

“I Have No Disbelief”: Spiritualism and
Secular Agency in Elizabeth Stoddard’s
The Morgesons

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In the preface to the 1901 reissue of *The Morgesons*, *Two Men*, and *Temple House*, Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard tells the origin story of her writing career: “One day when my husband was sitting at the receipt of customs . . . I sat by a little desk, where my portfolio lay open. A pen was near, which I took up, and it began to write, wildly like ‘Planchette’ upon her board.” Describing the process of composition that had led to each of her novels, Stoddard recalls how “the shadow of a man passed before me, and I built a visionary fabric round him”; her literary productions now seem to her “as if they were written by a ghost of their time.” She quotes her distant cousin Nathaniel Hawthorne’s assessment of her debut novel: “There are very few books of which I take the trouble to have any opinion at all, or of which I could retain any memory so long after reading them as I could do of ‘The Morgesons.’”¹ *The Morgesons* was published in 1862; Hawthorne had died in 1864 and thus could not have retained his living memory of the novel very long at all. Stoddard’s invocation suggests the eerie possibility that Hawthorne might remember *The Morgesons* even in death, and that he might yet endorse her novels from beyond the grave.

The idea that Hawthorne might continue to exist in all his individuality and to hold and express literary preferences forty years after his demise could be a flight of fancy on Stoddard’s part or a cynical attempt to cash in on her relationship with the man who was well on his way to becoming *the* major figure in American literary history.² But Stoddard’s mention of her dead relative, together with her gestures to “planchette”

and to the “visionary” origins and “ghost”-like qualities of her novels, also frames the composition of *The Morgesons* as a tale of Spiritualist mediumship harnessed for literary purposes. Like Harriet Beecher Stowe describing the inspiration for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stoddard obscures the agencies at work in her writing. But in place of the singular liberal Calvinist deity acknowledged in Stowe’s “God wrote it,”³ Stoddard points to a host of ghostwriters named and unnamed.

This essay argues that Stoddard’s *The Morgesons* is best read as a Spiritualist novel: not only a novel *about* Spiritualism, in which characters engage in acts of clairvoyance, trance-speaking, and spirit-traveling, but one that enacts a literary form of Spiritualist practice at the level of the text. The essay examines the imagery of Spiritualist practice that laces *The Morgesons* and argues that Stoddard employs the phenomena associated with Spiritualist religion to explore socially disruptive circulations of agency and the cross-gender and cross-class connections they enable. But these forms of agency only become visible when we eschew critical attitudes that subordinate women’s religious devotion to men’s clerical authority and confuse human agency with individual autonomy. To recognize the forms of religious devotion at play in *The Morgesons* and the models of agency they enable, we must turn from a secularized criticism to a secular one.

The Morgesons steers a course between overt supernaturalism and sterile scientism by invoking the indeterminacy of secular agency in the tumultuous middle decades of the nineteenth century. While Stoddard’s critics have most often read *The Morgesons* as indexing the decline of New England orthodoxy or the secularization of American culture, the novel actually reflects the conditions of secularism that characterized mid-nineteenth-century New England, conditions in which religious authority and its attendant agentive possibilities were not in decline but rather set free to circulate in new and less hierarchical ways. *The Morgesons* explores possibilities for female self-expression and affective connection in a secular milieu in which agency inheres in sympathetic relations between persons more than in clerical ordination or doctrinal correctness. The practices associated with Spiritualism help to highlight forms of female agency that might operate outside the bounds of commerce, competition, conversion, and domination that hem in the Morgeson sisters’ lives.

These Spiritualist practices are premised on the acceptance of certain doctrines: the persistence of individual human personalities beyond death, the ability of the living to speak with the dead, the “magnetic” or

mesmeric influence of certain spiritually gifted persons, and the possibility of clairvoyant communication between people of great emotional sensibility. Even as it implicitly embraces these premises and practices, however, the novel avoids the ritualized (and often commercialized) trappings of the séance and the trance lecture, scenes that would subject Veronica's and Cassandra's mysterious powers to public scrutiny at the hands of scientific and religious authorities—some of them, perhaps, among the novel's readers and critics—who could then pronounce judgment upon the sisters' spirituality in the same way that various patriarchs pronounce judgment on their beauty, piety, and intelligence. *The Morgesons* employs Spiritualism as a symbolic force and a set of discursive practices that together enable new visions of agency at the level of plot and character and new generic possibilities for female authorship. In doing so the novel models a style of secular reasoning by way of a literary form that elevates indeterminacy above certainty and locates possibilities for agency in mysterious interactions between persons.

Secular reading is particularly essential for understanding texts by women writers, since secular agencies like those enabled by Spiritualist religiosity have the potential to disrupt and defy entrenched structures of power. By allowing spiritual agencies to circulate between them, rather than ceding agency to those who would dominate them, characters in *The Morgesons* maintain a unique but precarious in(ter)dependence, temporarily circumventing social narratives that enforce women's economic, romantic, and spiritual dependence on men (fathers, lovers, clergy) and forging relationships in which dominance and subordination are ever shifting and always at play—in which power does not flow downward from God to men and from men to women but instead moves unpredictably between the spiritual realm and the material and between members of both sexes. And yet such configurations of agency are short-lived and unstable: Spiritualist practices enable Cassandra and Veronica to intermittently suspend or temporarily inhabit the interstices of the power relations that structure their lives, but they do not permanently overturn those relations. Hence the moments of secular Spiritualist agency in the novel are often also moments of pain and frustration. But to ignore them because they are not sustainable is to misunderstand and misread the power of female religious agency in a secular society.

Spiritualism is not the only symbolic force at work in *The Morgesons*; as the girls' names suggest, classical mythology and Catholic hagiography also offer resources for imagining possible ways of being in the world, and the welter of available spiritualities that the novel depicts

is part and parcel of the secular milieu that makes agency available to the Morgeson sisters. Examining the role of Spiritualism in the novel does not offer a legend or key to make the path of interpretation suddenly straight and narrow, because *The Morgesons* is a text that embodies mystery in its form and its plot, seeking to channel the ineffable rather than unmask it or explain it away. The ethic of *The Morgesons* is not an ethic of explication or uncovering but of obfuscation; like the saint from whom Veronica takes her name, its guiding symbol is the veil. But modern critical readings of *The Morgesons*—and of Veronica Morgeson in particular—have too often hinged on the unveiling of these narrative mysteries, on a secularized critical tradition that reduces the Morgeson sisters and the novel as a whole to the status of problems to be solved. To recognize the forms of agency depicted in *The Morgesons* and other Spiritualist texts by women writers, critics must amend their reading practices to do justice to the mysteries of a secular world.

Spiritualism and Secularism in *The Morgesons*

An early scene in *The Morgesons* finds the sixteen-year-old Cassandra Morgeson standing on the sofa in her Massachusetts home giving a mock sermon “after the manner of Mr. Boold, of Barmouth, taking . . . for my text, ‘Like David’s Harp of solemn sound’” (67).⁴ Cassandra’s parody of the local clergyman brings several members of the household to hysterical laughter as she mimics his expressive gestures and pompous tone. When her father, Locke Morgeson, enters the room with a strange man, Cassy is neither abashed nor ashamed: she “wave[s her] hand . . . a la Boold” and descends from her perch to greet the newcomer who will one day become her lover (67).

Cassy’s Boold-ness—her willingness to ridicule and disregard the pronouncements of New England’s orthodox clergy—has led to the critical consensus that *The Morgesons* depicts, or even celebrates, secularization and religious decline. Seeking signs of the novel’s religious commitments in details of character and setting rather than in innovations of narrative structure and form, critics have interpreted *The Morgesons*’s satirical portrayal of orthodox Protestantism and its ordained representatives as a dismissal of or an attack on religion. Lawrence Buell, for instance, noting how Stoddard’s text eschews theological discussion in favor of an extended attention to relationships between people, discounts any contribution the novel might make to religious discourse: “Stoddard . . . portrays a setting in which theology is reduced to parlor conversation and the supernatural resolves itself into . . . offbeat

bohemian charm.”⁵ Sandra Zagarell, following Buell, reads Stoddard’s text as not simply recording but actively hastening the decline of religion in America: *The Morgesons*’s “attacks on religion correspond with Stoddard’s critique of the Bible for assigning women inferior status,” thereby contributing to the increasing secularization of American literary culture.⁶ Reading “religion” as primarily the domain of ordained Protestant clergy, Buell, Zagarell, and the critics who came after them assume that because the clerics who appear in *The Morgesons* are ridiculed or relegated to diegetic obscurity, religion is not a central concern of the text.

The critical tendency to overlook or ignore the wide range of religious concerns that animates *The Morgesons* indicates the persistence of a particularly American version of the secularization narrative,⁷ one in which “the public influence of the Protestant clergy is [considered] the most important measure of the role of religion in American society.”⁸ If “religion” and “Protestant clerical authority” are believed to be the same, then any text that questions the cultural centrality of Protestant ministers—as *The Morgesons* does—will seem to be attacking religion as an aspect of human experience and reflecting or even contributing to the secularization of American culture. But *The Morgesons*’s explorations of religion go beyond the occasional jab at a pompous village preacher, and they can be better recognized by turning from the critical narrative of secularization to new work on secularism.

Eschewing inaccurate models of religious history that prematurely proclaim the death of religion by pointing to a decline in clerical prestige, philosophers and social theorists including Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, and Dipesh Chakrabarty have characterized contemporary Western societies as defined by the conditions of secularism rather than by a narrative of secularization. The term “secularism” describes, not the absence or decline of religion, or even the rise of pluralism, but a set of historical, intellectual, and cultural conditions that make “religion” into a category available for analysis rather than an unquestioned set of assumptions about the nature of the universe: “Rather than signal a decreasing influence of the religious, secularism names a conceptual environment—emergent since at least the Protestant Reformation and early Enlightenment—that has made ‘religion’ a recognizable and vital thing in the world.”⁹ Secularism theory assumes the interpenetration of hermeneutic regimes rather than the replacement of one regime (superstition) with another (science), and it allows scholars to recognize, among other things, how the American public sphere is structured by a set of

assumptions about human experience that are drawn directly from Protestant doctrine and practice, a condition that the religious historian and legal theorist Winnifred Sullivan calls “small-p protestantism.”¹⁰ Because mainstream Protestant models of religiosity classify “true” religion as “rational, word-centered, nonritualistic, middle class, unemotional, [and] compatible with democracy and the liberal state,”¹¹ this de facto Protestant bias obscures other modes of religious experience, including those characterized by ritual practice, emotional excess, nonnormative embodiments, collective action, or nonrational agency—precisely those forms that surface in *The Morgesons*.

In fact there is another religious discourse at work in the scene in which Cassandra mocks Mr. Boold: the discourse of Spiritualism, in which minds separated by death and distance are nevertheless sympathetically connected and past and future are legible texts to those with the gifts to read them. When Charles Morgeson enters the room where Cassandra is “preaching,” Veronica Morgeson, whose piety and uncanny spiritual gifts form a major motif of the novel, solemnly predicts his approaching death: “There are six Charles Morgesons buried in our graveyard” (67). Her clairvoyant powers invoke the ambient discourse of Spiritualism that by the time of *The Morgesons*’s publication permeated every corner of American culture.¹²

American Spiritualist practice, though emerging from European religious ideas that had circulated for centuries, began in earnest in the United States in 1848 with the “spirit rappings” in Rochester, New York. The movement, spawned by the clairvoyant gifts of precocious teenagers like Margaret and Kate Fox and Ira and William Davenport, spread rapidly across the country, its popularity enabled in part by the liberalization of American theology that arose during the Second Great Awakening. Growing out of the dual traditions of Swedenborgian religion and mesmeric practice, many of Spiritualism’s doctrines diverged considerably from traditional Protestant theology. Besides refusing to assign the dead to heaven or hell for all eternity (Spiritualists, like Swedenborgians, generally believed that the dead ascended through “spheres” of enlightenment), Spiritualist teaching differed most starkly from traditional Protestant beliefs about death in its insistence that human souls retain the unique characteristics they once displayed on earth—including an attachment to family and friends and a concern about ongoing political and social events—and that the dead are capable of communicating with the living.¹³ Spiritualism’s characteristic practices included communication with the spirits of dead loved ones or famous

figures (conducted either by a medium during public or private séances or privately using an automatic writing apparatus like the planchette), spirit-traveling (in which a medium viewed events or vistas at great distances from her own physical location), and clairvoyant communication. Dismissed or decried by mainstream religious and cultural authorities, the movement nevertheless spread rapidly through Europe and America, resulting in "the democratization of the otherworld" as "millions, from the urban working classes to royal families . . . experiment[ed] on each other through spiritualist séances, mesmeric waves, telepathic transmissions and out-of-body travelling."¹⁴

The Morgesons signals its engagement with Spiritualist discourse and practice in its very first scene. The novel opens in Mary Morgeson's "winter room," where the reading materials chosen by the Morgeson women signify the welter of religious modalities that circulate through the novel. Cassandra, ten years old and outspoken, climbs a piece of furniture to reach a shelf full of books, among them *Northern Regions* (1827) and *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (1658).¹⁵ The two books seemingly could not have less in common: Richard Baxter's *Saints' Rest* is a Protestant devotional manual and meditation on death; *Northern Regions* is an adventure book for children that tells the sensational stories of the Arctic explorers Richard Parry and John Franklin. But both books have connections to the Spiritualist movement: Baxter's manual described the afterlife in symbolic terms that would later be adopted by proponents of Spiritualism, and Sir John Franklin, subject of *Northern Regions*, was a frequent otherworldly attendant at trance lectures of the 1850s and 1860s.¹⁶ Cassandra's expedition to the top of the bookshelf also yields a copy of Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768), the font of much nineteenth-century sentimental literature.¹⁷ By invoking Sterne alongside the *Saints' Rest* and *Northern Regions*, Stoddard both situates her novel within an ongoing sentimental literary tradition and indicates the centrality of Spiritualist relations to her tale. At the same time, she connects these literary and religious movements to ongoing theological debates: as Cassandra is climbing shelves, her mother and aunt are reading aloud from the *Boston Recorder* an article describing a doctrinal feud between ministers of the Congregational church. The juxtaposition of these many texts allows the scene to face, Janus-like, both backward and forward, invoking traditional Puritan devotionalism, contemporary sectarian controversies, popular literary trends, and a progressive scientific spirit as they met on the common ground of Spiritualist belief and practice.

Like the later preface in which Stoddard would describe the otherworldly composition of *The Morgesons*, Cassandra's memory of Mary Morgeson's winter room takes on a ghostly quality, with past, present, and future collapsing into one as the narrating Cassandra notes that "the hands of [the house's] builders have crumbled to dust" (8). Describing the middle-class Victorian comforts of the room—its chintz chair-covers, serge curtains, "chocolate-colored" carpet, and cheerful Franklin stove—Cassandra describes a warm domestic scene in which the comingling of different literary and religious forms—the devotional manual, the Spiritualist memoir, the sectarian journal, the sentimental novel—facilitates female community and authorial agency (8–9). When Aunt Mercy declares the adventuresome Cassandra "possessed" she identifies Cassandra as the focal point for these secular circulations of belief. As reader and auditor, Cassandra is possessed by the spirits of Franklin and Parry, by Sterne, by Baxter, and by the memory of those whose "hands have crumbled to dust"; as Mary's daughter and Mercy's niece she is possessed by their theological concerns even when she does not share them; and as narrator of the scene she is possessed by Stoddard's authorial voice. Rather than indicating a narrative of religious decay from the doctrinal concerns of Mary's and Mercy's generation to the Spiritualist interests of Cassandra's, the scene offers a depiction of female religious identification not bound by narratives of progress, decline, or even chronological time: Protestant devotionalism, Spiritualist explorations, sentimental fiction, and sectarian debate coexist within the loose temporal frame of Cassandra's memory and *The Morgesons's* opening pages, offering a depiction of female community and agency enabled by the novel's secular milieu.

Spiritualist Practice and the Circulation of Agency

Cassandra's "possession" is an ongoing motif of *The Morgesons*, a moniker applied to her when she performs actions deemed willful or unladylike—in other words, when she asserts unclassifiable or ostensibly inappropriate forms of agency. To be possessed by another, or to appropriate someone else's voice, is to transgress boundaries of individual identity—to deny apparent separations between unique minds and bodies, and even between this world and the next—and thereby to defy notions of individual agency and self-determination. In *The Morgesons* episodes of trance-speaking, clairvoyance, spirit-traveling, and other Spiritualist practice both indicate and simultaneously construct unique sympathetic connections between characters, while the fluid and unpre-

dictable nature of Spiritualist agency enables new configurations of interpersonal power.

To understand the unstable but powerful forms of agency enabled by the Morgeson sisters' invocation of Spiritualist practices, it is necessary to recognize the model of agency upon which such religious practices rest—a model not premised on liberal ideals of self-determination and individual action. Ideals of Western liberal subjecthood have historically assumed the primacy of individuals above communities and asserted that agency belongs to the former rather than the latter; liberalism “constructs and relies upon a strong definition of the subject as one who is free, autonomous, and capable of self-government and rational behavior.”¹⁸ With its emphasis on individual consent, liberalism places a premium on rebellion: autonomous subjects assert their agency by rejecting any authority except that to which they have consented. Those who would participate fully in the liberal public sphere must abandon unquestioning allegiance to forms of authority based in tradition or revelation—including the authority of God—and learn to act independently of any oversight but their own or that of their rationally chosen governors.¹⁹ This pressure to reject all forms of authority conflicts with many kinds of religious expression, particularly those that emphasize duty and obedience above independence and autonomy.

Forms of agency based in religious beliefs, practices, or affects become much more legible when viewed through the lens of a discursive model of agency, one grounded in the philosophies of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Unlike the model of “sovereign agency” that understands self-determination and freedom from authority to be the highest expressions of human action, a discursive model recognizes that subjects are created in relation and that no subject can be entirely autonomous or liberated.²⁰ Because agency is enabled by discourse, and because discourse requires, at minimum, both a speaker and a listener, “the address that inaugurates the possibility of agency, in a single stroke, forecloses the possibility of radical autonomy.”²¹ Subjects are interpellated through discourse, including (and often primarily) religious discourse, so that employing a discourse model makes it possible to recognize kinds of religious agency that operate by inhabiting and operating within the particular structures of authority to which persons are subject. The actions prompted by these nonliberal forms of agency—both individual and collective—do not appear to be classically willful and may include religious rituals, careful ascription to rules, unregulated emotional experiences, or non-normative dis/embodiments; there may even be

circumstances in which passivity itself becomes an act of agency.²² Particularly in religious contexts, agency may manifest in forms that are shared, circulated, fluid, or collaborative. The will of individuals may be subordinated to the perceived well-being of the group, or agency may be understood as originating with immaterial beings rather than with individual men and women.

The stormy marriage between the Morgeson patriarch Locke and his wife Mary embodies the conflict between Lockean liberal rebellion and the Virgin Mary's paradigmatic submission. Locke and Mary's children Cassandra and Veronica, rather than choosing between these poles, craft agentive possibilities out of the new religious discourse of Spiritualism. Spiritualism became a transformative religious discourse because it allowed for and encouraged creative agentive forms, enabling inversions and disruptions of authority by blurring the boundaries between the spiritual and material worlds and between individual minds. In the process, it gave those traditionally positioned as meaning's repositories—particularly women—unprecedented access to channels of communication through which meaning might travel and be changed. Many of the most successful Spiritualist mediums were female, working-class, or people of color, so the agency that flowed unpredictably through Spiritualist circles was often facilitated by those with the least access to sources of temporal power, whether extrinsic (wealth and education) or intrinsic (maleness and whiteness). And because Spiritualist agency was wielded collectively, through the collaboration between medium, audience, and spirit, it flouted the singular and competitive model of sovereign agency and offered in its place one in which agency was shared, fluid, and impossible to control.

Spiritualist practice enables kinds of sympathetic connection among Cassandra, Veronica, and their friends that need not conform to the narratives of romantic love, sibling rivalry, sudden conversion, and economic dominance that their New England neighbors would impose on them. Cassandra and her future brother-in-law Ben Somers, for instance, refuse to fall into the romantic rituals prescribed by their school companions at Rosville. At their first meeting Ben describes, accurately and without ever having seen her, Cassandra's sister Veronica: "[I] fancy that the person to whom the name belongs has a narrow face, with eyes near together, and a quantity of light hair, which falls straight; that she has long hands; is fond of Gothic architecture, and has a will of her own" (96). Their non sequitur conversation and immediate rapport (Ben: "'Are your family from Troy?'" Cassandra: "'Do you dislike my name?'") sug-

gest an ongoing acquaintance, though they have never met, and when Cassandra's eyes wander Ben asks "Are you looking for your sister?" as though Cassandra and Veronica could communicate across the distance between Surrey and Rosville as Ben and Veronica apparently can (96). Ben's inexplicable clairvoyance—his ability to accurately describe a woman he has never met, and whom he will someday marry—and the immediate psychic connections between Veronica, Cassandra, and Ben signal both the novel's resistance to predictable romantic narratives (why talk to a beautiful woman about her distant and less attractive sister?) and a model of shared agency that can cross boundaries of time and space. Rather than imagining herself as the recipient (or victim) of Ben's romantic attentions and placing herself in a position of dependence on him, Cassandra forms a friendship with Ben in which the dominant role shifts with circumstance and need.

Ben and Cassandra's emotional interdependence is premised on their Spiritualist forms of communication and enables them to maintain their platonic friendship in the face of social conventions that would cast them in standard romantic roles. The uniqueness of their relationship is brought into sharp relief by the reactions of those around them, who interpret their behavior according to the expected terms of nineteenth-century sexual politics. Observing the strong but unspoken connections between them, Ben's friends assume the end of a predictable romance that never took place: "It is all over with them" (204). Ben's mother, too, offers a conventional explanation for Cassandra and Ben's closeness: Cassandra wants Ben for his money. But Cassandra and Ben refuse these categorizations—the jilted man, the gold-digging woman—which assume fixed power relations between men and women (women control sex, men control money). Their sympathetic Spiritualist communion enables them to form temporary affective havens where they are momentarily sheltered from romantic expectations, or at least able to defer them.

The hallmark of Stoddard's literary engagement with Spiritualism is mystery and indeterminacy—a refusal to collapse distinctions, provide concrete answers, or assign agency in expected ways. The Spiritualist abilities demonstrated by characters in *The Morgesons*, including the clairvoyant connections between them, offer explorations of shared agency and demonstrate how unpredictable agentive formulations can disrupt expected interpersonal narratives—not only those involving romance and marriage but those that depend on hierarchical family dynamics. Though Cassandra finds it difficult to communicate with her

mother in this life, after Mary Morgeson dies Cassandra, like an effective medium, can recall Mary's spirit from beyond the grave: "when my thoughts turned from her, it seemed as if she were newly lost in the vast and wandering Universe of the Dead, whence I had brought her" (235). Such inversions are disruptive precisely because they undermine the traditions of inheritance and (economic) possession that structure Cassandra's and Veronica's lives: as daughters the girls are worth less than sons. When their younger brother Arthur is born, Cassandra and Veronica are quickly made aware of their relative value. One servant, Hepsy, declares that "'Locke Morgeson should have a son . . . to leave his money to,'" while another, Temperance, points out that this tradition is grounded in local Congregationalist customs: "'Girls are thought nothing of in this 'ligious [religious] section; they may go to the poor house, as long as the sons have plenty.'" Mrs. Morgeson herself confirms the primacy of sons when she tells Cassandra after Arthur's birth, "'I am glad it is not a woman'" (29). After Mrs. Morgeson's death, Cassandra reverses the terms of this unequal relationship with her mother, performing a Spiritualist inversion of childbirth by bringing Mary back into a world in which, like a newborn babe, she finds herself "scared and troubled by the pressure of mortal life around her" (240).

The flowering of Spiritualist practice in the mid-nineteenth century was both effect and sign of a haunted modernity "in which one's actions [were] acted upon by others from a distance—people, to be sure, but also and perhaps more importantly, concepts, representations, and words."²³ Under such spiritually destabilized conditions, the rationalized notion of agency as unitary, proprietary, and voluntary—something owned and wielded by individuals acting consciously and independently—is neither accurate nor helpful. In a society in which ontological boundaries may shift at any moment, agency will seem to inhere in objects and organizations as much as in individuals and to circulate between secular subjects. It is the circuitous functioning of secular agency—the unpredictable movement of motive forces between sympathetic persons—that enables Cassandra and Veronica Morgeson to temporarily unsettle expected romantic and domestic narratives and to "come into possession" of themselves.

The Cultural Work of Women's Spiritualist Fiction

It was precisely the unpredictable nature of Spiritualist agency and its consequent potential for social disruption that made Spiritualism such a controversial movement. The perceived dangers of circulating

agency were made apparent by the vehemence with which Spiritualism's claims were repudiated, most often through attempts to determine the "true" source of the power that lay behind acts of Spiritualist agency. Scientists, clergymen, and other cultural representatives performed investigations or logical exercises whose purpose, irrespective of their methodologies, was to deny the fluidity of agency and locate a stable source for Spiritualist power, whether that source was the machinations of a fraudulent medium, the overactive imagination of an impressionable teenager, or the connivings of the devil himself. The most famous of these was the so-called Cambridge Investigations, in which Harvard professors Benjamin Peirce, Louis Agassiz, and Eben Horsford were invited to view a demonstration and pass judgment on the Spiritualist gifts displayed by the Fox sisters and other famous mediums.²⁴ The work of dissecting and denigrating the circulating agencies of Spiritualism took place in the popular press as well, with newspapers and magazines publishing dismissals of spiritual phenomena side-by-side with reports of the most recent Spiritualist wonders. An essay in the August 1854 issue of *Putnam's Monthly*, "Spiritual Materialism," for instance, sought to locate the source of the power at work in Spiritualist activity; the author denied the possibility of circulating agencies, or of a combination of human and divine action, by insisting that agency is competitive rather than collaborative: for one person to have agency, another's "must have been destroyed."²⁵

Critiques and debunkings such as these were often directed at trance lecturers or well-known mediums: those who put their gifts on display in public halls or other open forums. But the battle over the authenticity of Spiritualist gifts and the forms of agency they might provide took place in the arena of fiction as well, with both male and female authors broaching the subject. Until recently, only the former of these have received serious critical attention. Howard Kerr's *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals*, which remains the most thorough study of Spiritualist fiction available, asserts that "the spiritualistic movement exercised a distinct and fairly unified influence on the American literary imagination" by providing nineteenth-century authors with an easy target for humorous attacks or a storehouse of vague occult symbols.²⁶ But Kerr's definition of "nineteenth-century authors" included only men, for whom Spiritualism's affiliation with feminism and women's rights often made it a dangerous and frightening phenomenon.²⁷ Hence the "unified" (male) literary approach he describes is characterized by satirical disdain, dubious warning, or frowning disapproval.²⁸ Expanding the category of

Spiritualist fiction to include Stoddard and other women writers paints a different picture of the cultural work performed by Spiritualist fiction, one in which occult practices and symbols offer imaginative opportunities for exploring female religious agency rather than suppressing it.

In *The Morgesons* and other texts, women writers created fictions of uncanny female agency by invoking and entertaining the beliefs, practices, and symbols associated with Spiritualism. In many of these texts, the agency of both characters and author is obscured through the shifting of narrative voice and position. The popular poet Elizabeth Oakes Smith, for instance, composed at least two long works that invoked Spiritualist practices and tenets. One, *Shadow Land* (1852), is an extended account of Smith's dream-life, including her ruminations on the Bible, astrology, and other assorted topics. In the text the narrating voice shifts constantly between the waking Smith, her dreaming self, and other unnamed presences.²⁹ Smith's 1854 *Bertha and Lily* reads more like a traditional novel—it is the story of a New England minister's "conversion" to religious liberalism under the influence of two adopted children, his spiritually gifted neighbor, and an "angel-child" who appears only to those who have purified their vision—but maintains the shifting narrator, with chapters alternating between the voice of the minister, his neighbor, and an unidentified "we."³⁰ And Kate Field's *Planchette's Diary* (1868) records Field's experiments with spirit communication and automatic writing using the planchette. Here again the narrating voice is various, as the perspective shifts from Field's, to "Madam Planchette's," to those of the spirits the planchette channels. Indeed, Field refuses even to credit herself as author, instead signing her preface "The Editor."³¹ Unlike the male-authored texts that Kerr identifies, these female-authored explorations of Spiritualist belief and practice do not seek to debunk or ridicule the "trans-identific experiences" (as Eliza Richards terms them) associated with Spiritualism but instead explore them through forms of narrative experimentation that unsettle the subject positions of characters, narrators, and audience.³² Reading *Shadow Land*, *Bertha and Lily*, or *Planchette's Diary* can be a confusing and even frustrating experience, with the reader often struggling to determine who is narrating and who is speaking. Such confusions of narratorial identity represent textually what the Spiritualist medium embodied in her presence and voice: the fluidity of subjectivity and agency made possible by the sympathetic environment of the Spiritualist performance.

Classing Stoddard among these authors of Spiritualist fiction is controversial. Her letters reveal little engagement with the Spiritualist

movement until late in her life, and in her newspaper columns she tended to align herself intellectually and politically with the debunkers rather than the debunked. In New York in the 1850s Stoddard was attended by the physician John Franklin Gray, a homeopathist and Spiritualist with an interest in animal magnetism (now called hypnosis) as a medical procedure;³³ in 1865 she worried that her estranged friend Edwin Booth might have married the trance medium Laura Edmonds.³⁴ But in 1901, around the time of the republication of her novels, Stoddard wrote her friend Lilian Whiting to ask whether Whiting had ever "believed in" the Spiritualist medium Leonora Piper or whether Whiting might be in touch with Kate Field. Though Piper had publicly recanted her belief in spirit communication (but maintained faith in mental telepathy), the letter seems to suggest that Stoddard was seeking a medium through whom she might communicate with her recently deceased son Lorimer. "Sometimes I so long to touch Lorry's beautiful hand," she wrote, "that I would . . . stretch myself towards what I can never see."³⁵ The longing to reach across the gulf between life and death was one familiar to many nineteenth-century Americans, and a driver for the Spiritualist movement's continued popularity.

Stoddard was suspicious of most forms of collective action, religious and otherwise—particularly those spearheaded by women who sought to improve the lot of the "weaker sex" by political means. In her columns for the *Daily Alta California* she expressed disgust at the actions of women's rights crusaders including Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, and Mary Davis, who paraded their cause on public platforms and thus exposed themselves and their entire gender to ridicule, including Stoddard's own barbed wit. Stoddard's epithet for these politically active women was "strong-minded": the rights they laid claim to, she opined, were "hydra-headed and argus-eyed" and their public activism "humiliating."³⁶ And yet Stoddard's relationship to the women's rights movement was more complex than these excerpts indicate. In a letter published January 11, 1857, in the *Alta*, Stoddard described a recent Women's Rights Convention she had attended in New York. After lampooning the short hair and masculine posture of the marriage reform advocate Mrs. Mary Davis, Stoddard admits that

these Conventions make people think, after they have done laughing. The getters-up of them have some right ideas too Your correspondent, despite a hideous tendency to laugh at strong-mindedism, which she traces to the unfortunate influence

of her male friends, takes an humble place in the ranks of Women's Rights and Women's Shall Haves, especially in the latter.³⁷

Stoddard, then, decried less the ideas of the women's rights movement than its tactics—the getting up of conventions and the making of speeches.

Stoddard used the same epithet—"strong-minded"—for both women's rights activists and Spiritualist practitioners: in her May 19, 1855, column for the *Alta* she reported that the New York luminary Horace Greeley had recently appeared in public with "two strong-minded females . . . : one the Rev. Antoinette Brown, and the other an incog—a medium probably."³⁸ The association between Spiritualism and women's rights was a common one: as Ann Braude has detailed, Spiritualist practice offered antebellum American women access to religious and social influence denied them by restrictions on clerical ordination and the ballot box.³⁹ And just as Stoddard attributed her ridicule of women's rights to the influence of her male friends and only sheepishly admitted her affinity with activists like Davis, she may have masked her interest in Spiritualism to avoid scrutiny by these same male friends, including Bayard Taylor, to whom *The Morgesons* is dedicated and who in 1862 was in the midst of publishing a series of short stories in the *Atlantic Monthly* that mined either humor or horror from the collective actions of Spiritualists.⁴⁰ Practiced openly and collectively, Spiritualism, like the women's rights convention, was easy to attack, debunk, and rob of its disruptive potential, as when Lydia Maria Child complained in a letter to Parke Godwin that most séances amounted to only "the merest mass of old rags, saw-dust, and clam-shells."⁴¹ It is for this reason, perhaps, that although clairvoyance, spirit-traveling, and other Spiritualist phenomena pervade *The Morgesons*, there is no collective Spiritualist activity depicted in the novel: Cassandra and Veronica take part in no séances, attend no trance lectures, witness no ghostly hands popping in and out of spirit cabinets. Instead of being practiced openly, Spiritualist phenomena haunt the plot of *The Morgesons* just as the apparitions of Charles Morgeson and Mary Morgeson haunt Cassandra, and their very elusiveness facilitates their continued utility.

Misdiagnosing *The Morgesons*

The possibility of collective and circulating agency—of an agentive self that might travel between and among multiple persons connected by sympathetic means—lends an uncanny quality to interactions between characters in *The Morgesons*. Veronica Morgeson, like her

sister Cassandra, is possessed of Spiritualist talents, but her particular gift most resembles the Spiritualist practice of trance-speaking: the power to channel the words and feelings of others as though she herself were speaking or experiencing them. This is simultaneously the most explicit and the most paradoxical way in which Spiritualist mediumship undermines individual and hierarchical models of agency: Veronica can actually channel and ventriloquize those who should have authority over her. Veronica's first words in the novel are in the third person, as though something or someone were speaking through her: as a clumsy child she overturns a milk pan on her head and begs her mother to "Help Verry, she is sorry," perhaps divining the very words that are in her mother's mind (16). Later, when she is ill, the third person recurs: "It is the winter that kills little Verry" (153); this time it may be Cassandra or the family servant Temperance, watching by her bedside, whose voice she has borrowed. In each of these cases Veronica, though sick or frightened, is able to assume the thoughts and feelings of those around her in order either to enlist their sympathy or to enter more deeply into their emotional lives. Her shifts in identification, though subtle, parallel the narrative indeterminacy of more explicitly Spiritualist texts like Oakes Smith's *Bertha and Lily* and Field's *Planchette's Diary*.

Where Cassandra's Spiritualist gifts help her defy romantic conventions and disrupt patriarchal family narratives, Veronica's sympathetic clairvoyance embeds her more deeply within the family while simultaneously enabling her to repudiate the pieties of class that structure Surrey society and to form meaningful relationships across social divides. While the wealthy Morgesons condescendingly allow the local poor to warm themselves at the kitchen fire, only Veronica befriends them (26), and on a trip to Boston she uses her shopping allowance to buy presents for the "cadaverous" children of a poor missionary on his way to India (71). Veronica's unique and socially unsettling ability to empathize with those outside of her class is exemplified in her relationship with the family servant Fanny, whose ambiguous class status is a constant source of unrest in the Morgeson household. The Morgeson family "adopts" Fanny as a putative kindness to the girl's dead mother and uses her as kitchen help; when Mrs. Morgeson complains that she has "'never seen a spark of gratitude'" from Fanny, Veronica remarks that she "'never thought of gratitude, it is true; but why must people be grateful?'" (135). Veronica channels Fanny's anger—"I never thought of gratitude" could be Fanny's own words—and recognizes it as a legitimate response to events outside of her control; Mary Morgeson, by

contrast, ignores the economic and class privileges that make it possible for the Morgesons to appropriate an orphaned child and install her as household staff. Veronica's willingness and ability to empathize with others across boundaries of class are both sign and effect of her Spiritualist gifts—she can *feel with* others, even when they are not her social equals—and they widen the circle of emotional connection within which she lives.

While Veronica's clairvoyant gifts and unusual spirituality make possible emotional connections that would otherwise be foreclosed by the hierarchies of gender and class that structure Surrey society, critical analyses of Veronica's character pass judgment on the presumed effects of her actions while overlooking the innovations of agency that make it possible for her to act at all. Noting the multivalent nature of Veronica's seemingly altruistic behavior—she is “petted” for her kindness to the local poor, and her friendships with working-class women are tinged with patronage—critics have interpreted Veronica's peculiar behaviors as cynical grabs for attention and Veronica herself as “self-destructive,”⁴² “thwarted,”⁴³ or “oblivious.”⁴⁴ The rush to classify the effects of Veronica's spirituality as “good” or “bad” obscures the accession of agency that her Spiritualist gifts enable: Veronica's ability to divine and channel the thoughts, words, and feelings of others gives her access to forms of agency that would otherwise be denied her.

These forms of agency are unstable and temporary, and as such they have been largely overlooked by critics, particularly in light of the novel's tragic ending, in which Ben dies in delirium tremens after Veronica gives birth to their disabled child. The kinds of religious agency enabled by Spiritualist practice are difficult to sustain precisely because they exist in opposition to a liberal ideal that emphasizes self-determination, individual achievement, and the rejection of religious authority—an ideal often reserved for men. But it does not follow that because these forms of agency are available only intermittently and are often the result of struggle and difficulty, they are therefore invalid or unworthy of study. It is by stringing together such moments of collective agency that Veronica and Cassandra—and many women—create a life.

The Morgesons endows its characters with the supernatural abilities that underlay Spiritualist practice precisely because of the way Spiritualism foregrounded the medium's bodily experience as central to the experience of the divine. Spiritualist practices, rather than denying the body, placed it at the center of religious experience, positing the body rather than a particular building or book as a holy space through which

spirits and their attendant agencies might circulate. Whether in public trance lectures before a crowded hall of people, small séances in suburban parlors, or private hours between an individual and her planchette, "mediumship and the physical body became inseparable."⁴⁵ Spiritualist religion was controversial not only because it defied doctrinal tradition but because its manifestations were so frustratingly *this-worldly*: performances that purported to include communications from the spirit world seemed ridiculously grounded in this one. (The Fox sisters, for instance, were known to eat peanuts during their public séances.⁴⁶) The Spiritualist insistence on the centrality of the medium's body—often poor, sick, female, black, or all of the above—only heightened this impression.

Steeped in New England orthodox traditions that define the body in general and the female body in particular as "the temporary prison of the soul" and the seat of temptation,⁴⁷ Cassandra and Veronica seek out other ways of understanding their bodies as sites of both material experience and spiritual transcendence. In *The Morgesons* Veronica's illnesses, standing on the line between two interpretive regimes—the medical and the spiritual—are the embodied expression of these fluid and unpredictable forms of agency. Cassandra sits up with her sister during one of her terrifying episodes, in which Veronica

could not speak, but shook her head at me to go away. Her will seemed to be concentrated against losing consciousness; it slipped from her occasionally, and she made a rotary motion with her arms, which I attempted to stop; but her features contracted so terribly, I let her alone. "Mustn't touch her," said Temperance Her breath scarcely stirred her breast. I thought more than once that she did not breathe at all. Its delicate, virgin beauty touched me with a holy pity. We sat by her bed a long time Suddenly she turned her head, and closed her eyes In a few minutes, she asked, "What time is it?" "It must be about eleven," Temperance replied; but it was almost four. (153)

This sickroom scene is shot through with religious language and imagery: the "virgin beauty" of Veronica's body recalls the incorruptibility of the Virgin Mary (an association that recurs throughout *The Morgesons*),⁴⁸ while the misrecognition of time suggests a scene of worship removed from the temporalities of everyday life. Temperance, the Morgesons' family servant, has participated in the ritual many times and knows its patterns: "'Mustn't touch her.'" Instead, it is Cassandra who is "touched"

with holy pity. The unclear impersonal pronoun “its” that Cassandra employs—“its delicate virgin beauty”—reiterates the mysteriousness of these attacks and Veronica’s otherworldliness: is the “it” Veronica’s breath? Her illness? Veronica herself? The narrating Cassandra, like the reader, stands outside of the scene, puzzling through its possible interpretations. Veronica’s “will” is present but intermittent: is she imprisoned in this unruly body or acting through it? Is she physically ill or spiritually inspired? Is Veronica the agent or object of these attacks—a “she” or an “it”? Does Veronica, Cassandra, or Stoddard herself even know?

The multiple valences of the scene reflect the hermeneutic indeterminacy of nineteenth-century Spiritualist practice: the same symptoms welcomed by Spiritualist mediums and their followers as signs of divine anointment were diagnosed by medical professionals as debilitation: evidence of women’s inherent delusion and disorderliness (or, in the case of male mediums, of the unnatural feminization of men). Compare the description of Veronica’s inexplicable illness to the features of the Spiritualist trance:

There were two main variations . . . : falling into a fainting trance, sometimes called catalepsy, and uncontrolled thrashing, jerking, or trembling The sufferer alternately sobbed and laughed violently, complained of palpitations of the heart, clawed her throat as if strangling, and at times abruptly lost the power of hearing or speech. A deathlike trance might follow, lasting hours, even days.⁴⁹

The uncontrollable “rotary motion” of Veronica’s arms, her prolonged breathless unconsciousness, and her voiceless protests against Cassandra’s nursing mark her seizure-like attacks as similar to Spiritualist trances. But rather than come down on one side of the question or the other—the only diagnosis the novel will make is “delicacy of constitution” (30)—*The Morgesons* leaves the mystery of Veronica’s embodiment unsolved.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics, on the other hand, have rushed to diagnose Veronica’s illnesses as selfishness and psychosomatic delusion, “the hysterical reaction of a young woman who does not want to grow up and face her anger at her severely restricted life.”⁵⁰ The most common critical explanation for her unusual behavior is anorexia nervosa.⁵¹ Such diagnoses accord with Jenny Franchot’s observation that literary critics employing Marxist, psychoanalytic, or poststructuralist theoretical principles have tended to approach religion as though it were

disease: "About those who 'had it' in the past, scholars often write either 'around' the belief . . . or isolate it as a deviant element to be extracted for diagnostic analysis."⁵² The critical discourses Franchot invokes are all subject to the larger (a)historical narrative of secularization, in which the scientific processes of rationalization and disenchantment promise emancipation from superstition and solutions to all the spiritual mysteries a text might hold.⁵³

Such readings have obscured how Veronica's spirituality—signaled, in part, by her frequent illnesses—enables her to experience her body, not as an opaque signifier of a binary identity (male or female, beautiful or ugly, rich or poor, sick or well) or the source of temptation to men (she will have nothing to do with the local clergyman, who shows a more than spiritual interest in her), but as a fluid medium for accessing the possibilities of the mysterious and the divine. Like her Spiritualist gifts and acts of cross-class charity, Veronica's illnesses are multivalent: while it is possible to read them as transparent bids for attention or attempts to make herself the center of family life, they also provide opportunities for those around her to act on their best impulses (as when Fanny claims that Veronica's illnesses give Fanny the chance to "be somebody" (154)) while helping Veronica herself to make sense of her existence. Cassandra-as-narrator notes,

We did not perceive the process, but Verry was educated by sickness; her mind fed and grew on pain, and at last mastered it. The darkness in her nature broke; by slow degrees she gained health, though never much strength. Upon each recovery a change was visible; a spiritual dawn had risen in her soul: moral activity blending with her ideality made her life beautiful, even in the humblest sense. (65)

It is the creativity of Veronica's life—the way that Spiritualist agency enables her to imagine ways of being in the world that are not defined by patriarchy and privation—that critics who ignore her spiritual aspirations, or diagnose them as delusion or selfishness, simply cannot see.

Stoddard's columns in the *Daily Alta California* provide clues to alternate readings of Veronica's character—readings that do not diagnose Veronica as degenerate by assuming that self-expression is synonymous with independence, self-assertion, and rebellion. In her letter to the *Alta* dated February 1855, Stoddard comments on the late Edgar Allan Poe, noting that "his nervous system was so delicate that coffee would intoxicate him, and that a glass of wine would sometimes excite

him to frenzy”; she suggests that these proclivities were signs of his “great original and peculiar genius.”⁵⁴ In *The Morgesons* Veronica, who is so fragile that green tea causes her to “laugh all night,” is also “endowed with genius,” including the ability to read “the moods of nature” (65); her unusual eating and drinking habits are at least as much signs of this preternatural ability as they are symptoms of an eating disorder. In another letter to the *Alta* published in September 1855, Stoddard remarks on the difference between true illness and a romanticized “invalidism.” Whereas the true sufferer subsists on “barley-waters” and gruel and can only be stuffed into her clothes “*a la scare-crow*,” the “selfish invalid” sports “handsome dressing-gown, and dainty slippers, and perfumed hair” and insists on receiving the ripest peaches and the tenderest part of the steak from the family store.⁵⁵ Veronica, for her part, has “no strength, no appetite,” and far from perfuming her hair she cuts it off “lock by lock” until she is nearly bald (30). By Stoddard’s own taxonomy, then, Veronica is not a “selfish invalid” because she does not leverage her illnesses to attract attention, elicit coddling, or commandeer the best foods from the table. Examining Veronica’s illnesses in the context of Stoddard’s other writings and of the nineteenth-century secular milieu in which the novel was produced—rather than from our own anachronistic and diagnostic point of view—reveals how Veronica’s unique if fragile embodiment expresses her spiritual gifts.

The rush to diagnose Veronica is a symptom of a critical tradition in which “the real problem is that women, persons of color, and other members of historically oppressed groups are not generally allowed to be both subject and object at once.”⁵⁶ This binary critical regime, in turn, recapitulates the “monopoli[zation] of all knowledge” that nineteenth-century Spiritualists complained of: the mania among lawyers, physicians, clergy, scientists, and educators to pass judgment on and dismiss the embodied experiences of Spiritualist mediums and their fellow seekers.⁵⁷ As a cultural discourse emphasizing first-hand knowledge of the universe gained through collective, shared seeking, Spiritualism offered a vociferous challenge to “the incipient professionalism of science [and] medicine,” whose practitioners claimed the authority to assign meaning to existence by appealing to scientific principles “which to most people [were] as invisible as ghosts.”⁵⁸ As such, Spiritualism provided opportunities for personal and collective self-definition that were not bounded by the binaries of professional discourse. Though those opportunities were often short-lived, unstable, and subject to ridicule, they nevertheless formed an important arena for female and subaltern agency—both

in fiction and in everyday life. Restricting readings of nineteenth-century religious women, real or fictional, to diagnoses that treat embodied religiosity and nonliberal agency as mental or physical illness reinscribes the same limiting cultural discourses that, even in the 1860s, already sought to narrow the ways in which minds, bodies, and voices might exist in the world.

By invoking the embedded indeterminacies of Spiritualist practice and refusing to resolve them at the level of narrative, *The Morgesons* challenges totalizing discourses that would seek to reduce human experience and human agency to singular and mutually exclusive explanations. Like Spiritualist leaders, Veronica and Cassandra complain about the monopolization of knowledge—the foreclosing of mystery that total comprehension entails. When Locke Morgeson quizzes Veronica about her impending marriage to Ben with the question, “Do you know each other?” Veronica replies, “We do not know each other at all. What is the use of making *that* futile attempt?” (169). Cassandra, facing the prospect of life as the mediator of Ben and Veronica’s marriage, muses that her sister and soon-to-be brother-in-law “would have annihilated my personality, if possible, for the sake of comprehending me” (163). Complete and total knowledge—the kind provided by the professional discourses of doctors and many modern literary critics—is framed within the novel as an annihilation that must prove fruitless precisely because of its thoroughness. When Ben Somers probes Cassandra’s feelings for his brother Desmond, he dismembers a book in his agitation: “taking up a book, which he leaned his head over, and whose covers he bent back till they cracked,” Ben performs the action that later critics would perform on the book of Veronica and Cassandra. “You would read me that way,” Cassandra avers, and she could be speaking to twenty-first-century critics as much as to Ben (232). Like Cassandra’s mythical namesake, who foresaw the future but was unable to change it, Elizabeth Stoddard predicted the dissection to which her text would be subjected—a future in which critics would probe her novel for signs of spiritual disease.

Notes

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1. Elizabeth Stoddard, “Preface to the 1901 Edition,” in *The Morgesons* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 262–64.

2. For the history of Hawthorne’s canonization, see Jane Tompkins, “Masterpiece Theatre: The Politics of Hawthorne’s Literary Reputation,” *American Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (1984): 617–42.

3. Like Stoddard, Stowe made this statement late in life; the earliest occurrences of it in print appear in the 1880s, and the story was widely circulated after her death. See Florine Thayer McCray, *The Life-Work of the Author of Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1889).

4. Elizabeth Stoddard, *The Morgesons* (New York: Carleton, 1862). The authoritative scholarly edition of *The Morgesons*, edited by Lawrence Buell and Sandra Zagarell, reprints the revised text of *The Morgesons* that Stoddard's publishers issued in 1889. For this 1889 edition, Zagarell notes, Stoddard "made no major structural changes, but she did make extensive minor revisions . . . sometimes leading to a marked change of effect." See Sandra Zagarell, introduction to *The Morgesons and Other Writings, Published and Unpublished*, by Elizabeth Stoddard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), xv. Because the present essay seeks to demonstrate how *The Morgesons* reflects the changing religious atmosphere of midcentury New England—particularly the rise of Spiritualist practice—it draws on the 1862 Carleton edition. All quotations from the novel refer to that edition, and are hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

5. Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 364–65.

6. Sandra Zagarell, "The Repossession of a Heritage: Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*," *Studies in American Fiction* 13, no. 1 (1985): 56.

7. According to the most basic formulation of the secularization thesis, Western societies are moving inexorably away from superstitious and primitive religious beliefs and toward an enlightened rationalism that replaces faith with evidence and belief with fact. Max Weber called this process "Entzauberung," a word usually translated as "disenchantment" that has been more literally limned by the religious historian Molly McGarry as "the elimination of magic from the world." See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2001), and Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 13. The secularization thesis has been controversial almost since its appearance, but its assumptions continue to structure scholarly discourse because they help historians and literary critics to construct a usable past that ostensibly points toward an increasingly enlightened and rational future. See R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), vii.

8. Ann Braude, "Women's History Is American Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 93.

9. John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 7–8.

10. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 7. See also Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

11. Robert Orsi, "On Not Talking to the Press," *Religious Studies News*, May 2004, 15.

12. Very few critics have examined the intimations of Spiritualist and other occult religiosity that permeate *The Morgesons*. Christopher Felker has written the most thorough analysis I have found of the subject, but his interpretation is hampered by a post-Puritan view of Spiritualism as inherently "evil." See Christopher Felker, *Reinventing Cotton Mather in the American Renaissance: Magnalia Christi Americana in Hawthorne, Stowe, and Stoddard* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), 202–27. Michelle Ann Abate, though not addressing Spiritualism specifically, details the resemblance between Veronica Morgeson's odd behaviors and those that characterized the confessed witches executed at Salem in 1692. See Michelle Ann Abate, "The 'Possessed' Reassessed: Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*, the Salem Witchcraft Hysteria and Literary (Anti)nationalism," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2007): 47–65.

13. For thorough treatments of Spiritualism in the nineteenth-century United States, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003); Cathy Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*. For primary source documents related to Spiritualism and other occult movements in Europe and America during the long nineteenth century, see Shane McCorristine, ed., *Spiritualism, Mesmerism, and the Occult, 1800–1920* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012).

14. McCorristine, introduction to *Spiritualism, Mesmerism, and the Occult*, xvii.

15. Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, ed. Benjamin Fawcett (1658; repr. Boston: Lincoln and Edmands, 1828). “Uncle Richard,” *Northern Regions, Or, Uncle Richard's Relation of Captain Parry's Voyages for the Discovery of a North-west Passage: And Franklin's and Cochrane's Overland Journeys to Other Parts of the World* (New York: O. A. Roorbach, 1827).

16. The Spiritualist medium and trance lecturer Cora Hatch was particularly famous for her clairvoyant conversations with Franklin, including her ability to accurately describe Arctic landscapes she had never visited. See Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 104–5.

17. Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey and Other Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

18. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 2.

19. Saba Mahmood, “Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject,” in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 177–224.

20. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16.

21. *Ibid.*, 26.

22. For instance, Jane Tompkins has shown how Ellen Montgomery, the child heroine of Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), submits herself to the religious teachings of Alice and John Humphreys rather than the nonreligious commandments of Fortune Emerson, thereby exercising agency within the Calvinist doctrinal terms that give her experiences meaning—terms that do not assume that independence from all authority is the highest good. Tompkins's analysis has been immensely useful to scholars studying the depiction of agency in sentimental literature, but Calvinist submission was not the only model of nonliberal religious agency available to women in the nineteenth century. Jane P. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 147–85.

23. Modern, *Secularism*, xxix.

24. The Cambridge Investigations, according to the well-known medium and Spiritualist spokeswoman Emma Hardinge Britten, were disappointing to all involved: the professors considered the demonstration a failure because the mediums were unable to provide proof of their gifts under experimental conditions; the Spiritualists considered it a failure because the presence of too many skeptics made it impossible for them to make contact with other realms. Emma Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years' Record of the Communion Between Earth and the World of Spirits*, 2nd ed. (New York: New-York Print. Co., 1870).

25. [A. T. Tracy], “Spiritual Materialism,” *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art*, August 1854, 160. Both Elizabeth Stoddard and her husband Richard published pieces in *Putnam's*, Richard in 1853, 1855, and 1870, and Elizabeth in 1868 and 1869. Their friends Horace Greeley and Bayard Taylor were also frequent contributors. The issue in which “Spiritual Materialism” appeared also contained Taylor's “Ethiopian Nights' Entertainments.”

26. Howard Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism and American Literature, 1850–1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 4.

27. See Braude's *Radical Spirits* for a discussion of the close connection between women's social reform movements and early Spiritualist practice in the United States.

28. While Kerr provided detailed accounts of female Spiritualist mediums including the Fox sisters, Cora Hatch, and Emma Hardinge Britten, he generally overlooked Spiritualist fiction by women except for an occasional reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe or Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Recent treatments of Spiritualist fiction have begun to remedy Kerr's oversight. Bridget Bennett's *Transatlantic Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) treats Spiritualist practice and Spiritualist fiction as responses to ongoing violence in the circumatlantic world. John Kucich's *Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2004) undertakes a similar project but looks inward—at the treatment of Native Americans and slaves on US soil—rather than outward to Europe and Africa. Mitzi Schrag's “Rei(g)ning Mediums: Spiritualism and Social Controls in Nineteenth-Century American Literature” (Ph.D. diss, University of Washington, 2006) examines male-authored fictions that sought to narratively tamp down the possibilities for female agency raised by Spiritualist practice. And Eliza Richards's *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) offers an excellent treatment of Spiritualist poetry produced by female poet-mediums of the 1840s and 1850s.

29. Elizabeth Oakes Smith, *Shadow Land; Or, the Seer* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1852).

30. Elizabeth Oakes Smith, *Bertha and Lily; Or, the Parsonage of Beech Glen* (New York: J. C. Derby, 1854). Stoddard reviewed *Bertha and Lily* in her capacity as New York correspondent for the *Alta California*. She confessed herself “[un]able to divine its meaning” but found its “sketches of character” compelling. Elizabeth Stoddard, “From Our Lady Correspondent. [for the *Alta California*]—New York, Sept. 20, 1854,” *Daily Alta California*, October 22, 1854.

31. Kate Field, *Planchette's Diary* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1868). The nineteenth-century text most often characterized by recent literary critics as a Spiritualist novel is Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* (1868), a work that, like *The Morgesons*, eschews the particular details of Spiritualist practice—there are no séances and no audible conversations with the dead—while nevertheless accepting the basic Spiritualist premises that individual personalities persist after death and that loved ones will recognize one another in their spiritual forms. But *The Gates Ajar* is less a meditation on Spiritualist agency than an extended apology on the compatibility of Spiritualist beliefs with liberal Christian religion: Aunt Winifred spends much of her narrative time explaining how the Spiritualist vision of heaven accords with a biblical one. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Ajar* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co, 1869).

32. Richards, *Gender*, 111.

33. Jennifer Putzi and Elizabeth Stockton, eds., *The Selected Letters of Elizabeth Stoddard* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 21n3.

34. Putzi and Stockton, *Selected Letters*, 109n6.

35. Stoddard to Lilian Whiting, in Putzi and Stockton, *Selected Letters*, 236.

36. Stoddard made the “hydra-headed and argus-eyed” comment in her *Daily Alta California* column of October 22, 1854 (see note 29, above) and in April 1870 wrote to her friend Helen Hunt Jackson that she was “still boiling with wrath” at the “humiliating” behavior of New York's women's rights activists. See Putzi and Stockton, *Selected Letters*, 136.

37. Elizabeth Stoddard, “From Our Lady Correspondent—New York, Dec. 5, 1856,” *Daily Alta California*, January 11, 1857.

38. Elizabeth Stoddard, “From a Lady Correspondent—New York, April 20th, 1855,” *Daily Alta California*, May 19, 1855.

39. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 1–9.

40. Taylor's *Atlantic Monthly* stories depict Spiritualist ritual as a banal sham and Spiritualist agency as an unnatural attempt by women to usurp men's religious and romantic power. In “Confessions of a Medium” (December 1860) a lascivious Swedenborgian and his drunken female medium use the dubious doctrine of “natural affinities” to justify their extramarital affair; the narrator is saved from their sordid influence by the good offices of his chaste fiancée. In “The Experiences of the A.C.” (February 1862) another idealistic bachelor joins a utopian community, where he is horrified by the romantic advances of an older woman. In “The Haunted Shanty” (July 1861), a more gothic and ghostly tale than either of these, a spurned woman involuntarily spirit-travels to the remote homestead of her ex-lover, haunting his marriage bed and eventually causing the death of his child. In each of these stories Spiritualist ritual and practice are discursively linked with forms of female agency—particularly sexual agency—that are dangerously unstable and operate outside of male control. Taylor's tales defuse this threat at the level of narrative by disposing of the unruly women through death, sexual rejection, or exile.

41. Quoted in Cox, *Body and Soul*, 3.

42. Jennifer Putzi, “Tattooed Still: The Inscription of Female Agency in Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*,” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 17, no. 2 (2000): 172.

43. Zagarell, “The Repossession of a Heritage,” 48.

44. Ayse Çelikkol, “*The Morgesons*, Aesthetic Predicaments, and the Competitive Logic of the Market Economy,” *American Literature* 78, no. 1 (2006): 48.

45. Cox, *Body and Soul*, 20.

46. Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals*, 66.

47. Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost*, 141.

48. On the day of Veronica's wedding the Morgesons' Portuguese servant Manuel (“adopted” like Fanny), seeing her with her bouquet, exclaims “‘Santa Maria!’” (248). When Veronica and Desmond Somers meet for the first time after Desmond's travels abroad, Desmond tells her “‘you are like the Virgin I made an offering to, only not quite so bedizened’” (258).

49. McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 126–27.

50. Sabina Matter-Seibel, “Subverting the Sentimental: Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard's *The Morgesons*,” in *Flip Sides: New Critical Essays in American Literature*, ed. Klaus H. Schmidt (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995), 31.

51. Sabine Matter-Seibel and Christopher Hager both offer the anorexia diagnosis. See Matter-Seibel, “Subverting the Sentimental,” 31, and Christopher Hager, “Hunger for the Literal: Writing and Industrial Change in Elizabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*,” *American Literature* 77, no. 4 (2005): 700. Julia Stern remarks on the “automaternal dimensions” of Veronica’s adolescent habit of “subsist[ing] on a regressive diet of milk and buttered toast.” See Julia Stern, “‘I Am Cruel Hungry’: Dramas of Twisted Appetite and Rejected Identification in Elizabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*,” in *American Culture, Canons, and the Case of Elizabeth Stoddard*, ed. Robert McClure Smith and Ellen Weinauer (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 108. Jennifer Putzi contrasts Veronica’s illnesses unfavorably with Cassandra’s scars, and Ayse Çelikkol reads them as indicating Veronica’s complicity with market capitalism. See Putzi, “‘Tattooed Still,’” 169, and Çelikkol, “*The Morgesons*,” 48.

Whatever the exact diagnosis, critics agree that Veronica’s illnesses are marks of her self-ishness or symbols of her failed character: she is “thwarted” and “reclusive” (Zagarell, “The Re-possession of a Heritage,” 48), “a twisted specimen of the angel-child” (Matter-Seibel, “Subverting the Sentimental,” 31). In *The Morgesons*, Cassandra’s father gives her some advice: “‘Let me tell you something; don’t get sick. If you are, hide it as much as possible. Men do not like sick women’” (107). Neither, apparently, do critics.

52. Jenny Franchot, “Invisible Domain: Religion and American Literary Studies,” *American Literature* 67, no. 4 (1995): 837.

53. In a provocative essay, Susan Gubar offered her own diagnosis for the tendency among literary critics to reduce female authors and characters to a set of symptoms: “I could call the problem a bad case of critical anorexia.” Susan Gubar, “What Ails Feminist Criticism?,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998): 901.

54. Elizabeth Stoddard, “From a Lady Correspondent—New York, Feb. 20th, 1855,” *Daily Alta California*, [unknown publication date].

55. Elizabeth Stoddard, “From a Lady Correspondent—New York, Aug. 5, 1855 [for the *Alta California*],” *Daily Alta California*, September 6, 1855.

56. Jennifer L. Fleissner, “Is Feminism a Historicism?,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 21, no. 1 (2002): 55.

57. Emma Hardinge Britten, *Nineteenth Century Miracles, or Spirits and Their Work in Every Country of the Earth* (1884; repr. New York: Arno Press, 1976), 192.

58. Daniel Cottom, “On the Dignity of Tables,” *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 4 (1988): 774.

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