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“Give me the table – all the rest, all the other effects, come afterwards”: Sound and Sexual Communication in the Spiritualist Fiction of Marryat and Phelps

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In 1848, the phenomenon of rapping using objects such as tables to communicate with spirits was established as a practice by the Fox sisters, who claimed to have heard spectral echoes resulting from their contact with wooden surfaces. Katherine and Margaret Fox, who were twelve and thirteen years old respectively living in Hydesville, New York, “discovered that they could ‘talk’ to the unseen source of disturbances by establishing a simple code involving a specific number of raps in response to their verbal questions” (Owen 18).¹ Following this conversation between the Fox sisters and invisible sources of sound, Spiritualism was created, eventually turning into a mode of communication not only common in America but also widely practised on the other side of the Atlantic. In England as well as America, Spiritualism was simply defined as the communication with the dead through the presence of a living intermediary or medium. The mediation between the living and the dead was a position that the Fox sisters fulfilled by becoming correspondents or “channelers between life and the other world” (qtd. in Zusne and Jones 210, 222).

This paper examines the association between sound, sexual desire and women within the context of nineteenth-century spiritualist practices in the works of Florence Marryat (1833–1899) and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844–1911). Sound can be an effect of rapping that not only mediates erotic interactions between women and spirits, but also bestows on the former sexual agency within the social world that lies beyond the walls of the Victorian home. The paper argues that the employment of sound as a subversive medium of contact between female characters and spirits,

either in the séance room or in heaven, results in the liberation and empowerment of women's voices. This can take place within the phenomenon of materialisation, by which spirits – here sounds – turn into visible bodies with which female mediums communicate freely. In addition to enabling female sexual autonomy, the function of sound in Marryat's and Phelps's texts, particularly via wood-rapping, deconstructs masculine authority by questioning male voices and problematising their presence in the spirit world. Oppressive male figures in Marryat's and Phelps's novels become othered in the next world where hierarchical structures and gender roles are challenged and put on a basis of equality.

Communication with spirits of the dead usually takes place in a dark séance room that functions as a "contact zone" where, it seems, everything becomes possible (Bennett 9). Sitters, for example, can hear spirits playing music and see phenomena of levitation whereby furniture becomes subject to magnetic influences of mediumship and paranormal intervention. The ability to use the séance room as an acoustic space where natural and social laws can be broken subverts the traditional understanding of the nineteenth-century home as stable and ordered. Female mediums and séance participants problematised the conventional stability of the Victorian home by using sound as an embodiment of sexual desire and various acoustic effects as tools for gender subversion. Indeed, spiritualist activities during séances can be tied with female sexuality and the "potential, not always consciously realised, for subversion" (Owen 4). Furniture within the domestic sphere is associated with domestic order and the fixity of gender roles; however, the use of sound by means of accordions or pipes for levitation violates this domestic system. By using items of furniture such as tables as objects of levitation or surfaces for rapping that facilitate the passage of information between spirits and séance attendants, women such as Marryat create anarchy within the Victorian household, thus turning the séance room into a space of free sexual activity and speech.

Marryat, a British author and actress, playwright, editor, and daughter of Captain Frederick Marryat, was a keen and unorthodox supporter of Spiritualism. She was married at the age of sixteen to the soldier T. Ross Church with whom she parented eight children, but divorced Church in 1879 to marry Captain Francis Lean in the same year: these were actions that earned Marryat her family's umbrage. Her second marriage brought her closer to spiritualist circles that enabled her freedom outside the domestic space of the Victorian home. Some spiritualists believed in absolute liberty that is based on free love – in some cases outside the institution of marriage, as in the case of the American Victoria Woodhull. In America, Woodhull supported a utopian spiritual love that was free of "social ills" and governed by no "legal or religious authority" (Gutierrez 187).

In America too, Phelps's marriage to Herbert Dickinson Ward was also a failure due to the latter's total financial dependence on Phelps. He was, indeed, irresponsible enough to not care to "return home until three days after [Phelps's] funeral" (Kelly 17–18). Phelps adopted a spiritualistic conviction based on material pleasure and the rejection of traditional conjugality. Her model of spiritualism, however, differs from Marryat's with respect to faith: whilst Phelps's spiritualistic practice furthers

her “Christian faith” (Harde 350), Marryat’s is more secular and sensual. Phelps was surrounded by father-figures of strict religious education: her father, Austin Phelps, was “Professor of Rhetoric and Homiletics, assuming the Presidency of the Seminary in 1870”; Moses Stuart, her grandfather, was “Professor of Sacred Literature”. Spiritualism was an outlet for Phelps that helped her escape the “repression and frustration” of father-figures (Armand 55). Marryat and Phelps are non-canonical female authors in nineteenth-century literature; nonetheless, their ability to defy well-defined social and religious systems and strict patriarchal discourses via the use of acoustic techniques within spiritualist practices makes their fiction valuable and interesting. Marryat’s *There Is No Death* (1891) and other novels particularly *The Dead Man’s Message* and *The Spirit World* (1894) and Phelps’s three spiritualist novels *The Gates Ajar* (1868), *Beyond the Gates* (1883) and *The Gates Between* (1887) challenge patriarchy by either displaying intimacy between spirits and women through sound and materialisation, or bridging the gap between women, desire and the representation of heaven.²

I begin my reading here with the examination of the relationship between sound, spirits and the embodiment of sexual desire through what came to be known as materialisation. During the 1870s, spirit materialisation reached its highest apogee, bringing with it excessive levels of sexual radicalism and social defiance. Materialisation is an act in communication during which spirits transform from invisible ether into full-form objects or human bodies. This transformation is usually facilitated by the presence of the female medium whose body constitutes a conduit for the spirit and the ensuing materialisation. The spirit can be technologically equated with the sound wave: the spirit embodies the sound of rapping and becomes materialised. I hence read the medium’s body and the phenomenon of materialisation in connection with acoustic production, feminine agency and the enactment of sexual desire within nineteenth-century domestic spaces. Materialisation normally happens inside the séance room where the corporeal and spiritual, or sitters and spirits, are united “in a form of public sex” (McGarry 18). Within the process of spiritualist materialisation, McGarry argues that sound was replaced by “vision” and that “the spirit became flesh” (14). Even though the 1870s was a phase of spirit materialisation in which sound was majorly dominated by vision, I argue that the power of the auditory or the acoustic effect of rapping carries within itself the body of vision, matter, sexual desire and the potential for subversion.

Marryat and Phelps employ sound to embody their desire and communicate their voices within English and American societies. Materialised spirits, which are arguably embodied sound, could mediate scenes of “sexual displays” (Walkowitz 9). Whilst Marryat’s novels emphasise the presence of spectral bodies and “sexual displays” through materialisation, Phelps focuses on the unseen, “unfamiliar, home-like sound [that] is pleasant in the silent house” (GA 27). Throughout her novel *The Gates Ajar* in which Mary Cabot loses her brother Roy in the American Civil War (1861–1865), the spirit of the departed Roy does not become physically visible. It is, however, felt through hearing “pleasant” sounds that mediate between Phelps and her dead brother, thus functioning as sites of familial reunion and social

reconstruction. With the outbreak of the Civil War in America, more than half a million Americans were killed and mourners sought physical ways to console themselves such as spirit materialisation. In Phelps's novel, Lisa Long argues that Mary "focuses on the sights and sounds that surround her only contact with Roy's body" (786). The tendency to materialise spirits/sounds constituted a threat to religious authority, as it dismissed orthodox thoughts of death and the afterlife. In Phelps's work, the materialisation of death is harsh yet "joyous" because the return of the spirit creates a sense of autonomy of belief that contradicts the orthodox vision of death as the ultimate separation (King 190).

Marryat and Phelps deploy different radical materialisation techniques within the acoustic space of their spiritualist experiences or narratives. The former participates in séances where the sensory system is used for interaction with spirits and sexual gratification; whereas the latter focuses on the production of sound as expressive of "the passion of Heaven" (*BG* 228), as symbolic of women's passion for breaking corporeal laws. Marryat's relationship with the materialised spirit world can be described as earthly while Phelps's is celestial: the former does not interact with spirits beyond the earthly space. In Marryat's fiction, spectral-human interaction usually happens in the séance room and is applicable to corporeal human laws. Phelps, on the other hand, goes beyond the corporeal world into a magical, heavenly space where spirits enjoy freedom of choice and action. Phelps keeps a conservative distance from spirit materialisation, particularly in her three spiritualist novels, in that she does not involve her characters in audacious sexual or flirtatious action. Marryat is, conversely, "perhaps the only sitter who claimed to have both seen and touched the naked body of spirit" (Owen 227). In a séance led by Florence Cook, the medium who was notorious for being the guide of the flirtatious spirit Katie King, Marryat was called

into the back room, and, dropping her [Katie's] garment, stood perfectly naked before me. "Now," she said "you can see that I am a woman." [. . .] I was to strike a light as soon as she gave three knocks, as Florrie would be hysterical on awaking, and need my assistance, she then knelt down and kissed me, and I saw she was still naked. (*TD* 142)

Spirits can be flirtatious and thus subvert moral and spatial codes. Marlene Tromp suggests that spirits "have the power to violate boundaries with ease" and transgress spaces of insideness and outsideness (2). This is a departure from the late-Victorian newspaper editor W. T. Stead's suggestion that spirits in the séance room are aware of the borderland between life and death and Roger Luckhurst's argument that "ghosts haunt borders" (Luckhurst 52). The fact that the medium's body functions as what Steven Connor calls "the sonorous body" makes contact between spirits and séance attendants subject to no spatial restrictions (211). The return of spirits in the form of acoustic effects via table-rapping, for instance, allows female mediums to enact sexual activities, because sound that embodies the spirit crosses the boundaries between private and public spaces at ease, as evinced in Marryat's interaction with Katie.

Alex Owen suggests that Marryat's encounter with Katie is innocent (228); however, this communication between Marryat and the spirit Katie might not only be sexual but more significantly critical of gender roles and annul patriarchal logic within the domestic space. To engage in various acts of kissing, nakedness and knocking on the part of both sitters and spirits is to reverse the hierarchies of power mostly favourable to men. As this paper explores the acoustic potential of spiritualism for gender subversion, it is necessary to focus on Marryat and Katie's erotic interaction via sound effects. The incident shows knocking to be an essential part of communication between the medium, spirit and séance-sitters. The three knocks figuratively function as physical wires that transmit Marryat's erotic experience within and beyond the private space of the Victorian home. The capability of knocking to link between three bodies also manifests the séance room as a corporeal world of communication where bodies are subject to the penetration of voices, sounds, noises or knocks. J. Hillis Miller states that bodies are "pierced through and through, at every moment, by an enormous cacophony of invisible electro-magnetic waves resonating at many frequencies" (9). Within a spiritualist context, the connection between female bodies, sounds and spirits challenges patriarchal laws that govern domestic spaces: whereas silence is a feminine virtue in the domestic space within nineteenth-century Anglo-American discourses, spectral sound via table-rapping gives voice to the silenced and communicates unbound agency for self-expression. The fact that the séance space can function as a bubble of cacophony signifies women's acquisition of free action, as sound which metaphorically represents feminine voices becomes dissociated from masculine rational discourses. By knocking, which symbolises a direct physical interaction with the spirit's body, Marryat does not only prove the possibility of intercourse between the living and dead but also the female potential of subverting domestic laws that subject women to strict moral lives: knocking is a departure from codes of silence and privacy.

The materialisation of spirits and the entire phenomenon of spiritualist séances are "intolerable" (GA 125) to Mary Cabot's Aunt, Winifred Forceythe, in *The Gates Ajar*. Materialisation and séances are unnecessary mediums of contact between the living and dead. Both the protagonist Miss Cabot and Aunt Winifred lost members of their families during the American Civil War: the former her soldier-brother, Roy; the latter her husband, John. During their meeting, Winifred advises Mary to accept this loss as transient, yet her counsel is not given by means of séances and direct communication with naked or flirtatious spirits like Marryat and Katie's correspondence. According to Winifred, material pleasure and eternal happiness are present in the next world. By accepting her aunt's council, Phelps creates a balance between erotic spiritualism, Christian values and rational science. Instead of full-form materialisation in which the spirit's whole body becomes apparent to the participants, Phelps employs spirit- or self-materialisation in the afterlife and draws comparisons between heavenly impressions and worldly sensations. When human beings depart to heaven, they carry the same earthly desires and senses that may grow or become heightened in the other world. *The Gates Ajar* engages in subtle philosophies on the physical nature of the afterlife and borrows implicitly from Swedenborg's beliefs about spiritual matter

(see Jones-Hunt 39).³ A person, in Swedenborgian philosophy, moves to the next stage of existence with “a similar body, a similar face, similar speech, and similar senses”. The fact that Swedenborg believed in the development of matter in the afterlife implies that human beings depart to a place that is celestial yet sexual, a place where marriage and the practice of sexuality are free (Swedenborg 37–44). Even though Winifred and Mary reject séances and extreme Swedenborgianism, references to this spiritualist practice can be noted in *The Gates Ajar*.

Women in this text sometimes become involved in one-to-one séances which take the form of speaking to the dead through seeing, touching or hearing. Materialisation for Phelps, however, takes place in the other world; its development “is sometimes best trained by [earthly] repression” (GA 90). Phelps’s silence that is representative of women’s repression on earth is rewarded by a better life of materialised pleasure in heaven.⁴ In her spiritualist novels, Phelps describes heavenly life using a terminology that alternates between the spiritual and material or dream and reality, even though spiritual experiences are mostly narrated from an afterlife perspective. Once a person is dead, we see him/her from beyond the gates, to use Phelps’s Christian-spiritualist discourse. After death, spirits can return to the earthly world on errands, but unlike Marryat’s spirits, they do not materialise in full form. Nonetheless, messages from the spirit world which might take the form of knocking are present in the text. Phoebe, Mary’s servant in the novel, “knocked” (GA 135) and voices are consequently heard: Roy’s or John’s. The novel ends in Winifred’s speaking to her husband’s spirit: ““John”, she said, – “why John!”” (GA 137).

The end of *The Gates Ajar* is sentimental and sensational, and the gates of Phelps’s heaven are no longer ajar as they become wide open for women’s sexual expression in the afterlife. Phelps’s next spiritualist novel *Beyond the Gates*, whose protagonist is also the young unmarried Mary, describes a place of endless pleasure as she exclaims: “Now I found this more energetic than the bodily sensations I had known” (BG 157). Whilst on earth, Mary is not aware of the sexual and material nature of the human body, but when she goes beyond the gates, she becomes sexually different and communicative.

Beyond the Gates explores the adventures of Mary, who “had been ill for several weeks with what they called brain fever” (141) and the movement of her spirit into ethereal spheres after her death. Her sexual life changes after the physical transcendence of her body. She travels to heavenly places where laws governing the human body are materially similar yet spiritually different to their earthly counterparts. In heaven, Mary becomes passionate, which is linked to her being unmarried. Yet her passion also stems from being born into a new experience in which she is exposed to visual and acoustic life, developing what John Kucich calls “visionary realism” (75),⁵ a new form of spiritualist realism that parallels Victorian social realism. Her dream-like departure from life takes the shape of hysteric passion that is symbolic of sexual frustration. She is an unmarried girl who is delivered into heaven via sickness:

“Father, I begin to be perplexed. I have heard of these hallucinations, of course, and read the authenticated stories, but I never supposed I could be a subject of such illusions. It must be because I have been so sick.” (BG 155)

Nineteenth-century American culture stressed marital life and familial stability, a fact that led to Mary's – being unmarried and thus incompatible with social expectations – sense of loneliness and frustration.⁶ Sickness or “hallucinations”, however, deliver Mary into a subjective feminine role: she moves from being inactive and sick within her domestic sphere to becoming free and dynamic in heaven where she moves “at will” and experiences multiple “sensations of pleasure” (BG 159). Heaven functions as an agent of mobility and powerful femininity where space and voice are bound to no restrictions. The transformation of sickness into health and material delight in the afterlife turns heaven into what Kucich calls “an *object petit a*, a fantasized lost object” (75); its possession gives women power beyond measure and unity beyond social fragmentation. The wish to sexually escape earthly or patriarchal codes can especially be manifested by the immaculate form of hearing. Even though the female body passes into “visionary” experiences or what Constance Classen calls the heavenly “culture of the eye” (1), the acoustic system forms a powerful network between women, desire, power and defiance within the discourse of spiritualism. Hearing cannot only be associated with passion and sexual pleasure but also the subversion of “moral order” and masculine discourses of rationalism (3).

The traditional classifications of senses into masculine and feminine (men are associated with reason and high, pure senses like hearing and sight; women with low, sensuous ones like smell, taste and touch) are refuted by Mary's spirit:

All Heaven seemed heavenly. I heard distant merry voices and music. Listening closely, I found that the Wedding March that had stirred so many human heart-beats was perfectly performed somewhere across the water, and that the wind bore the sounds towards me.
(BG 228)

Mary negates the traditional classification of senses on the basis of gender. Classen argues that hearing is no longer a “weighty” discourse of masculinity within a spiritualist context (66). Mary acts as an acoustic subject that not only narrates heavenly experiences via hearing but also symbolically turns sound into a cacophony of material desire that challenges imposed gendered classifications of senses. The sounds of spiritual weddings and “heart-beats” develop into acoustic knowledge represented in Mary's mental growth and awareness that defy cultural expectations of unmarried women on earth. By hearing “distant” voices, Mary becomes the spiritual conduit of desire, free action and acoustic subversion.

Historians refer to Pythia in ancient Greece as the Oracle of Delphi or the female medium who “received the initial communication or inspiration”: after going into a trance, God “spoke through her in the first person” (Lehman 5). Pythia's place within the Greek society as the embodiment of God's voice is an early example of female mediumship and an affirmation of feminine corporeal agency. The nineteenth-century phenomenon of women becoming conduits for spirits and the inherent link between the medium's body and sound/voice has its origin in the myth of the Oracle of Delphi: indeed, Gina Bloom's description of women emerging as “acoustic subjects” is pertinent in this context (18).⁷ In nineteenth-century séances, women's sensitivity was regarded a prerequisite for spirit communication. The reception of

sounds and noises from the other world was tied with passivity that became a feminine “normative” ideal (Sword 90). In Marryat’s *My Sister the Actress* (1881), Betha Selwyn discloses to a friend that “she and I make a fine noise together” (1:248). “She” in this context refers to Euripides’s Medea, the female ghost that Marryat represents in her novel. With the mythological figure of Medea, Betha is able to enact her role in the theatrical space of the séance and entrance the audience of her spiritualist performance by producing a noise as “fine” as the latter’s. Noise here is symbolic of Medea’s violent, vengeful actions; it is the source of Betha’s internal power and self-representation too. Making a “fine noise” with Medea powerfully undermines the boundaries separating women and sexual and social authority.

Sound functions as an uncanny or ghostly presence that arguably returns to the female body as a “foreign body” (Abraham 171–76), though Freud defines the foreign, uncanny or *unheimlich* as the “old and long familiar [which] ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (220). Even though the return of sounds and spirits to the space of the séance-room is homely, they resist familiarisation by being defiant of domestic laws and social structures. Marryat’s spiritualist experiences, especially those narrated in *There Is No Death*, manifest this relationship between sound, spirit and unhomeliness by emphasising the disruptive or subversive nature of women’s bodies, table-rapping and spirit materialisation during séances. During the mediumship of Miss Rosina Showers, a notorious medium in England “who was followed by voices in the air, which held conversations with her” (*TD* 108), Marryat – being invited to assist at one of the séances – narrates how the séance-room became full of

materialized creatures, who were determined to let us know they were not to be trifled with. Our hands were slapped, our hair pulled down, and our clothes nearly torn off our backs [...] at the same time we heard the sound as of a multitude of large birds or bats swooping about the room. The fluttering of wings was incessant and we could hear them “scooping” up and down the walls. (*TD* 113–14)

Marryat and Showers become situated in the middle of “an oral-aural” world where they stand face to face with their spectral interlocutors. The space described by Marryat is an “acoustic space” that situates hearers “in the middle of [social] actuality” (Ong 28, 164). Even though the scene narrated by Marryat might carry implications of sexual violence, which are recognised through the act of seeing “clothes nearly torn off our backs”, it is via hearing and materialised sounds that both women’s subversive power is actualised. The “incessant” sound in the séance-room communicates a hysteric condition, which is “a condition of unsavoury sexual and expressive connotations” (Owen 139).⁸ Foucault also calls this condition hysterical and unmanageable: this movement of sound and “that disorder of the spirits” result in the “chaotic movement” of the hysteric body communicating “messages that cannot be verbalized” (147). The description of Marryat’s and Showers’s bodies as hysterical does not perpetuate the traditional medical discourse which regards hysteria as “a shameful, “effeminate” disorder” (Showalter 289) but challenges nineteenth-century social and spatial hierarchies by positioning women at the centre of defiant, domestic action. Foucault

argues that “the nerve which, in the organ of hearing, becomes sensitive to the vibrations of sonorous bodies, differs no whit in nature from those which serve the grosser sensations such as touch, taste, and odor” (151). By categorising hearing and the ear as low or “gross”, Foucault problematises the traditional gendering of hearing as masculine. Within a nineteenth-century spiritualist context, however, hearing represents a powerful feminist mechanism of social subversion.

Kontou argues that the acoustic body communicating through spirits is a mechanism of dictation, “a typist [...] from beyond the grave” that allows for the uncontrolled influx of subversive sound into the interior structure of spiritualist mediation (2). During séances, the medium’s body is normally sensitive and “overanxious”, becoming easily “attuned to the slightest vibrations” (Ferenczi 140). These vibrations, which embody the spectral sound that travels through the air and is received into the medium’s body, have the power to violate the corporeal and discursive presence of oppressive patriarchal figures. After the death of Professor Aldwyn, a man of science and figure of patriarchal oppression in Marryat’s *The Dead Man’s Message*, Mrs Aldwyn and her daughter Madeline go to see a female medium called Mrs Blewitt to communicate with the spirit of their dead husband/father. During the séance, they become overwhelmed by the sudden convulsions of the medium’s body: Mrs Blewitt “closed her eyes, and, in another moment, her head fell forward on her bosom, and she was asleep [...] and then she began to moan and gasp, as if speaking were a terrible effort to her” (85–86). Despite her role as “a passive instrument”, Mrs Blewitt possesses what Galvan calls “fine nerves” which change into an acoustic wave of emotional and social action (30). By closing her eyes and letting her head fall, Blewitt is acoustically pierced through by a spectral aural force that transforms into physical vibrations. The importance of these vibrations stems from the fact that they work as a barrier between living female characters and masculine voices in the other world. They are dismissive of patriarchal authority: Professor Aldwyn, who “repressed” his wife’s and daughter’s “affection” on earth (*DDM* 68), is unable to communicate through the medium’s body. His communicative incapacity signifies a failure of masculine discourse within the space of the afterlife.

The materialisation of sound or desire in nineteenth-century séances can take many forms, including table-rapping: ‘Give me the table – all the rest, all the other effects, come afterwards’, says Mrs Jordan in Henry James’s *In the Cage* (1898) (24). For Mrs Jordan, as for other Victorian mediums, tables are important materials that transfer the person involved into the realm of power and presence. Tables and table-rapping emerge as a unique, influential and moral ideology in nineteenth-century spiritualist séances. What is it to produce sound or mediate through wood? It is to symbolically turn wood into flesh and blood or employ the language of wood to communicate women’s sexual desire and subversive voices. Derrida defines the table as a “non-sensuous sensuous” [thing], sensuously supersensible” (155). Sarah Willburn argues that tables are “feminine” subjects: “women and wood both found themselves in the subjunctive” (94, 100). Willburn also links spectrality, femininity and tables by stating that “tables become girls; girls become ghosts” (101). In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud argues that tables “stand for women [...] ‘Wood’ seems, for its linguistic

connections, to stand in general for female ‘material’” (355). I take Derrida’s words to suggest that women and tables are sensitive and “sensuous” beings that are thus capable of defiance via rapping or acoustic correspondence with spirits. Thus in nineteenth-century séances, tables are not ordinary pieces of furniture; they can function as animate objects, conduits of sexual desire and feminine subversive voices.⁹ Karl Marx goes so far as to suggest that tables form “crotchets” – or crotches? – in their heads (1:44), implicating the erotic aspect of tableology (or table ideology). In her letters, Elizabeth Browning portrays a spiritualist image of wood that best unravels its link to passion: “the panting and shivering of that dead dumb wood, the human emotion conveyed through it – by what? Had to me a greater significance than the St. Peter’s of this Rome” (2:158).

Marryat and Phelps develop the rhetoric of rapping as a mode of gender subversion. However, whilst Marryat employs tables and the language of wood within domestic séances, Phelps constructs feminine defiance in celestial spaces by using immaterialised forms of mediation. When the spirit of Mary in Phelps’s *Beyond the Gates* returns to her earthly home after death, she experiences matter differently, specifically that she exists in a non-acoustic relationship to things. She finds herself “able to pass the medium of this resisting matter, and to enter and depart according to my will” (BG 181). Mary’s free mobility discards female mediumship and the spiritualist tradition as an unnecessary liaison between earthly life and the other world. She exists in no relationship to matter/wood, in that she passes unnoticed through “this resisting matter”. But how does Phelps situate her female protagonists or make them stand out in the middle of earthly cacophonies? Phelps departs from earthly materialisms based on interactions between séance-sitters, spirits and tables-rapping. She represents human-spectral channels of communication as spiritual, emotional, not wooden. Whilst on earth, the spirit Mary realises that material sounds produced by motions die away or become suppressed:

I went up and opened the familiar door. I had begun to learn that neither sound nor sight followed my motions now, so that I was not surprised at attracting no attention from the lonely occupant of the room. (177)

The expression of female desire on earth changes into another form of corporeal pleasure in heaven that is represented as a place flooding with “music” and open to “marriage[s]”, but not those “imperfect ties that pass under the name, on earth”, as Mary suggests (212, 200). Mediation in Mary’s case is meditational or dream-like: at the end of the novel, Mary wakes up from a shocking, death-like experience to discover that her spiritual journey has been “thirty hours of stupor”, a mere dream (231–32). Whereas communication with the other world in Marryat’s fiction is physical, Phelps takes up the psychical mode of spiritual mediation and self-representation. Kate Mattacks suggests that “dreams or meditation” are Phelps’s chosen modes of contact with the spirit world (326). Through sleep, dreams or trances, which stand as forms of death or physical transcendence, Mary is transported into a state of sensuous presence in which her sensory system and material pleasures operate in harmony. The ability to enjoy a free material existence in heaven through dreaming

allows Mary to escape forms of patriarchal repression, domestic confinement and celibacy. Even though she is a young, unmarried girl suffering from “typhoid” with which she is accused of infecting other prisoners (*BG* 143), Mary mediates her escape through dream or death which is a “morbid nervous condition”, as described by Phelps (“Great Psychical” 257). Like Marryat, Phelps highlights the power of female morbidity or hysteria that Showalter associates with “sexual passion” and that constitutes an access to authoritative representation (*Female Malady* 132). Heaven is Phelps’s space for ideal marriages, a place that “very much elevates and celebrates earthly sex” in eighteenth-century spiritualist discourses perpetuated by Swedenborg and William Blake (Maynard 33); Marryat’s séance-room, however, represents the principal and radical domestic space for the interaction of women and spectres.

Despite the fact that Phelps in *The Gates Ajar* expresses her intolerance of late-Victorian spiritualist traditions such as séances and spirit communication via wood, she implicitly incorporates this tradition in her earlier spiritualist fiction. In “The Day of my Death”, a short story published in Phelps’s collection of short stories *Men, Women and Ghosts* (1869), Fred narrates many bizarre occurrences at his home where he lives with his wife Alison and their temporarily visiting relative Gertrude Fellows who turns out to be spiritualistic. Fred is a hard-line non-believer in spiritualism, which he describes as “a system of refined jugglery” (“The Day” 71). During Gertrude’s visit, Fred and Alison are ill at ease due to the perpetual noises and disturbances coming from surrounding furniture. Throughout the narrative, Fred becomes interested in knowing the source of these disturbances and begins seeking mediums and séances to answer his questions and doubts about spirit communication. The story later focuses on Fred’s death as foretold by mediums he visits in New York, Boston and Philadelphia. Despite the fact that Fred’s death “on the second of May, at one o’clock in the afternoon” (89) turns out to be unreal, it is interesting how Fred, fundamentally anti-spiritualistic, becomes involved in spirit communications by means of furniture language. One night, Fred, being frustrated with the mysterious source of the invisible noises, investigates:

matters a little more thoroughly, I asked my wife to stand upon the inside of the doorway while I kept watch upon the outside. We took our position, and I closed the door between us. Instantly, a series of furious blows struck the door; the sound was such as would be made by a stick of oaken wood. The solid door quivered under it.

“It’s on your side!” said I.

“No, it’s on yours!” said she. (75)

Whilst Fred rejects the spiritualist tradition in its entirety, Gertrude and Alison engage in spirit communication throughout the story, an engagement that eventually contributes to the reconstruction of gender roles. Despite the fact that Phelps mocks spiritualist phenomena such as communication by “unseen hammers, fists, logs, and knuckles” through Fred (77), she endows Gertrude and Alison with the power of occult subjectivity. Unlike Fred who dies before the narrative comes to an end, both women become centralised in the story as the occult bodies in communion with

spirits. Gertrude and Alison reshape spatial gender definitions not only by becoming the pivot of textual and social spaces but also by turning Fred into a sequestered object within the larger domestic space. Phelps's narrative, despite being dismissive of the séance tradition, resembles Marryat's in the sense that both shed light on feminine transgression of domestication. Phelps challenges traditional thinking of femininity as interior and masculinity as exterior: Fred stands upon the *outside* whereas Alison stands upon the *inside*. Fred's instructions to his wife regarding positions confirm the patriarchal tendency to define outer spaces as public and masculine and inner ones as private and feminine, thus invoking the Victorian image of the Angel in the House. The fact that Fred "closed the door between" himself and his wife also shows the patriarchal perpetuation of spatial divisions based on masculinity and femininity. Yet the representation of spectral sounds and acoustic fluidity as an invisible force that makes "the solid door" shake imperceptibly problematises this spatial gender separation. The door stands as a physical barrier between husband and wife and a marker of spatial differences and traditionally defined roles. However, the unknown source of the spectral sound causes confusion on both sides of the door, creating a counter definition of patriarchal space. The "furious blows" symbolically turn the door into an immaterial object, hence causing the collapse of barriers and the unity of feminine and masculine spaces.

Sounds and the faculty of sensitive hearing are positive because they firstly confer agency on female participants within nineteenth-century spiritualist practices, and secondly they are deconstructive of masculinities. I conclude this paper by examining how male figures in Marryat's and Phelps's novels are diminished in power within the spiritualist discourse. Nineteenth-century patriarchy endeavours to make the female body "aetherialised and invisible" (Porter 91); matriarchy, however, defies invisibility via the employment of acoustic communication within transgressive places such as Marryat's séance-room and Phelps's heaven. The representation of the séance-room and heaven as radical acoustic spaces enhances the association of women and spirit communication with visibility and sexual autonomy. Marryat's séance-room functions as an interior location that transforms into a visible space of acoustic fluidity through constant interaction between the dead and living. It is a place that turns all forms of fixity, especially patriarchal authority, into a fluidity that is symbolic of gender anarchy.

Spectral noise metaphorically penetrates the firm walls of séance-rooms, transforming all solidities within, particularly traditional masculine discourses of reason into a fluid language that resists the patriarchal links between women and concealment. Furniture in the séance-room, particularly tables, defies domestic and social order by being connected with noise and the spiritualist phenomenon of levitation. Tables can be symbols of stable marital relationships and social hierarchies. Yet by being used as mediums of spiritual contact via rapping or levitation, they subvert nineteenth-century interior structures and problematise gender fixity. The séance room can thus consist of solid items that signify instability or changeability: via table-rapping and the sense of hearing, women create a kind of dissonance between the fixed and fluid. The medium's body, for instance, challenges its fixed domestic and

social role by becoming spiritual, fluid or uncontrolled via rapping. Mackenzie Bartlett argues that “‘séance’ originally comes from the French *seoir*, meaning ‘to sit’”, which implies a kind of passivity on the part of the sitters’ and medium (273). Sitting negates the masculine definition of female passivity as it transforms into not only the sexual activity taking place among séance-sitters but also the rhetoric that communicates female autonomy. The incessant movements of spirits that produce various acoustic effects turn the medium’s inaction into active physical presence and linguistic dominance.

Whilst women become authoritative and autonomous in Marryat’s and Phelps’s novels; men are pushed into the secondary order through being absented by death. Phelps employs spiritualist discourse not only as a space where women become capable of free sexual expression – bearing in mind Mary’s status in the novel as unmarried – but also as a secular utopia where social, moral and spiritual relations emphasise egalitarianism and liberalism. Phelps and Marryat problematise the Christian patriarchal discourse that sets boundaries between men and women. By making the female body the centre of the spirit world, both writers revolutionise the representation of women within the traditional theology.

The ghosts of Marryat’s and Phelps’s women function as a “door through which we enter the Other reality” (Aguirre 208). This figurative language of wood and door-opening communicates an immaculate subversion of male authority: the masculine “I” loses significance within the acoustic act of spirit communication. In heavenly and séance spaces, hierarchy stops functioning as authoritative voices are no longer in control whereas feminine voices appear to subvert all sexual, class and religious systems. Through acoustic power which transpires in Marryat’s *The Dead Man’s Message* and Phelps’s *The Gates Between* as subversive, spiritualism challenges male scientific voices as they embody a claustrophobic identity and lose their influence. In these two novels, both authors create scientific or medical men who have little or no zeal for spiritualist practices. Whilst alive, these masculine figures dedicate their time and thinking to worldly pleasures that keep them shut from familial affection and conjugal duties. Professor Aldwyn in Marryat’s novel is a man who likes “no flowers, nor dainty little tables, nor signs of feminine occupation [being] scattered about” (*DDM* 3). The physician Esmerald Thorne in Phelps’s novel, likewise, engages in a severe argument with his wife Helen over their sick baby: “it is very unpleasant to me that you make such a fuss over him. If you had married a greengrocer it might have been pardonable” (*GB* 256). Suddenly and during scientific discussions or medical treatments, both men ironically die: Aldwyn slips away after rebuking his wife for her objections to his unremitting carelessness, cruelty and anti-social behaviour, and Thorne similarly dies on a medical expedition after quarrelling with his wife over domestic care.

Death in both novels is the beginning of change not only for women but also men who become self-effacing and subservient to the laws of the spirit world. Masculine authority, which is traditionally represented as the all-powerful “I”, shifts from centrality to marginality. Joel Kovel argues that the “I” is a personal centre that blocks all ontological spaces (299). Patriarchy utilises the centralised space of the “I”, thus

monopolising discourse and obliterating all natural, objective or ontological feminine spaces. This patriarchal centrality confers on women the statuses of the “less human” and the sexually inferior. Yet to die, or to become a spirit signifies that all these definitions and classifications cease functioning; they turn out to be a dead discourse within the spaces of the séance-room and heaven. All entities in the spiritual world are other or even the other Other. Miller disparages patriarchy by complicating the “I” reference: in German, “*mein*” means “mine” and “*meinen*” signifies “mean”; thus “when I say “mine” I can mean anybody’s” (54). The exploitation of “I” as a sole identity of patriarchy and reference to its power regime is annihilated, since in spectral communications the patriarchal “I” discourse stands next to nothing. The pronoun “we” is sometimes used alongside “I”; whereas “we” refers to the collective voice of spirits regardless of gender, “I” could refer to anyone.

When Mr. Aldwyn’s spirit realises that he cannot materialise or be visible to the desired addressee, Aldwyn’s spirit-guide, John Forest, declares that “*something* cannot come out of *nothing*, my friend. You have no light to spare from your spiritual body” (*DMM* 123). In Marryat’s novel, Aldwyn’s attempts to transform into an acoustic effect or visible light are no different to Thorne’s repetitive acts of escapism in Phelps’s text, but “obstruction there was, alas! [. . .] I, the dead man fleeing to my living wife, was beaten back” (*GB* 284). The natural sense of earthly communication also disappears, as “no one came within hearing my [Thorne’s] voice; the noise soon ceased, and my efforts at freedom with it” (269). To men of science and medicine, death is a shocking, unpleasant experience that reduces them to the status of the unwanted other. Once they enter the other world and become spirits, they experience restriction. Kovel argues that a spirit is “not to be reduced to other” because it is “a presence *within* the world” (329). The presence of Aldwyn and Thorne is however denied: Aldwyn is “*nothing*” whereas Thorne is “beaten back”. Both men’s communication with the earthly world is cut, and they become unable to contact their wives until they succumb to the spiritual laws of the next world.

Unlike female spirits, men in Marryat’s and Phelps’s texts are incapable of action, yet to be able to communicate after death or during séances is to dispose of masculine thinking and become effeminate. To be entitled to spiritual power, D. D. Home the notorious Scottish medium (1833–1886), for example, had to effeminise his behaviour by being passive or receptive to various acoustic effects of spirits. With William Crookes, who also worked with the medium Florence Cook, Home played the accordion under the table, an act that became part of his spiritualist rituals. The accordion, which was a commonly used instrument at séances, was reported to have played musical sounds via the mediation of spirits. The association between Home and the production of sound within the interior space of the séance-room, which earned him criticism and hatred, could be viewed as effeminate due to the nineteenth-century patriarchal construction of women as domestic. Home was excoriated in Robert Browning’s famous poem “Mr. Sludge, “The Medium”” (1864) for his unmanly behaviour and acting as an effeminate tool for spirit communication. Leo Tolstói describes Home as “short man, with hips like a woman’s, knock-kneed, very pale, handsome, with beautiful shining eyes, and long hair” (660).¹⁰ By playing the

accordion, Home arguably showed unrestrained passion during his communication with spirits, a passion that is also reported in Marryat's physical interaction with the spirit Charlie: "I put my finger in the mouth, and felt all round it carefully. The interior was moist and smooth like the mouth of any mortal" (*SW* 277). In heaven, Phelps reverses the definition or gender categorisation of sickness by describing Dr. Thorne as someone who "had begun to be as nervous as a woman; and, I might add, as unreasonable as a sick one" (*GB* 265). Within the space of the spirit world, the new gender pattern dictates that effeminacy is power and the way to heaven. Marryat's and Phelps's spiritualist fiction, accordingly, shows how the relationship between women, spirits and acoustic receptivity engenders female emancipation. Through sound, the female body emerges as socially radical and symbolic of powerful transmission, a network of desire.

For Kovel, spirit and desire emerge as duplicates; desire is "the necessary conduit for spirit" and vice versa (331). Aldwyn and Thorne, unlike Marryat's female spirits and Phelps's Mary, emotionally fail to manifest desire: their expression or communication of desire to their wives is trapped by their lack of desire, as they become silenced and powerless. Aldwyn's body freezes in the spot where he dies, and when he lies on the chair motionless, he discerns he is victimised by his own mutinous body: "how very strange and uncertain his limbs felt!" (*DDM* 25). Thorne could not reach his wife to apologise for his wrongdoings, for his body is "beaten back". Realising his physical incapability, Thorne tries to use "the private telegraph which stood by Brake's desk, mute and mysterious" (*GB* 268) during his captivation in Brake's office. Even though Thorne manages to send an electric signal, none replies and his message becomes dead since it is emptied of desire or passion. Dr Thorne is shut from the sensory world of hearing, seeing, speaking and even writing: Thorne as well as Aldwyn becomes "mute" like the telegraph on Brake's desk.

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Notes

- [1] There is some controversy surrounding the ages of the Fox sisters. For further details, see Lis J. Warwood. "The Fox Sisters: Riddle of the Records." *Psypioneer* 4.9 (September 2008): 186–196.
- [2] Whilst Kontou refers to Marryat's book as a collection of personal spiritualist experiences, Georgina O'Brien Hill does call it a novel in her article "'Above the Breath of Suspicion': Florence Marryat and the Shadow of the Fraudulent Trance Medium." *Women's Writing* 15.3 (November 2008): 333–347. In this paper, I will treat Marryat's autobiographical writing as a novel too. Throughout the paper, I will be referring to Marryat's and Phelps's novels in

the body of the text as TD (*There Is No Death*), DMM (*The Dead Man's Message*), SW (*The Spirit World*), GA (*The Gates Ajar*), BG (*Beyond the Gates*), GB (*The Gates Between*) respectively.

- [3] Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish spiritualist, established a distinct science based on the coexistence of immortality and mortality and the possibility of travelling to non-material landscapes or “geo-psychic places” after death.
- [4] Whilst at home, the protagonist Mary Cabot is repeatedly visited by the Calvinist church deacon Quirk; however, she finds no sympathy and relief from him after Roy's death, thus losing faith until Winifred's arrival.
- [5] Kucich coins “visionary realism” to signify a realistic “device that applies the techniques of social realism to spiritual visions” (75).
- [6] The most perfect role played by women according to mid-nineteenth-century American culture is marriage and motherhood. See Tiffany K. Wayne, *Women's Roles in Nineteenth-Century America*, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007. 1–25.
- [7] Although Bloom speaks within an early modern context by talking about acoustic subversion in relation to female actors on stage, her argument is significant to the paper's overarching discussion.
- [8] Elaine Showalter argues that hysteria can no longer be regarded as a biological or medical characteristic of the female body; it is a protest against social prejudices and construction of the female body as “hysterical” or sick, a resistant act also noted in the departure of the sick Mary, Phelps's protagonist in *Beyond the Gates*, towards heaven. See Showalter, “Hysteria” (286–345).
- [9] For more analysis of the moral significance or symbolic meaning of tables and Victorian objects, see Charles Bray, *Illusion and Delusion; Or, Modern Pantheism versus Spiritualism*, London: Thomas Scott, 1873; Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988; and Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987.
- [10] For further information on Home, his reputation and spiritualist séances or psychic performances, see Peter Lamont, *The First Psychic: The Peculiar Mystery of a Notorious Victorian Wizard*, London: Little, Brown Book Group Limited, 2005.

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