

**The Victorian Social Network:
Women Media in Technology and Occult Communications**

The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, The Occult, and Communication Technologies.
Jill Galvan. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010. 216 pp.

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<1> It is no secret to scholars that the emergence of new technologies in the nineteenth century altered the way in which the body was understood. As Tim Armstrong expresses, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a “particular fascination with the limits of the body, either in terms of its mechanical functioning, its energy levels, or its abilities as a perceptual system.”⁽¹⁾ It is not surprising, then, that discourses of that time incorporated and operated on bodily metaphors — many of which were concerned with the body as machine. Jill Galvan’s book, *The Sympathetic Medium*, is also concerned with the body, and how the body, through certain sympathetic qualities, can become (or function as if it were) a technological machine of knowledge conveyance. In particular, Galvan focuses on the “woman-turned-communication device” (1).

<2> Galvan’s book explores different textual representations of the female “communication go-between” or medium within history and literature in the mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries (2). As she convincingly explains, metaphors, language, and cultural perception unite ideas about emergent technology and the cultural fascination with séances. Each chapter, while dealing with different aspects and impacts of emerging technology and spiritualist ideologies, works to bring these two seemingly different concepts together as mediated communication. She argues that “women’s operating, typing, and séance channeling” are not “separate functions, but different expressions of the same one” (11). Through a nuanced and historically grounded analysis, Galvan explores how the language and imagination surrounding both notions are interwoven, and how both the technological and spiritual worlds are firmly rooted in the idea of the sympathetic woman as communication medium. The woman, culturally imagined as both sympathetic and automatic, is the imagined ideal for spiritual channeling and operating communication technologies because of her ability to be both present and absent. She is able to help connect people across places and spaces while seeming disinterested in and detached from the messages she communicates.

<3> Investigating these particular intimations about female media, Galvan points out and demonstrates through her analytical exploration of texts by Henry James, Anthony Trollope, Bram Stoker, Marie Corelli, George du Maurier, George Eliot, Arthur Conan Doyle, T.S. Eliot, and many others that the sympathetic woman is a “pervasive and versatile literary presence,” often revealing the female medium as vulnerable to the public or threatening to the privacy of the communicating world (2). Moving a step beyond the female medium’s role in a networked culture, Galvan culminates her study by exploring literature itself as a “relayed — mediated or channeled — communication” (18), successfully reading a text’s narrator as a mediating instrument between author and audience.

<4> While the Introduction offers readers a brief insight into these contentions, the first chapter explores in depth the sympathetic nerves of women mediums and their significance to communication. The Victorian mindset regarding information conveyance was focused around human inwardness, whereupon people transmit their interiors to one another. The wires used to connect technological devices were compared to the nerves of women. With their sensitive bodies, women were especially able to further such communication, with the added advantage of fading into the background. This trope was often played on in literature, but as Galvan shows, Henry James’ *In the Cage* (1898) works to accentuate “the dangers” the female medium “brought to the vocation or the vocation brought to her” (25). Moreover, in James’ narrative in particular, these dangers are tied to issues of class. Technology and spiritualism are conflated when James’ telegrapher “attempts to shift her own mind” from a worldly to an otherworldly plane of connection with the aristocracy (35-36). Her sympathy is revealed to be self-serving, a means for her to cross class divides. One notable aspect of Galvan’s reading is that it exposes the female telegrapher, whose job opens her up to communication with strange gentlemen, as a prostitute figure. At the same time, the telegrapher’s access to knowledge makes her capable of revealing private messages to the public world. Using Anthony Trollope’s “The Telegraph Girl” (1877) to further express “the sin of publicizing others’ messages,” Galvan shows how the medium’s sensitive body becomes implicitly tied into knowledge networks and transfers, and written onto class conflicts (55).

<5> Extending her argument regarding the medium’s sensitivities and the vulnerability inherent to conveying knowledge and feeling, Galvan turns to cross-cultural encounters in mediation. Going beyond the sensitive body, the second chapter examines more thoroughly the automatic state of the female medium in gothic literature. The female channel’s unconscious state, much like her natural sympathy, makes her vulnerable to foreign threats. While this fear undermines the medium’s ability to reveal secrets and knowledge, it compromises her security, “converting her into an entryway for sometimes menacing forces” (71). In what easily becomes her most interesting textual reading, Galvan connects the exotic, foreign other to spiritual weaponry in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). In an effort to reclaim the vulnerable (white) woman’s body, Stoker makes his female medium, Mina, the heroine of the novel. As Galvan points out, despite her ability to become an unconscious medium for Dracula’s nefarious aims, Mina defies the traditional view of women’s mental weakness; not only does her brain resist becoming submissive to Dracula’s telepathy, but the transcription work she does to share knowledge amongst her allies works to defeat the threat. This leads to Galvan’s contention that women must have a “personal and intellectual stake in the messages” they convey (86). In addition, Galvan reads Marie Corelli as the authoress figure, putting herself in the “feminized position of

communication medium” within her own novel-writing, investing the female medium with the intelligence of an author, and the author with the ability to mediate and transfer knowledge through writing (95). While intriguing overall, the chapter leaves the reader wondering how Galvan would position Stoker’s *Dracula*, arguably a complex mixture of mediated narratives, in the discussion of authors as mediating knowledge through transcription and character narratives.

<6> Galvan continues to examine the story of the “magical man who enters onto unwelcoming soil through an automatized woman” by closely reading George du Maurier’s *Trilby* (1894) in Chapter 3. In the novel, Svengali, the ethnic villain, uses his powers of mesmerism to transform the innocent Trilby into a human phonograph, which he publicizes for his own material gain. For Galvan, this use of hypnotism as recording technology is a way for du Maurier in *Trilby*, and in his other novels, to explore connections to “other people, worlds, and times” as well as look toward a future world (101). Trilby, as unconscious phonograph, not only takes dictation, but also reproduces it for others. In this way, Galvan argues that du Maurier’s phonographic unconscious “becomes a figure for probing new turn-of-the-century criteria for artistic production,” particularly regarding capitalist and aesthetic values (101). Furthermore, *Trilby* participates in future ideas of a feminine popular media. The author, through the mediation of the narrator, can extend an emotion, crafting a reader response that is hypnotic and mesmerizing, something Galvan interprets as prescient of the modern bestseller.

<7> Chapter 4, much like Chapter 3, considers the female medium in terms of publicity, by discussing her as detective device. Because the séance experience was dependent on a “dynamic of ignorance and knowledge,” of revealing and concealing information, it turned women into instruments for “probing and discovering” (135). Through a close reading of Arthur Conan Doyle’s “A Case of Identity” (1891), which features a typist whose typewriter becomes crucial in solving Sherlock Holmes’s mystery, as well as psychologist’s Morton Prince’s case study *The Dissociation of Personality* (1906), which depicts a “vexed rendering of his patient’s unconsciousness,” Galvan situates the woman as the ground through which the path of knowledge is uncovered (137).

<8> The final chapter of Galvan’s book takes a gender bend by shifting to discuss the figure of the male medium in the Victorian era. Citing Robert Browning’s poem “Mr. Sludge, ‘The Medium’” (1864) as an example, she argues that the depiction of Mr. Sludge as a “prostitute” and “exploited woman” within the poem suggests that the male medium was regarded as effeminized: lacking in virility, masculine control, and even self-presence. Amongst these discussions, Galvan once more highlights “mediation in literature” by analyzing George Eliot’s “The Lifted Veil” (1859), arguing that its protagonist Latimer is an emasculated narrator-medium who shapes the story’s transmission. She also turns the discussion to Rudyard Kipling’s “Wireless” (1902), revealing the narrative as a channeled communication that is a “complex, multi-station transmission” by which John Keats’ poetry is mediated within the text (162). She concludes by showing how T.S. Eliot re-genders mediation through his imagining the male poet-medium in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). Despite the presence of the male medium, and attempts at redeeming him in literature, the female medium continued to be read as the “essence of social intercommunication” (187).

<9> Overall, Galvan's text elucidates the vulnerability surrounding Victorian communication networks. The female medium's body is open to physical and mental threats, while still able to influence and upset private communication transactions, as well as complicating issues of class, race, gender, and narration. In addition, Galvan illuminates ideas of femininity within the nineteenth century as well as working toward "modernizing concepts of communication and knowledge transfer" (2). These ideas regarding women's relationship to knowledge transfer and dialogue clearly "haunt the present," as Galvan is eager to demonstrate throughout her text. She rightly points out in her Epilogue that examining the gendering of communication can provide new ways of seeing our own future (188). Indeed, communication as a network and means of human outreach and information-gathering is still an element of today's culture, one largely dependent on technology's ability to connect us across distant spaces and informed by nineteenth-century discourses surrounding the body, the occult, and the communication technologies of that time.

Endnotes

(1)Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 5.(^)