant examples of the absurd incongruities which occur, when the Will is temporarily prevented by the mental preoccupation from summoning Common Sense to check the ideas which external impressions suggest." ([35]) A passive medium like Richmond or Sprague failed to exert "self-direction" on their mental experiences by virtue of the fact that they had no control over the trance state and opened their mind to an infinitely variable supply of beliefs and ideas which may or may not have been entirely absurd.

According to historian Cathy Gutierrez, Davis recognized that "both trance and insanity occupy the nebulous ground of alternative consciousness" and attempted to save trance. Davis argued that the entranced were not suggestible whereas the insane could be easily influenced by others' stronger will. ([36]) But for Carpenter, there was no difference between subjecting oneself to the influence of the spirits and the will of a living person. The medium was like the dreamer and should not trust any of the impressions she received while her consciousness was inoperative. According to the historian of psychology S. E. D. Shortt, "[m]ost [alienists] would have accepted Carpenter's notion that the control of mind ultimately rests with the will.... For Victorian neurology, as for social theory generally, the essential capstone was the concept of individual volitional control." ([37]) Spiritualism, which pre-dated Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the rise of materialist neuroscience, was ill-equipped to address rapid changes in the standards of empiricism as they moved steadily toward the establishment of formal academic psychology in the 1880s. ([38]) If dissociative states were viewed as the source for extreme error and insanity then mediumship required a new approach to the role of consciousness.

Victoria Woodhull's Radical Mediumship

Victoria Woodhull took up the platform to deliver trance lectures fairly late in the genre's development, but her career represented a revolution in what trance mediumship could achieve. In the 1870s, Woodhull broke with the standard protocols of mediumistic performance in order to promote radical cultural change. She had worked as an actor before taking up mediumship, and for Woodhull, theatricality proved central to her unique approach to mediumistic performance and allowed her to promote an agenda that pushed beyond the already progressive attitudes of mainstream spiritualists. Woodhull spoke to Congress on the topic of women's suffrage and ran for president in 1872. She published the first English translation of the Communist Manifesto and she advocated for free love which at the time meant a woman's right to divorce her husband and enjoy voluntary and pleasurable sexual encounters. She was accused of being a polygamist and a prostitute and jailed on obscenity charges. And she claimed to do all of this at the direction of the spirits of the dead.

Unlike the chronically ill Sprague or the rural Richmond, Woodhull's entry into public life began with a short stage career. In her late teens or early twenties, she was living in San Francisco with her first child and husband, a carousing, alcoholic physician named Canning Woodhull. According to Woodhull's contemporary and biographer Theodore Tilton, her husband made hardly any financial contribution to the family, and so to help support herself and her child she took a job as a cigar girl. But Woodhull was too "blushing, modest, and sensitive" for the job. ([39]) Luckily, around this time she met an actress named Anna Cogswell who was looking for a seamstress "to make her a theatrical wardrobe." ([40]) But Woodhull didn't earn enough making dresses to support her family and so Cogswell suggested that she try her hand at acting. Her first role was as the Country Cousin in *New York by Gas-light* and she went on to perform for six weeks in a variety of roles, earning fifty-two dollars. Her final role was in *The Corsican Brothers*, adapted by Dion Boucicault from the French original by Alexandre Dumas, pere. Suddenly, during the ballroom scene, a spirit voice addressed Woodhull, calling her to come home, and she gave up acting to rescue her sister, Tennie, from her abusive parents. ([41])

Woodhull received word from her spirits that she should "repair to Indianapolis, there to announce herself as a medium, and to treat patients for the cure of disease." ([42]) She was raising money in part to liberate Tennie. Tennie was also working as a healing medium, but her father "add[ed] to much that was genuine in her mediumship, more that was charlatany," including selling lye as a cancer cure and burning away the skin of his clients. Using the money she raised, Woodhull "clutched Tennie as by main force and flung her out of this semi-humbug, to

the mingled astonishment of her money-greedy family, one and all." ([43]) With her sister by her side, Woodhull launched into a public career that was rooted in trance mediumship but ranged widely from politics to the stock market to the newspaper business.

While Woodhull's stage career was short, Tilton made a point of praising Woodhull's ability to memorize. According to Tilton, "the text was given to [Woodhull] in the morning, she learned and rehearsed it during the day, and made a fair hit in it at night." ([44]) At the time Tilton was writing his biography of Woodhull, the pair were friends and so this tidbit about memorization likely came from Woodhull herself and was included with her approval. She was proud of her skill, but her skill posed a direct challenge to the spontaneity of trance mediums traditionally projected onto their performances. The fact that Woodhull was in the regular habit of memorizing lines would have introduced an opportunity to create a fraudulent trance performance that she had rehearsed in advance except that Woodhull made no claim to direct and immediate spiritual inspiration on the platform. Woodhull took ownership of her skill to prepare, memorize, and perform her lectures because she made a significant change to the frame of the trance performance. Woodhull did not perform as her spirits but rather with her spirits, trading on the audience's impression that her speeches were supernaturally inspired while maintaining her conscious presence in the room as a performer.

Woodhull performed as herself, reading from the spirit-inspired notes transcribed in advance of her speaking engagements. She spoke about her spirits in the third person in contrast to more traditional trance mediums, whose spirits spoke in the first person. Richmond, who was frequently controlled by a group of spirits, used pronouns like "we" and "us." Sprague spoke of herself while in trance as "our own medium." ([45]) By contrast, Woodhull talked in terms of being educated by her spirits in advance of her lectures. In her speech, "The Elixir of Life," for example, she argued for women's sexual and political freedom based on the authority of "Spirits, who have never deceived me, have informed and shown me why it must be so." ([46]) Woodhull did not so much compose in the voice of her spirits as write in conjunction with their voices.

While this may seem like a small distinction, it actually held major implications for the way Woodhull performed and was perceived by her audiences. To begin, Woodhull's manuscripts, whether composed consciously or unconsciously, did not comprise the whole of her remarks. Critics frequently observed how she would put down her notes and speak extemporaneously. The Newburgh Telegraph, for example, described how "She began her lecture by reading from [her] manuscript, but gradually warming with her subject, she placed the manuscript on the table, and spoke as she felt, citing numerous dramatic incidents in her extended career since she began the 'Social Crusade,' as proofs of the peculiar views she holds." ([47]) The Argus of Albany, New York reported that Woodhull delivered her "peroration... without looking at the manuscript" and Albany's Evening Post said that "[w]hen Mrs. Woodhull speaks without notes, she is a better orator than either Anna Dickinson or Olive Logan." ([48]) At her speaking engagements, Woodhull's spirits served a background role, writing Woodhull's manuscript before the performance but leaving Woodhull to consciously convey, elaborate, and express her own opinions on their theories as herself.

While Woodhull was generally more consciously aware than her fellow trance performers at her speaking engagements, her style should not be read as a complete break with traditional trance performance. Tilton contended that, like Richmond and Sprague, Woodhull was entirely beholden to her spirits. She "lived her life" according to their dictates and entered into the spirit realm on a daily basis. ([49]) As for her lectures, "every characteristic utterance which she gives to the world is dictated while under spirit-influence, and most often in a totally unconscious state. The words that fall from her lips are garnered by the swift pen of her husband, and published almost verbatim as she gets and gives them." ([50]) Tilton's description of Woodhull's process was very likely her biographer's attempt to respond to the at least partially true assertion that Woodhull's speeches were written for her by her second husband, James Harvey Blood, and the social reformer Stephen Pearl Andrews, a frequent contributor to Woodhull and Claffin's Weekly. ([51]) The key distinction between Woodhull and other female trance mediums is that Woodhull's spirits did not dictate her speech while in performance but in advance of the performance.

If her critics are any indication, Woodhull largely succeeded in maintaining the aura of spiritual inspiration while assigning her spirits an offstage role. An admirer at the Cincinnati Inquirer observed that the "expression of her face sometimes, when she got warmed up to her subject, grew almost spiritual." ([52]) Writing for the spiritualist publication The Banner of Light, Allen Putnam said, Mrs. Woodhull may, for aught we know, be herself very able—may be a highly talented human being. But she avows, and we believe that, in the main, her higher, bolder, more startling and yet coherent productions are passed through her brain by an expanded, disembodied intelligence. Consequently, we are surveying her as the instrument of some super-mundane being or beings, and not as a self-controlling actor and speaker. ([53])

Whereas other trance speakers like Richmond and Sprague explicitly performed in a dissociative state as their spirits, Woodhull created an ambiguous performance that blurred the line between the medium and her spirits. Her audiences were often unsure as to whether they were listening to Woodhull the orator or spirits speaking through her.

This ambiguity shifted the audience's focus from the truth claims of the spirits to the talents of the speaker herself. Critics and commentators frequently noted Woodhull's skill as an orator. The Evening Post writer said that Woodhull "would have made a glorious actress. She has just the looks and brain-power necessary to become the early and successful rival of any actress who ever lived." ([54]) The Ohio State Journal said "Mrs. Woodhull possesses a voice, an enunciation and a manner that would have made her a fortune upon a tragic stage. At times she grows terribly earnest and fires off her words as if they were red hot and unpleasant occupants of her mouth." ([55]) Woodhull encouraged this association with the theatre by having her sister, Tennie, read a scene from Macbeth before her 1875 lectures. While Woodhull was willing to share credit with her spirits for the content of her performances, she succeeded in taking sole credit for the quality of her delivery.

All of this served to render Woodhull's performances a more secular affair in contrast to her fellow trance mediums. Richmond framed her trance lectures with prayers and hymns, foregrounding the religious dimension of trance speech. Woodhull opened her performances with Shakespeare or the poetry of Richard Sheridan. Woodhull's ability to convey a this-worldly perspective while maintaining a connection to her spirits had much to do with how she situated the moment of spiritual revelation in relation to the moment of performance. Richmond and Sprague may have been personally enlightened by the spirits but their spirits performed as themselves, having no use for the medium's own understanding. Since Woodhull performed as herself, her personal enlightenment was the originating event that she recreated and repeated in her performances. As such, the lecture's higher meaning was not hidden in the mysterious realm of the spirits but brought down to earth in the person of the medium who claimed a full understanding of what the spirits meant to convey. This is the difference between the oracle and the augur. The oracle speaks in the voice of the gods, but her message can be incomprehensible and often requires further interpretation. The augur interprets the signs etched by the gods in this world in a way that is fully comprehensible but subject to human error. The spirits reside in an unconscious or subliminal space and the medium straddles the unconscious and conscious mind, tending toward one side or the other depending on the depth of the trance.

In Woodhull's performances, the intervention of her conscious will allowed her to appropriate the sacred power of the spirits to achieve terrestrial ends. Conscious use equates to profane use, cutting up the infinite truth of the transcendent source by enchainning it in a finite vessel. Woodhull was focused on wielding her spirits for practical ends, and the greatest truths for Woodhull had their test in creating actual change in the human world. Her most celebrated causes were the sexual liberation and political enfranchisement of women. In 1870, she spoke to a special committee of Congress, arguing that women already had the right to vote since the 14(th) and 15(th) amendments—passed to end the socio-political disenfranchisement of African Americans following the Civil War—guaranteed that right for all citizens. She argued that, The right to vote cannot be denied on account of race. All people included in the term race have the right to vote, unless otherwise prohibited...Back to Top ●
Men are also essentially just; and when the thought shall really come home to them, with the cogency of conviction, that they have, through thoughtlessness, been all along acting unjustly to their mothers and wives and daughters, by depriving them of political rights, it may happen that there will come up a great swelling-tide of reactionary sentiment which will make a sudden revolution. ([56])
This speech made no reference to the spirits or supernatural motives or designs but was, rather, a fairly straightforward argument for her cause. In 1872, she was nominated as the presidential candidate of the Equal Rights Party, even though the government still denied her right to vote in the election. As a candidate, her speeches dwelled on grand themes like freedom and justice but remained heavily rooted in practical politics. She argued that "no personal merit or demerit can interfere between individuals so that one may, by arbitration or laws, be placed unequally with another" and "every individual is entitled to all the natural wealth that he or she requires to minister to the various wants of the body." ([57])

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Just as Woodhull hybridized the form of her trance performance—being neither fully dissociated nor fully separated from her spirits—she also hybridized her content. Her practical goals maintained some connection to spiritual ends. As an advocate for free love—which, to Woodhull, meant a woman's right to seek out a healthy monogamous relationship—she argued that men and women should be allowed to dissolve their marriages at any time for any cause. In her 1875 lecture "Breaking the Seals; The Key to the Hidden Mystery" she told her audiences that a spiritual-sexual apocalypse she envisioned was presaged in the Bible, which, when read using her spirits' "cabalistic key" described the means by which individuals could achieve immortality. The key involved interpreting the Garden of Eden as a metaphor for the human body and sexual congress as the union of creative forces to generate an "elixir of life" or a "perfected blending of the positive and negative creative powers, from which shall come the constant rejuvenation or building up of the body." Woodhull held this secret back from her audience: "do you ask what is the process by which this is to be gained? This I am not permitted to tell now. But I know what it is. I have been shown by the spirit of truth all things that relate to this wonderful mystery." ([58]) She suggested that her listeners return to their Bibles and, using the clues she had provided them with, discover the secret for themselves. Significantly, the secret belonged first to the spirits and then to Woodhull, but it remained a secret. The truth, this "Elixir of Life," came closer to this world but, in line with the ambiguity of Woodhull's spiritual inspiration, kept one foot in the other world. It had practical consequences—life-enriching sexual union—and could be known in practical terms, but it remained secret and required spiritual and intellectual work to discern.

In her "Elixir of Life" lecture which she toured with in 1873, Woodhull envisioned a literal closing of the gap between the spiritual and human worlds, hinging on practical changes to social codes and sexual habits. Nineteenth-century marriage, which condemned women to sexual slavery, had precipitated "growing disgust sexually, between the sexes." ([59]) Social and political circumstances in the form of women's disenfranchisement were holding the spirits back from bringing an apocalyptic new age to the people of earth. Many couples joined in happy sexual unions were required to create a supernatural erotic energy, welcoming the spirits to descend to earth and sanctify humanity: "[i]t will be readily understood that, when the final union has occurred; when Spirits become materialized, and human beings become Spiritualized, that the bodies in which both shall appear will be of the same etherealized material." ([60]) In this vision, otherworldly spiritual designs and this-worldly practical designs overlapped in a perfect synthesis and Woodhull's political program became a spiritual quest, realizable through human political and social change.

The Orator as Effigy

Woodhull's radical secular and spiritual quest would eventually lead to her downfall as a public figure. Joseph Roach argues that when a performer troubles society's boundaries, she can function as a surrogate or effigy sacrificed on the altar of a culture's superfluity: "'burning in effigy' is a performance of waste, the elimination of a monstrous double, but one fashioned by artifice as a stand-in, an 'unproductive expenditure' that both sustains the community with the comforting fiction that real borders exist and troubles it with the spectacle of their immolation." ([61]) Woodhull's secularization of trance as a form of entertainment coupled with the artifice and theatricality of her performances rendered her as just such a stand-in. She became expendable; a curiosity and sideshow that ultimately had to be dispensed with for society to carry on as usual. Unlike Richmond or Sprague, Woodhull did not seek to displace herself with her spirits as a crosser of boundaries. By embodying the medium's conscious empowerment and advocating for women's social and sexual liberation, Woodhull directly attacked the effacing premise that had made female trance mediumship possible. This profaned the spirits through practical use for political and terrestrial ends and crossed well beyond the heavily-patrolled borders of religious and sexual propriety, forcing a crisis that demanded a monstrous double—Woodhull herself—be burned in effigy.

Her various causes were often too progressive even for the spiritualists or women's rights advocates she circulated among. Suffrage leaders like Susan B. Anthony and leading spiritualists were uncomfortable aligning themselves with Woodhull's free love politics, and so those politics rested firmly on Woodhull's own shoulders. Actors are not responsible for the actions and opinions of their characters, but by performing as her spirits' knowledgeable interpreter, Woodhull collapsed the distinction between herself and her source, serving as both actor and character. In turn, she became responsible and let her spirits off the hook for all of the things her audiences disliked about her speeches. In an editorial from the Troy Daily Whig, a writer professed to having been at least partially won over by hearing Woodhull speak and meeting her afterward. Comparing her to Joan of Arc and Emmanuel Swedenborg, he interpreted her spirits as a kind of inherent genius but questioned whether Woodhull was putting that genius to good use: "[s]he has such an intense nature... that I presume she sees visions—as many angels as St. John perhaps—as many devils as Luther... she is an abnormal growth of democratic institutions—thoroughly sincere, partly insane, and fitted to exaggerate great truths like self-denying love, into theoretical free love and some practical mischief." ([62]) The writer believed that Woodhull saw visions but that she embellished them, distorting her spirits' inspiration through her own mischievous designs.

Woodhull understood that she was quickly falling into the role of sacrificial victim and sought to replace herself with a substitute. Substitution is common in the use of both ritual and mythological sacrifices. In the history of ritual sacrifice, poor children were substituted for the children of kings, animals were substituted for humans, and bread for animals. In mythology, Artemis substituted a deer for Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia, and the God of Abraham accepted a sheep in place of Isaac. ([63]) In theatre, ancient heroes try and fail to locate a scapegoat for the divine curses that haunt them; Renaissance protagonists often bring down a series of other characters on their way to the grave; and melodramatic heroes seek villains to die in theirs or their loved one's places.

Woodhull's choice for substitute was a novel and convenient one: the abolitionist preacher Henry Ward Beecher. Beecher and Woodhull happened to both include Theodore Tilton in their close circle of friends. Beecher was having an affair with Tilton's wife, Elizabeth, and in 1872 Woodhull discovered the poorly kept secret. Beecher had been speaking out vehemently against Woodhull's radical free love politics, and Woodhull saw this affair as an opportunity to reveal her opponents' hypocrisy. Being in overlapping social circles with Beecher, she attempted to persuade him to get out ahead of her plan to expose the affair and confess in a joint public address, officially aligning himself with the free love movement. Beecher appeared to be willing to go along with Woodhull, or at least so she believed, until the last moment when he failed to show at their speaking engagement. This prompted Woodhull to take to the pages of the Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly to publish news of his marital transgressions. ([64])

But airing Beecher's affair kept Woodhull in the role of her own champion. She had failed to coerce Beecher into standing in front of her as a substitute. Woodhull's article drew the attention of notorious moralizer Anthony Comstock who prosecuted Woodhull, her sister, and her husband. ([65]) Comstock had them charged with distributing obscene materials through the mail because of a secondary article in the Beecher issue about two wealthy men debauching a pair of teenage girls. Comstock's raid and destruction of Woodhull's office and subsequent libel suit depleted her financial resources and imperiled her health. She was arrested and briefly jailed which gave Woodhull another opening for a theatrical display. Having been released from the Ludlow jail, a second order for her arrest had been issued and the police planned to apprehend her at a scheduled speaking engagement. Woodhull dressed as an old Quaker woman and worked her way to the front of the crowd, throwing off the disguise as the crowd gathered around her, shielding her from the police for the duration of her speech. ([66]) "I come into your presence from a cell in the American Bastille," she said, painting herself as a revolutionary, "to which I was confined by the cowardly servility of the age." ([67]) She participated in a series of very public trials in which she was prosecuted by Comstock and sued by L. C. Challis—one the men she and her sister had accused of corrupting teenagers. This culminated with Tilton's lawsuit against Beecher in 1874 and 1875 for which she served as a witness. The Comstock prosecution and scandal that followed wore Woodhull down and eventually put an end to her political and speaking careers; an immolation in the name of her sexual and spiritual border-crossing. ([68]) In 1877, she sailed for England and never regained the celebrity she'd enjoyed as a radical mediumistic orator.

Woodhull utilized a progressive style of paradoxically conscious trance performance as a vehicle to spread a progressive social agenda. She knew from the reactions of her detractors that her viewpoints were radical. Even if she had chosen to present free love and women's enfranchisement in the form of direct spirit communication, her highly critical audience would have quickly discredited both her and her spirits. Whether driven by ego or cunning, she chose to put herself between her spirits and her audience. In this way, her spirits were able to maintain a

kind of authority even in the face of audiences who disagreed with her. While this routine succeeded in keeping Woodhull and her politics in the spotlight for much of the first half of the 1870s, it could not be sustained forever. Operating on the vanguard, her role was to introduce the public to ideas they had never before considered. These ideas included new approaches to sex, marriage, and the family but also the nature of performance and consciousness. Often viewed as an aberration and curiosity by her contemporaries, Woodhull is better interpreted as a free-thinking innovator, willing to adopt and share unpopular opinions and happy to play to fans and critics alike as long as she could draw a crowd.

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3. Barbara Myerhoff, "The transformation of consciousness in ritual performances: some thoughts and questions" in *By Means of Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 247.
4. Charles Poyen, *Proofs of Animal Magnetism in New England* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan, and Co., 1837).
5. Poyen, *Proofs*, 130-131.
6. Robert C. Fuller, *Americans and the Unconscious* (London: Oxford U. P., 1986), 36.
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9. John DeSalvo, *Andrew Jackson Davis: The First American Prophet and Clairvoyant* (Morrisville, North Carolina: Lulu, 2005).
10. Swedenborg experienced a series of dreams or visions which became the basis for his own Biblical theology. Mesmerists took inspiration from the fact that Swedenborg's revelations had come in an altered state of consciousness. See *A Compendium of the Theological Works of Emmanuel Swedenborg* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1974).
11. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind* (New York: S.S. Lyon and William Fishbough, 1847). Davis said, "there is another distinct principle, which appears and is evident to me as Spirit. Also there is a mediator, or medium connecting the spirit with the body. This mediator I know as sensation. And when this medium becomes disunited, there is a physical dissolution, and a spiritual elevation to a different sphere of existence" (42).
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13. Davis argued in his *Principles of Nature* that "the free, unshackled spirit... can receive impressions instantaneously of all things desired,--and with its spiritual senses, communicate with spiritual substances." Of his own mesmerized state, he said, "When you ask me a question, I am then existing in the medium or sphere of the body; but in investigating and finding the answer, I pass to the sphere where I can associate with the truth and reality" (43-44).
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28. Achsa Sprague, *The Poet and Other Poems* (Boston: W. White and Co., 1864), 300-301.
29. Cora L. V. Richmond, "Psychic or Supermundane Experiences," *The Arena* (July 1897).
30. Cora L. V. Richmond, "Psychic or Supermundane Experiences," *The Arena* (July 1897).
31. In one of the harshest criticisms Richmond received, the *Christian Inquirer* said that her performance was "chiefly a prolonged school-girl's essay, with allusions to the fragrant flowers, and bespangled with talk about the glittering stars. Now and then there was a striking sentence, but as a whole it was vague, sentimental and exceedingly weak" (21 August 1858).
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38. Wouter Hanegraaf, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (New York: SUNY Press, 1997), 471.
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40. Tilton, "Victoria C. Woodhull," 17.
41. Tennie Claflin was born Tennessee Claflin but changed her name to Tennie C. after leaving her parents'; home with her sister. Tilton, "Victoria C. Woodhull," 17-19.
42. Tilton, "Victoria C. Woodhull," 19.
43. Tilton, "Victoria C. Woodhull," 22. Woodhull had a contentious relationship with her immediate and extended family throughout her life.
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46. Victoria C. Woodhull, "The Elixir of Life; or, Why Do We Die? An Oration Delivered before the Tenth Annual Convention of the American Association of Spiritualists, at Grow's Opera House, Chicago, Ills., by Victoria C. Woodhull, September 18, 1873" (New York: Woodhull & Claflin, 1873).
47. Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly 9, no. 8 (23 January 1875). Woodhull made a regular habit of reprinting notices about her performances in her own newspaper. In reprinting these reviews, she tacitly approved of or gave the impression that she approved of their characterization of her.
48. Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly 10, no. 14 (4 September 1875).
49. Tilton, "Victoria C. Woodhull," 8.
50. Tilton, "Victoria C. Woodhull," 9. This process is a direct echo of the way in which Andrew Jackson Davis composed his *Principles of Nature* with his scribe, William Fishbough. This suggests the possibility that Woodhull was intentionally assuming a more masculine trance role.
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53. *Banner of Light* (20 November 1875).
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57. Victoria C. Woodhull, "A Speech on the Impending Revolution," in *Selected Writings of Victoria Woodhull*, ed. Cari M. Carpenter, (Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 2010), 67.
58. Victoria Woodhull, "Breaking the Seals; The Key to the Hidden Mystery an oration delivered by Victoria C. Woodhull, First in Martin House, Albany, N. Y., Friday Evening, Aug. 2 1875, and since at various other cities in the east," Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly 10, no. 17 (25 September 1875). In this speech, Woodhull took a strange turn toward occultism, using a 'cabalistic' key to reveal the Garden of Eden as a metaphor for the human body. She gave this speech at the same time that Helena Blavatsky and Henry Olcott had attracted the notice of America's spiritualists with their new Theosophical Society which drew heavily on Egyptian occult themes in its early days, and so it's likely Woodhull was attempting to capitalize on a new vogue for occultism. That having been said, the speech's reference to an "elixir" helps to create continuity with her earlier work on "The Elixir of Life."
59. Victoria C. Woodhull, "The Elixir of Life; or, Why Do We Die? An Oration Delivered before the Tenth Annual Convention of the American Association of Spiritualists, at Grow's Opera House, Chicago, Ills., by Victoria C. Woodhull, September 18, 1873" (New York: Woodhull & Claflin, 1873).
60. Woodhull, "Elixir." Woodhull loops all the way back to trance's mesmeric roots by discovering her "elixir" in the magnetic poles of two sexual partners. Complementary positive and negative poles cure disease in the afflicted partners and promote health and longevity.
61. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia U. P., 1996), 41.
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68. Woodhull was in such terrible shape at the nadir of the scandal that news circulated that she had died. Later, corrections were issued that she was only seriously ill. *New York Times* (7 June 1873). For his part, Beecher's reputation survived Woodhull's attempt to expose him. To this day, a statue of Beecher stands in Cadman Plaza in Brooklyn, New York. There is, to my knowledge, no corresponding statue of Woodhull.

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