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Celebrating Medusa's Laugh: Phallocentrism, The Female Body, and Trance Mediumship in Florence Marryat's *Hannah Stubbs*

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<1>During the interlude of a play performed at the Union-Square Theatre in London in 1885, British novelist, Florence Marryat (1833–99), gave a speech to the ladies about what to do with men. Dressed in a red robe and an Oxford mortar board cap, assuming a masculine identity,⁽¹⁾ Marryat compared men with animals and suggested the possibility of gender role reversal.⁽²⁾ It was an audacious act for a woman in the late nineteenth century to re-define the positions of the sexes in a public venue, notwithstanding the considerable scorn the audience reserved for her remarks. Nearly a century later, feminist critic, Hélène Cixous, calls for a new mode of literary movement, namely *écriture féminine*, literally translated as feminine writing.⁽³⁾ In her influential essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous commands women to write for themselves, advocating for the use of the body to reclaim the female voice: “[I]isten to a woman speak at a public gathering ... She doesn't ‘speak,’ she throws her trembling body forward ... Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body” (881). Writing in conversation with the differentialist debate about separating gender from sexual identity in France in the 1970s, Cixous challenges the male control of rhetoric and bridges the gap between the female body and female authorship. She qualifies *écriture féminine* as a practice of writing predicated on the materiality of the body to affirm the feminine voice. Viewed in this light, the foremost concern of my essay is more than identifying Marryat's tendencies of appropriating the female body to make her manifesto for reform of women's role in the present and into the future. Situating Marryat's supernatural novel within Cixous's discussion of *écriture féminine*, I argue that Marryat confronts patriarchal deconstruction through her fiction writing about women's bodies that defy prescriptive femininity in fin-de-siècle England.

<2>This essay examines the political function of female mediumship in Marryat's 1896 novel, *The Strange Transfiguration of Hannah Stubbs* (hereafter *Hannah Stubbs*). I contend that the patriarchal authority the male characters in *Hannah Stubbs* exercise over women through appropriating the bodies of the spirit mediums reveals how public discourses essentialized female sexuality at the time. In the séance room, the female mediums suffer from male oppression but they re-appropriate their bodies to restore their feminine identity. While I do not make the claim that Marryat deliberately deployed the mythical figure Medusa to write her work, I propose reading the representations of female mediums in tandem with the myth of the Medusa deconstructed in Cixous's article. Cixous's reinterpretation of the Medusa as a symbol of male fear and female desire to conquer illuminates critical possibilities to analyze the portrayal of physical mediums as socially constructed and biased towards a phallocentric attitude on women. My thesis will be expanded with Judith Butler's theory of performativity as I further account for the significance of corporeal acts by the female mediums who repetitively perform gendered behaviour that contests existing cultural norms. As my concluding argument, I assert that Marryat embraces the idea of *écriture féminine* in Cixous's sense through writing about trance possession, that is the bodies of the suppressed women, in her supernatural fiction.

<3>As a prolific author of sensation fiction, Marryat launched her career with her novel, *Love's Conflict* (1865). From 1872 to 1876, Marryat worked as editor for the *London Society* (1862–1898)

and turned to playwriting and acting following her editorship. In the early 1870s, Marryat was deeply invested in occultism. Apart from *There is No Death* (1891) and its sequel *The Spirit World* (1894), which record her séance visits and people's supernatural experiences, she published supernatural novels, including *Open! Sesame!* (1874–75), *The Ghost of Charlotte Cray* (1883), *The Dead Man's Message* (1894), and *Hannah Stubbs*.⁽⁴⁾ At the time of publication, *Hannah Stubbs* was not critically acclaimed. For instance, G. Barnett Smith, a reviewer of *The Academy*, declined to call it a work of literature on the grounds that its weak, careless style failed to “commend spiritualism to unbelievers” (382). The reviewer at *The Dundee Courier* shared a similar opinion, writing that the novel would unlikely “commend itself to the Society of Psychical Research” (“Literature” 6). Likewise, H.G. Wells treated the work as “a highly dangerous and idiotic pastime,” deploring it in the *Saturday Review* as an “absurd book” and “far from transfiguring Spiritualism” (657). For these Victorian critics, *Hannah Stubbs* was mere entertainment and an unconvincing work to uphold spiritualism. The novel, however, goes beyond the mere promotion of occult beliefs and deserves of more critical attention for its prefiguration of the feminist tradition.

<4>Notwithstanding that twenty-first-century scholarship has sought to re-assess the feminist value of Marryat's fiction, in-depth critical analysis of *Hannah Stubbs* remains inadequate. In examining radical feminism in Marryat's supernatural fiction, Greta Depledge cites *Dead Man's Message*, *There Is No Death*, and *The Spirit World* instead of *Hannah Stubbs* as examples of Marryat's spiritualist interest (317). Another scholar, Catherine Pope, argues that Marryat establishes herself as an early feminist because her works anticipate the New Woman writing in the fin de siècle (3). Pope devotes a short section of her paper to explore the female authoritative voice, as embraced by the female medium, in *Hannah Stubbs* (148–50). To enrich existant scholarship, I contend that, as informed by Cixous's re-appropriation of the Medusa and Butler's theory of performativity, the operation of an alternative sexuality in the séance room is predicated on a corporeally enacted femininity performed by the female characters in the novel.

The Victims of Phallogentrism

<5>The representation of trance mediumship in *Hannah Stubbs*, consisting of a male spiritualist and a female spirit medium, follows the model of narrowly-defined female sexuality and the assumption that female supernaturalism is constructed around certain ‘natural’ feminine qualities. Male oppression of women in the séance room is based on descriptions about the nature of women in Victorian scientific and biological discourses that degraded women as physically and intellectually inferior and as a tool of reproduction. These female mediums, at the same time, are portrayed to possess superior powers because they managed to move beyond the confines of the feminine ideal through spirit mediumship. Implicit in these limiting yet subversive depictions of physical mediums is, however, an undervaluation of Marryat's political vision, which I shall uncover by reading her novel against Cixous's critique of the myth of the Medusa that has rendered the mythical woman a victim of phallogentrism.

<6>*Hannah Stubbs* centers on an Italian professor, Signor Ricardo, and his friend, Dr. Karl Steinberg, who conspire to trick the serving-maid, Hannah Stubbs, into being the trance medium for their spiritual sittings. Ricardo wants to conjure the spirit of his former wife, Leonora d'Asissi, whom he has murdered for her suspected adultery, because he wants to confirm her infidelity. As a medical practitioner who believes in empirical truth and evidence, Steinberg is skeptical about occult practices. But after joining Ricardo's séances, he becomes interested in the exploration of the spiritual world. When the men first discover Hannah's mediumistic potential, they exercise their patriarchal mindset to assume control over the process of developing the talents that Hannah has not fully mastered. In order to persuade Mrs. Battleby, the landlady who rents the room to Ricardo and who employs Hannah

as her maid, to allow Hannah to come to their rooms to conduct their séances, Steinberg attributes the inexplicable incidents of Hannah's power to her nerves, a condition called "hysteria" (Marryat 49). Ricardo and Steinberg describe Hannah's extraordinary ability to move objects as an "illness" that is to be cured with their method, claiming her as an object in their study of the occult and calling themselves "the pioneers of a new Science" (75). Mrs. Battleby is reluctant at first, but she finally gives her consent when the doctor pays her a generous amount of money to compensate her for the work that was to be done by Hannah during those hours. Thus, within the transaction, Hannah resembles a prostitute being sold to customers.

<7>Both prior to and during the process of spirit conjuration, Hannah is continuously subjected to the manipulation of the male characters and the spirit control. For instance, Ricardo and Steinberg "compose her" and slap her "on the back and [address] her with soothing words" in order to comfort her (56). When Hannah falls into an arm-chair, having lost consciousness, "a gruff, manly voice [speaks] at a distance of two or three feet above her head" and asks them to leave Hannah to her present state (56). The voice identifies itself as James, the medium's spirit control. The spirit control James uses Hannah's voice (i.e. her vocal organs) as a tool to speak to the others. When realizing that the men doubt his identity, James orders them to pour water into Hannah's mouth while he talks (69). Hannah, earlier on, still in a trance, staggers into the dark room where the séance is being conducted, with Ricardo and Steinberg forced to follow her. They find her "sleeping on the floor, her figure being thrown across the cushions" (57). They then creep up to her side and bend over her prostrate form (57). It is apparent that Hannah has been treated violently and the men's actions have sexual implications. Their behaviour to Hannah, as to be explicated later, is reminiscent of Poseidon's sexual assault on Medusa in Ovid's version of the myth. Since Hannah has no memory of what has happened in the séance, the men command Hannah to remain silent about what occurs during their sittings. As Steinberg advises his friend, "it would be better to persuade her that she has a species of St. Vitus's dance ... [B]etween the dread of being sent home again and the dread of becoming incapacitated for work, ... we shall manage to make her hold her tongue" (53–54). Exploiting her innocence, they believe that she should be more than grateful for having secured a job and a place of shelter.

<8>Although Hannah's mediumistic powers to conjure the spirits of the dead amaze the men, they see her as merely an ordinary woman who happens to possess supernatural talents which they are yet to harness. They only express interest in her as a sexual object, physically, socially, and intellectually inferior to themselves. This is particularly evident in their first impression of Hannah. Hannah, born into a lower-class family, is a most ordinary housekeeping maid at Mrs. Battleby's before becoming a physical medium. Ricardo describes her somewhat unattractive appearance: "a thick, ungainly figure, with a waist like a tar-barrel, and huge hands and feet" (26). He casts his male gaze over the different parts of her body—her "unusually developed" bosom, her "broad and flat" face, her wide mouth, her short and turned-up nose, and her coarse color—which are all "failings" to him excepting her "wonderful pair of grey eyes" (26). Later, when Ricardo sees Hannah scrubbing the door steps, he catches sight of her "rosy heels," exposed through the two holes in the stockings on her large feet, which to him resemble sour apples set on the edge of his teeth (37). Although he claims that Hannah's heels arouse only his compassion, and no desire to possess, the way in which his perceptions of her excites his physical sensations arguably has clear sexual connotations (37). His friend, Steinberg, refers to Hannah a spirit medium from whom they "may evolve great things" because she is just "an animal, with grand vitality and perhaps magnetism—with any amount of bodily strength, and no brain" (44).

<9>In my observation, the representations of Hannah's female sexuality are comparable to Ovid's retold myth of Medusa in *Metamorphoses* (8th A. D.). In early examples of Greek literature, Medusa was one of the three Gorgon sisters, or creatures with hair made of venomous snakes. Medusa was described as evil and fatal for her gaze transformed people into stone. As the only mortal Gorgon,

Medusa was beheaded by the Greek hero Perseus. Her head was thereafter used as a weapon to ward off enemies by different warriors as relayed in various stories (Hard 61). According to Ovid's recount of the myth, Medusa was originally a beautiful maiden before she was cursed and became a monster. Coveting for Medusa's extraordinary beauty, Poseidon, God of the sea, raped her in the Temple of Athena. Athena was enraged by Medusa out of jealousy and thus turned her hair into coils of snakes (Hard 61). Ovid's version gives an alternative, innocent image of Medusa, a victim of sexual violence. In spite of variations in her physical attractiveness and grotesqueness, Medusa had oftentimes come to be portrayed as a mysterious and malignant monster in multifarious forms of art, literature, and popular culture. Such an evil image is so invincible that it has laid the groundwork for the enduring myth in literary imaginations.

<10>In Cixous's view, the horrifying myth of the Medusa has to be dispelled as a phallogocentric view of gender differences for the traditional representations of her are constructed within the discourses of men. As Marina Warner pertinently points out, having endorsed Roland Barthes's view, the charm of a myth is partly founded upon "an air of ancient wisdom" shared by people who tell the story to one another in public. However, a myth vitally works by its "secret cunning," meaning that "it pretends to present the matter as it is and always must be, at its heart lies the principle, ... that history is turned into nature" (13). Whereas the circulation of myths might perpetuate certain of our stock notions and assumptions, Warner also reminds us that telling and retelling the story of the same mythical figure can lead to a dramatic change in the myth's original content and meaning. Newly told stories of the Medusa, in particular by Ovid, and re-interpretations of the old story, in the case of Cixous, might potentially unpack values and expectations institutionalized by the traditional myths. In Ovid's retelling, Medusa becomes a victim of phallogocentrism for the men desire to possess her body and her head. The mutability of myths, as Warner elucidates, indicates the evolving concerns considered by the myth makers and tellers within their social and cultural context (13). In her re-reading of Medusa's laugh, Cixous defends that Medusa has been misunderstood as a deadly, tragic figure because such depictions are grounded on socially approved standards pertaining to sexual differences and gender behaviour. Rather, the Medusa, as Cixous purports, is a symbol of male fear and castration threat: "[m]en say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That's because they need femininity to be associated with death ... They need to be afraid of us. Look at the trembling Perseuses moving backward toward us, clad in apotropes" (885). Men suppress women out of their fear of losing their authority. It is men's retelling of the narrative of the Medusa in which she has been turned into a monstrous being. Therefore, Cixous proposes not only an interrogation into the naturalization of woman as a dangerous category but also an empowerment of female sexuality by re-appropriating the female body.

<11>In the light of Cixous's reworked myth of the Medusa, the narrowly-defined sexuality of a physical medium, as demonstrated by Hannah in Marryat's novel, can be read as informing the feminine qualities being highly endorsed in Victorian popular and spiritualist discourses that assigned women a subordinate position to men due to their different physical structures. As I have illustrated, the male characters manipulate Hannah and appropriate her body for their occult practices in the name of scientific research. In every sitting, Hannah relies on the initiation and assistance of male spiritualists (i.e. Ricardo, Steinberg, and James), yet she remains passive and oblivious of the occurrences during the possession. According to Alex Owen's original research about the representation of women in nineteenth-century spiritualist writings, Victorian female spiritualism was constructed around "female frailty" and "innate female passivity," and that these 'natural' feminine qualities were regarded as negative characteristics "in opposition to so-called masculine will-power" (6-7). As such, it is a male-dominated perspective to attribute spirit mediums' power to communicate with the spirits of the dead to a 'natural' gift based on their female gender.

<12>The patriarchal views inscribed on the female body and psyche are virtually a camouflage for the Victorian essentializing scientific and popular discourses on women. In the Victorian era, it was generally held that Victorian women lacked creativity and the ability to reason. On the one hand, Charles Darwin writes in *The Descent of Man* (1871) that the “chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn by man attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than women can attain” (564). On the other hand, Herbert Spencer argues in *The Study of Sociology* (1873) that men, owing to their larger and better developed brain, are distinguished from women by the latter’s lower capabilities in “mental manifestations” (374). Women are thus not encouraged to pursue professions held predominantly by men. From Ricardo’s earlier degrading remarks on Hannah’s intellect inferiority, he clearly affirms male notions of the expected roles and behaviour of women as described in the scientific theories of their time. For Steinberg, women are only useful for reproduction. As he tells Ricardo, “I have not cared for women. I look upon the sex as a necessary evil—something without which the population cannot go on—without which, too, Nature could not exist—but as something also to be avoided as much as possible, and dealt with as little as maybe!” (Marryat 12–13). Assuming the production of future generations as a ‘natural’ duty of women was emphasized by biologists in the Victorian period. As delineated in his theory of evolution, Darwin stressed women’s reproductive role in the human behaviour of sexual selection: “sexual selection will give its aid to ordinary selection, by assuring to the most vigorous and best adapted males the greatest number of offspring” (*On the Species* 127). These male-defined attitudes are essentially endorsed by the physical medium, Hannah, in *Hannah Stubbs* before she successfully masters her ability to conduct séances in the later half of the story.

Bodily Subversion and Feminine Writing

<13>One may show sympathy for the Medusa in Ovid’s account for she has been violently deprived of her virginity, cruelly cursed by Athena who changed her hair into snakes, and mercilessly slain of her head. Regardless of the damage done to her body, Cixous unveils the patriarchal view underlying the myth motivated by male fear. She proposes revising the hideous figure to a beautiful, laughing woman who takes the initiative to possess and conquer. If such perspective is adopted, the Medusa resembles a *femme fatale*, whose eyes can petrify and whose hair can kill. In this sense, Medusa re-appropriates her female body for castration of men and thus reclaims a feminine identity that transgresses essential definitions of womanhood. In *Hannah Stubbs*, the physical bodies of the female mediums are subjected to men’s manipulation in the spiritual sittings. Nevertheless, the female characters deploy their bodies to move beyond gender norms and conventions. In particular, Hannah shows increasing resistance to patriarchy when she comes to control her mediumistic powers in the séance room.

<14>The transfiguration of Hannah from a submissive young maid to an independent and dangerous medium primarily relies on the supernatural power of the spirit of Leonora, who gradually replaces James as Hannah’s spirit control. With improved skill and confidence, Hannah begins to take more charge of her body in her sittings. For example, at the time when she is married with Ricardo, she expresses disagreements with conducting private sittings for him. Hannah shows “signs of insubordination” and “vehemently oppose[s] [his] desire” for she is extremely afraid to enter the dark room (Marryat 125). In one rejection, she adamantly asserts her will, stating, “I tell you, Professor, there ain’t many wives in this world who would do as much for their husbands. You treats [sic] me as if I had no feelings ... you must wait for your séance till I choose to give it you” (142). Feeling surprised, Ricardo reminds her of the ‘proper’ behaviour required as a wife. Subsequently, Hannah accuses him of only taking her as his wife so that she could be a medium to conjure the spirit of Leonora. Ricardo apparently upholds the notion of the Victorian feminine ideal that confined women to the domestic realm within the institution of marriage. Victorian women were generally expected to perform the role of submissive wife, maintain domestic order, and eschew their own profession. This

ideal, as noted by Lynda Nead, defined the gender norms for women based on “all the values of duty, fulfilment and moral purity which were commonly associated with respectable femininity” (7, 12).⁽⁵⁾ Therefore, in order to contain his wife’s body within the household, Ricardo directly rejects her request for conducting public seances as a way to maintain her financial independence: “you are not fit for such gathering. They only make you insolent and overbearing at home. I told you when we were married, that you would have to perform the household duties, as I could not afford to keep a servant” (201).

<15>In view of the ideal womanhood, Hannah’s offering séances to strangers and posing herself in public become acts that openly defy gender role expectations in the late nineteenth century. While I consider the feminine ideal a disguise of phallogentrism, men’s opposition to women’s (including their wives’) exposure of their bodies in spiritual sittings affirm their feeling of shame. When Hannah appears to be the center of attention in a public séance, her body is placed in a passive state and subject to male gaze. Yet, from the men’s point of view, if a woman exposes her body in public, it is the equivalent of transacting their body for economic benefits, which is similar to a prostitute who exchanges sex for money. For men, prostitutes represent “fallen women” whose manners and behaviour have deviated from the Victorian feminine ideal. Sally Mitchell contends that the “fallen woman,” as well as the prostitute, fails to comply with the nineteenth-century paradigms around women and “feminine purity” (x).⁽⁶⁾ The fallen woman has lost all “purity” and has thus deviated from womanly virtue and morality (x). The men’s reactions to Hannah’s appearances in public sittings suggest her failure to behave like a ‘proper’ woman. As Lyn Pykett elaborates, the ‘proper’ feminine signifies the ‘improper’ feminine, the “suppressed other” (16). She rightly points out that ‘improper’ women include those who pose “a subversive threat to the family; threateningly sexual; pervaded by feeling; knowing; self-assertive; desiring and actively pleasure-seeking; pursuing self-fulfilment and self-identity; independent; enslaver; and victimiser or predator” (16). These rebellious qualities are embraced by both Hannah and Leonora.

<16>This form of subversion of domestic femininity by the female body perpetuates when a female spirit is conjured and it reveals herself in its full form. The visually haunting scenes created by spirit manifestations produce the spectacle of transgressive womanhood. These full-form manifestations are aligned with late Victorian spiritualism that began in the early 1870s. During that time, two female mediums, Florence Cook and Mary Rosina Showers, practiced trance mediumship in front of an audience. With the help of their spirit controls, namely Katie King for Cook and several spirits for Showers, the two conjured spirits whose bodies were fully revealed (O’Brien Hill 333).⁽⁷⁾ In *Hannah Stubbs*, Hannah and Leonora re-appropriate their bodies to exert their haunting. To cite an example, the revelation of female body parts causes daunting effects on the audience in a sitting offered by Hannah. At this point of the story, Hannah has successfully transformed into a fine lady, and everyone in the room is astonished by the “stout,” “fleshly,” and “self-possessed” woman (Marryat 176). She looks “exceedingly well” in her attire: “a white dress, hanging in straight folds from her shoulders to her feet, and thus leaving her waist and general contour undefined, whilst above it [rises] her well-covered, pinky neck and arms—looking very youthful and healthy” (177). At this sitting, Leonora hiding behind the curtain reveals herself as the spirit control. To prove to Mrs. Atkinson, a member of the audience, that it is not a fraudulent act by Hannah, Leonora “[thrusts] her little bare foot beyond the curtain, for the satisfaction of the sitters. It [is] a lovely foot—white as marble, slim and smooth, and excite[s] the universal admiration of all the gentlemen present” (180). Given that Hannah’s feet, presently hidden from their view, would not be as small as the spirit’s feet, Mr. Atkinson shows slight impatience about his wife’s query and says to her, “you are making a fool of yourself! ... [A]nd if you can’t say anything more sensible, I’ll be obliged by your holding your tongue altogether!” (181). Mr. Atkinson’s intention to silence his wife reflects the gendered expectations of women at the time. However,

Leonora seems annoyed by the man's remarks as she "show[s] her feet and her hands, and smile[s] her saucy smiles for the edification of the male portion of the assembly, who [are] all ready to swear to her beauty and distinct personality from that of the medium" (181). While her smirk strongly reminds of the laugh of the Medusa, it is without doubt that the women use their bodies to draw the attention of the crowd, particularly exciting the men with sensual pleasure.

<17>Apart from her laughter, Medusa's petrifying gaze serves as a symbol of transgression and male threat. In *Hannah Stubbs*, upon first meeting Hannah, Ricardo and Steinberg abhor her ugliness, uncouthness, and brainlessness while being fascinated by her mysterious, wonderful eyes. Over time, Hannah overcomes her fear and would decline giving sittings to them. In one rejection, she casts Ricardo "a certain arch look that startle[s] him" (142). Hannah even appears to be possessed by an inexplicable, demonic force: she turns "a face upon [Ricardo], which he could hardly recognize as her own. Her usually dull eyes [are] blazing with passion—and her tones [are] loud and authoritative" (150). Later on, Steinberg feels shocked to see the "strange look in [Hannah's] eyes—half sensual and half cunning"—and her alluring tone when he offers to correct her accent (168, 173). The female gaze, which initially attracted the men, now imposes a profound impact on them. Despite the hints contained in her unusually threatening gaze, neither Ricardo nor Steinberg advance a timely alert to the dangers accruing in the young medium, who is no longer the innocent, naïve girl she used to be.

<18>In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous describes the Medusa as a myth that has survived centuries, "anchored in the dogma of castration" (885). Regarding the female mediumship portrayed in *Hannah Stubbs*, the transgressive behaviour by the female mediums can be said to exemplify the men's fear of their partner's infidelity, potentially posing a castration threat to male authority. As previously mentioned, the reason for Ricardo to conjure the spirit of his former wife is to interrogate her about his charge of her unfaithfulness. Hearing a rumor that his wife was having an affair with a young man, Ricardo stabbed her in the heart while the young lover made his escape. Ricardo remained disturbed by his actions because he did not allow Leonora to explain herself before her death. As the narrator reveals, she had been guilty of laying with her lover and "half-a-dozen other men" (Marryat 35). Her adultery inevitably subverts what was regarded as 'proper' femininity; namely, chastity and purity. When Hannah managed to conjure Leonora for Ricardo, the spirit maintains her silence without addressing his inquiry about her extra-marital affair. Her reticence effectively provokes his deepest guilt. Keeping the truth to herself, Leonora pretends to grant Ricardo forgiveness; yet, the realization that he had murdered an 'innocent' woman "[smites] him to the ground" and "[strikes] a blow at his heart" (137). Feeling devastated, he never recovers from this shock and remains in low-spirits from then on.

<19>The female characters conspire to evoke the guilt of the male characters through spirit manifestations. During one spiritualist sitting at Mrs. Battleby's lodging attended by Hannah, Ricardo, and Steinberg, the spirit control, James, conjures apparitions to demonstrate his power. In the dark chamber, a "faint filmy figure" appears at the door of the cabinet. Steinberg recognizes it as Mrs. Carlile, his former patient and friend. Mrs. Carlile lost her hand and her life due to a careless medical mistake by the doctor. He exclaims, "[s]he had her hand amputated—I performed the operation under chloroform—and she never recovered from the anaesthetic. Look! Don't you see her arm is without a hand! Good Heavens! I never thought I should feel a thing like this!" (83–84). Shortly after having a drink of brandy to calm down, Steinberg shouts loudly again for the return of Mrs. Carlile so as to ask for her forgiveness. The spirit re-appears, waving its left hand, nodding its head, and giving a distinct smile, but the doctor is "too prostrate for the moment to see anything" (84). Even though the ghost has not uttered a single word, Steinberg is literally paralyzed by the materialization of the spirit. The missing female body part profoundly haunts the male characters, who could hardly conceal their

apprehension in response to the spirit's appearance and actions. Hence it is possible to discern that this female haunting imposes castration threat to the men.

<20>For I observe that the physical mediums reclaim their female body in trance mediumship, the séance room is the contested site where the sexual codes suppressing the female voices are subverted. Spirit possession empowers the physical mediums to articulate on behalf of the suppressed women their desires and predicaments, as indicated in the cases of Leonora who speaks her vengeance against Ricardo and of Mrs. Carlile who demands Steinberg's admission of his fatal mistake. Speaking up beyond social constraints was definitely in defiance of the gender norms that discouraged Victorian women from expressing their opinions in public. Female mediumship therefore allows the mediums to acquire a different language beyond the confines of the gendered discourses created by men. The same effect works with appropriating a foreign language rather than the mainstream language. For instance, Hannah, having made significant improvements in her speech and manners, sings in French to show her delight. Overhearing her and feeling astonished, Steinberg relays to his friend, Ricardo: "I heard her singing, or rather humming, the air of '*Au clair de la lune*,' yesterday. Now, where can she have caught that up? It is essentially French" (139). *Au clair de la lune* is an eighteenth-century French folk song. Adopting a different language enunciates one from masculine discourses being imposed on women. As Rebecca Copeland notes, when a woman in a patriarchal society is denied her voice, or a language of her own, she has to "use the idiom of the dominant culture, even when using that idiom in defiance, brushes uncomfortably close to compliance and thereby diminishes the voice, the power, the protest" (52). The power of Leonora not only transforms Hannah but also restores her voice being previously denied by the male characters in their occult practices.

<21>In appropriating the metaphor of the Medusa, I intend to re-assess the representation of female trance mediumship in *Hannah Stubbs* in two aspects. On the one hand, as Cixous criticizes, the myth of the Medusa is constructed around a homogenous, dangerous category of the feminine imagined by men and institutionalized by phallogocentric discourses. In a similar vein, the gender identities of the female mediums in *Hannah Stubbs* are scripted and shaped by various forces at work, namely the Victorian feminine ideal and female spirituality portrayed in supernatural writings. The physical mediums are expected to act in compliance with the traditional masculine and feminine standards. This essentialization of women informs the patriarchal imaginings by men for fear of women's threat and castration. On the other hand, Cixous reworks the Medusa into a powerful figure who reclaims women's power and identity. Her refashioning invites a feminist exploration of how the radical spirit mediums move past gender constraints using their female bodies. To further give evidence of how the female bodies contest existing orders in the process of spirit manifestation, I will draw on Judith Butler's theorization of gendered performance and investigate how repetitive bodily acts discursively exhibit resistance to pre-assumed gender binary in the séance room.

<22>In line with Cixous's anti-essentialist perspective on the construction of gender identities, Butler contends that the female body is an imaginary construct whose meanings are primarily determined by the values, structures, and ideologies of the culture we live in. It is the effect of public discourses, instituted by power and knowledge, that affect our perception of the masculine/feminine division as a result of 'natural' sexual differences. In a society that regards heterosexual behaviour as the norm, we are inclined to perform the masculine and the feminine gestures 'correctly' based on the socially recognized gender logic. Butler reminds that "the power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentrism seek to augment themselves through a constant repetition of their logic, their metaphysic, and their naturalized ontologies" (*Gender* 44). In order to enact presumed scripts of gendered sexualities, we employ "bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds [to] constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (191). These identities are sustained through continuous corporeal enactments and discursive means. According to Butler, when the female subject

repetitively performs bodily acts that defy the cultural constructions of the feminine, she not only reveals the artificiality of the gender 'standards' but also radically deconstructs patriarchal notions of femininity. Butler describes this act of renewing existing discourses as resignification, a practice of performativity (*Bodies* 184). Performativity, as she elaborates, is "not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that ... it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (xxi). Butler thus concludes that seeing gender attributes and acts as cultural signification creates the possibilities "for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality" (*Gender* 193).

<23>Applying the theory of performativity to the practice of female spiritualism in *Hannah Stubbs*, I argue that transgressive womanhood is repetitively performed and materialized by the female mediums in their séance sittings. The séance room is where the medium attains the power to move beyond gender constraints. The word "séance," by definition, has its French origin "soir," meaning "to sit," which connotes a certain degree of passivity (Bartlett 273). Despite this passivity, a spiritual sitting, particularly given in a public venue, involves a staging act because the medium is positioned at the center of the performance, and thus becomes "the spectacle ... by performing certain actions demanded of ... by ... spirit visitors" (273). In every sitting, the physical medium, Hannah, throws her body forward, posing for spirit conjuration. The spirit control James speaks through her voice while Leonora manifests and reveals parts of her body to awe the spectators. The conjured spirits surpassing the death of their physical body return to haunt and threaten the men. These women perform a differently scripted femininity, showcasing a set of 'incorrectly' performed gendered behaviour. The female gender of the trance mediums is performed via a "repeated stylization of the body" in Butler's words (*Gender* 45). This gender is "political" for it involves acts governed by the regulatory gender norms in the culture of their time. Whether it is Cixous's re-framing of the Medusa or Butler's examination of gender trouble, they attest to the fact that gender identities after all are fabrications and performances.

<24>The gendered performances of the female characters come to an end when Steinberg finally discovers that his wife Hannah has been possessed by Leonora, who not only empowers her with mediumistic abilities but also manipulates her to poison Ricardo. In confrontation with Leonora, Steinberg asserts his role as Hannah's husband and declares, "I have promised to defend and protect her, and I will drive your hateful spirit from her body" (Marryat 271). Leonora admits to all her doings: "[h]ave I not shown my power over it already? Who but I prompted her to poison [Ricardo]? ... to defy you? to trick? to lie? to deceive?" (271). She claims to hold the men responsible for her possession of Hannah: "[h]ow could I have obtained such [a] powerful hold of her if you had not used this girl as an instrument to satisfy your curiosity concerning the mysteries of Spiritualism?" (272). Leonora states that she longs to "make [her former husband] feel the same misery he [has] inflicted upon [her]," so she returns to a human body to take her revenge (272). Steinberg is incapable of commanding Leonora to leave Hannah's body, and Leonora eventually escapes but falls off on her way. When Hannah awakes, she is entirely oblivious of all the crimes she has committed. Since she is physically too weak to survive, she dies in peace. The death of Hannah may appear to reinforce the patriarchal oppression of women; yet, I would argue that this ending reflects Marryat's reservations about representing completely transgressive women in her fiction.

<25>After re-examining the laugh of the Medusa, Cixous urges women to reclaim their identity in *écriture féminine* through writing about themselves and about other women: "[i]t is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence" (881). Given that women in the Victorian time had to struggle with pre-established notions of femininity, Marryat wrote about other women, about female spirit mediums, about the suppression of women, and about female empowerment. Marryat deserves to be

included in the feminine “economy” that Cixous mentions because Marryat’s fiction opens up alternative experiences to women of her time by giving “that there may be life, thought, transformation” even though it could be in the supernatural sense (Cixous 893).

Notes

- (1)Marryat resembled the famous actress, Ellen Terry, in her style of dressing. Terry had played Portia in the trial scene of William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer in order to save the friend of her lover.
- (2)In her speech, Marryat told her audience that her talk was supposed to be delivered in 1995. She asserted that “the men of the last century —meaning [the nineteenth]—were no better than animals” and the rise of women’s power meant that “men were now (1995) ... quite useful in the nursery” (“What” 4). She further declared that scientific advancements had rendered men “of little use” and that women could therefore go on to “sit on them” (4).
- (3)Cixous was a member of the French feminists who proposed the concept of *écriture féminine*. Along with other French theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Cixous calls for a subversion of the phallogocentric system of gender and sexuality by “writing from the body.” Another critic and philosopher, Julia Kristeva, argues for a psychoanalytical position to view the construction of a subject’s identity in relation to the mother figure. Generally speaking, French feminist theories from the 1970s to the 1990s are distinguished by a more philosophical and metaphorical approach.
- (4)Other women writers of ghost literature around the time Marryat was writing include Catherine Crowe (1803–76), Margaret Oliphant (1828–97), Amelia Edwards (1831–92), and Vernon Lee (1856–1935). Some famous male writers of the supernatural include J. Sheridan Le Fanu (1814–73), Henry James (1814–1916), M. R. James (1862–1936), and Charles Dickens (1812–70).
- (5)Nead adds that the ability to comply with these expected roles was described as “woman’s mission” (12). Her research focuses on the representation of female sexuality in visual culture.
- (6)Nead indicates that even though the notion of the fallen woman activated associations different from the prostitute, the distinctions between the prostitute and the fallen woman were not clearly made (96).
- (7)Trance mediumship during the Victorian era was not exclusive to women, but with notable examples of male mediums including William Eglinton (1857–1933) and Daniel Dunglas Home (1833–86). Tatiana Kontou notes a tendency for women to become mediums. Some unmarried women chose mediumship as their profession rather than confining themselves to the domestic duties in marriage (9). Janet Oppenheim indicates that a number of middle-class housewives engaged in home séances (10).

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