

***“The Spirits of Devils Working Miracles”:  
Spiritualism as “Modern Witchcraft” in New England, 1848-1866***

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1848 found New York to be a hothouse of religious and social innovation. In Seneca Falls, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other female reformers drafted the Declaration of Sentiments at the first women’s rights convention in American history; in Oneida County, John Humphrey Noyes established perhaps the most successful of the myriad communitarian projects in his socialist, “free love” Oneida Community; and in late March in Hydesville, New York, Kate and Margaret Fox claimed to have heard the mysterious “spirit rappings” that transformed the Fox sisters into national celebrities and heralded the formation of a diffuse cultural and religious phenomenon known as Spiritualism. Spiritualists, who claimed to have established direct contact with the souls of the deceased, articulated a radical religious and social platform that opposed traditional religious establishments and advocated women’s rights. Through their copious publications and popular public lectures and performances, Spiritualists attracted millions of passionate followers and invoked the contempt of many critics.

This paper seeks to understand the antebellum American Spiritualist movement in terms of the ideology and experiences of its members and the scorn it provoked from mainstream Americans. Spiritualism and the backlash surrounding it have received considerable attention from historians, so this investigation takes place with an eye toward America’s Puritan, witch-hunting past. In analyzing the motivations and meanings of

attacks on Spiritualism, I consider what lingering elements of Puritanism remained in the worldview of certain New England elites. It is my hope that this approach enhances our understanding of Spiritualism in antebellum America and lends it a greater degree of “deeper historical resonance,”<sup>1</sup> to use a phrase from Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, concerning the enduring presence of the “witch” in American culture.

The closest historians have come to engaging the presence of the witch in American culture vis-à-vis Spiritualism and other byproducts of the Second Great Awakening have been inquiries into the Salem episode as a metaphor or cautionary tale. But interpreting the witchcraft accusations of Spiritualists *outside* the metaphor of the Salem episode deserves attention. Some critics of Spiritualism, I argue, perceived the performances by Spiritualists as genuine instances of “modern witchcraft” and the Spiritualists themselves as witches. Not all antebellum Americans believed witchcraft was the relic of a bygone era of superstition and fanaticism, as historian Gretchen Adams would have it. Rather, for some, witchcraft lived on into the nineteenth century through the practice of contact with the dead and, therefore, continued to threaten America’s religious and cultural foundations. These commentators, most notably the New England Reverend William McDonald, considered the “seeking unto spirits” as “the same spirit commerce which is condemned by the apostles; the old testament calls it witchcraft, and pronounces judgment against it.”<sup>2</sup> While some dismissed Spiritualism as “mere sleight of hand, deception, and humbuggery,”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul S Boyer & Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed; the Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1974), 156

<sup>2</sup> W. McDonald, *Spiritualism Identical with Ancient Sorcery, New Testament Demonology, and Modern Witchcraft; with the Testimony of God and Man Against It* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1866), 155

<sup>3</sup> Humbugs (Laid on the Table): Letter to the Editor. *Christian Inquirer (1846-1864)*; Aug 27, 1853; 7, 47; American Periodicals Series Online

others were “convinced of its satanic character.”<sup>4</sup> The latter alleged that the “same spirits or demons...such as were present in the witchcraft of Europe or America”<sup>5</sup> were manifested in the practice of Spiritualism. When nineteenth-century religious conservatives like Rev. McDonald looked out at the rappings, table-tippings, and séances of Spiritualism, he saw them as the Rev. Samuel Parris had seen the witches of Salem in 1692: as “a manifestation of a diabolical menace which openly confronted”<sup>6</sup> the community.

Before showing how these findings point to a very real fear of witchcraft in the nineteenth century, I turn first to the pre-existing arguments and evidence. Particularly, I examine how Gretchen Adams and Marion Gibson interpret the presence of Salem and “witchcraft” in antebellum America, enunciating certain anxieties that critics of Spiritualism expressed when they invoked the symbol of Salem and its witches.

Marion Gibson’s *Witchcraft Myths in American Culture* is a literary historiography that, in part, looks at how witchcraft trials have been remembered by historians and by intellectuals in American culture. For Gibson this approach serves to elaborate on how witchcraft histories have been used as “a stick to beat other groups of Americans.”<sup>7</sup> In her first three chapters, Gibson argues that as American historians throughout the last two centuries have historicized witch trials “fact and fiction have complemented one another” in the service of a contemporary political or ideological message. Gibson relies heavily on Unitarian minister Charles Upham’s 1867 history of Salem as a representation of how the mid-nineteenth century American writers and intellectuals in general believed “that the

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<sup>4</sup> W. McDonald, 190

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 95

<sup>6</sup> Paul S Boyer, *Salem Possessed; the Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1974), 173

<sup>7</sup> Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths in American Culture*, 37

Salem trials had been the fault of the respectable citizens and clergymen of New England.”<sup>8</sup> Gibson’s work demonstrates how contemporary biases have seeped into and influenced histories of the witch in antebellum America. “A dislike of activist religion that promoted social change,”<sup>9</sup> she argues, manifested in the lessons drawn from Salem. In short, histories of witchcraft served as proxy meditations on troubling aspects of contemporary political or cultural developments. For Gibson’s nineteenth century Americans, the witch and the perceived threat to society of witchcraft were remnants of the past.

In *Specter of Salem*, Gretchen Adams sets out on a similar mission in that she deals with how Americans remembered their witch-hunting past. Adams, however, carries out her study of Salem-as-metaphor in a much more focused and thorough manner by limiting her work to the mid-nineteenth century. *Specter of Salem* argues that to Americans the metaphor of Salem was a “common *symbolic* point of reference”<sup>10</sup> (emphasis mine) that resolved cultural and political dilemmas in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The chapter of Adams’ book that focuses on the tensions and anxieties surrounding antebellum religious innovation and upheaval is most pertinent here. In it, Adams argues that the meaning of the metaphor of Salem from 1830 to 1860 emerged as a reaction to the impassioned revival meetings and radical religious factions of the Second Great Awakening. Salem provided a vivid historical illustration of the consequences of fanaticism and superstition taking hold of a community. In Adams’ assessment, religious innovations such as Spiritualism threatened the lapse of the established social and clerical order into a superstitious past negating the perception progress since the Salem witch

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<sup>8</sup> Marion Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 42

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 44

<sup>10</sup> Gretchen A Adams, *The Specter of Salem: Remembering the Witch Trials in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3

trials. Adams notes that critics of Spiritualism classified it as “*self-delusion* in parallel with the accusers and court officials of Salem.”<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, Adams concludes that “Salem’s witch hunt [was] a useful symbol to mark the cultural boundary between the virtuous national present and the superstitious, disorderly, and even brutal colonial past.”<sup>12</sup>

Adams’ work encourages the perception that by the time Spiritualism entered the scene, “Salem’s witches were long gone” as real threats and were characterized by historians or social commentators in the mid-nineteenth century as victims of the antiquated fanaticism and superstition practiced by Protestant extremism. In other words, and this is the crucial point at which my findings diverge with Adams’. The critics of Spiritualism did not believe in witches as individuals covenanting with the Devil to wreak havoc, nor did they believe in the power of the supernatural. Rather, it was this misguided belief in the power of witchcraft that had caused the Salem outbreak in the first place. When Americans looked at Spiritualism, Adams contends, they saw the same elements of “delusion” and “fanaticism” that induced the Puritans to believe in witches and thus partake in shameful witch-hunts. Spiritualism was a bane to society insofar as it represented a belief in the supernatural that American’s wanted to believe they had progressed beyond. “Progress,” Adams argues, “remained a chief concern for those who assessed Spiritualism.”<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, my own research has unearthed evidence to support this stance. An article published in 1852 commenting on Spiritualism and other “-isms of the day” relates the sense of progress and development that caused people to dismiss Spiritualism as lacking in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 84

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 85

credibility. "In old countries... miracles and vulgar witchcraft... were credulous," scoffed one writer. "But we naturally pass from the bondage of superstition. No cats and broomsticks for us, no witch gatherings in the glen. We have thrown off the shackles of the past."<sup>14</sup> Other investigations of Spiritualism during the mid-nineteenth century sought to prove that "the act of possession is *induced* and not of the devil."<sup>15</sup> Those who wrote in this vein identified the performances of Spiritualism as well as the "hysteria" of Salem "as a *mental* phenomenon... capable of being induced by ordinary agencies."<sup>16</sup> "Whereas it was formerly the Devil and the evil spirits to whom almost all mysterious and novel effects were ascribed," wrote one social commentator, "the devil occupies a place immeasurably less prominent than in that of former days."<sup>17</sup> To these critics, Spiritualism was a threat only in that it distracted from America's progress into a scientific, secular, rational era free from superstition.

However, I suggest that there was not such a clear-cut boundary separating 1692 and 1848 in terms of beliefs in witchcraft, the supernatural, and the presence of the Devil. These writers dealt with Spiritualism and witchcraft not in order to impart a lesson or a cautionary tale, but to warn of a very real danger to society. Progress was not the concern so much as was the presence of Satan and the destruction of religious and social foundation by his influence.

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<sup>14</sup> The Isms of the Day --- Spiritualism and Infidelity *National Era* (1847-1860); Dec 9, 1852; VOL. VI., NO. 310.; American Periodicals Series Online pg. 200

<sup>15</sup> Divination, Witchcraft, and Mesmerism. *Christian Inquirer* (1846-1864); Apr 3, 1852; 6, 26; American Periodical Series Online.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> History of the Supernatural in All Ages. *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature* (1844-1898); Mar 1864; 61, 3; American Periodicals Series Online, pg. 288

This stance is most thoroughly stated by the aforementioned Reverend William McDonald in his two-hundred page work entitled *Spiritualism Identical with Ancient Sorcery, New Testament Demonology, and Modern Witchcraft*. McDonald's work was the product of a series of lectures delivered to a number of ministerial and clerical associations in New England on the nature and history of Spiritualism. Published in 1866, *Spiritualism...Identical with Modern Witchcraft* is but a single piece of evidence, yet I believe it can be viewed as representative of a certain type of crusade against Spiritualism that gripped antebellum New England and thus warrants of extensive analysis. Having been commissioned for publication by "an association of clergymen at Bridgewater, Mass.," and containing published letters sent in by other respected New Englanders, we can safely infer that McDonald spoke for a notable portion of the religious community. In this work, Reverend McDonald made quite clear that the episode at Salem and other outbreaks of witchcraft that plagued America and Europe were not instances where the communities were gripped with fanaticism or delusion. Witchcraft was real, dangerous, and --most importantly-- threatening New England's ordered society once again via Spiritualism. "We have witnessed its phenomena, seen tables tip, seen writing executed in a mysterious manner, heard trance speakers, etc.," McDonald warned, "and from the first observations made, we have been convinced of its Satanic character." <sup>18</sup> "This strange system," he declared, "is older than Christianity, and has had its periodical developments in the past, and has always found fighting against God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent." <sup>19</sup>In the particularly incendiary words of a critic in another publication, "Spiritualism, with a gaping

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<sup>18</sup> McDonald, *Spiritualism Identical with Ancient Sorcery, New Testament Demonology, and Modern Witchcraft; with the Testimony of God and Man Against It*, 190

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 30

throat, like an open sepulcher, commits this imbecile folly [of infidelity] to an extent almost beyond belief. It denies every leading doctrine and fact of the Bible. From the bottom of its hoofs to the tips of its horns it is infidel. It is soaked and saturated with infidelity.”<sup>20</sup>

McDonald’s departure from the type of censure deployed by Gretchen Adams’ anti-Spiritualists stems from his perception of the “wonders” produced by Spiritualists. “Intercourse with spirits... moving tables and turning things up generally... rappings by the aid of unseen agents” were, he insisted, the real product of evil spirits. “There may be a difference of opinion as to the force or agent by which these phenomena are produced,” wrote McDonald, “but that they are produced... *without deception*, cannot be successfully questioned” (emphasis mine).<sup>21</sup> For Reverend McDonald, the Devil himself was the source of these supernatural incidents. In contrast to those who invoked mental or physical phenomenon, McDonald boldly declared that “Spiritualism is the work of demons... such as were present in the witchcraft of Europe and America.”<sup>22</sup>

Another assessment of Spiritualism situates it as a continuation of the work of the Devil throughout the history of mankind. A lecture published in the Southern Literary Messenger with the tongue-in-cheek title *A Lecture – Not on the Devil*, sought to prove that “every nation and every age has had its own devil.” The author mentions “that most interesting field of investigation, witchcraft, as one of the branches of Satanic influence.” Despite advances in science and technology, witchcraft, the article states, “still lingers,

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<sup>20</sup> The Theology of Modern Spiritualism. *The Ladies' Repository; a Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Art and ...* Jun 06, 1856; ~t. XVI.-, American Periodicals Series pg. 364

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 95



unexercised, even now, in this, the latter half of this most boastful of all centuries.” The lecturer makes a rather chilling statement when, after ridiculing those who “swallow whole tomes of gibberish revelations from living spirits, rapping out their ridiculous fan-faronade on tarnished mahogany,” he remarks on the “peculiar virtue in hanging a witch.” In essence this article seems to be written with a motivation similar to McDonald’s book in that it connects the practice of Spiritualism to the Devil’s presence.<sup>23</sup>

To grasp why Spiritualism engendered such serious backlash that focused both on Salem as a metaphor and witchcraft as a reality, it is necessary to examine its ideology. Two notable works pertaining to the history of Spiritualism lay out its philosophy, providing clues as to why the beliefs and practices of Spiritualism garnered such vitriolic backlash. Like other appraisals, Brett Carroll’s *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* contextualizes the phenomenon as an offspring of the social and religious ferment of the antebellum period. In focusing on its more sensational aspects, Carroll argues, historians have neglected its “religious dimension.” Most histories, he says, have seen Spiritualism as taking to radical extremes the liberalizing, democratizing thrust of the Second Great Awakening. For Carroll, Spiritualists’ anti-institutional, individualistic rhetoric was a “profoundly conservative middle-class concern for order.”<sup>24</sup> Spiritualism was not a repudiation of *all* authority, but rather an attempt to seek it in new and more fulfilling forms. To support his thesis that Spiritualists developed well-structured religious practices and central authorities, Carroll traces the movement’s theological underpinnings, analyzes its cosmology, and traces

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<sup>23</sup> A Lecture – Not on the Devil. *The Souther Literary Messenger; Devoted to Every Department of Literature*, June 1, 1860; 30, 6; American Periodicals Online pg 449

<sup>24</sup> Bret E Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, Religion in North America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 5

hierarchical structure within Spiritualist society. Although he drives a controversial thesis, Carroll's work is particularly useful for understanding the theological and ideological worldview of Spiritualism. Spiritualists owed much to the philosophy of eighteenth-century Swedish scientist, mystic, and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg who gained fame for claiming "the presence and activity of spirits on earth and the ability of human beings to revive religious comfort and guidance through communication with them."<sup>25</sup> Spiritualist ideology also drew on Enlightenment and Romantic emphases on "a loving deity, the inner divinity and consequent goodness of the individual, and gradual spiritual growth into divine perfection."<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, Carroll's interpretation situates the Spiritualist phenomenon as a continuation of the ages-old "desire to establish contact with a spirit world" and the uniquely antebellum search for "order and security" within a broad cultural transformation "from boundlessness to consolidation whereby Americans sought to *stabilize* their malleable society."<sup>27</sup>

Though Carroll goes to great lengths to show that the early Spiritualist movement was not as amorphous and radically opposed to religious institutionalism as it has been remembered, he does not doubt that the way they went about their unique "search for order and security" was threatening to Protestant orthodoxy and establishment. The "innate depravity, eternal damnation, and the aristocratic restriction of salvation to an elect few" inherent in Calvinist doctrines "offended the Spiritualists'... sensibilities."<sup>28</sup> Spiritualists dismissed the need for divine authorities to lead the laity towards salvation through traditional institutions. Rather, the ability of the individual to gain enlightenment

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 104

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 45

and spiritual perfection from contact with the “other side” made traditional religious practice obsolete. Thus, we can begin to gain a sense of why critics believed that the “heathenish absurdity of Spiritualism” threatened “the whole fabric of Christianity.”<sup>29</sup>

In addition to being an appraisal of “modern spiritualism,” McDonald’s tome was dedicated to historicizing “the witchcraft of Europe and America.” “We have been inclined to laugh at the credulity of the authorities of Salem,” he wrote, “but after giving the history of that period a careful perusal, I confess I have no disposition to make myself merry at their expense. Few persons who have not taken special pains to investigate that chapter in the history of New England have a just conception of its real character.”<sup>30</sup> By the *real* character, McDonald referred to the presence of a diabolical, demonic agency in colonial witch episodes. McDonald believed that other views of Salem –the kind that Gretchen Adams and Marion Gibson rely on to illustrate antebellum America’s relationship with its witch-hunting past – presented poor histories of the incident because they rested on the premise that Salem’s inhabitants were “bigoted and superstitious believers in the antiquated doctrine of witchcraft.”<sup>31</sup> Men “who had little faith in spiritual things” all produced “lame efforts” to understand the Salem witch episode because they refuted the presence of demonic forces. To McDonald, though, there was nothing antiquated or superstitious about the witchcraft in the history of colonial America. The same “diabolical influence” which swept over Europe during its witch-hunting era and produced Spiritualism in nineteenth-century America was responsible for Salem. In McDonalds view,

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<sup>29</sup> History of the Supernatural in all Ages. *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature (1844-1898)*; Mar 1864; 61, 3; American Periodicals Series Online pg. 288.

<sup>30</sup> McDonald, *Spiritualism Identical with Ancient Sorcery, New Testament Demonology, and Modern Witchcraft; with the Testimony of God and Man Against It*, 94

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

“New England witchcraft stands before us the elder brother of modern Spiritualism.”<sup>32</sup> The phenomena were related not in their misguided superstition, but in the presence of the forces of Satan. “We have no disposition to question the legitimacy of the supernatural manifestations that spurred the witch hunt” McDonald declared, “knowing as we do, that cases similar and analogous [i.e. cases of Spiritualism] are attested by evidence which we are compelled to regard as valid.”<sup>33</sup>

To McDonald, the mediums of this “diabolical” and “supernatural” manifestation and the young women who took on the role of accusers in the Salem witch-hunt resembled one another. Of course, many histories of Salem have fixed blame on the possessed accusers for being hysterical or prone to “nervous excitability” and therefore responsible for sparking Salem’s witch-hunt. McDonald, though, believed that “the persons who professed to be bewitched” were in fact “*in league with the devil.*”<sup>34</sup> Thus when McDonald and others like him looked around at female trance mediums such as the Fox sisters performing seemingly supernatural feats and in general acting like the “bewitched” girls of Salem, they saw characteristics identical to those whom they believed to be Salem’s true witches. *Spiritualism Identical to... Modern Witchcraft* declared that “the persons who professed to be bewitched were the persons who were in league with the devil, and not the persons accused by them.” They were in “correspondence with specters, or evil spirits, as thy themselves grant. This is a very gross evil, a real abomination, not fit to be known in New England, and yet is a thing practiced... by many [through Spiritualism].”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 112

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 106

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 107

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 184. Written in 1853 by Boston Unitarian minister Allen Punam, *Spirit Works; Real but not Miraculous* suggests a similar perception that the same forces responsible for Spiritualism presented themselves in Salem.

Though McDonald based his comparison between the possessed accusers of Salem and mediums of Spiritualism on a belief in a mutual presence of the Devil, a more rational historical analysis of the similarities between the trance mediums of Spiritualism and the possessed accusers of Salem reveals some striking similarities and allow us to understand why men like McDonald saw in trance mediums the same “vile and sensuous blasphemies” as Salem’s possessed accusers. Both groups of women were unconsciously using the “performance” of possession to contest rigid gender norms.

In her chapter on “The Meaning of Mediumship” in *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, Anne Braude argues that “Spiritualism’s greatest contribution to the crusade for women’s rights... lay in the new role of spirit medium.”<sup>36</sup> The most popular Spiritualist mediums were young women who entered into a trance state -- supposedly possessed by guiding spirits – to transgress the antebellum social taboo against females delivering public lectures. Many women who are now famous for their trailblazing feminism – Susan B. Anthony among them – attended lectures given by trance mediums and were inspired by their ability to speak publicly about controversial topics ranging from marriage to abolition. According to Braude, mediumship and spirit guidance allowed women to circumvent the structural barriers that excluded women from religious leadership<sup>37</sup> and “held up a model of women’s unlimited capacity for

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“The agonies and convulsions produced in those days [of the Salem episode]... were no greater than are often experienced now, and... have their parallel... in the cases of Mesmerism and Spiritualism.” “The old records abound in facts which might be adduced in evidence that Witchcraft is resolvable into Mesmerism and Spiritualism.” “Putnam arrived at a much different conclusion than McDonald’s, however. He made a *pro*-Spiritualism argument by claiming that the phenomenon of Spiritualism had manifested itself in various forms through history (including the possessed of Salem) and was therefore legitimate and “natural.” Until the nineteenth century, Putnam believed, Spiritualism in its various incarnations had been *misinterpreted* as the work of the Devil.

<sup>36</sup> Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1989), 82

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 84

autonomous action.”<sup>38</sup> Paradoxically, while mediumship offered women a unique type of attention and authority, it also reinforced nineteenth-century stereotypes of femininity. Trance mediums were “passive vehicles” who qualified by their “innocence, ignorance, and youth.”<sup>39</sup>

Carol Karlsen found a similar dynamic at play in Salem between possessed accusers of Salem and male authorities. In looking at the possessed female accusers of witches, Karlsen begins with the notion that “possession [was] a cultural performance, a symbolic religious ritual through which shared meanings were communicated.”<sup>40</sup> The “strange fits, grotesque screams, and prolonged trances” that indicated possession to Puritans were actually expressions of profound internal conflict; a struggle “to assert what their culture deemed unacceptable in women” and “an oblique challenge to both religious and social norms.”<sup>41</sup> Possession, in Karlsen’s view, was the momentary assertion of the witch within. Ultimately, however, the performance of possession represented capitulation to Puritan gender and class arrangements.

The exclusionary structural barriers that Braude argues female Spiritualists attempted to transcend were constructed around what Barbara Welter termed “The Cult of True Womanhood.” As the nineteenth-century American man was “at work long hours in a materialistic society,” women were “a hostage in the home.” By adhering to the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, the antebellum American woman was

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 85

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 85

<sup>40</sup> Carol F Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 231

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 244

expected to preserve the republic from the corrosive and corrupting influences of capitalism, materialism, and modernization in general.<sup>42</sup>

Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits* furthers our understanding of why Spiritualism was a platform for women to reject or subvert early nineteenth century gender hierarchies and ideals of femininity. Much of Braude's work revolves around looking at "the nature and extent of the overlap between the woman's rights movement and Spiritualism." In doing so, she puts forth an argument that sharply contrasts with Carroll's vision of an institutional, authoritarian, and restorationist Spiritualism. Braude emphasizes the movement as "providing a religious alternative that supported the individualist social and political views of antebellum radicals."<sup>43</sup> In this reading, Spiritualism had no official doctrine, leadership, or membership; it was more a diffuse cultural phenomenon. The "staunchly individualistic" essence of Spiritualism – i.e. belief that divine truth was accessible to individual human beings through spirit communication – made the movement into a vehicle for promoting social change; most notably, female suffrage and empowerment. For Braude, the uniqueness and appeal of Spiritualism lay in its distinctive brand of "extreme individualism." This was an individualism that, in her view, "never accepted the compromise with individualism"<sup>44</sup> that characterized the other contemporary social and religious reform movements. Notably, Braude thinks that Spiritualism also appealed to Americans who rejected Calvinist theology. The Puritan divines and their descendants in the form of various Protestant denominations promoted a doctrine of predestination, original sin, and hierarchy that did not appeal to Spiritualists' vision of a benevolent God

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<sup>42</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 151-174

<sup>43</sup> Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 6

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

and the essential goodness of human beings. Braude argues that “Spiritualism presented the most extreme version of the rejection of the Puritan view.”<sup>45</sup> In Brett Carroll’s work, the Spiritualists were men and women ultimately searching for the familiar security of a religious institution, but to Braude they are “men and women anxious to depart from the traditional social order and especially from existing gender roles.”<sup>46</sup>

The threat that Spiritualism posed to traditional social order and gender relations in American society was not lost on men like Reverend McDonald. Indeed, it played a large role in his case toward establishing Spiritualism as witchcraft that led to “immorality... the tearing down of all that is dear and sacred in our institutions.”<sup>47</sup> “There can be no doubt,” wrote a former Spiritualist whose letter McDonald included in his work, “that Spiritualism seeks to remove all the old landmarks which have been set up for the defense of morality, religion, and good order among men. It seeks to let loose a horde of lecherous, religious mountebanks upon the community, such as creep into houses and lead captive silly women, laden with sins, led away with diverse lusts.”<sup>48</sup> Spiritualists were further demonized for transgressing New England’s sexual norms. “Some of the most prominent Spiritualists,” McDonald wrote “have confessed that the strongest bond of union among them is the facility their association affords for sexual debauchery.”<sup>49</sup> Perhaps one of the most damning criticisms of Spiritualism came in the form of the accusation that it assaulted the all-important 19<sup>th</sup> century domestic sphere. “Already hundreds of homes, once happy, have been turned into earthly hells, filled with untold horrors,” wrote the husband of the famous

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 41

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>47</sup> McDonald, *Spiritualism Identical with Ancient Sorcery, New Testament Demonology, and Modern Witchcraft; with the Testimony of God and Man Against It*, 206

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 188

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 199



ex-medium Cora Hatch, “fathers and husbands wandering in the mazes of spiritualism in search of some jezebel who ‘calleth herself a prophetess,’ while wife and children are left to poverty, shame, and disgrace.” Spiritualists, “not knowing the true Christian plan of reform, set about the overthrow of the marriage institution itself, --- thus introducing a thousand evils under pretext of curing one.”<sup>50</sup>

The writings of Rev. McDonald and those who subscribed to his thinking suggest a belief in the presence of witches in antebellum American society that paralleled the beliefs of the Puritans in the seventeenth century. The grounds on which McDonald and others attacked Spiritualists mirrored those used by the clergy to identify witches in Puritan society. The Spiritualist of the 1850-60s, much like the witch of the seventeenth century, “explained attitudes and behavior antithetical to the culture’s moral universe,”<sup>51</sup> and was perceived as a heretic and infidel who subverted the hierarchical relations between church and laity and husband and wife. Most of all, the Spiritualist was a symbol of the struggle between God and Satan for human souls. If their “special friendship for and worship of the devil”<sup>52</sup> flourished, Spiritualists would destabilize New England’s well-ordered society by introducing “a new condition of society upon the earth, with a new religion, a new state, and a new order of men and women.”<sup>53</sup> These findings indicate a more complicated relationship between antebellum Americans (particularly New England religious elites) and their Puritan past than historians such as Gretchen Adams argue. In fact, the witch in antebellum American culture was neither simply a metaphor in a cautionary tale used to

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<sup>50</sup> “False Principles of Reform”. *New York Observer and Chronicle (1833-1912)*; Jul 15, 1858; 36, 28; American Periodicals Series Online pg. 218.

<sup>51</sup> Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 181. This framework for defining the Puritan witch is borrowed heavily from Karlsen’s work; 122-130, 181.

<sup>52</sup> McDonald, pg. 181

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 93

warn against contemporary religious innovations nor the symbol of the “brutal colonial past.”<sup>54</sup> Rather, the belief in the witch as a wicked woman in league with Satan to “break down all barriers considered essential to a well-ordered community”<sup>55</sup> persisted well into the nineteenth century.

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<sup>54</sup> Adams, *The Specter of Salem*, 36

<sup>55</sup> McDonald, *Spiritualism Identical with Ancient Sorcery, New Testament Demonology, and Modern Witchcraft; with the Testimony of God and Man Against It*, 206

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