CHAPTER 5

Queering the Séance
Bodies, Bondage, and Touching in Victorian Spiritualism

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What is a Queer Séance?

The séance could be an awfully queer place. Female mediums might be bound together on a mattress in a darkened room, or a female medium and spirit might invite a third woman into their private space, disrobe, and invite that guest to touch their bodies. The Victorians understood ‘queer’, in its broadest sense, to mean non-normative, but also, by the end of the century, to define sexual relations between men. I would argue not only that the profoundly homoerotic acts between women often queered the séance in the former sense, but also that they began increasingly to suggest women’s homoeroticism, and, in this way, shifted the ground of the séance with particular effects. The goal of the séance—to uncover relations that had not been previously possible—authorised female mediums’ socially and spiritually ‘queer’ acts. This, too, was the means by which they authorised their own disruptive mediumship, non-normative gender relations, and social authority. In this essay, I focus on four famous female mediums’ production of flesh and blood spirits or ‘full-form materialisation’ and records of séances during the 1870s through 1890s, engaging both the practical strategies of mediums themselves and the experiences of the séance attenders or ‘sitters’. In that context I explore how the queer moments in relationships among women were far more fundamental to Spiritualism as a movement than we have previously supposed. I further argue that those moments were appreciated and valued by the community and that such practices applied pressure to the limits of ‘respectable’ womanhood. While several critics have pointed to the ways in which the erotic played an important role in Spiritualism (see particularly Owen 1989; Tromp 2006; Willburn 2006), no one has, as yet, explored the erotic relations between women in any depth or asked what those relations might have meant. Women’s homoeroticism helped shape the séance, and plumbing homoerotic moments can illuminate the potential for social transformation embedded in Spiritualism’s sometimes deeply conservative practices.

Let me begin by defining my terms. In this essay, I will address the homosocial, the homoerotic, and, more obliquely, the potential for the homosexual, as well as their impact on gender and power. For decades, critics have argued that the line between the terms in the binary homosexual/heterosexual is tenuous and
permeable: that, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s words (1990: 10), “the ontologically valorized term [‘heterosexuality’] actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of [‘homosexuality’],” and that slippage characterises the relations between these ideas. Even in our own cultural moment, the boundary between these concepts is often blurrier than we have acknowledged. In the period I discuss here, these concepts were emergent. Perceiving sexuality as identity-shaping, knowable, and stable are twentieth century sensibilities, as are ‘homosexuality’ and ‘heterosexuality’. Sharon Marcus (2007: 19) has shown that in nineteenth-century Britain, the homoerotic and homosexuality not only lived alongside heterosexuality, but that “our contemporary opposition between hetero- and homosexuality did not exist for Victorians, and that Victorians were thus able to see relationships between women as central to lives also organized around men.” While I am sensitive to Marcus’s caution to avoid treating all homosexuality or homoeroticism in Victorian women’s relationships as transgressive, I will explore potentially disruptive uses of the queer in the already vexing space of the materialisation séance. Here, I follow Ellen Bayuk Rosenman (2003: 5) in her argument that “because the consolidation of sexual categories has had serious political repercussions, it is instructive to see how they were evaded, even if only partially and on a local level.”

My argument is situated, therefore, against two significant backdrops. First, the séances to which I refer took place prior to sexologists’ articulation of the gender ‘invert’, an often internally contradictory conception of a mannish woman who desired women and one that was later often deployed to pathologise women's relationships. This does not mean, however, that prior to this time, women were assumed not to be sexually intimate with one another or that all of what we would now call lesbian relationships were closeted or shaped wholly by a rhetoric of shame and secrecy. Indeed, as Martha Vicinus (2004) and Sharon Marcus have shown, the Victorians understood sexual relations between women as real and possible. Second, the events about which I am writing were marked by a specifically Spiritualist sense of religion, Godhead, spiritual-material relations, and gender, a sense that grew out of a craving for physical contact with the spiritual and that neither Vicinus nor Marcus considers in her argument. While both authors engage sexuality and religion, Spiritualism likely did not emerge in their studies because it has typically been figured as marginal in studies of Victorian religion. Indeed, it has even been ignored, left out of surveys of faith in the period, because it stands at odds with some scholarly notions of Victorian religion.

The historical disregard for Spiritualism, which is at last being corrected, occurred in spite of the large numbers of people who described themselves as Spiritualists and the incredible reach of the movement into respectable