

“IT SOUNDED LIKE A MAN, AND I QUITE FORGOT IT WAS A WOMAN
SPEAKING”: ON SCIENCE, GENDER, AND PERFORMANCE IN *FIN-DE-
SIÈCLE* BRITISH PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract

This paper is an examination of the role of gender in the *fin-de-siècle* scientific investigations and theoretical work of the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Focusing specifically on the SPR's investigations into the séance phenomena of the well-known American medium Mrs. Leonora Piper, I examine how Piper's cross-gendered séance "performances" were considered desirable within the context of late-Victorian psychical investigations, despite their transgressive potential outside of the confines of the séance. Piper's masculine séance "performances" fulfilled the masculine code of behaviour that was integral to the SPR's scientific investigations, and investigators' participation in the production of Piper's masculine trance identities during the séance reveals that specific kinds of masculine identities were enacted at the *fin de siècle* that served the important purpose of asserting the legitimacy of the scientific process. Although Piper's séance "impersonations" of men who shared SPR investigators' scientific concerns were tremendously influential in determining the SPR's conceptual language and intellectual direction, investigators were careful to suppress the potentially subversive effects of these "impersonations" in order to preserve the integrity of Victorian beliefs about the stability and naturalness of gendered identities. In order to contain Piper's "impersonations," investigators appealed to a psychological explanatory framework that described Piper's trance personalities as subconsciously produced romantic creations. The SPR's psychological work describing the subconscious mind's tendency to produce a number of different selves was a radical and quintessentially "modern" assertion of the "normal" individual's potential to exhibit characteristics whose gendered associations were at odds with the individual's anatomical sex. At the same time, the SPR's psychological explanation of Piper's "impersonations" acted as a conservative means to preserving traditional Victorian understandings of sexual difference since it dismissed cross-gendered trance "impersonations" as fictive (and hence unreal) creations. Despite the conservative effects of the SPR's explanatory framework, the significant presence of Piper's male "impersonations" and SPR investigators' active role in making these cross-gendered "performances" possible offers insight into the erosion of Victorian understandings of sexual difference in a variety of unpredictable quarters at the turn of the century.

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When the renowned physicist Oliver Lodge introduced the first report, in 1890, of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) on the séance phenomena of the extraordinary American medium, Leonora Piper, he was extremely careful to distance himself and other psychical researchers from associations with spiritualism. The séance had typically been the centre of spiritualist practice, the sacred space where devotees could communicate with the dead via a spiritually gifted medium. Investigators within the emerging scientific field of psychical research, which sought to uncover the scientific laws governing what had traditionally been conceived as the “supernatural,” re-imagined the séance as a place of experimental work and reduced the medium to the status of research subject. In contrast to spiritualists, who believed that spirits spoke through the medium during the séance, Lodge explained that the personalities who claimed to speak through Mrs. Piper while she was in a state of trance were not spirits, but creative manifestations of her subconscious mind. Lodge was adamant about the subconscious origin of Mrs. Piper’s trance personalities, yet in his description of his first sitting with Mrs. Piper in 1889 he explained that he could not help but address the French doctor “Phinuit” (who identified himself during the séance in a deep and heavily-accented voice) as an old gentleman, “for it sounded like a man, and I quite forgot that it was a woman speaking for the rest of the sitting: the whole manner and conversation was masculine.”¹ Lodge emphasized that differences between Mrs. Piper and “Phinuit” went much further than the surface attributes of voice and conversational style: “The manner, mode of thought, tone, trains of idea, are all different. You are speaking no longer to a lady but to a man, an old man, a medical man. All this cannot but be vividly felt even by one who considered the impersonation a consummate piece of acting.”² Over the course of the more than twenty years that Mrs. Piper participated in psychical research, the personalities manifested during the séance were typically educated middle- and upper-class men who were capable of fully participating in the SPR’s scientific investigations. Though investigators

¹ Oliver Lodge, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 6 (1890): p. 444. The *Proceedings* will hereafter be referred to as *PSPR*.

² Lodge, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” p. 448.

bracketed off potential belief in spirit possession in order to arrive at a properly “scientific” understanding of mediumistic phenomena, Mrs. Piper’s trance personalities struck most who made contact with them as entirely unique selves, displaying idiosyncratic behaviour and thought patterns in every way different from Mrs. Piper’s.

Unlike the typical spiritualist medium whose primarily “physical” séance phenomena ranged from levitation and table-rapping to the materialization of spirit bodies who could walk, talk, and even eat food from sitters’ outstretched hands, as a “mental” medium, Mrs. Piper’s trance phenomena assumed what were believed to be the more civilized forms of speech and writing. As a result, not only was her “mental” mediumship considered appropriate to the genteel intellectual qualities of many of the personalities claiming to communicate through her, but it also satisfied investigators’ aims in constructing a milieu suitable for coolly rational scientific inquiry.³ The SPR’s “discovery” of Mrs. Piper’s mediumship in 1885 was described by renowned American psychologist William James, in comparison to the study of spiritualist séances, as a pleasant “turn from phenomena of the dark-sitting and rat-hole type” to the “calm air of delightful studies.”⁴ Unlike most spiritualist séances, sittings with Mrs. Piper took place in well-lit rooms where investigators could easily observe and record everything that took place and was said. Furthermore, numerous investigators reported that Mrs. Piper had a sincere desire to understand her unusual abilities in scientific terms: “She has not taken the view that she was exercising a new kind of priesthood; she has understood that she was an interesting anomaly for science, and she has allowed science to study her.”⁵ That Mrs. Piper reportedly did not hold any spiritualist assumptions about the nature of her abilities, and shared investigators’ objectives, demonstrates that psychical researchers’ investigations relied upon not only a newly re-conceived experimental

³ The distinction between “mental” and “physical” mediumship was introduced by psychical researchers in order to distance the mediumistic phenomena that interested them most from the numerous exposures of fraudulent mediums (all of whom displayed “physical” phenomena while entranced) in the 1870s. Researchers seemed to unanimously associate physical mediumship with fraud, whereas mental mediumship was viewed as potentially genuine.

⁴ William James, “Address by the President,” *PSPR*, 12 (1896): p. 6.

⁵ Michel Sage, *Mrs. Piper and the Society for Psychical Research*, trans. Noralie Robertson (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1903), p. 2.

milieu but also a fully compliant research subject who agreed with the SPR's scientific aims. As investigators held that the "vanity" of most mediums tended to be great, and "their sincerity. . . frequently doubtful,"⁶ one of the most problematic aspects of séance investigations was in finding individuals who would not subvert the investigative process through acts of fraud in order to establish professional careers as outstanding mediums. Myers frequently lamented the difficulty in finding suitable subjects for research, as the SPR's work, unlike the psychiatric research taking place on the continent, did not rely upon an "endless procession" of "obedient *malades*," but instead required "healthy independent persons to lay their hands on planchettes which they regard as grossly superstitious, or to hold pencils which they are firmly persuaded that no automatism will ever stir."⁷ Studies by both Alex Owen and Jenny Hazelgrove note that the period between the early 1880s, following numerous exposures of fraudulent mediums, and the Great War was marked by a decline in interest in spiritualism and greater mistrust of spiritualist claims.⁸ Mrs. Piper's "discovery" and development into an ideal subject of psychical research therefore heralded the emergence of a new kind of mediumship, coinciding with the decades in which the mediumistic profession had entered its period of greatest disrepute.

Explicit references to the performative origin of Mrs. Piper's trance personalities—all of which introduced themselves during sittings as spirits "controlling" the medium—pervade descriptions of the Piper sittings, emptying the experimental séance of spiritualist associations. Investigators' references to Mrs. Piper's "performances" rarely implied conscious trickery on her part—her sincerity as a subject of psychical research was vouched for by the vast majority of sitters who made contact with her. Investigators instead described the role of her subconscious mind, more commonly referred to in SPR literature as her "subliminal self," in creating and enacting the personalities of departed relatives, friends and colleagues of those present at the

⁶ Sage, p. 2.

⁷ Frederic W. H. Myers, "Binet on the Consciousness of Hysterical Subjects," *PSPR*, 6 (1889): p. 206

⁸ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Jenny Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

séance. In describing Mrs. Piper as “performing” or “impersonating” other people while entranced, SPR researchers were effectively pointing not to something pathological or willfully immoral (insanity or fraud), but to what all investigators believed was a hopeful glimpse at future human evolutionary development. Investigators held that Mrs. Piper’s trance utterances and writing involved the little understood “subliminal” part of her mind, which in most individuals lay hidden beneath the threshold of waking consciousness, and which investigators believed was also responsible for the mental phenomena associated with genius. Investigators held that the “supraliminal self”—the term they used to describe the conscious self—was merely a tiny fraction of the whole self, and the only part of the self that had thus far experienced the effects of the evolutionary process famously outlined by Charles Darwin.

The investigator responsible for developing the theory of “subliminal consciousness,” Frederic W. H. Myers, postulated that the “subliminal self,” as an undifferentiated mass of human mental and spiritual potential, had remained undeveloped throughout human history, most individuals never having experienced its effects in conscious, waking life. Viewing human consciousness as a wide spectrum spanning “subliminal” and “supraliminal” mental states and functions, Myers held that the subliminal self was manifested in “supernormal”⁹ as well as degenerative ways: “Hidden in the deep of our being is a rubbish-heap as well as a treasure house—degenerations and insanities as well as beginnings of higher development. . . . The range of the subliminal is wide.”¹⁰ While cases of hysteria and multiple personality frequently constituted degenerative subliminal forms, at the other end of the spectrum were the subliminal functions that were responsible for genius and telepathy. As a result, he argued against claims made by reputable men of science that the civilized races had already reached their developmental apex and were

⁹ Myers defined the term “supernormal,” as describing “a faculty or phenomenon which goes beyond the level of ordinary experience, in the direction of evolution.” Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, vol. I (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), p. xxii.

¹⁰ Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, vol. I (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1903), p. 72.

rapidly degenerating,¹¹ that many mental phenomena which appeared pathological because so unusual—including the medium’s trance state—belonged to a future stage of evolutionary development. While the ramblings of the insane resulted from intrusions of the lowest subliminal centre into conscious life, the “flashes of inspiration”¹² that culminated in works of genius stemmed from a very different part of the mind. To distinguish between the many different creative effects of the human mind, from mad hallucinations to artistic genius, Myers postulated a three-tiered model of the subliminal self, with the effects of the highest level of the subliminal self associated with genius and the effects of the lowest level associated with insanity. Subliminal creations stemming from the “middle-level” subliminal self, which was described as the “region where a strange manufacture of inner romances perpetually goes on,”¹³ though they were not considered degenerative subliminal forms, were not “true” in the same way as works of genius (which were understood as revealing an occluded higher reality). Myers claimed that if one were to “impress into our waking service. . . the middle-level only,” then “error and confusion” would result. In contrast, if the highest level was accessed, it “may introduce us to previously unimagined truth.”¹⁴ Though the boundaries between the different subliminal centres lacked definition, just as the boundary between supraliminal and subliminal states was fluid and permeable, Myers’ genteel Oxbridge beliefs about what constituted truth and error provided a framework for clearly identifying, and distinguishing between, the manifestations of each.¹⁵

Viewed via the theory of the subliminal self, Mrs. Piper’s entranced male “impersonations” were far more potentially disruptive of Victorian beliefs about separate-sphere gender identities than spiritualist understandings of mediumship ever allowed. In her study of spiritualist mediums in late Victorian England, Alex Owen explains that the potentially transgressive nature of

¹¹ Sander Gilman, “Degeneration: An Introduction,” in *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, edited by J. Edward Chamberlain and Sander L. Gilman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. ix-xiv.

¹² Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. I, p. 73.

¹³ William James, “Frederic Myers’ Service to Psychology,” *PSPR*, 17 (1901): p. 20.

¹⁴ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. I, pp. 74-75.

¹⁵ Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 32-37. Dixon describes the “cultured” upper-class position from which SPR investigations proceeded.

mediums' performances as male spirits during séances was diminished by the spiritualist belief that mediums acted as mere vessels for spirit possession. As a result, mediums bore no responsibility for their masculine performances as their real selves were believed to be absent during the séance. Mrs. Piper's mediumship, as it developed from a very early stage through the guidance of psychical investigators, was shaped by a very different set of beliefs and practices to those that formed spiritualist mediumship. That the SPR's observations of Mrs. Piper's trance phenomena took place from within the epistemological framework of subliminal consciousness made her (at least subliminally) responsible for her "impersonations." Applying a Lacanian reading to the Victorian spiritualist séance, Owen suggests that mediums' cross-gender séance performances constituted an unconsciously motivated subversion of Victorian separate-sphere gender identities, as they revealed the "conditions by which the seemingly unified and coherent [gendered] self was constituted and maintained."¹⁶ Owen's Lacanian interpretation, as she notes, did not have any parallel in spiritualist beliefs about mediumship, however it is far closer to being within the conceptual framework that defined SPR investigators' beliefs about mediumship in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

This paper examines how Mrs. Piper's trance "performances" functioned within the SPR's development of its new model of consciousness, centred around the subliminal self, focusing specifically upon how Mrs. Piper's masculine "impersonations" were produced, and later interpreted in the SPR's *Proceedings*. Mrs. Piper's trance "performances" of individuals who differed in almost every way from herself remained at the heart of SPR investigation into the human psyche for over twenty years; at the turn of the century, they were at the centre of an intense debate among the SPR's most prominent investigators over the precise nature of the

¹⁶ This is perhaps an over-simplification of Owen's use of Lacanian theory. Owen speculates, drawing upon psychoanalytic theory, that though spiritualists did not deliberately set out to reveal "the contradictions inherent in the acquisition of gendered identity," nonetheless "the spiritualist project. . . was a prefiguring and playing out, within a specific arena of cultural practice, of the tension between social and psychic demands." (p. 204)

relationship between Mrs. Piper's waking self and her trance personalities.¹⁷ Not only did her "impersonations" constitute an important body of evidence that investigators discussed and debated, but at a fundamental level they also made the entire investigative process possible. A close examination of séance transcriptions and discussions published in the SPR's *Proceedings* reveals that to a large extent Mrs. Piper's various trance personalities controlled the direction of séance investigations and directly contributed to investigators' scientific understanding of séance phenomena. In some cases, investigators entirely deferred authority to the male "spirit" claiming to speak during the séance when it came to determining the scientific meaning of séance phenomena, indicating that Mrs. Piper's male trance personas could participate in the investigative process in ways which her conscious self was deemed incapable. As this paper will demonstrate, the specifically genteel masculine code of behaviour that was essential to psychical investigation at the turn of the century made Mrs. Piper's male "impersonations" a necessary feature of SPR séance investigations. The educated men that she "became" while entranced enabled investigators to enter into discussions about the nature of mediumship that would otherwise have been impossible. Although investigators encouraged and benefited from Mrs. Piper's trance "impersonations" during the séance, the subversive effects of her cross-gender "performances" were contained through appeals to the "middle-level" subliminal self's perpetual production of "inner romances." Alex Owen's insightful reading of spiritualist mediumship demonstrates how the subversive potential of spiritualist trance performances never came to fruition since spiritualists assumed "that the spirit and medium were not one and the same." As Owen argues, "it is only when taken outside the spiritualist context that the cross-gendering and assumption of 'masculine' characteristics become transgressive."¹⁸ SPR investigators did not

¹⁷ The debate referred to here was loosely described in a number of articles in the *Proceedings* published between 1897 and 1903 as the "spirit hypothesis" versus the "hypothesis of telepathy," though the debate actually involved a number of different interpretations under these two broad categories. In a general sense, the debate involved competing views of Mrs. Piper's séance phenomena: as demonstrative of spirit possession in some form, and as "impersonations" suggested telepathically by someone present at the sitting. A more complete and in-depth presentation and analysis of this debate will be provided in a later section of this paper.

¹⁸ Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 217.

share spiritualist beliefs, however investigators similarly, though using very different epistemological strategies, contained Mrs. Piper's gender-crossing within the experimental milieu of the séance, and suppressed its potentially subversive effects. Investigators' concern to affirm Mrs. Piper's femininity as well as the feminizing effects of her mediumistic practice can be seen throughout papers published in the SPR's *Proceedings*. Myers' asserted, for example, that, "In character she has always belonged to a quiet domestic New England type, much occupied with her household and her children. . . her control by intelligences above her own has increased her stability and serenity."¹⁹ Mrs. Piper's gender identity was, therefore, not compromised by her enactment of, in Charles Richet's description, the "virile" Phinuit.²⁰ Though Mrs. Piper "performed" men while in her trance state, her supraliminal state (that small fraction of her whole self) was always presented as resolutely and unshakably a perfect model of Victorian femininity.

In the last two decades a number of scholars have noted the subversive possibilities of cross-gender performance and the ways it reveals the socially and culturally constructed nature of gender. These discussions provide a useful framework for understanding the effects of gender-crossing in the nineteenth century. In her path-breaking work on gender as "performative" rather than "expressive," Judith Butler argues that all gender identity is "a corporeal style, an 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative suggest[ing] a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning."²¹ Arguing that gender is enacted through "social performances,"²² rather than existing in some neutral form outside of a specific context, and preceding the existence of the performing subject, Butler points to the performative nature of all gender identities.

Butler's claims shed light not only on Mrs. Piper's trance "impersonations," but also on SPR researchers' claims to being "men of science." Ruth Barton's study of Victorian scientific identities emphasizes the absence of stable professional identities for "men of science" in the

¹⁹ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. II, p. 251.

²⁰ Charles Richet, "Professor Richet's Report," *PSPR*, 6 (1890): p. 619. "Sa voix a changé; ce n'est plus Madame P. qui est là, mais un autre personnage, le Dr. Phinuit, qui parle avec une grosse voix, allures viriles avec un accent melangé de patois nègre, de Francais, et de dialecte Americain."

²¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 177.

²² Butler, p. 180.

Victorian era, and points out that scientific identities did not revolve around membership within professional groups, but were seen to be expressed through personal qualities, notably those associated with “traditional gentlemanly values and the ideals of a liberal education.”²³ The most elite “men of science” were believed to have “the capacity to philosophize and direct.”²⁴ Distinguishing themselves from “workers,” true “men of science” were viewed as devoting considerable amounts of time to the dispassionate pursuit of “truth for truth’s sake,” rather than for monetary remuneration.²⁵ Further, she notes that the gentlemanly associations with science brought honour, and endowed “men of science” with public trust and a high social, moral, and intellectual standing.²⁶ The Victorian model of masculinity which “men of science” relied upon adhered to middle- and upper-class moral and intellectual values, which as Stephen Garton has pointed out, placed high value on “control and self-denial” as “the hallmarks of civilization.”²⁷ The achievement of this model of masculinity, Garton notes, required a suppression of the private world associated with domesticity in favour of a public intellectual life among men. Studies such as these illuminating the close relationship between participation in science and genteel conventions of masculinity point to the fact that the SPR’s scientific investigations relied upon the collective enactment of a specific kind of masculine identity in order to bring to their work both scientific credibility and social respect. Hence, *both* Mrs. Piper’s trance “impersonations” and researchers’ identities as “men of science” assumed during the experimental séance can be seen as mutually constitutive enactments of a specific kind of masculine identity. Each gender identity was brought into being through its performance during the séance, and neither preceded the SPR’s investigative work.

An examination of how SPR investigators both encouraged and contained Mrs. Piper’s

²³ Ruth Barton, “‘Men of Science’: Language, Identity and Professionalization in the Mid-Victorian Scientific Community,” *History of Science*, 41, no. 1 (2003): p. 75.

²⁴ Barton, p. 107.

²⁵ Barton, p. 106.

²⁶ Barton, p.109.

²⁷ Stephen Garton, “The Scales of Suffering: Love, Death, and Victorian Masculinity,” *Social History*, 27, no. 1 (Jan. 2002): p. 56.

“subliminal” cross-gendering is particularly relevant as the period during which the SPR was investigating Mrs. Piper’s séance phenomena (from the late 1880s through to about 1910)²⁸ coincided with the emergence within wider British culture of new understandings of consciousness, selfhood, and gender and sexuality. Carl Schorske describes the late nineteenth-century breakdown in Enlightenment values of rationality, morality, and progress as well as the collapse of traditional structures of authority in the wake of revolution and the emergence of mass politics as forcing the modern “psychological” self²⁹ into being at the *fin de siècle*. This “psychological” self was a “not merely a rational animal, but a creature of feeling and instinct,”³⁰ and his/her existence challenged liberal notions of the wholly rational, autonomous and unified self. This fractured and discordant “psychological” self came into being within increasingly fractured and heterogeneous metropolitan social spaces which, as Judith R. Walkowitz describes, profoundly influenced many individuals’ public enactment of their beliefs about the socially constructed nature of gender and class. As social spaces traditionally closed off to women and the working class opened up to both, and the spatial divisions that had supported Victorian notions of intrinsic gender and class difference dissipated, new social types emerged. The dandy and the New Woman, as socially critical stances enacted through clothing, behaviour, and lifestyle, are frequently pointed to as emblematic of the erosion of Victorian separate-sphere masculinity and femininity. Walkowitz also draws attention to a host of other social types who came into public view at the turn of the century and similarly exposed underlying class and gender controversy: “protesting workers, platform women, girls in business, and Glorified Spinsters,” were “telling and disturbing signs of modernity” that “challenged spatial boundaries. . . imaginatively

²⁸ SPR investigations of Mrs. Piper’s séance phenomena reached their peak during the 1890s and the first years of the twentieth century. Other than sittings in 1915-16 with Oliver Lodge and Eleanor Sidgwick, there was no thorough investigative work on Mrs. Piper’s trance phenomena after 1911 by members of the British SPR. Conclusions reached during Sidgwick’s lengthy war-time investigations reaffirmed the hypothesis she had developed at the turn of the century.

²⁹ Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 4. Schorske describes the modern “psychological” self as having taken the place of the Enlightenment “rational” self.

³⁰ Schorske, p. 4.

constructed to fix gender and class difference in the city.”³¹ The emergence and proliferation of these new social types significantly contributed to the *fin-de-siècle* experience of social and cultural crisis, and provides important context for understanding the potentially subversive effects of Mrs. Piper’s cross-gender séance “performances.”

Many features of the modern “psychological” self can be found in Myers’ work on subliminal consciousness and human personality; his contribution to precisely the kinds of intellectual changes that supported the emergence of the “psychological” self at the *fin de siècle* was both complicated and extremely important. Myers’ work set out to refute the “old-fashioned or common sense view [of personality], which is still held by the mass of mankind,” which he described as the view that the “self or I . . . is a monad, and is not divisible into parts,”³² and the belief that “identity” was “perfect. . . fixed and precise.”³³ In opposition to the “common sense view,” Myers asserted that human beings possessed a “composite. . . character,” comprised of supraliminal and subliminal parts. In the natural dynamic relationship between supraliminal and subliminal selves, there were “not only co-operations between these quasi-independent trains of thought—but also upheavals and alternations of personality of many kinds.”³⁴ Myers pointed to the natural existence of a fragmented self similar to the one described by Schorske: “no Self of which we can here have cognisance is in reality more than a fragment of a larger Self.”³⁵ Myers’ theory of the self, developed in the 1890s, not only shared aspects in common with “modern” understandings of selfhood emerging at the *fin de siècle*—most frequently linked with the development of Freudian psychoanalysis—but it also contributed to contemporary understandings of self to a far greater extent than Freud.³⁶ Myers’ two-volume *Human Personality and Its*

³¹ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 80.

³² Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. I, p. 10. He quotes the “common-sense view” from Thomas Reid’s “Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man” (1785).

³³ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. I, p. 10.

³⁴ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. I, p. 10.

³⁵ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. I, p. 15.

³⁶ Mark S. Micale, “Introduction: the Modernist Mind—A Map,” in *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940*, edited by Mark S. Micale (Stanford: Stanford University

Survival of Bodily Death, published posthumously in 1903, received far more attention within scientific communities both in Britain and on the continent than Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which received very little critical notice. As Sonu Shamdasani points out in his study of Flournoy's work on "subliminal psychology," *From India to the Planet Mars*, the psychological study of mediums, initiated by Myers, was the true starting point in the *fin-de-siècle* development of early dynamic psychology. He asserts that "a great deal of what was supposedly discovered by Freud and Jung was already present in the work of Flournoy,"³⁷ and by extension Myers, "whom Flournoy called the founder of subliminal psychology."³⁸ Myers' impact on the development of dynamic psychology was acknowledged by a number of important and influential contemporaries, and upon his death in 1901, William James declared that he "will always be remembered in psychology as the pioneer who staked out a vast tract of mental wilderness and planted the flag of genuine science upon it."³⁹ In James' view, Myers' mapping out of the subliminal self was "a rather momentous event in the history of our science," which forever changed the way in which scientists would understand psychological phenomena.

Recent studies of mediumship and psychical research have uncovered important links with developing modernist trends, providing insight into the interaction between SPR thought and a diversity of cultural responses to the rapid and contradictory changes associated with "the modern." Literary scholar Helen Sword points to the form and content of automatic writing, with its "linguistic playfulness, decenterings of consciousness, fracturings of conventional gender roles," as prefiguring the literary experimentation of the modernist era, despite its lack of

Press, 2004), pp. 7-10. Micale points out that scholars have traditionally associated the emergence of the modern psychological self with Freud, however a number of recent studies have refuted this claim as reductive, and argue that psychoanalysis was "only one of many emerging models of mind. . . that contributed to the constitution of the modern psychological self." (p. 7). Micale lists Myers as one of the important contributors to "modern" understandings of selfhood.

³⁷ Sonu Shamdasani, "Encountering Helene: Theodore Flournoy and the Genesis of Subliminal Psychology," in Theodore Flournoy, *From India to the Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages*, trans. Sonu Shamdasani (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. xi-li: p. xii.

³⁸ Shamdasani, p. xv.

³⁹ William James, "Frederic Myers' Service to Psychology." *PSPR*, 17 (1901): p. 22.

experimental intentions.⁴⁰ Pamela Thurschwell argues that the foundational SPR concept of “telepathy,” was part of a constellation of writings and events at the *fin de siècle*, along with Wilde’s sensational trials and psychoanalytic writing, which converged “to inaugurate shifting models of the permeability and suggestibility of the individual’s mind and body.”⁴¹ Roger Luckhurst also identifies a number of consistent links between modernism and psychical research that were forged well into the 1920s, when Andre Breton listed Myers as a key figure in the Surrealist lineage. Further, both Thurschwell and Luckhurst argue that *fin-de-siècle* links between Freud and the SPR demonstrate the significant influence which psychical research had on the development of some of Freud’s central ideas.⁴² Engaged in producing most of their foundational work in the 1880s and 1890s, SPR investigators saw psychical research as poised on the brink of something entirely new. Oliver Lodge, for example, stated that “it rather feels as if we were at the beginning of what is practically a fresh branch of science.”⁴³ A number of investigators mentioned the SPR’s relationship to history, through parallels with Copernicus and Newton, stating that the most profound obstacle to the success of psychical research was having to work within the limits of a worn-out conceptual framework that was unsuited to the kinds of phenomena that investigators were in the process of deciphering in the name of “Science.”

Although the SPR was thoroughly engaged in producing new epistemological models of self and consciousness, they resolutely avoided any discussion of the implications of Mrs. Piper’s cross-gender trance “performances” vis-à-vis the seemingly fixed nature of Victorian gender difference. Despite the explosion of interest in gender and sexuality that marked the final decade of the nineteenth century, investigators found in Myers’ articulation of the subliminal self an epistemological framework that asserted the non-pathological nature of trance “impersonations”

⁴⁰ Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 11.

⁴¹ Sword, p. 7.

⁴² Thurschwell argues that the SPR approach to the human psyche which established close links between consciousness and body supported the emergence of the Freudian model of mind-body connection. Luckhurst argues that Freud’s ambivalence on the concept of telepathy constituted an important point of tension in his early work. He is famously quoted by the psychical researcher Hereward Carrington to have said in 1921 that “If I had my life to live over again I should devoted myself to psychical research rather than psychoanalysis.” (Cited in Thurschwell, p. 1)

⁴³ Oliver Lodge, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” *PSPR*, 6 (1890): p. 465.

while also preserving the stability of gendered selfhood. A discourse of truth-versus-error was produced to frame explanations of subliminal creativity, rendering Mrs. Piper's trance personalities into misleading fictions manufactured by the subliminal self. Hence, the theory of the subliminal self was at once one of the most radical and quintessentially "modern" aspects of SPR psychological work, as well as one of the most conservative, as we shall see it was also tightly bound to exclusionary upper-middle-class ideals of civilization, high art, and genius. An examination of the SPR's role in producing these "performances," and its response to the potential subversion at the core of Mrs. Piper's cross-gender trance "performances" provides insight into both the advantages and perils of women's gender-crossing at the *fin de siècle*, as well as into the complicated ways in which Victorian gender identities were preserved despite obvious challenges to their status as natural categories. It also reveals the process through which specific kinds of gendered identities were enacted in the name of "Science," thereby disclosing the performative content not only of séance investigations, but of the entire experimental process that formed the foundation of the SPR's production of scientific knowledge about humanity at the *fin de siècle*. A study of the SPR's work with Mrs. Piper demonstrates how the genteel manliness that was necessary for séance investigations was variously produced and circumscribed in order to meet the SPR's specific scientific, social, and moral requirements.

* * *

In his first address to the Society for Psychological Research in 1882, SPR President Henry Sidgwick stated emphatically that the SPR's ultimate goal was to convince orthodox men of science of the reality of a diversity of phenomena traditionally considered "supernatural": "Scientific incredulity has been long in growing, and has so many and so strong roots, that we shall only kill it. . . by burying it alive under a heap of facts. . . we must accumulate fact upon fact, and add experiment upon experiment. . . [and] trust to the mass of evidence for conviction."⁴⁴ The SPR's desire to participate in scientific debate, using verifiable facts as the tools of

⁴⁴ Henry Sidgwick, "Address by the President at the First General Meeting," *PSPR*, 1 (1882): p. 12.

persuasion, was central to researchers' concerns at the *fin de siècle*. In the twenty years preceding the SPR's formation, Sidgwick, along with a number of the other original SPR Council members, had been eager to form an organization that would regulate, compile and promote their investigations into "that large group of debatable phenomena designated by such terms as mesmeric, psychical, and Spiritualistic."⁴⁵ In 1876, the Royal Society had turned down physicist William Barrett's proposal to form a psychological research group, as questions of psyche were seen as inextricably tied to the metaphysical. Thomas Huxley was a particularly staunch opponent of psychical research, and famously likened séance investigations to "listening to the chatter of old women and curates in the nearest cathedral town."⁴⁶ The association made between religious belief and psychical research by many of the most reputable scientists was a consistent barrier to scientific recognition and support throughout the first decades of the SPR's existence. Siding with these "men of science" and adopting a similar attitude toward the "unscientific," SPR investigators clearly articulated their opposition to Christianity and all non-Christian expressions of religious yearning (spiritualism and occultism were rejected as wrongheaded because investigators claimed they lacked scientific rigour) in the SPR's *Proceedings*, and Myers did so with particular passion in *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*.⁴⁷ The direct precursor to the SPR, the Psychological Society of Great Britain, founded in 1873, unambiguously expressed its opposition to the Church, stating as part of its mandate that "all theological questions were to be strictly excluded."⁴⁸ Nearly a decade before the SPR's foundation, the Psychological Society initiated séance investigations whose goal was to provide a scientific understanding of the human psyche, "bracketing spirit for questions of psyche, pursuing

⁴⁵ Society for Psychical Research, "Objects of the Society," *PSPR*, 1 (1882): p. 3.

⁴⁶ *Report on Spiritualism of the Committee of the London Dialectical Society, Together with the Evidence, Oral and Written, and a Selection from the Correspondence* (London: Longmans, 1871), p. 229, cited in Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 31.

⁴⁷ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. II, p. 287: "I will not say that there cannot possibly be any such thing as occult wisdom, or dominion over the secrets of nature ascetically or magically acquired. But I will say that every claim of this kind which my colleagues or I have been able to examine has proved deserving of complete mistrust; and that we have no confidence here any more than elsewhere in any methods except the open, candid, straightforward methods which the spirit of modern science demands."

⁴⁸ Luckhurst, p. 49.

fugitive evidences of its operation.”⁴⁹ Though its lack of organisation and its failure to forge social and scientific connections resulted in its dissolution in 1879, the Psychological Society played a crucial role in the early development of psychical research, establishing the tone, conceptual language, and objectives of séance investigations, and marking out at this early stage the SPR’s desire to discover mediums who would facilitate their scientific study of the human mind.

Continuing along the analytic path set by the Psychological Society in its scientific investigations into psychical phenomena, the SPR succeeded in “proving” the reality of mental “telepathy” within the first year of its existence.⁵⁰ Investigations into hypnosis led to further conclusions concerning the existence of other non-conscious strata of the mind, and by 1886, both Myers and Gurney had published papers outlining their hypothesis of a secondary intelligence that existed in parallel to conscious intelligence and that was active during trance states. By 1892, four years after Gurney’s death, Myers had developed their ideas into the larger theoretical framework of the “subliminal Self” or “subliminal consciousness,” which described human consciousness as a continuum upon which conscious life was denied the primacy which it usually received within British psychological science. Myers asserted that he “accord[ed] no primacy to my ordinary waking self, except that among my potential selves this one has shown itself the fittest to meet the needs of common life.”⁵¹ Though environmental circumstance had, according to the laws of evolution, necessitated the development of the conscious self, Myers held “that it has established no further claim, and. . . that other thoughts, feelings, and memories. . . may now be actively conscious, as we say, ‘within me’—in some kind of co-ordination with my organism, and forming

⁴⁹ Luckhurst, p. 58.

⁵⁰ Henry Sidgwick, “Address by the President at the First General Meeting,” p. 12. In his first presidential address, Henry Sidgwick stated that SPR investigators could prove the “natural” existence of seemingly “supernatural” phenomena by “accumulat[ing] fact upon fact, and add[ing] experiment upon experiment,” thereby following the methods of “Science.” He proceeded to report that “this result. . . has been satisfactorily attained in the investigation of thought-reading.”

⁵¹ Myers, “Subliminal Consciousness,” *PSPR*, 7 (1891): p. 301.

some part of my total individuality.”⁵² Hence, he asserted that many other potential selves which had been less suited for development continued to exist within him, contained within his “subliminal self.”

The articulation of Myers’ theory of the “subliminal self” was in many ways a watershed moment in the history of psychical research. Until this point, there had been no grand theory, or over-arching explanatory framework, to unify and bring coherence to the various phenomena that the Society had been engaged in investigating. The subliminal self also constituted a challenge to the psychological theories that were being developed within British scientific circles, all of which assumed that there was only one stratum of consciousness, and which held all non-conscious waking states as pathological (this included states of hypnosis, trance mediumship, and the semi-conscious states associated with hysteria and epilepsy). Further, Myers argued against the notion that the self that one experienced in everyday life was anything approximating a “true” self. Not only did he hold the view that one’s conscious self was developed to meet the needs of physical survival, and that many other “selves” might have been selected for the same function under different circumstances, but he also claimed that secondary selves were frequently better than the conscious self, especially as circumstances often tended not to support the development of the most noble human qualities. Myers’ belief that the secondary personality could prove better than the waking one was supported by French case-studies of multiple personality where the patient was “cured” under hypnosis through the replacement of the dominant waking self with a healthier and more stable subliminal one.⁵³

SPR investigators closely followed French psychiatric experimental research into hypnotism, hysteria, and multiple personality, which was at the forefront of the development of dynamic psychology in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Myers argued that studies of these

⁵² Myers, “Subliminal Consciousness,” p. 301.

⁵³ A case that made a significant impact on Myers’ formulation of subliminal consciousness was Pierre Janet’s work with Léonie, a woman who had shown many signs of hysteria prior to having had a second personality (revealed under hypnosis) “replace” her conscious self. A similar mode of therapy was employed in Morton Prince’s work with the Misses Beauchamp, a case of multiple personality. He published reports of his work in the *PSPR* in 1898 and 1900.

subjects afforded glimpses into aspects of the human mind which were normally concealed from view:

I consider that dreams, with natural somnambulism, automatic writing, with so-called mediumistic trance, as well as certain intoxications, epilepsies, hysterias, and recurrent insanities, afford examples of the development of what I have called secondary mnemonic chains—fresh personalities, more or less complete, alongside the normal state.⁵⁴

While French psychiatric researchers, following Pierre Janet's lead, tended to understand the coincidence of different memory streams as pathological, and as demonstrating the existence of two incommensurably different levels of consciousness, SPR investigators interpreted these different states as merely two (of many) selves existing interactively within the same mind.⁵⁵

What most distinguished Myers' from Janet's model of consciousness was the dynamic relationship between different strata of consciousness in a normal subject. From the "flashes of inspiration" that led to the creation of artistic masterpieces to the incoherent beliefs of the insane, Myers postulated that the merging of supraliminal and subliminal selves assumed a variety of healthy and unhealthy forms.

The "man of genius" was held up by SPR researchers as the highest human type, and Myers published a number of articles explaining genius as a psychological process. Myers asserted that the inspiration responsible for works of genius was manifested in a variety of ways, from artistic creation, to highly developed mathematical skill, to telepathic and clairvoyant ability. In attributing to telepathy and clairvoyance a psychologically superior status, Myers hypothesized that genius and the telepathic faculty were neither "exotic" nor "accidental," as they were features of "the central stream of evolution. . . an intrinsic part of that ever-evolving response to our surroundings."⁵⁶ Myers' assertion that his primary objective was to discover "the evolution of

⁵⁴ Myers, "French Experiments on Strata of Personality," *PSPR*, 5 (1887): p. 387.

⁵⁵ Eli Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul: a Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), pp. 28-9. Zaretsky describes "the prevailing dynamic psychiatry" of the 1890s, developed principally by Janet, as holding to the view that "the unconscious was an *idée fixe* or split-off idea located somewhere in the lower or subconscious realms of the psyche, cut off from the conscious ego, inaccessible except by hypnosis." According to this model of consciousness, interaction between subconscious (or unconscious) and conscious strata of the mind was always a symptom of pathology.

⁵⁶ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. I, p. 96.

human personality. . . of faculties newly dawning, and of a destiny greater than we know,”⁵⁷ placed both the “man of genius” and the “clairvoyant” at the centre not only of SPR research, but of human evolutionary destiny itself. According to Myers’ evolutionary scheme, the highest mental faculties of the present would be more commonly accessed in the future: “The actual average at any given moment is no ideal standard; rather, the further evolutionary stage now reached is tending, given stability of the environment, to become the average of the future.”⁵⁸ In Myers’ view, Darwin had made a significant contribution to the expansion of scientific understanding in his explanation of physical change, however he had neglected to account for significant mental and spiritual changes that humanity would undergo on its path toward developmental perfection. Myers asserted that the laws of nature could not be discovered in their entirety by scientists who sought to understand only the physical, or “external,” aspects of the universe. “Unless,” he stated, “some insight is gained into the psychical side of things. . . some light thrown upon a more than corporeal descent and destiny of man,” men of science would never come to a full understanding of humanity.⁵⁹

The SPR view of human evolution was explicitly teleological, and it ascribed positive progressive value to human change. Optimistic about humanity’s future, SPR investigators consistently positioned themselves in opposition to the era’s overriding preoccupation with degeneration and decline.⁶⁰ The numerous points of disagreement between the SPR’s approach to human psychology and the British medical-psychological approach stemmed from fundamental differences in each community’s assumptions about humanity. British medical psychologists, with Darwinian medical psychologist Henry Maudsley at the forefront, subscribed to a pessimistic

⁵⁷ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. I, p. 19.

⁵⁸ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. I, p. 76.

⁵⁹ Myers, *Science and a Future Life* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1893), pp. 73-75.

⁶⁰ Sander Gilman and Edward Chamberlain, eds., *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). This collection of essays explores the overwhelming pessimism of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. The SPR’s self-consciously oppositional stance to the degenerationist paradigm is repeatedly mentioned in articles published in the *PSPR* as well as in Myers’ two-volume *Human Personality*. Myers, for example, took particular issue with Nordau and Lombroso’s views on genius as a symptom of degeneration. In Myers’ view, genius, rather than being “an aberrant manifestation,” demonstrated the “power of utilising a wider range than other men can utilise of faculties in some degree innate in all.” *Human Personality*, vol. I, p. 71.

intellectual paradigm that perceived signs of degeneration everywhere, and treated instances of mental illness as incurably linked to bad heredity.⁶¹ In Myers' view, the pessimistic stance of medical psychologists like Maudsley lacked any concern for moral values, and he feared the "disastrous social effects" that he anticipated would result from materialists' intellectual victory:

the kind of adversary present to my mind is a man like Dr. Maudsley. . . who represents a school of thought which, if it prevails, will bring the world to the nihilism of the brutes of the field. I want to snatch our young Ray-Lankesters as brands from the burning, to save men whose minds associate religion and the mad house, psychology and the vivisection table, Love and the Strand.⁶²

For Myers and other SPR members, everything that they valued most what was at stake in their battle against materialist science, as materialists denounced everything that was understood to bear some relationship to the spiritual, or "supernatural," as symptoms of mass degeneration. In contrast to Darwinian medical psychologists of Maudsley's ilk, SPR researchers looked for signs of human evolution in every unusual, and seemingly abnormal, mental state. In response to the dominant materialist view that nervous illnesses among civilized peoples, chiefly affecting "its most eminent members," were symptomatic of civilizational decline, Myers asserted that "perturbation masks evolution."⁶³ According to Myers' oppositional interpretation, "not nervous degeneration but nervous change or development is now proceeding among civilised peoples more rapidly than ever before, and. . . this self-adaptation to wider environments must inevitably be accompanied in the more marked cases by something of nervous instability."⁶⁴ On this interpretation, an increased susceptibility to nervous collapse was seen as a positive evolutionary effect of progressive environmental change. Pointing to a host of individuals who had been singled out as degenerate—artists, "men of genius," and mediums—Myers was adamant that such individuals were "progenerate" rather than degenerate.⁶⁵ At a time when men of science were fixated upon humanity's degenerative decline, and the civilization that SPR men so highly valued

⁶¹ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 104.

⁶² Letter from Myers to J. A. Symonds (August, 1883), cited in Alan Gauld, *The Founders of Psychical Research* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 142.

⁶³ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. I, p. 93.

⁶⁴ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. I, p. 92-3.

⁶⁵ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. I, p. 71.

was coming under harsh critique in some of the most influential quarters, investigators perceived a crucial need to reveal to the civilized world the full implications of human evolution.

The SPR's experimental studies of subliminal consciousness became focused upon Leonora Piper in the late 1880s, and the first reports of their findings were published in the *Proceedings* in 1890. The possibility of genuine mediumship had interested investigators long before they encountered Mrs. Piper, though séance investigations had always ultimately been found disappointing, the mediums all failing to demonstrate authentic ability. As Alan Gauld relates in his history of British psychical research, the Sidgwick group's first experience with the investigation of the medium Eva Fay in the early 1870s, who Myers eventually declared "an undoubted cheat,"⁶⁶ set a pattern for the group's séance investigations:

During the next quarter of a century the Sidgwick group investigated many physical mediums; and the same pattern of events was repeated a number of times. Myers would become enthusiastic about such-and-such a medium; the Sidgwicks would acquiesce far enough to support or participate in an investigation; and everyone would in the end be more or less disappointed. . . Myers sat, often several times, with practically every famous medium, public or private, of that time; and the Sidgwicks sat with many of them.⁶⁷

SPR investigators' interest in mediums had always exceeded their interest in the possibility that the human personality survived bodily death—this aspect of the séance actually assumed a minor role in investigations, especially following the discovery of Mrs. Piper's "genuine" abilities. Instead, mediums were viewed as the best subjects for first-hand examination of mental faculties that investigators believed were evolutionarily advanced. Introducing the Society's first report on Mrs. Piper's trance phenomena, Myers explained that Mrs. Piper was "not actually a '*malade*'—as the French are wont to term their subjects of experiment," and that "her case" demanded "prolonged study outside the walls of a hospital."⁶⁸ Although French medical research into hysteria and hypnosis constituted the SPR's initial intellectual foundation in developing their psychological theories, SPR researchers (especially Myers) were sensitive to the fundamental differences in attitudes toward research subjects that existed between the SPR and French

⁶⁶ Letter from Myers to Sir Oliver Lodge (March, 1892), cited in Gauld, p. 106.

⁶⁷ Gauld, p. 107.

⁶⁸ Myers, "A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance: Introduction," *PSPR*, 6 (1890): p. 437.

psychiatry. While French physicians tended to focus on curing the pathologies of their research subjects, British psychical researchers viewed their subjects as healthy and in possession of “supernormal,” as opposed to “abnormal,” mental abilities. Myers asserted that mediumship was “far from being demonstrated. . . a pathological phenomenon,” and argued that “it is abnormal, no doubt, in the sense of being rare, exceptional—but rarity is not morbidity.”⁶⁹ He also pointed out that in countries where mediums had been studied most—England and America—the perception of mediumship was “not at all unfavorable; and that, far from regarding it as a special case of hysteria, they see in it a faculty superior, advantageous, [and] healthy.”⁷⁰ Myers further noted that England, in comparison to France, possessed “a marked poverty in hysterics,”⁷¹ a comment reminiscent of a claim made by Myers and Gurney a few years earlier, in a co-authored paper, that the English were not nearly as susceptible to hypnosis as the French have been found to be in experimental research, and hence were less likely to lose self-control.⁷² SPR researchers believed that the British environment (along with the American, with the founding of the American branch of the SPR in 1885) was best suited to investigation of the “supernormal” aspects of the healthy mind. The Anglo-American context alone seemed to possess a significant number of men with the correct scientific attitude, and, as was the case with Mrs. Piper, mediums who shared in an attitude favourable to investigation.

Mrs. Piper came to the attention of the SPR in 1887, having been “discovered” by William James in Boston in 1885. Never having worked as a professional medium, she had stumbled upon her mediumistic abilities in June 1884, at the age of twenty-seven, during a visit to a clairvoyant healer. Like many middle-class female mediums, Mrs. Piper’s earliest explorations of her trance mediumship took place in small private circles, consisting mainly of family and friends, along

⁶⁹ Myers, “Pseudo-Possession,” *PSPR*, 15 (1900): p. 397.

⁷⁰ Myers, “Pseudo-Possession,” p. 397.

⁷¹ Myers, “Binet on the Consciousness of Hysterical Subjects,” *PSPR*, 6 (1889): p. 200.

⁷² Edmund Gurney and Frederic W. H. Myers, “Some Higher Aspects of Mesmerism,” *PSPR*, 3 (1883): p. 423. In the same paper, Myers and Gurney also stated that the hypnotic trance, unlike the medium’s self-suggested trance, demonstrated a greater ability for the subject to be controlled and influenced by others. SPR experiments had demonstrated that mediums were generally not susceptible to hypnosis.

with the occasional outside guest. William James' mother-in-law was one such individual to receive an invitation during the first year of Mrs. Piper's private family sittings, as was Mrs. Piper's biographer and future editor of the SPR's *Journals* Anne Manning Robbins. Robbins describes her first séance with Mrs. Piper, during the winter of 1884, as a small "family gathering of about a dozen people,"⁷³ as Mrs. Piper was still "in the process of developing her powers."⁷⁴ By the autumn of 1885, William James had had his first sitting at the urgent request of his mother-in-law and, as Mrs. Piper's daughter describes it, took control of all of Mrs. Piper's sittings for the next eighteen months.⁷⁵ In 1887, James relinquished supervision to Dr. Richard Hodgson, secretary of the American branch of the SPR, who was well-known for his skills in the detection of fraud, and scepticism toward all so-called "supernatural" phenomena, and Hodgson was to retain his supervisory position until his early death in 1905. After Hodgson's death, there was no suitable investigator to take control of Mrs. Piper's séance investigations, and other than a few visits to England between 1906 and 1915, where she sat for SPR investigators Oliver Lodge and Eleanor Sidgwick, there was little thorough investigative work on Mrs. Piper's trance phenomena that was undertaken after the first decade of the twentieth century.

According to all accounts of Mrs. Piper's mediumship, her transition from private mediumship to subject of psychical research was relatively uncomplicated. Descriptions of her history as a research subject not only point to her willingness and pliability, but also note that it was entirely her decision to devote her life to psychical research, as she had desired to come to a scientific understanding of her peculiar abilities. Describing Mrs. Piper's entry into the world of psychical research, her eldest daughter, Alta Piper, quotes the explanation that her mother gave "to all who have questioned her" regarding her participation in psychical research: "When I found that I possessed a gift, power, or what you will, which to the best of my knowledge formed no part of my conscious Self, I determined then that I would give my life, if need be, in the attempt to

⁷³ Anne Manning Robbins, *Past and Present with Mrs. Piper* (New York: H. Holt, 1920), p. 3.

⁷⁴ Manning Robbins, p. 4.

⁷⁵ Alta Piper, p. 25.

fathom its true nature.”⁷⁶ Her daughter goes on to note that “Her attitude has always been one of simple desire to know the truth, to discover, if possible, the real nature of her power.”⁷⁷ It is clear from Mrs. Piper’s use of the term “conscious Self” that she was familiar with papers published in the SPR’s *Proceedings* on consciousness. In his 1890 report, Charles Richet, in fact, noted that Mrs. Piper had been reading the *Proceedings* for years.⁷⁸ Her familiarity with SPR theories, and her active desire to discover the underlying scientific reasons behind her mediumistic abilities, was made clear in an interview with the *New York Herald* in October 1901, sensationally entitled “The Confessions of Mrs. Leonora Piper,” where she expressed the view that her trance utterances were most likely the result of telepathy via her subliminal self:

The theory of telepathy strongly appeals to me as the most plausible and genuinely scientific solution to the problem. . . I do not believe that the spirits of the dead have spoken through me when I have been in the trance state. . . It may be that they have, but I do not affirm it. . . I have never heard of anything being said by myself during a trance which might not have been latent in my own mind or in the mind of the person in charge of the sitting, in the mind of the person trying to get communication with someone in another state of existence, or of some companion present with such a person, or in the mind of some absent person alive somewhere else in the world.⁷⁹

Mrs. Piper’s assertion of scientific understanding in her “confession” was met with strong objection in the SPR’s *Journal* in the months that followed the publication of the interview.⁸⁰ Her assumption of authority on scientific matters associated with her trance phenomena was dismissed as illegitimate: “Mrs. Piper is no better judge than any other reader of the published reports of sittings with her, [therefore] the question whether supernormal knowledge is communicated to her from the living or from the dead remains exactly where it was before her ‘confession.’”⁸¹

In contrast to this opposition to Mrs. Piper’s attempt to assert her opinion on scientific matters as authoritative, investigators never opposed her spirit “control,” Phinuit’s, frequent, and often belligerent, reminders to investigators and sitters that he was master of the séance domain.

⁷⁶ Alta Piper, p. 36.

⁷⁷ Alta Piper, p. 39.

⁷⁸ Charles Richet, “Professor Richet’s Report,” *PSPR*, 6 (1890): p. 619.

⁷⁹ Cited in the *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research*, Nov. 1901, p. 143. The interview with Mrs. Piper was first published in the *New York Herald* on October 20th 1901, with the title “The Confessions of Mrs. Leonora Piper.”

⁸⁰ The *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research*, unlike the *Proceedings*, was available only to members and associates of the SPR.

⁸¹ *Journal of Society for Psychological Research*, Nov. 1901, p. 143.

For example, in one characteristic incident recorded by Richard Hodgson, Phinuit was angered by Hodgson's attempt to end the sitting before he (Phinuit) had decided it was time to finish:

Here I thought the medium had been long enough in trance—45 minutes—and I said to Phinuit: 'I think this is enough. I don't want to know anymore.' Whereupon Phinuit said hastily, angrily: '*You* can't send me away. I will go when I get ready.' I explained that I thought the medium would be too tired and that it was enough. Phinuit: 'I will go when I get through. Don't you want me to find out something more for you?' 'No, that is all I want to know about the locket, &c., &c.' Phinuit: [Eagerly] 'Well, I will tell you about yourself then.'⁸²

Hodgson recounts that Phinuit recited facts about his life for a short while, before stating that it was time to leave. In a sitting given the same year with John Brown, a sceptical, and slightly hostile sitter, Phinuit threatened violence if Brown did not show the necessary respect. In Brown's description, it is clear that Phinuit controlled the séance: "Again, he declared he was going to thrash me. I laughed and said it took considerable of a man to do that. He said he could do it. I asked why he proposed to thrash me. Instantly came the answer, sharp and decided, 'Don't you say *Ugh* to me any more; you say, *Yes, sir*'."⁸³ Séance investigator Hereward Carrington understood that it was the trance personality, rather than the investigator, who controlled the séance experiment and in response to claims made to the contrary argued, "The conversation is invariably opened by some control; each new subject is broached by him; (if by the sitter as a test, it very seldom succeeds); and the knowledge is offered or written out quite spontaneously, to be either recognized or disclaimed by the sitter."⁸⁴ As Carrington points out, the assertion of dominance by Mrs. Piper's "controls" during the experimental séance was impossible to counter or dismiss.

The fact that the trance personality's assumption of control over the séance was always granted, whereas Mrs. Piper's waking self was not given any authority in discussions of séance phenomena, demonstrates the striking difference in the quality of the relationships that existed between investigators and Mrs. Piper's supraliminal and various subliminal "selves." As Mrs. Piper's trance personalities evolved over the course of the 1890s into more refined, intellectual

⁸² Richard Hodgson, "A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance," *PSPR*, 8 (1892): p. 163.

⁸³ Hodgson, "A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance," p. 86.

⁸⁴ Hereward Carrington, "Discussion of the Trance Phenomena of Mrs. Piper," *PSPR*, 17 (1902): p. 342.

men of letters—by 1897, entirely displacing Phinuit, to the relief of most investigators—the “controls” were treated with increasing respect. By the late 1890s, with the arrival of the spiritually evolved “Imperator” group—a group of five spirits who assumed the enigmatic identities of “Imperator,” “Rector,” “Prudens,” “Doctor,” and “Grocyne”—the usual tests undertaken to determine the powers of the communicating intelligences were abandoned and conversations assumed a more philosophical tone. Investigators became increasingly interested in having discussions with trance personalities about the nature of the afterlife, man’s place in the universe, and the true meaning of human evolution. Just as in early days, when, as William James reported, Phinuit “suddenly started off on long lectures. . . about our inward defects and outward shortcomings,”⁸⁵ displaying remarkable psychological and moral insight, the intellectually elevated content of the trance utterances were viewed as proof that the personalities claiming to speak were entirely distinct from Mrs. Piper’s waking self.

One of the most significant differences in the relationship between investigators and Mrs. Piper’s supraliminal and subliminal personalities was the active involvement of many of the “spirit controls” in the research endeavour, particularly those that made appearances at sittings over the course of the 1890s and into the first decade of the twentieth century, as they shared insights into how the medium’s mind functioned. Certain “controls” even claimed that they themselves were engaged in formal studies of mediumship, and were attempting to discern the most effective method for gaining control of the medium for communication to be as effortless and undistorted as it was through a telephone. This attitude of scientific authority was enabled by the fact that many of these “controls” claimed to be actual investigators who had worked with Mrs. Piper—Edmund Gurney began making appearances in the late 1880s, as did Myers five weeks after his death in 1901, and Hodgson only days after his sudden death from heart failure in 1905. Though his first appearance was very brief, when Gurney first took control of the medium at a sitting with Oliver Lodge in 1889, the conversation abruptly turned, at Lodge’s request, from

⁸⁵ William James, “A Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance—Part III,” *PSPR*, 6 (1890): p. 655.

talk of trivialities to an intense discussion of research issues and problems pertaining to Phinuit (his reliability and his fallibility) and Mrs. Piper (whether she was a genuine medium and what the exact nature of mediumship was). In response to Lodge's queries, the "Gurney control" explained that the medium was like a "candle," while the rest of the material world remained shrouded in darkness: "Must use analogy to express it. When you need a light you use it, when you have finished you put it out."⁸⁶ Using the analogy of primitive tool-making, "Gurney" explained that though communication through a medium was difficult at first, with training she could be made into an effective instrument of communication: "It's coarse in the beginning, but it can be ground down fine."⁸⁷ Referring to the sound quality of communications via the medium, the "George Pellew control" described the séance conversation as "something like telephoning. . . by long distance telephone,"⁸⁸ and when explaining the difficulties in controlling the medium as a communicating "machine," he stated that "her mind leaves the brain empty. . . it is difficult to control it, simply because it is material."⁸⁹ In the wake of these claims, increasingly frequent analogies were made between mediumship and different forms of new technology, thereby transforming the language used in SPR discussions. As "controls" likened Mrs. Piper both to a telephone and a telegraph, investigators incorporated this language in their séance discussions—for example, Myers described her brain, the locus of communication, as "something between a typewriter and a calculating machine."⁹⁰ That Mrs. Piper's controls introduced new conceptual forms to SPR discussion demonstrates the extent to which controls came to be treated as authorities on the subjects they chose to discuss. Moreover, it provides a glimpse into the complicated relationship between Mrs. Piper and investigators; though her supraliminal, waking self was not permitted to have a voice in investigative matters, intellectual contributions were often explicitly demanded of her numerous subliminal selves.

⁸⁶ Oliver Lodge, "A Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance—Part I," in *PSPR*, 6 (1890): p. 445.

⁸⁷ Lodge, "A Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance—Part I," p. 445.

⁸⁸ Richard Hodgson, "A Further Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance," *PSPR*, 13 (1898): p. 301.

⁸⁹ Hodgson, "A Further Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance," p. 435.

⁹⁰ Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. II, p. 201.

Though certain controls made a significant impact on the direction of psychical research, the language used, and the development of new conceptual frameworks, they continued to be referred to in SPR reports as “performances” of Mrs. Piper’s subliminal consciousness, despite the controls’ constant insistence on their identities as spirits. The assumption that Mrs. Piper’s subliminal self merely assumed the behavioural characteristics of other personalities as a communicative mode lay at the heart of most séance investigations over the course of the *fin de siècle*. In a particularly revealing discussion of Mrs. Piper’s sittings, published in 1909, Oliver Lodge insisted that the manner in which researchers addressed and carried on conversations with trance personalities should not be read to indicate that they actually believed that they were speaking to spirits, but that, for the purposes of carrying out the scientific experiment, they needed to act as though the various men speaking were the spirit-identities that they claimed to be.⁹¹ Lodge explained that because the format of the investigation was in essence the same as an ordinary conversation, its success depended upon the investigator’s full participation in the conversation, “deal[ing] with the utterances at their face value, and accept[ing] the speaker or writer for what he purports to be at the time.”⁹² As a result, Lodge essentially signalled that the séance transcriptions be read as two-sided performances in which *both* Mrs. Piper’s subliminal self and the investigators participated, pointing to the extent to which the trance “performances” were mutually enacted. Further, Lodge’s insistence upon mutual performance during the séance, which was intended to distance psychical research from belief in spirit possession, is indicative of the special difficulties involved in transforming the spiritualist séance into an environment more suited to the test conditions required for the scientific aims of psychical research. The “only alternative,” Lodge insisted was “to refuse to continue the conversation,” which would have been tantamount to discontinuing the investigation altogether: “A conversation would soon languish if

⁹¹ Oliver Lodge, “Report on Some Trance Communications Received Chiefly Through Mrs. Piper,” PSPR, 23 (1909): pp. 128-29.

⁹² Lodge, “Report on Some Trance Communications Received Chiefly Through Mrs. Piper,” p. 129.

friendly advances were met by accusations of fraudulent impersonation.”⁹³ As Lodge explained, SPR investigators’ treatment of Mrs. Piper’s trance personalities as the spirit-identities that they claimed to be was necessary in order for the investigation to yield any results.

The performances required from the investigators appear effortless in the séance transcriptions, largely as a result of the realistic quality of the “performances” given by Mrs. Piper’s subliminal self. Mrs. Piper entranced assumed the features of archetypal Victorian masculine behaviour with an ease which was frequently noted, and for many sitters she “passed” so successfully as a man that they forgot they were speaking to a woman. In his séance report, the sceptical sitter J. Rogers Rich, who “had always had a dislike for any ‘mediums’ or ‘spiritualists’ of every kind,”⁹⁴ was careful to emphasize Mrs. Piper’s femininity; he had expected to encounter a more mannish woman as the séance descriptions that he had been exposed to seemed to force this conclusion. As he explained it, “Her voice was full and agreeable, but in every way a ‘feminine’ voice, and there was an entire absence of any masculinity in her manner, which I had been expecting to find under the circumstances.”⁹⁵ After finding Mrs. Piper agreeably feminine, and in appearance and manner “too gentle and refined” to be a medium (a point that is frequently made in sitters and investigators’ reports), Rich was “startled” and confused by the remarkably convincing masculine performance of her trance personality. As Mrs. Piper went into trance, he describes being shocked by the transformation: “I was startled by the remarkable change in her voice—an exclamation, a sort of grunt of satisfaction, as if the person had reached his destination and gave vent to his pleasure thereat by this sound, uttered in an unmistakeably male voice, but rather husky.”⁹⁶ Like most other sitters, he noted the peculiarly masculine gestures and behaviour of the medium while entranced: “I remarked an odd movement of the medium while under this influence; she apparently was twirling a moustache, a trick which my [deceased] friend formerly

⁹³ Lodge, “Report on Some Trance Communications Received Chiefly Through Mrs. Piper,” p. 129.

⁹⁴ Cited in Hodgson, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” *PSPR*, 8 (1892): p. 127.

⁹⁵ Hodgson, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” p. 127.

⁹⁶ Hodgson, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” p. 127.

practiced much.”⁹⁷ Despite his initial disturbance at Mrs. Piper’s cross-gender “impersonation” while entranced, as the séance progressed, Rich appeared to become convinced that he was talking to a man, and soon changed the pronoun used when referring to the entranced Mrs. Piper from “she” to “he,”⁹⁸ demonstrating how even the most sceptical sitters could be swayed by the verisimilitude of Mrs. Piper’s subliminal “performances.”

Though Rich’s pronoun shift resulted from his eventual conclusion that “Phinuit” was a spirit separate from Mrs. Piper, even sitters who did not ultimately presume spirit possession demonstrated a similar confusion of pronouns in their reports. Richard Hodgson concluded his first report of Mrs. Piper’s trance phenomena (published in 1892) by stating that Mrs. Piper’s secondary personality was responsible for her trance “performances”:

The hypothesis which for a long time seemed to me the most satisfactory is that of an auto-hypnotic trance in which a secondary personality of Mrs. Piper either erroneously believes itself to be, or consciously and falsely pretends to be, the “spirit” of a deceased human being, Phinuit, and further fictitiously represents various other personalities according to the latent ideas of some of the sitters.⁹⁹

Despite his stated belief that Mrs. Piper’s trance personalities were not separate entities, Hodgson’s detailed séance transcriptions were inconsistent when describing who it was that was speaking, whether it was “he” Phinuit, or “she” Mrs. Piper. In an early séance transcription, Hodgson referred to Phinuit and Mrs. Piper as two separate individuals: when Mrs. Piper was in a trance, the speaker was constantly referred to as “he.” In another early transcription, he included inverted commas around “Dr. Phinuit’s” name, and referred to the trance personality as “she”:

“‘*Dr. Phinuit*’ then said there was something in my pocket connected with a loss and asked me to empty the objects from my pocket into *her* hand. I asked which pocket? ‘The right pants pocket’ I gave *her* each article in turn, and *she* rejected all, and then said it was in my other pocket. . . *She* (*‘Dr. Phinuit*’) said I had lost some of my keys near some mountains.”¹⁰⁰ In still other transcriptions, Hodgson was inconsistent in how he referred to the gender of the speaker, and

⁹⁷ Hodgson, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” p. 129.

⁹⁸ Hodgson, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” p. 127-129.

⁹⁹ Hodgson, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” p. 57.

¹⁰⁰ Hodgson, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” p. 65 (emphasis is mine).

pronouns would alternate from one sentence to the next: “*Phinuit* then proceeded to give a general description. . . *She* then began to rub the right eye on the under side, saying ‘There’s a spot here.’. . . I asked *Phinuit* how *he* obtained information about the eyes.”¹⁰¹ The lack of clarity in transcriptions, as far as gender is concerned, is indicative of many investigators’ bewilderment vis-à-vis the entranced Mrs. Piper’s severing of the seemingly natural connection between bodily sex and the mental characteristics linked to gender identity. Though SPR investigators never directly articulated the precise nature of the anxiety that Mrs. Piper’s “impersonations” brought about in many who witnessed her trance phenomena, séance transcriptions demonstrate that whatever investigators’ beliefs were about the nature of Mrs. Piper’s “controls,” the medium’s mind (the masculine spirit) and body (the feminine medium) often needed to be treated as separate entities in order to preserve the integrity of the differently gendered identities.

This confusion of many investigators and sitters regarding the nature of the relationship between the controls and the waking Mrs. Piper, inspired by the perceived verisimilitude of séance “performances,” does not seem to have been experienced by everyone. One of the most striking features of the SPR reports on Mrs. Piper is the lack of unanimity among investigators regarding the authenticity of her “performances.” Though it is apparent that Hodgson, Lodge, and Myers considered the séance “performances” to be near-perfect representations of the men they purported to be, a number of other SPR investigators perceived an unmistakable imprint of Mrs. Piper’s waking self on her trance “impersonations.” For SPR Council member Dr. Walter Leaf, Mrs. Piper’s “impersonations” were never wholly successful. Describing her “considerable freedom of language”¹⁰² while entranced, Leaf claimed that Mrs. Piper’s conscious self was never wholly absent: “Once she used the expression ‘what the devil’ and it certainly seemed to me that there was a momentary hesitation in bringing it out, such as would be more natural to a person of gentle manners, which Mrs. Piper in her normal state certainly has, than to the boisterous and

¹⁰¹ Hodgson, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” p. 66-67 (emphasis is mine).

¹⁰² Walter Leaf, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance: Part II,” *PSPR*, 6 (1890): p. 606.

rough-spoken Dr. Phinuit.”¹⁰³ To many witnesses of Mrs. Piper’s trance phenomena, the “performances” appeared to be filtered through the medium’s conscious self. Eleanor Sidgwick—mathematician, principal of Newnham College at Cambridge from 1892 to 1910, wife of Henry Sidgwick, and perhaps the most sceptical and rigorous of SPR investigators—argued that there was no great degree of separation between Mrs. Piper’s conscious and subliminal selves. Sidgwick asserted that the medium’s conscious self always forced its limited knowledge and experience upon the knowledge and experiences of the individual claiming to speak through her: “that the automatic personality is here Mrs. Piper’s is confirmed by certain intellectual limitations, an interest in certain kinds of trifles, and certain impressions as to what has occurred, which the communicator exhibits, and of which the origin is most easily found in Mrs. Piper’s training and habits.”¹⁰⁴ Providing evidence for her view, Sidgwick drew on the numerous mistakes made during the George Pellew communications (begun in 1892) concerning details of his life and death. Since Pellew had been a friend of Hodgson’s, information communicated during the séance could easily be checked for accuracy. In an early communication, the Pellew “control” had described his mother brushing his clothes in preparation for his funeral, when it had in fact been his valet who had performed this task—the usual procedure for a man of aristocratic background. Sidgwick explained this absurd mistake, and others like it, through an appeal to the influence of Mrs. Piper’s own lower-middle-class experiences upon the communication. Bolstering her argument even further, Sidgwick pointed out that philosophical discussions ostensibly with Pellew via the entranced Mrs. Piper were incoherent to the point of being ridiculous, with the most basic questions of philosophical import being completely misunderstood, whereas the living Pellew had been an avid student of philosophy. Ruling out the possibility that Pellew might have been a disembodied spirit communicating through Mrs. Piper, Sidgwick concluded that “Mrs. Piper’s trance-intelligence has a strong tendency to unconscious dramatic personation; and is

¹⁰³ Leaf, “A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance: Part II,” p. 607.

¹⁰⁴ Mrs. Henry Sidgwick, “Discussion of the Trance Phenomena of Mrs. Piper II,” *PSPR*, 15 (1900): p. 23.

continually dreaming itself to be a number of different persons under the influence of suggestion (including self suggestion) somewhat as an ordinary hypnotic subject can be made by suggestion to assume different characters with startling dramatic effect.”¹⁰⁵ A crossing-over like the one attempted by Mrs. Piper was ultimately viewed by Sidgwick as immoral, but its immorality was rendered inconsequential as it was believed to stem from the “apparently lowered moral standpoint of the automatic personality,”¹⁰⁶ which she saw as an ordinary “defect” of the subliminal self.

In Sidgwick’s view, Mrs. Piper’s “dramatic” trance “impersonations” could never wholly capture the men she dreamed herself to be. As a result, Sidgwick suggested that Mrs. Piper could never successfully escape her social reality and assume another—this incoherent dreamlike mixture of male and female, lower-middle-class and upper-class in the trance communications was simply an unsuccessful attempt to imagine herself an educated upper-class man. Though Sidgwick made important contributions to psychical research and functioned ably within its male-dominated environment, she never assumed a complete equality to exist between women and men.¹⁰⁷ As Janet Oppenheim points out in her study of Sidgwick’s “feminist” work in promoting women’s higher education, she never “articulated what has been called ‘a sustained critique of the gendered order of society,’” and when she argued for the importance of women’s higher education, Sidgwick still emphasized differences in the intellectual capacities of men and women:

even if very few women should prove capable of the greater and more important part of the work of discovery and research—fewer even than the very few men—I have good hope that women will do excellent work in the subordinate fields of science and learning, will do well much laborious work that needs to be done, though it is not very brilliant and striking, and will in particular prove excellent assistants.¹⁰⁸

Though it would seem that Sidgwick’s investigative contributions to SPR work denoted a successful crossing-over into the domain of masculine rationality, judging from the views she

¹⁰⁵ Sidgwick, “Discussion of the Trance Phenomena of Mrs. Piper II,” p. 34.

¹⁰⁶ Sidgwick, “Discussion of the Trance Phenomena of Mrs. Piper II,” p. 28.

¹⁰⁷ Janet Oppenheim, “A Mother’s Role, a Daughter’s Duty: Lady Blanche Balfour, Eleanor Sidgwick, and Feminist Perspectives,” *The Journal of British Studies*, 34, no. 2 (April, 1995): p. 227.

¹⁰⁸ Mrs. Henry Sidgwick, *University Education of Women* (Liverpool), p. 14, cited in Oppenheim, p. 221.

expressed on differences between the intellectual capabilities of men and women, she probably saw herself as something more akin to an assistant than an innovator. Though Sidgwick believed that a small minority of women might, with proper encouragement and training, make intellectual contributions to parallel those of the most brilliant men, she would certainly not have considered the poorly educated Mrs. Piper capable of functioning in traditionally male-dominated realms at anything close to the same level as the men she claimed to be while in a state of trance.

Disagreement within the SPR over the verisimilitude of Mrs. Piper's trance "performances" took the form of two competing hypotheses by the late 1890s—the spirit hypothesis and the hypothesis of telepathy. Though investigators disagreed over whether spirits were responsible for trance utterances, the different theories developed by investigators and published in the *Proceedings* agreed on a number of points: all theories assumed that trance communication involved Mrs. Piper's subliminal self, and all believed it imperative to account for the fact that her conscious self made an impact upon, and even altered, the communications. Investigators' end goal also remained the same, as all were chiefly concerned with determining the exact nature of the mental processes involved in the trance communications, and the means through which trance messages were produced (whether they were self-suggested, suggested by others telepathically, or could be explained in some other way). Mistakes made during trance communications, such as the ones pointed to by Eleanor Sidgwick, were explained by those who supported the spirit hypothesis—Hodgson by 1897, both Myers and James Hyslop by 1900, and Lodge by 1915—through an appeal to spirits' difficulty in learning to control the medium as an entirely new kind of instrument of communication. Supporters of the spirit hypothesis considered such mistakes insignificant in comparison with the overall spirit of the performance, the gestures, mannerisms, and modes of thought that were approximated and, though sometimes altered by the medium's brain, were accurate enough to be considered impossible for a woman of Mrs. Piper's social and intellectual background to perform.

Investigators who supported the hypothesis of spirit agency largely based their conclusions

on the realistic nature of the “impersonations.” For James Hyslop, Columbia Professor of Logic and Ethics, Mrs. Piper’s “performances” pointed to the agency of spirits primarily because of the tremendous “realism” involved in what he termed the “dramatic play of personality” during the séance: “The main point at present is the distinctive marks of different personalities represented in the various communicators, [and] in the change from one to the other.”¹⁰⁹ Hyslop proceeded to describe in great detail the personalities of each of Mrs. Piper’s controls, marking out the significant distinctions between each, in order to demonstrate the impossibility of willfully producing and enacting even one “spirit” personality in its entirety: Phinuit “showed no special refinement. . . [with] absolutely nothing of the religious nature about him,” as was “the very opposite with Emperor and Rector,” who were “nothing if not religious. . . lacking in the sense of humour as a Puritan, and exhibit moral and religious seriousness that has no equal outside the church of the most orthodox type,” whereas George Pellew was described as “a secular type, a jolly man of the world. . . a thoroughly companionable clubman.”¹¹⁰ In Hyslop’s view, that each personality was complete in itself, “in all their distinctness and reality just what makes the individuality of different persons in real life,” was the most striking evidence against the telepathic hypothesis as he did not believe it possible to capture fully such seemingly authentic selves through the telepathic acquisition of information about the people being performed. That which Hyslop considered to be the most crucial evidence for “proving” the spirit hypothesis was also the most difficult to capture in words and communicate to the reader. As Eleanor Sidgwick explained, evidence in the Piper case could never be fully conveyed as much of it was non-verbal in character: “When so much may depend on manner, gesture, and tone of voice, both in Phinuit and the sitter, the fullest shorthand report cannot be complete.”¹¹¹ Sidgwick astutely pointed out that how one interpreted Mrs. Piper’s trance phenomena depended to a great extent upon how one experienced her performance, and on how much the performance, as opposed to the bare content

¹⁰⁹ James Hervey Hyslop, “A Further Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” *PSPR*, 16 (1901): p. 180.

¹¹⁰ Hyslop, “A Further Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” p. 181-82.

¹¹¹ Mrs. Henry Sidgwick, “Discussion of the Trance Phenomena of Mrs. Piper, II,” *PSPR*, 15 (1900): p. 20.

of the trance communications, seemed convincing.

Many supporters of the hypothesis of telepathy—Eleanor Sidgwick, Walter Leaf, Andrew Lang, Hereward Carrington, and Frank Podmore¹¹² attempted to share the view that Mrs. Piper's "performances" were inaccurate representations of the people claiming to communicate. To the extent that her "impersonations" conveyed true-to-life characteristics of the communicators, Walter Leaf postulated, Mrs. Piper when entranced made telepathic contact with the sitter's mind and enacted the sitter's deepest thoughts, memories and desires. He described Mrs. Piper as a "warped and flawed mirror" that "one sees the contents of one's mind" through.¹¹² The representation of the sitter's thoughts, imperfectly apprehended by the medium "as through the rents in a veil,"¹¹³ was always mediated by the medium, and filtered through her own thoughts, memories and desires. Eleanor Sidgwick used similar language in discussing the medium's "performances": "Mrs. Piper in trance plays. . . a part analogous to that of a bad mirror reflecting very imperfectly the contents of the sitter's subliminal consciousness, coloured and distorted by the contents of her own."¹¹⁴ Reducing Mrs. Piper to the status of a "bad mirror," proponents of the theory of telepathy viewed her "performances" as imperfect enactments of the contents of sitters' minds. Like the supporters of the spirit hypothesis, proponents of telepathy viewed Mrs. Piper as a vessel for communication, however, in this case, the content of "performances" was believed to be derived from living sitters rather than their deceased friends and family.

Sidgwick, Leaf, and Andrew Lang all held that Mrs. Piper's subliminal "performances" were not morally neutral representations of reality. Rather, as the trance personalities claimed to communicate truthful statements, these "performances" carried overtones of deception, tainted by what a number of investigators described as the "low moral tone" of the "preposterous scoundrel of a secondary personality."¹¹⁵ The waking Mrs. Piper was believed to be beyond all suspicion as

¹¹² Walter Leaf, "A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance: Part II," *PSPR*, 6 (1890): p. 574.

¹¹³ Leaf, "A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance: Part II," p. 574.

¹¹⁴ Mrs. Henry Sidgwick, "Discussion of the Trance Phenomena of Mrs. Piper, II," p. 37.

¹¹⁵ Walter Leaf, "A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance: Part II," *PSPR*, 6 (1890): p. 506; Andrew Lang,

far as attempts at willful deception were concerned as, in investigators' reports, her trustworthiness was tied to the fact that she was a "lady" in possession of the finest manners, as well as the fact that she was a "typical" wife and mother and in no way demonstrated any socially deviant characteristics. Alex Owen has noted that private mediums, who tended to be middle-class, were considered far less prone to commit fraud than public mediums who were generally working-class. Owen suggests that while public mediumship was associated with "middle-class assumptions about lower-class morality," private mediums "remained closely associated. . . with middle-classness, uplifting moral imperatives, and the sanctity of the family circle."¹¹⁶ The trustworthiness which investigators seemed to link to her middle-class feminine waking self was broken as soon as she went into trance, and the infinitely more complex (and complexly motivated) selves that existed beneath the threshold of consciousness were free to construct and perform their subliminal romances. Sidgwick speculated that Mrs. Piper's critical moral sense was deadened while she was in a state of trance. With the belief that the secondary self was amoral (even immoral), Mrs. Piper's trance "impersonations" were dismissed by proponents of the telepathic hypothesis as subliminally motivated deception. In viewing Mrs. Piper's subliminal "performances" as dissimulative and immoral, supporters of the hypothesis of telepathy emptied trance "performances" of their possible significance vis-à-vis the subliminal potential to become someone very different from one's conscious waking self. As Myers had postulated that the conscious self was only one of many possible selves—that which one's particular environment had made necessary to develop—Mrs. Piper's trance personalities had shown that one's other possible selves might align themselves with characteristics and behaviour whose gendered associations appeared to conflict with one's physical sex. If the waking self was merely an accident of circumstance, then investigators were forced to confront, through Mrs. Piper's trance "performances," the fact that gender identities might in fact be unstable, potentially fleeting and

"Discussion of the Trance Phenomena of Mrs. Piper, III," *PSPR*, 15 (1900): p. 42.

¹¹⁶ Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 51.

temporary, states of existence, taking the form which they did only by chance of an individual having been born where and when he/she was. If the waking self developed in relation to context, and if Mrs. Piper was believed to be exemplary, then any number of selves could become dominant depending upon environmental circumstances. In arguing that Mrs. Piper's subliminal self deceived her audience, that her trance "impersonations" were fictional representations that resulted from a disruption of the waking moral sense, supporters of the hypothesis of telepathy effectively contained the potentially subversive effects of Mrs. Piper's trance "performances" through an appeal to the oppositional relationships between fiction and reality, morality and immorality, truth and error.

Proponents of the spirit hypothesis refused to accept the view that the subliminal self had an intrinsic tendency toward deception. Believing that humanity was essentially moral, both Hodgson and Hyslop hypothesized that if mistakes were made during trance communications, it was due to the confusion of spirits not having yet adjusted to their new states of being, and the difficulty that communicating spirits claimed to experience in learning to control the mediumistic "machine." Rejecting the possibility that Mrs. Piper was actively producing trance personalities, proponents of the spirit hypothesis avoided the full implications of subliminal consciousness by emphasizing the medium's role in psychical research as an instrument, a sexless "machine." The medium was therefore a perfect vessel for spirit possession as her ability to think, decide, and will were entirely displaced in order to make room for the communicating spirit. The "Gurney control" communicated to Lodge that a medium possessed "Not too much spirituality, and not too much animalism. Not the highest people and not the lowest. Sympathetic and not too self-conscious. Able to let their minds be given up to another. That sort of person, easily influenced."¹¹⁷ "Gurney's" assessment, accepted by proponents of the spirit hypothesis as fact, clearly indicates that, for those who accepted the spirit hypothesis, the most effective mediums were devoid of any strong sense of self, and therefore capable of renouncing their conscious selves in order to allow

¹¹⁷ Lodge, "A Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance," *PSPR*, 6 (1890): p. 552.

foreign “spirit” selves to assume control. This view of the medium as a selfless “machine” emptied the experimental séance of any associations with “performance” or “impersonation.” Instead, proponents of the spirit hypothesis took “controls” at their word, and believed that spirits somehow assumed control of the medium’s body, as a “machine” more akin to a mechanical puppet than a telephone. The spirit hypothesis, however, though it was attractive to a number of investigators, including Myers, remained incomplete in its articulation. A number of important questions—such as how the medium actually left her body without causing any lasting physical harm, and how the spirit entered—were never definitively explained, and this made a significant impact upon its success as a theory. Despite its shortcomings, however, the spirit hypothesis saved its proponents the difficult and profoundly troubling task of accounting for the subliminal self’s amoral “will to personate,”¹¹⁸ and to assume identities that blatantly contradicted Victorian understandings of behaviour as closely linked with anatomical sex.

Ultimately, Mrs. Piper’s trance personalities, since they were an intrinsic feature of her supposedly more evolutionarily advanced mental abilities, presented the SPR with their most complex conundrum. In viewing her subliminal “performances” as fictive, proponents of the telepathic view were able to avoid confronting the full implications of Mrs. Piper’s subliminal cross-gendering. In adhering to an oppositional, mutually exclusive, framework of truth-versus-error when interpreting her subliminal “performances,” proponents of the telepathic hypothesis established clear boundaries between the cherished works of genius which they believed pointed in the direction of a higher human truth and the erroneous subliminal “romances” that merely confounded and confused. This manner of containing Mrs. Piper’s “performances” was not wholly successful, in many investigators’ view, as it brought into question humanity’s intrinsic morality. Investigators instead might have treated Mrs. Piper’s trance “performances” as meaningful elaborations on Myers’ theory of subliminal consciousness and attempted to make sense of the challenge which her “performances” posed to Victorian understandings of the

¹¹⁸ James, “Frederic Myers’ Service to Psychology,” *PSPR*, 17 (1901): p. 21.

stability and naturalness of gender identities. That investigators refused to apply the theory of subliminal consciousness to its full extent when interpreting Mrs. Piper's séance phenomena demonstrates that they were not willing to accept all that it might have made possible. During the séance, women might become men, and men become women, however by associating trance representations with works of fiction, it was possible to prevent anyone from considering that these transformations might actually bear some meaning for real, conscious waking life.

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In Britain, the 1890s was a decade “in which anxieties about the permeability and suggestibility of bodies and minds erupt[ed] in crises around sexuality,”¹¹⁹ and these anxieties were frequently expressed through narratives of degeneration. Although SPR investigators stood in opposition to the degenerationist paradigm appropriated by British medical psychologists, they never opposed (or even addressed) Darwinian assumptions about the nature and scope of sex difference. According to the degenerationist view, the erosion of sexual difference—associated with individuals whose gender identity was seen to deviate from civilizational norms of femininity and masculinity (including most obviously the stereotypes of the New Woman and the decadent homosexual)—was interpreted as a menacing sign that humanity was moving back to an evolutionarily primordial and savage state. Ornella Morsucci explains that the threat surrounding the potential obliteration of sex difference was largely based on Darwin's theory in *The Descent of Man* (published in 1871) that the human progenitor had been androgynous and that sex differences had developed as necessary responses to environmental change.¹²⁰ In Darwin's view, mental and behavioural characteristics linked to sex had developed as a result of the different roles which, over many generations, each sex had played in the bringing about the reproductive union. Along with greater physical strength, men had acquired greater intelligence through their

¹¹⁹ Thurschwell, p. 2.

¹²⁰ Ornella Morsucci, “Hermaphroditism and Sex Difference: The Construction of Gender in Victorian England,” in *Science and Sensibility: Gender and Scientific Enquiry, 1780-1945*, ed. Marina Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 183.

long history of competing for the “possession” of their mates,¹²¹ while the qualities which women, as the “passive” sex, were seen to excel at were linked to more primitive stages of evolution:

Woman seems to differ from man in mental disposition, chiefly in her greater tenderness and less selfishness. . . It is generally admitted that with woman the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man; but some, at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilization. The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shown by man’s attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands.¹²²

Darwin’s account of the origin of sex difference naturalized Victorian stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, construing deviations from these ideal forms as evolutionary throwbacks—a position which “normal” women already appeared close to occupying.

Darwin’s interpretation of sex difference was not the only two-sex model that viewed the sexes as incommensurably different that was being discussed in the 1890s. As Thomas Laqueur points out, the two-sex model predominated throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, almost entirely replacing an earlier one-sex model that understood “sexual difference as a matter of degree, [as] gradations of one basic male type.”¹²³ Geddes and Thomson’s highly influential work, *The Evolution of Sex*, published in 1889, responded to *The Descent of Man* and, taking a more extreme two-sex stance, argued that sex differences were such an intrinsic feature of natural selection that the only way in which they could be overcome would be through beginning the entire evolutionary process over again.

Though theories arguing for the inevitability of sex difference were dominant at the turn of the century, in the last decade of the nineteenth century new theoretical orientations speculating on the possibly contingent nature of sex differences entered into the discussion. In Britain, Havelock Ellis’ 1894 publication *Man and Woman* argued that it was entirely likely that sex

¹²¹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: J. A. Hill and Co., 1904), pp. 310-11.

¹²² Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, pp. 267-68.

¹²³ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 6.

differences were brought about through social, or environmental, circumstances.¹²⁴ On the continent, Fliess and Freud theorized that men and women were not fundamentally different, but instead existed on a sexual continuum, each bearing (repressed) traits of the other sex. Freud also, significantly, theorized that an individual could come to inhabit a position on the continuum that was not normally aligned with their physical sex as a result of traumatic childhood experiences.¹²⁵ Though these newly developing *fin-de-siècle* theories severed the absolute link that had been forged between sex and gender identity, they persisted in upholding mental and behavioural characteristics as essentially gendered, bringing further credence to the notion that gender characteristics existed outside of particular social and cultural contexts.

The SPR's silence on issues of gender and mind is striking, particularly as it kept well-informed of all of the latest scientific developments in psychology and physiology in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Though Darwin was criticized for having imperfectly outlined human mental and spiritual development, his theory of sex difference as an outcome of the evolutionary process resonated with investigators' assumptions about civilizational gender norms. At its founding, the SPR had made a point of mentioning in the first volume of the *Proceedings* that "Ladies are eligible either as Members or Associates."¹²⁶ There were, however, very few female members until the second decade of the twentieth century, which probably resulted from the fact that the Society privileged what were generally acknowledged as middle- and upper-class masculine values of rationality, and scientific rigour. Joy Dixon has described the British Theosophical Society in the 1890s as being marked by a similar exclusionary attitude, theosophy being defined in opposition to Christianity as "manly," the latter viewed as "weak and womanly."¹²⁷ In the manly clublike atmosphere of the Theosophical Society at the turn of the century, membership was open to women as it was in the SPR, however this membership came at

¹²⁴ Havelock Ellis, *Man and Woman, A Study of Human Secondary Sexual Characters*, sixth edition (London: A. & C. Black Ltd., 1930), pp. 512-3.

¹²⁵ Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 181-82.

¹²⁶ Society for Psychical Research, "Objects of the Society," *PSPR*, 1 (1882): p. 6.

¹²⁷ Dixon, p. 64.

the price of women being expected to subscribe to an implicitly masculine code of behaviour. Ruth Barton points out that the term “men of science” did denote an exclusively masculine quality to scientific work, even if it was not explicitly intended to.¹²⁸ Barton further notes that qualities associated with “men of science,” and which were so persuasive as to set such individuals apart from mere “dabblers” in science, were those most frequently attached to educated gentlemen, such as respectability, intellect, and moral character, and argues that claims to expertise within scientific communities depended far less frequently upon degrees and examinations, as they did upon “gender, class, income, and geography.”¹²⁹ Christopher Hamlin has pointed out that in Victorian scientific communities, “rhetoric and reputation, not rigour, [were] the basis for judging knowledge claims,”¹³⁰ pointing to the fact that scientific investigations were shaped more significantly by cultural norms of masculine authority, rather than by any necessarily “objective” pursuit of truth. Within the Oxbridge upper-middle-class circles of SPR investigators, claims to scientific authority depended heavily upon the individual’s conformity to the social conventions of genteel Anglo-American masculinity. Dixon notes that in the SPR’s investigations into theosophy in the mid-1880s, British “gentlemen” theosophists were not subjected to the “rigorous cross-examination” and assumptions of hypnotic susceptibility (which would render them prone to being tricked or fooled by Madame Blavatsky) that Indian theosophists were made to suffer. Dixon insightfully argues that this difference in treatment stemmed from investigators’ “reluctan[ce] to challenge too directly the complex set of associations that linked their scientific inquiry to elite models of manliness.”¹³¹ Though membership was always open to women, assumptions about the nature of sex difference remained at the core of SPR work, active in shaping the relationships between the primarily male investigators and primarily female subjects of research.

¹²⁸ Barton, p. 107.

¹²⁹ Barton, p. 107.

¹³⁰ Christopher Hamlin, “Scientific Method and Expert Witnessing: Victorian Perspectives on a Modern Problem,” *Social Studies of Science*, 16, no. 3 (August 1986): p. 504.

¹³¹ Dixon, p. 37.

Although she was the only female SPR member of note until after the Great War, Eleanor Sidgwick's role within the SPR can in many ways be summed up by the fact that she was only ever known in reports as Mrs. Henry Sidgwick. Though she was an important contributor to research, she negotiated her position in relation to the manly SPR environment through an appeal to her role as supportive and helpful wife. Janet Oppenheim notes that Eleanor Sidgwick's neglect by feminist scholars' partially results from the fact that most of her work was done in conjunction with her husband.¹³² The women who researchers viewed as possessing admirable qualities, particularly those associated with genius, were women who, in some way, enacted behaviour traditionally open exclusively to men. The women that investigators openly included within the same category as "men of genius"—Joan of Arc and George Sand—had engaged in behaviour that flagrantly transgressed the boundaries of femininity. Lauded for her heroism, Joan of Arc was particularly praised, and a number of papers published in the *Proceedings* argued that she was a visionary—a clairvoyant who had experienced a perfect union between her supraliminal and her highest subliminal selves.¹³³ Women's possession of those highest mental attributes that SPR investigators generally ascribed to men—as seen through SPR praise for Joan of Arc as cross-dressed warrior and Mrs. Piper's male trance personas—always involved a certain amount of cross-gender performance.

Judith Walkowitz draws an illuminating parallel between the mediumistic assumption of male identities while entranced and the male impersonations that were performed in music halls in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. In her discussion of spiritualist mediumship, she argues: "This form of male impersonation reflected the contradictory dynamic operating around gender in spiritualist circles: women could authoritatively 'speak spirit' if they were controlled by

¹³² Oppenheim, p. 230. A study revealing Eleanor Sidgwick's precise role in the SPR and her negotiation of gender as a psychical investigator has yet to be written.

¹³³ Andrew Lang, "The Voices of Jeanne D'Arc," *PSPR*, 11 (1895): pp. 198-212; Myers also devotes significant portion of an article published in 1887 to a discussion of Joan of Arc's clairvoyant ability in "Automatic Writing—IV—The Daemon of Socrates," *PSPR*, 5 (1887): pp. 522-548. Both Lang and Myers responded to contemporary claims that she was a hysteric.

others, notably men.”¹³⁴ In bringing to attention the superficial similarities between these two very different forms of cross-gender performance, Walkowitz points out that spiritualist mediumship lacked “a certain ‘edge,’ a level of gender consciousness,” which, she argues, music hall male impersonations possessed.¹³⁵ In Walkowitz’s view, the absence of the medium’s conscious self in producing her male “impersonations,” and the fact that she did not have to take responsibility for her behaviour while entranced, emptied her performance of any potential “gender consciousness.” Although Mrs. Piper’s mediumship differed from spiritualist mediumship in many important ways—particularly in the fact that her agency in creating and enacting “performances” was always, at least, considered—the link which Walkowitz makes between spiritualist mediumship and male impersonation remains a valuable one. A look at music hall male impersonation at the *fin de siècle* reveals a number of important similarities with Mrs. Piper’s trance “impersonations,” shedding light upon both the reasons behind, and effects of, gender-crossing in the late-Victorian era. It also demonstrates how successful male impersonation was negotiated, and the role which audiences played in making it not only possible, but desired.

In her biography of Vesta Tilley—the most popular male impersonator to tour music halls between 1876 and her retirement in 1919—Sara Maitland argues that the key to a male impersonator’s success lay in the fact that her audiences were always aware that her performances were impersonations, that it was clear that she was merely playing at being a man. In Maitland’s view, drag “can only exist when there is an audience, a society, which understands gender difference clearly enough to get the joke. Performance drag is a socio-cultural event.”¹³⁶ The stark contrast between Vesta Tilley’s off-stage femininity—she always put great effort into her feminine dress, and took care in presenting herself as a demure, fully deferential wife—and her on-stage masculinity endowed her performances with a transgressive edge; the knowledge that her performance lasted only a short time, and would not carry on off-stage, however, diminished its

¹³⁴ Walkowitz, p. 177.

¹³⁵ Walkowitz, p. 188.

¹³⁶ Sara Maitland, *Vesta Tilley* (London: Virago Press, 1986), p. 88.

potentially subversive effects. Further, Vesta never took on an entirely masculine persona on stage—for example, she never sang with a masculine bass but always used her own feminine treble. Maitland points out that the gap between her off-stage femininity and on-stage masculinity “was integral to her act. . . It was inevitably, unnervingly present.”¹³⁷ Her impersonations were less a matter of “passing” as a man, or attempts at disguise, than they were conscious enactments of the conflict between Victorian and Edwardian ideals of masculinity and femininity. This conflict was further heightened by the numerous musical acts with lyrics that were explicitly derogatory to women and yet sung in a feminine voice.¹³⁸ Vesta’s career clearly demonstrates that success as a male impersonator at the *fin de siècle* depended upon the performer’s constant reminders to her audience of her underlying femininity.

The 1890s and early 1900s were the peak of Vesta’s career, coinciding with the years that “saw the fullest flowering of the Music Halls,”¹³⁹ and the same years during which Leonora Piper was most central to SPR investigation and giving the vast majority of her sittings. As with Vesta Tilley’s impersonations, the potentially subversive effects of Mrs. Piper’s masculine “performances” were muted by the remarkable femininity of her waking self. In her daughter’s biography she is described as “tall, slender, with a grace and dignity difficult to describe, with clear cut Grecian features, and masses of golden hair.” Further, her daughter states that she was her “ideal of womanhood.”¹⁴⁰ Drawing on similarities between Vesta Tilley and the famous fifteenth-century androgyne, Joan of Arc, Maitland comments that sexual respectability was insisted upon to the utmost degree by both women, which offset any potential connections that might have been made between the assumption of male dress and deviant sexuality.¹⁴¹ Similarly, Mrs. Piper’s status in SPR reports as devoted wife and mother assured Mrs. Piper’s audiences as well as the wider SPR readership that her “performances” in no way left a polluting mark upon

¹³⁷ Maitland, p. 108.

¹³⁸ Maitland, p. 116.

¹³⁹ Maitland, p. 42.

¹⁴⁰ Alta Piper, p. 11.

¹⁴¹ Maitland, p. 94.

her waking feminine morality (her heterosexuality remained intact). Just as Vesta's male impersonations gave her a certain amount of power, helping her to become to highest-earning woman in England in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, so Mrs. Piper's trance "impersonations" endowed her with scientific authority that otherwise would have been inaccessible during the séance. While performing as Edmund Gurney, George Pellew, and the Emperor Group in the 1890s, and as Myers and Hodgson in the first decade of the twentieth century, not only was she treated as an equal in séance investigations, but her intellectual input was also viewed as providing legitimate insight into the scientific meaning of mediumship and human personality. Maitland suggests that Vesta Tilley's enactment of both male (on stage) and female (off stage) ideals "gained her 'the best of all worlds': she could express 'masculinity' and enjoy its power, without having to reject her own 'femininity' or endure the social stigma attached to women who are too 'mannish'."¹⁴² So too, Mrs. Piper can be seen to have experienced the fruits of male power without compromising the social respect accorded to a morally and sexually chaste lady in Victorian and Edwardian society. Mrs. Piper's femininity helped support claims to her trustworthiness as a subject of psychical research, while her masculinity while entranced (though it might have seemed morally suspect) established a claim to authority which was treated as illegitimate when made as her waking self in her sensational "confession."

In her work on the performative nature of gender identities, Judith Butler argues that the "gendered body" has no "ontological status," and that gender comes into being through performative acts.¹⁴³ Butler explains that "impersonation" should not be understood as pointing to a conflict or contradiction between the performer's natural "anatomical sex" and the gender being performed, but that it "implicitly reveals the the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency."¹⁴⁴ As Butler argues that there is no "original which such parodic identities imitate,"

¹⁴² Maitland, p. 56.

¹⁴³ Butler, p. 173.

¹⁴⁴ Butler, p. 175.

but only imitations “without an origin,”¹⁴⁵ there is no interior “natural” gendered state that precedes (and stands in conflict with) the performance. Butler’s reading provides important insight into the effects of cross-gender performance, although she does not discuss the conditions which have, in certain situations, made such performances desirable. If drag draws attention to the artificiality of gender differences which have “cultural survival as [their] end,”¹⁴⁶ then it is necessary to explore the reasons why both Vesta Tilley and Mrs. Piper’s gender-crossing were desired by their audiences. Maitland points out that all cross-gender performances were “socio-cultural events” that were produced collectively by performers and audiences. As such, Mrs. Piper’s and Vesta’s “impersonations” were not one-sided performances which their audiences merely received, and in Piper’s case, reported on. Maitland notes that Vesta’s largest fan base was among middle-class married women, for whom, she speculates, Vesta’s performances likely appealed both because they presented the possibility that another kind of man might exist, who understood women and could think like them, as well as the possibility for a new kind of woman “who could afford to laugh at men while claiming for herself all their privileges.”¹⁴⁷ Men also loved Vesta’s performances which Maitland suggests was probably a more straightforward response to her sympathetic representations which confirmed their “inalienable superiority.”¹⁴⁸ Maitland ultimately points to Vesta’s performances as reinforcing Victorian assumptions about gender difference all the while moving in between categories that were believed to be natural, fixed, and unbridgeable. Vesta’s appeal seems to have resided in both of these different, and contradictory, effects.

As with Vesta’s impersonations, the specific forms of séance “impersonations” resulted from the interaction between the medium and his/her audience. In a report describing his experiences as a medium, SPR member Charles Hill Tout emphasized what he believed was the mutually enacted

¹⁴⁵ Butler, p. 175.

¹⁴⁶ Butler, p. 177.

¹⁴⁷ Maitland, p. 128-29.

¹⁴⁸ Maitland, p. 128.

nature of his “dramatic” trance “performances”:

I was merely a passive spectator interested in what was being done. My second self seemed to be a mother overflowing with feelings of maternal love and solicitude for some one. The very features of my face seemed to be changing, and I was distinctly conscious of assuming the look of a fond and devoted mother looking down upon her child. . . I now felt I wanted to caress and console somebody, and the impulse was strong upon me to take my friend in my arms and soothe and cheer him. . . My friend was confident that I had been influenced by the spirit of his dead mother. . . which probably accounts for the feeling of relationship I experienced, as well as for my impersonation of the maternal character.¹⁴⁹

In Hill Tout’s view, the form and content of his “impersonation” were derived from his friend’s hopeful expectation, which he discovered once the sitting had ended, that he might encounter his dead mother during the séance. Though Mrs. Piper never directly reported a similar view of her trance “impersonations,” clearly investigators’ expressions of relief at the disappearance of the vulgar “Phinuit,” and their encouraging responses to the appearance of the culturally refined “Imperator,” indicates that investigators’ idealised stance of dispassionate distance vis-à-vis Piper’s trance phenomena could not be perfectly maintained. Investigators clearly had much to gain in their study of Mrs. Piper’s trance phenomena: after many years of disappointment resulting from the study of “physical” mediums, Mrs. Piper’s trances produced personalities who spoke their language, communicated on their intellectual level, and made important contributions to scientific discussions. As many of Mrs. Piper’s trance personalities possessed all of the qualities which investigators privileged as markers of the late-Victorian genteel “man of science,” séance investigations could not have proceeded in nearly the same way, or produced the kinds of fruitful discussion and debate that they did, without her masculine “impersonations.” Furthermore, her trance “impersonations,” as one half of the grand two-sided séance performances to which Lodge drew attention, also enabled investigators themselves to enact the qualities and behaviour associated with true “men of science.” As a collective enactment of masculine scientific identities, each séance “performance” enabled the other to emerge and take form, and, over the twenty years of Piper investigations, the seemingly natural masculine

¹⁴⁹ Charles Hill Tout, “Some Psychological Phenomena Bearing upon the Question of Spirit Control,” *PSPR*, 11 (1895): p. 310.

identities of participants in séance investigations were produced and perfected through the tireless repetition of these investigative performances.

That the precise form and content of Mrs. Piper's trance "impersonations" were beneficial to investigators is clear throughout the thousands of pages of SPR reports and discussions devoted to her séances. She, more than any other research subject to participate in SPR work, contributed to the formulation of the theoretical framework that supported SPR endeavours for the next few decades, until psychological research turned from a focus upon mediumistic psychology to the study of statistical information derived from census data in the 1930s.¹⁵⁰ Although investigators benefited from trance "impersonations," they were also aware that they had much to lose if Mrs. Piper's gender-crossing were not confined to the experimental séance. Mrs. Piper's cross-gender "performances" implied a potential fluidity and mutability which, outside of the séance, would have disrupted the aura of permanence surrounding gendered identities which were rooted in tradition and social necessity, and naturalized through scientific discourse. Furthermore, the disruption which her cross-gender "performances" implied would have potentially led to a dissolution of the masculine identities that supported their scientific endeavours, and that they had worked so hard to bring into being. One crucial function of the theory of the fiction-producing "middle-level subliminal self" was to separate the research space where male impersonation was desirable from the larger civilized world outside of the séance where masculine identities were believed to be natural and the exclusive property of men. In separating "genius," as a manifestation of the highest level of the subliminal self, from fictive and deceptive middle-level subliminal creations, Myers saved the poetic, artistic, and musical masterpieces that he and his colleagues valued as the highest human creations from associations with subliminal deception. The binary oppositions—fiction versus reality, truth versus error, evolution versus dissolution—

¹⁵⁰ Renée Haynes, *The Society for Psychical Research, 1882-1982: A History* (London: MacDonald and Co., 1982). Haynes gives a detailed description of more recent SPR work, providing a sense of how the SPR changed over the course of a century of work. As a central feature of this change, the SPR focuses far less on work with individual mediums and now devotes the bulk of its energy to the study of statistical data (similar to the census of hallucinations published in 1886 in *Phantasms of the Living*).

that framed the conception of the subliminal self, enabled investigators to preserve a particular version of waking life that fit their particular concerns. For Myers and his colleagues, the notion that the waking self was actually only one of many possible selves did not open up an infinite number of possibilities for Victorian selves. Instead, it merely placed the kinds of selves that they prized most—the civilized man of letters, the man of genius, the man of science—at the pinnacle of human evolutionary development, while the rest of humanity was offered a scientifically validated model to aspire to. Though Myers' theory of the subliminal self pointed to the distinct possibility of women and men being freed of the constricting gender identities that had become, from a Darwinian standpoint, necessary to the evolution of the most civilized race, the consistent identification of the gender-crossing aspects of the subliminal mind with “deception” undercut its radical potential.

Mrs. Piper's trance “impersonations” marked out both the possibilities and the limits of gender-crossing at the *fin de siècle*. Although it is clear that within certain specific milieus women's cross-gender “performance” was desirable and even beneficial to performer and audience alike, such milieus required clear boundaries. For the music hall male impersonator, the conventions of satire provided the rationale and limits to her crossing-over. In that music hall male impersonation was a self-consciously articulated form of comedic fiction, the impersonator did not lay claim to being the differently gendered personalities that she performed. Mrs. Piper's situation was more complex since there was no assumption of gender play involved in her “performances”; instead, she enacted actual claims to being men while in a state of trance. The verisimilitude of Mrs. Piper's cross-gender “performances,” and her trance personalities' assertions that they were real men, challenged the assumption that individuals “possessed” one particular gender identity. Because they stemmed from her subliminal self, Mrs. Piper's trance “impersonations” pointed to the potential for distinctly gendered minds to inhabit differently sexed bodies, something that was more akin to transsexualism than transvestism. The concept of the transvestite only appeared in medical literature in 1910, and it was not until the 1930s that the

idea of transsexualism entered into medical discourse.¹⁵¹ As a result, SPR investigators did not have access to a “scientific” conceptual framework that would have enabled them to make sense of Mrs. Piper’s sincere claims, while in a trance, to being men when her body suggested otherwise. Hence, the limits to Mrs. Piper’s male “impersonations” were defined not merely through anxiety over the potential subversion of separate-sphere gender identities, but through an absence of how to conceive of the possibilities that she enacted.

As both Joy Dixon and Alex Owen have demonstrated, conceptual frameworks that explained gender-crossing in non-judgemental, non-pathological terms did exist at the *fin de siècle* within theosophical and occult circles. Dixon demonstrates that the theosophical interpretation of reincarnation which postulated that individuals assumed wholly “male” and wholly “female” qualities in only one out of approximately every seven lives, opposed mainstream understandings of gender and sexuality, though implicitly relied upon Victorian conceptions of gender in its articulation of essential “masculine” and “feminine” traits. As Dixon points out, “the binary oppositions of man and woman. . . were central to theosophical cosmogony.”¹⁵² Both Dixon and Owen also point to the theosophical and occultist reinterpretation of hermaphroditism, or “bisexual unity,”¹⁵³ in spiritual terms as a desired end of diligent spiritual practice, however, as Owen points out, occult adepts adhered to the implicit social demands of gendered selfhood and, “were not expected. . . to become ‘unsexed’ in their private lives.”¹⁵⁴ Though these groups provided alternative understandings of gendered existence that did not refute Victorian essentialist understandings of gender, and that could have been useful in making sense of Mrs. Piper’s subliminal “impersonations,” such schools of thought were explicitly avoided by SPR investigators, tainted as they were through associations with

¹⁵¹ Dave King, “Gender Blending: Medical Perspectives and Technology,” in *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 80.

¹⁵² Joy Dixon, “Sexology and the Occult: Sexuality and Subjectivity in Theosophy’s New Age,” in *The Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 7, no. 3 (January 1997): p. 431.

¹⁵³ Dixon, “Sexology and the Occult: Sexuality and Subjectivity in Theosophy’s New Age,” p. 418.

¹⁵⁴ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 112-3.

“unscientific” spirituality.

As seen in the oppositional models of gendered selfhood presented by theosophists and occultists, the space of possibility for a reconfiguration, or deconstruction, of gender at the *fin de siècle* remained confined to milieus that were imagined as separate from mundane everyday existence. Although these different oppositional discourses were ultimately safely contained within the dominant discursive framework of Victorian gender difference, that SPR investigators and their mediums regularly and deliberately found themselves unconstrained by the “normal” limits of gender is a testament to the fact that the *fin-de-siècle* erosion of Victorian beliefs about separate-sphere gender identities assumed a variety of contradictory forms. That SPR investigators, who were from the most privileged classes of society and had most to lose from the subversion of normative gender identities, felt that the circumstances of scientific inquiry made such transgression necessary, indicates that normative Victorian femininity needed to be subverted in order to meet the specific needs of a variety of agendas and concerns, some of them (like the SPR) non- or anti-feminist. Though investigators expended much intellectual energy in finding ways to contain the subversive possibilities of the séance, Mrs. Piper’s cross-gender “performances” remained one of the most striking instances of critique (however unintentional) of late-Victorian ideals of masculinity and femininity. Demonstrating that one’s subliminal selves could escape traditional gendered associations, Mrs. Piper’s “performances” remained yet another “telling and disturbing sign of modernity”¹⁵⁵ even if their disruptive implications were never fully realised.

¹⁵⁵ Walkowitz, p. 80.

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