

Spiritual Bodies and Physical Spirits in *The Undiscovered Country*

(ハウエルズの『未知の国』における
霊的な身体と身体的な霊)

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SUMMARY IN JAPANESE: ウィリアム・ディーン・ハウエルズは 20 世紀転換期のリアリズム作家として知られているが、当時流行していた心霊主義を題材とした作品、『未知の国』(*The Undiscovered Country*) をものしてしている。ヘンリー・ジェームズの『ポストニアン』(*The Bostonians*) との類似点も多いこの小説で、彼はメスメリストの父親と霊媒の娘の関係に焦点を当て、二人の病的な関係に踏み入っている。この論文では、作者の意図にも拘らず、この小説が 19 世紀心霊主義における重要な問題、つまり霊媒の身体と精神の問題を浮き彫りにしていることを指摘する。ボストンの交霊会の場面では、女性の霊媒が身体的・性的な存在とされることを描き出すと同時に、舞台の一部を禁欲主義を信念の 1 つとして掲げるシェーカー教徒の共同体に置いて、女性が性的な身体から自由になれる環境をも描き、女性のセクシュアリティの在り方の可能性を探るものとなっている。シェーカー教に興味を示すハウエルズは、女性が結婚制度の外で生きることによって得られる可能性を理解していたかのようにありながらも、「不自然な」生活形態に対する不信感を克服できなかった。ヘテロノーマティヴィティ（異性愛規範性）から自由なライフスタイルを模索していると読むことができるこの小説であるが、最終的には妻となり母となることを主人公に選ばせることで、結局、「正常」な選択が正しいものだと主張しているといえよう。

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In 1880, William Dean Howells published a story of a female medium, *The Undiscovered Country*. Dubbed the “Dean of American Literature,” Howells prided himself on painting realistic pictures of America, but the spiritualist scene does not look like one of the “smiling aspects of life,” which he recommended American writers to write about. As expected, the novel does not explore the possibility of spiritual communion; it is in fact a courtship novel, in which the heroine finds the right choice not between a bad suitor and a good suitor, but between a dubious life as a medium and a good life as a wife. Howells’ novel revolves around a young female medium’s growth into maturity by emerging from her father’s influence. *The Undiscovered Country* does not betray the impression of Howells as a realist; he appears to faithfully depict what was going on in late nineteenth-century America. It does, however, provide an important insight into modern spiritualism. The realist treatment of séances and spiritual meetings, through a courtship plot, paradoxically illuminates the very fundamental question of spiritualism—the relationship between mind and body, especially that of the female mind and body.

Part of *The Undiscovered Country* is set in a village of the Shakers—a religious sect that had flourished in early nineteenth-century America but is almost extinct today. Focusing on the image of the Shakers, I will argue, allows us to see the medium-turns-bride story as an exploration of the possibilities of a woman’s relationship with her own body and sexuality. Probably because of the author’s lack of interest in the spirit world, as in Henry James’ *The Bostonians*, a novel about the Boston reformist/spiritualist scene, the novel depicts the beautiful medium as having a very physical and sexual existence, instead of a spiritual one, exposing the fundamental contradiction in modern spiritualism. The female medium’s body becomes the site where all the questions about spiritualism, sexuality, and women’s rights are tried and investigated, illustrating the negotiations between body and soul, sexuality and asexuality, and mind and matter.

The Undiscovered Country follows the journey of a medium and her father from Boston to a Shaker community. Howells does not put the Shakers in the center as he does in *The Day of Their Wedding* and *A Parting and a Meeting*, but he does explore the life of spiritualists and the meaning of Shakerism through a character who pursues spiritual communion in both lifestyles. Focusing on the unfulfilled quest of a mesmerist, Dr. Boynton,

who is obsessed with the world hereafter, the novel examines his relationship with his daughter, Egeria. Egeria is under the control of her father, and released from it in a Shaker community, from which her suitor takes her away to marry her. The Shaker village becomes a place to reconsider the father-daughter relationship, the nature of spiritual communication, and Egeria's sexuality.

Howells' novel bears a particular resemblance in many regards to *The Bostonians*, a novel published in book form six years after the publication of *The Undiscovered Country*. James' treatment of spiritualists and the surrounding reformists is "cruel in its attacks on Boston life," as Marcia Jacobson puts it. According to Jacobson, the novel is "simply a variant of the career versus marriage," for, in the end, the "pretty girl torn between marriage and the woman's movement chooses marriage" (267). Yet her suitor and a journalist, Basil Ransom, and a suffragette, Olive Chancellor, see the same thing in Verena Tarrant. Verena may be a star medium or an ideal bride, yet is essentially a beautiful shell.¹

As a medium, Verena functions as a spiritual vessel, a more physical than spiritual existence. From her father to Olive, and to Basil, as Susan Wolstenholme argues, Verena is transferred to function as a "voice" that conveys others' ideas to the world. The novel uses the expression "to take possession of" to describe the relationship between Olive and Verena, and Basil and Verena, as if Verena were always to be possessed, either by spirits or by other humans. Her mesmerist father, Selah Tarrant, owns her to be "possessed" in front of the audience to deliver his thoughts. When Olive meets Verena, Olive takes "possession of her" with a "quick survey, omitting nothing" (62). As Lynne Wardley argues, Verena is "adaptable, accommodating, assimilative and absorptive" (645), for Verena's mediumship consists of her ability to accept a spirit or another individual to inhabit her body. Thus, Basil, while courting her, proclaims his distaste with her cause, as if to say her "contents" can be easily replaced as soon as he "owns" her. He plays a sort of mixture of tug of war and hide and seek with Olive, trying hard to steal Verena from Olive, and when he sees a chance he decides to "take possession of Verena, to carry her to a distance" (248) temporarily and then permanently.

In *The Undiscovered Country*, Egeria also is portrayed as a beautiful and perceptive young woman like Verena Tarrant. She is a pythoness with

“Medea-like beauty” (45) and “ethereal beauty” (139). She has a “beautiful, serious face” with blue eyes that shine with “unnatural alertness” (4). Egeria collaborates with her mesmerist father as a medium unwillingly, becoming a receptacle of spirits. Unlike Verena Tarrant, who plays a receptacle for three different persons one after another, Egeria’s “spiritual sensitivity” seems to be limited to her father.

In both novels, the suitors’ role is that of rescuer who saves the damsel in distress. As in *The Bostonians*, Egeria’s appearance immediately attracts her would-be suitor, an ambitious journalist, Edward Ford, who will eventually take her away to marry her. Hamlin Garland’s *The Tyranny of the Dark*, written about twenty years later (1905), develops a more obvious plotline of a suitor as the savior of the medium-heroine, as one can easily guess from the title. Viola Lambert tours Boston and New York as a medium, but she is rescued from the spiritualist circle by a scientist suitor, Morton Serviss, whose declaration of love and his “control” over her finally win her. Garland’s novel depicts the mesmerist, Anthony Clarke, as the force of the dark, who controls and claims to love the heroine as a substitute for his dead wife. *The Undiscovered Country*, too, suggests the spiritual world not only to be dark and unhealthy but also fraudulent, and the relationship between the mesmerist and the medium appears to be dubious in a similar manner—the father loves his daughter as a substitute for her mother. Although, as Kelly Richardson points out, Howells describes Dr. Boynton with sympathy, not as a villain or tyrant, he controls and binds his daughter in a suspicious way. In these medium-heroine rescue stories, a woman is a helpless victim under the spell of a dark force, only to be saved by a sunnier or “normal” bridegroom, yet with controlling power all the same.

In one sense, Dr. Boynton’s force may be even darker than that of Anthony Clarke, considering the implication of what the father seeks in his daughter—a medium that enables his communication with his wife. One character sees problems early on in the relationship between Egeria and her father. A friend of Ford, Phillips, tells him:

“The girl is such a deliciously abnormal creature. It is girlhood at odd with itself. If she has been her father’s ‘subject’ ever since childhood, of course none of her ordinary young girl interests have entered her life. She hasn’t known the delight of dress and dancing; she hadn’t had

‘attentions;’ upon my word, that’s very suggestive! It means that she’s kept a child-like simplicity, and that she could go on and help out her father’s purposes, no matter how tricky they were, with no more sense of guilt than a child who makes believe talk with imaginary visitors. Yes, the Pythoness could be innocent in the midst of fraud.” (109)

Philips believes Dr. Boynton to be a fraudulent trickster, which is not true, but he is right that Egeria is an innocent victim who is sacrificing her own life. She does not have the ordinary enjoyment of life that a young girl is supposed to experience: the joy of wearing beautiful dresses, of attending balls, and of having suitors. With her “child-like simplicity,” Egeria responds to her father with her utmost loyalty and love, and the “attentions” she receives are not from young men, but from spirits, séance sitters, and her father.

As the only daughter and the father, the love they have towards each other is so deep that the Boyntons are almost inseparable, and that love lies at the foundation of their relationship as a medium and a mesmerist. At one point, the loving daughter worries about her father who looks upset, suspecting something is wrong. Dr. Boynton questions his daughter about how she has learned it, and to that question she answers that she knows because she loves him so (60). Her ability as a medium reflects her desire to respond to her father “spiritually” by causing rappings or reporting spiritual communications, and Dr. Boynton’s desire to see the supernatural in everyday interactions forces his daughter to take the responsibility of a medium to the point that, as he later puts it, he plays the vampire to his daughter (319). As Kermit Vanderbilt argues, the implication is obvious; the father and the daughter are nearing incest through their spiritual communion, because his daughter is the conduit through which Dr. Boynton believes he can reach his dead wife. Dr. Boynton and Egeria, on their way home in Maine after leaving Boston, are mistaken as a young wife and an old husband at the train station by some Shakers, who find that repulsive, and later as a runaway from a reform school and her accomplice by the landlord of a tavern they stop at. Their relationship remains suggestive, but they seem to be overstepping the boundary of father and daughter.

This nebulous father-daughter/mesmerist-medium team suffers a critical blow in one of their spiritual experiments. The Boyntons decide to

leave Boston after an incident; in one séance, Egeria supposedly produces a materialized hand, but it turns out that the patron of the séance plays the hand. In that séance, the skeptical Ford grabs Egeria's hand to prove that she causes all the materializations, shocking her into losing consciousness. Disappointed in the prevalence of fakery, Dr. Boynton decides to quit the spiritualists' circle in Boston.

In describing the materialization séance episode, Howells must have used two sources. A revelation of a deception in materialization séances caused Howells as an editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* a serious problem in 1874-75: a woman came forward to reveal that she had masqueraded Katie King, a materialized spirit, when Howells was going to print an article by Robert Dale Owen, who insisted on the authenticity of Katie King. It was too late for Howells to withdraw the article, so he had to issue a correction in the next issue. The "grabbing" episode easily evokes an actual incident in England in 1873, when Florence Cook, who also materialized Katie King, was grabbed by a man called Mr. Volckman. Howells, with his bitter experience of the Owen incident, must have been especially skeptical of materializations. In his fantasy, *The Seen and the Unseen at Stratford-on-Avon*, Shakespeare and Francis Bacon come back to life and explain that materialized ghosts have some of the "penalties as well as privileges of mortality, of matter" (21), creating a comical moment and questioning the popular understanding of materializations. His suspicions are well-founded: materialization séances, which promise to transgress the boundary of two worlds, were most of the time fraudulent or at least high-risk demonstrations that caused more disasters.

On another level as well materialization séances were the site of transgressions. Molly McGarry argues that "part of the allure of this form of spiritual contact was physical contact itself" so "the séance offered the possibility of multiple boundary crossings" (104). Alex Owen points out "the spiritualist context and materialization rationale allowed for a remarkably explicit enactment of the forbidden" (*The Darkened Room* 216). Materialization séances put a female medium's body at center stage; their bodies were used and tested to prove, paradoxically, that the spiritual world exists. In that sense, spiritualism "blurred the boundaries between the spiritual and the material," according to Marlene Tromp, and "made social violations of all kinds possible" (68). At the expense of the bodies

of mediums, in many cases female bodies, the spiritual world may be seen and felt, and these mediums are reduced to their material bodies and sexual beings.

Thus, for Egeria, the first and last materialization séance exposes her to a multitude of dangers. In other words, the materialization séance (figuratively) materializes the issues that exist in the unseen world. At the séance, her material body becomes the focus of attention to be seen and even to be touched: she lets her hand be touched by a strange male, and she faints just to allow him to pick her up. This “materialization” puts Egeria’s sexuality at stake at two levels: one, her physical body becomes exposed and sexualized to the audience, and two, Egeria’s relationship with her father will go into another phase since she supposedly succeeds in “materializing” what lies in the spiritual world. Materializing what is expected in the spirit world may mean materializing Dr. Boynton’s love for his dead wife through his daughter.

The Shaker community in Vardley, a fictional town in Massachusetts, offers Egeria a place to be free from her physicality and her sexualized existence, when the father and daughter reach there by accident after their aimless sojourn. The Shakers, earlier known as the Shaking Quakers, arrived in New York harbor in 1774 from Manchester, England. Led by a poor illiterate woman and the wife of an English blacksmith, Mother Ann Lee,² after experiencing severe persecution they started building their communities in New England. What distinguish the Shakers from other religious groups, along with their well-known worship dance, quaint clothing, and furniture, is one of their tenets, celibacy, the rejection of marriage. The Shakers’ celibacy aims for a sinless life, or “angelic life” on earth by rejecting carnal sins. The members who want to marry have to leave their communities, because being a Shaker means being celibate. They do, however, including Mother Ann Lee herself, make it clear that they do not deny marriage for others, although that did not seem to appease harsh public opinion. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s dark and negative portrayal of the Shakers in “The Shaker Bridal” and “The Canterbury Pilgrims,” in which the Shakers are described as a group of cold and dispassionate people devoid of love and sensitivity, may reflect some of the criticism that the Shakers had as those who chose an “unnatural” lifestyle.

Howells, however, offers a more favorable account of the Shakers in *The Undiscovered Country*. The description of the village is based on the

experience of Howells himself, when he spent three weeks in a community of Shakers called Shirley, which he recorded in his article in the June 1876 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* and later published in his book *Three Villages*. In "Shirley," Howells writes his impressions, which, according to Edward R. Horgan, Shaker critics considered to be "an oversimplified, sentimental and ambivalent commentary on Shaker life" (115), and expresses his respect for the Shakers, while showing slight but persisting doubts.³ He admires their discipline and diligence and explains that the Shakers' "peaceful life" is seen as "refuges for those disabled against fate, the poor, the bruised, the hopeless" (74) and that it seems to him that "one whom the world could flatter no more, one broken in hope or health, or fortune, could not do better than come hither and meekly ask to be taken into that quiet fold, and kept forever from his sorrows and himself" (75). That is how Dr. Boynton finds himself when he reaches Vardley, and the Shakers warmly accept him and Egeria as "wayfaring poor."

Yet Dr. Boynton's interest in the Shakers is not simply that of a man who needs mercy. According to Edward Deming Andrews, the Shakers were the "forerunners of modern spiritualism" (175), for ten years before the Fox sisters became a sensation they recorded spiritual manifestations, which Howells himself acknowledges in "Shirley." In 1837, young girls in the Shaker village of Watervliet, New York, started exhibiting the sign of trance possessions and receiving visions from Mother Ann Lee. This spiritual revival, or the "Era of Manifestations," lasted about a decade and preceded modern spiritualism; Lawrence Foster calls it a "bittersweet time for Shakers," since it deepened the faith of many believers, but it also caused some important members to leave (*Religion and Sexuality* 70).⁴ Although the period of spirit manifestations has long gone for the Shakers at the time the story unfolds, knowing that reputation, Dr. Boynton pursues a couple of Shakers whom he encounters at the station, after overhearing them talking about the trend of spiritualism. Later those Shakers find them, as they are wandering aimlessly after they have missed the train home, and take them in as they would do to "those disabled against fate, the poor, the bruised, the hopeless," and Egeria, who has been suffering from ill health during the course of their sojourn, collapses as soon as they get on the Shakers' wagon. There Dr. Boynton and his daughter meet different fates that divide them, solving the entangled problem of spiritualism, materiality, and the father-

daughter (near-) incestuous relationship.

The Shaker community offers a haven for Egeria, allowing her to regain her health. Egeria's recovery coincides with her separation from her father; by the time she has fully recovered and becomes able to spend time with her father, she has lost her ability as a medium, and is irresponsive to her father's mesmerist power. The rule of the Shaker village plays the crucial part in their separation: in the Shaker communities, men and women live in separate quarters, engage in separate activities, and enter the meeting house for prayer from different doors. Families are not units in a Shaker community; Shakers do not commit themselves to their own conventional families, but to their enclaves called "families" or "orders." Robly Edward Whitson sees the cause of relative success of the Shaker communes—the last traditional Shaker member died in 1992⁵—compared to the nineteenth-century communitarianism such as Owenism, Harmonism, Oneida Perfectionism, and Amana and others—in their freedom from family/children values (158).⁶ For Egeria and Dr. Boynton, though they stay in the guest quarters, the period in the Shaker village offers a clear break from their too-close relationship. In a world that is not dictated by blood ties, and in an environment where women's bodies would not be sexualized, she finds solace and becomes healthy. At the Shaker village, Egeria, who has let her body function as a vessel to accept other spirits, takes back control of her body as well as her spirit, freed from her father's control.

For Dr. Boynton, too, the Shaker community provides a chance to unite his mind and body. As Egeria regains her health, Dr. Boynton becomes frail. In his sick bed, he ponders on his failure, and insists that the spiritual world does not gain enough credibility because of prevailing materialism, a "grosser materialism than that which denies; a materialism that asserts and affirms, and appeals for proof to purely physical phenomena" (367-68). His argument is consistent with his contemporary spiritualists, who believed their task was to "deplore and combat the materialism that they perceived as all too rampant in their time" (Oppenheim 61). And Dr. Boynton himself seems to fall victim to the force of materiality.

Materialism greatly affected the Shakers' history, too. By the time Howells visited Shirley, and therefore by the time Dr. Boynton and Egeria visit Vardley, the Shaker communities had already suffered from a severe decline in membership. The major reason behind it was of course the

essential system of the Shakers, celibacy, which requires them to have new converts continuously, but as postbellum America went through various social changes, including buildings of state-run orphanages, the Shakers did not receive many new members and the demand for the Shaker life dwindled. Contemporary journalists cited the causes of its decline, such as “overinvestment in land, a shift in emphasis from agriculture to manufacturing, and substitution of worldly products for Shaker-made goods” (Horgan 124). As Howells himself feels and experiences, the Shakers represent values that contrast with the fast-paced, fast-evolving trend in the latter half of the nineteenth century, so their slower pace of life simply did not appeal to regular people who lived in a more materialistic world. Some, however, disagree with the idea that the Shakers represent an immaterial, spiritual, and natural world as opposed to the material, physical and artificial outside world. Earlier, Charles Lane, a member of Fruitlands, which was adjacent to a Shaker village at Harvard, MA, was critical of the Shakers’ active involvement in trade with the outside world, believing that it showed a “lack of true simplicity” (Horgan 81) and the Shakers were quick to install telephones and electricity, and always willing to improve and invent appliances that would make their work more efficient. Yet it is true, as Howells sees, that the Shakers lived in a slower, less materialistic world. Their “heart to God, hand to work” motto underlies their work ethic, supporting the physical yet asexual aspect of their life.

As the Shakers’ decline was not simply caused by materialism, Dr. Boynton’s illness does not signify the defeat of spiritualism by materialism, or of mind by matter, either. Rather it indicates that he succumbs to his deep desire for the other world, finally breaking off the split between spirit and matter. Dr. Boynton’s pursuit of spiritualism ends in failure also in the Shaker village, because the Shaker brothers and sisters do not show much interest in his claim, and also because his experiment in front of them fails. It fails because Egeria has already reconciled the split between her body and mind: her body would no longer be used by her father as a receptacle of spirits. The answer to his pursuit will come to Dr. Boynton, when his body and spirit are in harmony in death. He does not find material evidence of a spiritual world by using and risking his daughter’s material body, and he brings his material body with him to enter the world hereafter.

Despite favorable depictions, the novel does not wholeheartedly embrace

the Shakers' way of life, for Egeria leaves the community to marry, rejecting the asexual life. In *The Bostonians* as well, marriage is given as the answer, instead of the asexual life, which Verena leads with Olive Chancellor. In describing Basil's sneaky courtship ritual, the narrator slips in the word "Shakers" to indicate Olive's life is also like that of the Shakers. When Doctor Prance sees him hovering around Olive's cottage, she reacts as if "it was as natural for Ransom to sit on a fence half a mile off as in one of the red rocking-chairs, of the so-called 'Shaker' species," in Olive's back verandah (302). For the Shakers were and are still known for their furniture, though the reference to Olive's Shaker chairs does not seem to have any particular significance at first sight. However, considering the tenets of the Shakers and comparing the similarity with Howells' novel, the narrator may infer Olive's asexuality by this reference to a Shaker chair.

Verena's life at Olive's house, in many ways, resembles Egeria's life in the Shaker village, for Verena is nourished physically and mentally away from her controlling and fame-seeking mesmerist father. From the first meeting, Olive impresses Basil Ransom as a "signal old maid," and he sees it as "her quality, her destiny; nothing could be more distinctly written" and he believes Olive to be "unmarried by every implication of her being" (16). Basil's impression is simply confirmed further as he and the reader learn more about her. Olive does not care about the issue of marriage, as she claims she has no "views about the marriage-tie that she should hate it for herself," (66) and she is not interested in the free love movement either, which Verena leans toward,⁷ suggesting her asexual/celebrate state. The Shakers' rejection of marriage, according to Whitson, allowed the "sense of freedom, dignity, and true equality achieved by sisters and brothers in the new open relationship of Christlife" (157). The issue of gender equality in Shakerism has been variously discussed,⁸ yet many agree that Shaker women could escape from the patriarchal authority that marriage would grant men over women, as Olive does in her "old maid" life. The impression of Olive as an cold old maid, with her white skin tightly drawn across her face, shows a certain similarity with the impressions of Shaker women reported by many visitors, who describe them to be aesthetically displeasing to the eyes.⁹

Seeing the connection of Shakerism and Olive Chancellor, "the signal old maid," through a piece of furniture she possesses, may not be quite as far-

fetched as it seems. In James' correspondence with Howells, he comments on Howells' *The Undiscovered Country* and expresses his opinion on Shakerism:

You strike me, once you have brought in Shakerism, as not having made quite enough of it—not made it grotesque, or pictorial, or whatever-it-may be, enough; as having described it too un-ironically & as if you were a Shaker yourself. (Perhaps you are—unbeknown to your correspondents & contributors!—& that this is the secret of the book!) (Anesko 152)

James complains about Howells' portrayal of the Shakers because he finds Shakerism grotesque, as he describes Olive Chancellor as a grotesque figure in the novel with her "pathological hatred of men" (Jacobson 269). One could speculate that James remembered Howells' treatment of Shakerism in writing his similarly-themed novel to suggest Olive's existence is as repulsive as the Shakers. Verena finds a safe haven at Olive's, like Egeria in the Shaker village, but Olive's possessiveness and coldness is exaggerated to the point that the "rescue" by the arrogant Southerner feels almost like a relief for Verena. Basil's figurative occupation of a Shaker chair can suggest the man's intrusion into the asexual feminist haven for the purpose of rescuing the damsel in distress to the world of heteronormativity—into marriage.

In a similar manner to that in which Basil takes Verena out of Olive's cottage, Edward Ford visits the Shaker village to court her and to marry her. Ford's accidental visit to Vardley brings him and Egeria together again and takes her further away from Dr. Boynton, who believes Ford has the power of "opposite control" over Egeria (279), before finally taking her away from the Shaker village. Getting to know Ford at the Shaker village places Egeria in a decisively different context compared to her former contact with Ford, when he grabs her hand without warning in the darkness. Egeria's body cannot be forcefully taken or possessed there, at least until she agrees to leave the village with him. Egeria's gradual expulsion from the Shaker village reflects Howells' view on Shakerism and women.

Although Howells sees Shakerism positively to the point that James mocks him as a secret Shaker, he does seem to have certain reservations, as one can see in "Shirley," in which he expresses an uneasiness towards their teaching of celibacy.¹⁰ He witnesses one Shaker woman's sister's visit to

the village with her baby, who becomes surrounded by the Shaker women. He observes: “Somehow the sight was pathetic. If she were right and they wrong, how much of heaven they had lost in renouncing the supreme good of earth” (113). Dr. Boynton does not agree on their “angelic life” either, insisting that the Shaker world is for a woman, not for a man. His assessment can find its support in the historical data, as Wergland points out the fact that more Shaker-raised girls stayed Shakers than boys, for “more women than men were happy” (55), as well as the fact that “equality was an important pull factor for women” to join Shakerism, while it may have been “unimportant (or even alarming) for men” (54). Dr. Boynton seems to agree with Wergland, for he argues that this celibate world away from the “normal world” is the place that offers women a non-self-sacrificing life. Unless she is happy in her sacrifice for those she loves, she would not be happy in the world outside. His statement is surprisingly feminist, for he is arguing that women in a patriarchal society must deny themselves as long as they are in relationships with men. His view seems similar to those of many spiritualists/free love advocates, who opposed the institution of marriage. Yet as I have argued, he contradicts this view by being complicit in sacrificing a woman—by using his daughter as an instrument of his lifework. Egeria’s life, therefore, outside the community as a mesmerist’s daughter, and eventually as the wife of a scientist, means a life of sacrifice. Regardless of the conclusion, the novel partially admits that the way of life for women is that of sacrifice in late nineteenth-century America.

The ending of the novel suggests not the victory of spiritualism or materialism, but a compromise, represented by Egeria and her husband’s yearly visit to Vardley, MA, while living in a suburb with her husband. However, the issue of a woman’s sexuality and body remains unchanged, since Egeria’s choice to marry and live outside the Shaker’s community indicates her renouncement of control over her own body. Egeria’s coming to terms with her physicality only prepares her to turn it over to a future husband, who transforms himself into a scientist, suggesting strongly that her married life, except when they stay in Vardley, is dominated by materialism. The celibate environment in the Shaker village is only a temporary haven for Egeria, who prepares herself to enter the world of heteronormativity. Howells lets us glimpse Egeria’s transformation after the spiritual world; she goes to the Episcopal Church and enjoys beautiful clothes. Others

suspect her to be a former actress, which is not far away from the truth. Her performing body is now not for her father and séance sitters, but for her husband and his small circle of friends. She is now allowed to enjoy material wealth, which Howells calls “the innocent pleasures of life” (418) this time. Egeria’s life is no longer that of spiritual sacrifice, but of material gain and sacrifice.

In *The Undiscovered Country*, the key incidents in the female medium’s transformation signify some of the critical concepts in nineteenth-century spiritualism. The medium-heroine is regarded and treated as physical matter that receives and delivers spiritual messages. Life as a medium threatens Egeria’s sexuality, for the materialization séance exposes her to the danger of physical invasion, and to an incestuous relationship. The mesmerist father and the medium daughter both have to renegotiate the relationship between them, and the relationship between their bodies and minds. The Shaker village offers the opportunity for both of them to integrate mind and body, but only the daughter comes out alive and (possibly) happy. Egeria leaves the Shaker community to enjoy marriage, a mixture of modest spirituality and materiality. Yet the novel also implies that Egeria’s married life is another sacrifice as an actress who acts the part of a happy wife.

William Dean Howells explores the spiritualists’ world to show its transgressions and potential dangers in *The Undiscovered Country*, and the realist writer ejects his heroine into the outside world in the conclusion. The Shakers’ image in *The Undiscovered Country* ties the issue of spiritualism and sexuality, as an experimental way of life free from the oppression of heteronormativity and patriarchal control. Nevertheless, the novel presents the Shakers’ life as a peaceful but depressing choice, so in contrasting effect it shows the normalizing ending—the medium chooses marriage over a non-conventional lifestyle—as a better choice. That “better solution” is limiting for the medium all the same—reducing her into physicality, just not to be seen in public, but to be owned and possessed by her husband in the privacy of their home—which is completely “normal.”

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Notes

- 1 Marcia Jacobson notes that the model of the medium is “at best a shadowy reflection of Victoria Woodhull (1838-1927)” (265) while others suggest Cora Lodencia Veronica Scott, best known as Cora Hatch (1840-1923).
- 2 Ann Lee is often called “Mother Ann” since she is regarded as mother to all Shakers, and is often seen as a female Christ. However, according to Lawrence Foster, whether “Ann Lee herself ever claimed such quasi-divinity is open to question” (*Religion and Sexuality* 28).
- 3 One of the major concerns is their celibacy, as I will discuss later, but Howells also questions the effects of their more relaxed lifestyle in the country and healthy diet, away from the “unhealthy” city life. He confesses that the “Shakers did not seem to [him] especially healthful-looking” and speculates only one generation cannot change the effects of the “common stock of an unwisely-feeding ancestry” (86).
- 4 For detailed analyses of the Shaker spirit possession and sexuality, see Susan McCully’s “Oh I Love Mother, I Love Her Power,” Chapter 3 of Lawrence Foster’s *Women, Family and Utopia*, and Chapter 9 of Glendyne R. Wergland’s *Sisters in the Faith*.
- 5 Out of twenty-three Shaker villages in the United States, most of which were located in the Northeast, several, such as Hancock in MA, Enfield in NH, Pleasant Hill in KY, have been turned to national historic sites and museums today. The last traditional member lived in Canterbury Shaker Village, NH, which I visited in 2012 and which was turned into a national organization in 1969 while the last surviving members still lived on the site. One active village, Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village, ME, which is also a museum, consists of new members that the traditional Shakers did not accept.
- 6 That was the reason why the Shakers were attacked, for people felt that the “Shakers contributed to the breaking up of marriages, the separation of children from their parents, and similar family disharmony” (*Religion and Sexuality* 31). Also this exact issue generated one of the strongest anti-Shaker critics, Mary Dyer, and the first well-known custody battle in the U.S.
- 7 As a daughter of Selah Tarrant, who once used to be a member of the “Cayuga community,” which easily reminds the reader of Oneida Perfectionism, Verena feels kinship with the movement at the other end of the spectrum in experimental sexual relations.
- 8 Foster questions gender equality in the Shaker communities in *Women, Family and Utopia*, citing the “economic division between the sexes” (33) and Wergland’s book, *Sisters in the Faith*, focuses on the issue, concluding the Shakers have achieved equality. Yet as she acknowledges, their equality is not what we think today, and that equality escaped the notice of many visitors to their villages. Visitors witness that the division of labor between genders was practiced in the Shaker villages, and assumed that men took the leadership roles. Howells seems to have seen it that way, for in *The Undiscovered Country* “elders” (male leaders) clearly show more power in the decision-making process in the community.
- 9 Visitors report similar impressions of Shaker women, including Howells himself. For more analysis, see Chapter 6 of Wergland’s *Sisters in the Faith*.
- 10 In his novellas, *A Parting and a Meeting* and *The Day of Their Wedding*, Howells deals with the issue of celibacy for a young couple torn between the world outside and the Shakers’ “angelic life.”

Spiritual Bodies and Physical Spirits in *The Undiscovered Country*

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