

Our Mother Who Art in Heaven: Death, Spiritualism and the Family in the Late Nineteenth Century

Introduction

The late Victorian period is popularly portrayed as having been one which witnessed the death of Christianity. Ronald Pearsall claims “God had been dismissed from His universe, and had left a yawning chasm.”¹ However, this takes a simplistic view of an age which explored complex themes and challenged long-held beliefs. Darwinism and its antecedents had stimulated intense and wide-ranging debate, and individuals were forced to question the very foundations on which their ideas concerning life and death were based. To question was not necessarily to dismiss, and, once the more insoluble aspects of Christian doctrine had been filtered out, what remained was not as secular as it might have at first appeared. As Julia Briggs writes, “Arnold may have heard the ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ of the Sea of Faith, but the ebb tide had left pools of new or renewed convictions, often of a magical or mystical kind.”² Although some of the groups promoting these “magical” or “mystical” convictions set themselves up in direct opposition to the established Church, many acted within or on the periphery of existing sects in order to augment a faith that was not fulfilling their needs.

For Dissenters such as the Unitarians, the Bible was seen as the sole authority, and they eschewed the mysterious or revelatory elements of faith. As Knight and Mason argue, they desired an “immediate and personal relationship with God and rejected the clerical intermediary.”³ Whilst some sects, such as the Plymouth Brethren, overcame any potential concomitant doubt by making their creed more rigid, others permitted an unprecedented level of psychological enquiry. Such enquiry was occurring in parallel with major scientific advances which affected the understanding of the material world. Consequently, people began to question religion and attempted to reify the answerable elements, nowhere more so than in the issue of death.

Tim Armstrong asserts that “modern physics challenged materialist thinking in which the universe [was] seen in terms of the mechanical action of solid bodies.”⁴ Matter was reduced to energy, which, it was established, could not be created or destroyed – it could only be converted from one form to another. The Spiritualism movement adopted these scientific findings to endorse their belief that the dead ascended to a higher plane and were contactable by those with mediumistic powers. *Glimpses of a Brighter Land*, one of many spiritualist tracts of the 1870s, averred: “Matter is essentially of earth, spirit of heaven, and spirit pervades all, and permeates through all matter.”⁵ Such ideas also permeated literature. As Dorothy Scarborough wrote in her retrospective on the period:

Man must and will have the supernatural in his fiction. The very elements that one might suppose would counteract it, - modern thought, invention, science, - serve as feeders to its force.⁶

¹ Pearsall, Ronald. *The Table-Rappers: The Victorians and the Occult*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004, p9

² Briggs, Julia. *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story*. London: Faber, 1977, p52

³ Knight, Mark, and Emma Mason. *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p11

⁴ Armstrong, Tim. “The Vibrating World.” *Modernism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, p115

⁵ A.M.H.W. *Glimpses of a Brighter Land*. London: Bailliere, Tindall, and Cox, 1871, p145

⁶ Scarborough, Dorothy. *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*. New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1917, p55

For some writers, the exploration of spiritualistic or supernatural elements was a cathartic process enabling them to come to terms with their own losses in an age where, despite progress, infant mortality was still high:

Spiritualism's denial of death offered a unique level of consolation to the bereaved. Messages frequently focused on the spirit's happiness after death, and continued concern for surviving family members.⁷

For a grieving parent, the possibility of instant resurrection was desperately appealing, as was the idea that family life could be continued across the divide by means of a séance. Dead family members could reassure those left behind and ameliorate their sufferings. In the case of mothers, they could continue to care for their earth children, and, in some cases, they became Delphic figures able to provide guidance from beyond the grave and offer a benign and benevolent contrast to the omnipotent God who had cruelly snatched her from her family.

This paper will consider how the rationalisation of religious beliefs and a continuing preoccupation with death in the late nineteenth century encouraged the growth of spiritualism. The radical anti-Christian spiritualist movement has been covered extensively by Logie Barrow, so my focus will be on the religious middle-class family and its struggle to reconcile faith and grief in the context of spiritualism. Whilst much has been written on death in the vast body of Victorian canonical novels, little attention has been given to the fiction and non-fiction work of lesser-known writers, such as Margaret Oliphant, Florence Marryat, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. This paper will examine their contribution to consolation literature, along with their own experiences of spiritualism.

Death

*He put our lives so far apart
We cannot hear each other speak.*⁸

Humphry House claimed that “a religion in a state of transition from supernatural belief to humanism is very poorly equipped to face death, and must dwell on it for that very reason.”⁹ However, the Victorians' preoccupation with their mortality was not simply a matter of apostasy. Although death rates gradually fell during the nineteenth century, recurrent epidemics acted as a memento mori. As Ann Braude writes: “urbanisation and industrialisation transformed death from an event that deprived the community of a unique social actor into a personal loss felt only by family and friends.”¹⁰ Queen Victoria's example of extended mourning influenced those further down the social hierarchy and death became a major industry in itself, with elaborate funerals and Elysian cemeteries. Although such rituals enabled the bereaved to remember their dear departed, they did not answer the salient question as to where they had gone. Florence Dombey, on demanding to know the whereabouts of her late mother is told “you wear that pretty black frock in remembrance of your Mama.” She

⁷ Braude, Ann. *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, p52

⁸ Tennyson, Alfred. *In Memoriam*. Norton Critical Editions. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004, p56

⁹ Tucker, Herbert F., ed. *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p110

¹⁰ Braude, p51

responds, tartly, “I can remember my Mama...in any frock.”¹¹ There was, then, a sense that some people required more than just observance of certain customs.

Keith Thomas in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* asserts that belief in ghosts has diminished as a result of it being more common for people to live out their full life span. Their role in society wanes and they fade away before finally dying.¹² In the nineteenth century, however, it was more common for family members to die in their prime, leaving behind a “social vacuum”. The notion of an afterlife helped those left behind believe that some issues could be resolved from beyond the grave. In an era where the prosperity of the higher echelons of society often depended to a large degree on inheritance, the demise of a wealthy relative who did not leave clear instructions for the disposal of their fortune could cause further grief and, indeed, conflict. In Mrs Oliphant’s *Old Lady Mary*, the eponymous Lady Mary is dismissive of the need to make a will, despite being over eighty, and her young goddaughter, also called Mary, is consequently left penniless when she loses her fight with mortality. Although she is able in spirit form to visit the house where she lived, the once powerful Lady Mary is rendered impotent and is unable to right the wrongs of her life. She is informed: “you are a great lady no longer.”¹³ Despite her inability to improve the material comfort of young Mary, they are able to reach a spiritual reconciliation and ensure one another of their mutual and enduring love. For both Marys, then, death is not final and they continue to have a positive influence of each other’s lives.

Lady Mary’s exit, typically for Mrs Oliphant, is not the traditional death bed scene, favoured by other Victorian novelists. The only immediate difference she perceives is the disappearance of her sore throat and she feels as though she has awakened from a long dream. It is only when she is confronted with a dead acquaintance that she realises what has happened. Margarete Rubik argues that death scenes in most other Victorian novels follow a particular model:

The descriptions follow specific ritualised lines and stock gestures, irrespective of the age, social position and status of the dying person. In keeping with this pattern pious persons take leave of friends and relatives with solemn last words, give final instructions for the benefit of the family, make peace with enemies and, in turn, ask them to forgive their sins and omissions. They say farewell to their loved ones with a final kiss and pass away gently, in hopes of heavenly splendour.¹⁴

Oliphant’s death scenes, on the other hand, are often “undramatic and without didactic intent.”¹⁵ The dying appear to simply lose consciousness and awaken, as if from a painless sleep, on the other side. This change in style suggests an appetite for something other than the traditional mode of death. Oliphant was challenging the received wisdom of the rigid separation of the spheres of heaven and earth and affirming that love would endure.

Although outliving at least some of one’s children was not uncommon during the nineteenth century, Mrs Oliphant’s experience of losing all of hers was particularly tragic. She felt herself increasingly alone as they departed one by one, and she was left to ponder what happened after death. Through her writing, she sought to console herself that death was not the end, and that her children’s lives were in some way still contiguous with hers:

¹¹ Dickens, Charles. *Dombey and Son*. London: Penguin, 1985, p77

¹² Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. London: Penguin, 1971, p723

¹³ Oliphant, Margaret. “Old Lady Mary.” *A Beleaguered City and Other Tales of the Seen and the Unseen*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000.

¹⁴ Rubik, Margarete. *The Novels of Mrs Oliphant: A Subversive View of Traditional Themes*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1994, p262

¹⁵ Rubik, p275

Where, then, are they, those who have gone before us? Some people say around us, still seeing, still knowing all that occupies us; but that is an idea I cannot entertain either. It would not be happiness but pain to be beside those we love yet unable to communicate with them, unable to make ourselves known.¹⁶

She struggles with her faith and continually questions whether God is indeed benevolent, having been tested to the utmost limits of her endurance. Despite seeking a revelatory sign from God, she concludes: “the heavens are to me as brass – no answer comes.”¹⁷ She never wavers in her fundamental beliefs, but finds her faith inadequate for the task. Conversely, Catharine Tait, wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury, was greatly fortified by her faith when she lost five of her children to scarlet fever in the space of a month. After her own death, a family friend was moved to comment:

How both her family joy and her family sorrow were leavened by that deep devotion which was her main characteristic was shown in the tone and look of unspeakable thankfulness with which she ever acknowledged the privilege, that of all the six children taken from her, every one, from the youngest to the eldest, had so passed from life as to leave not a shadow of doubt that they all went direct to the presence of their Saviour.¹⁸

Margaret Oliphant was consoled by the experiences of the Taites, but found herself unequal to their orthodoxy. As she wrote in her autobiography, “Oh, how thankfully I should take up my life again. How cheerfully I should finish my work if I could be sure of being like her.”¹⁹ The fact that Catharine Tait was exemplified as a model of piety suggests that she was the standard to which many aspired and did not necessarily reach. For the grief-stricken mother, established religious teaching, with its emphasis on providence, sounded hollow. Oliphant may have articulated the thoughts of many when she wrote: “My heart feels dead...when I think of all the mothers round me who are happy in their children, my heart cries out against God’s will.”²⁰

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who wrote a number of spiritualist novels to comfort those who, like her, were bereaved by the American Civil War, was especially concerned with the sufferings of women. She described grief as hanging over the land “like a material miasma,” and believed that women found dealing with grief more difficult because “even the best and kindest forms of our prevailing beliefs had nothing to say to an afflicted woman that could help her much. Creeds and commentaries and sermons were made by men.”²¹ In *The Gates Ajar*, Dr Bland is faced with the inadequacy of his own creed on the death of his wife:

[His sermons] were meant for happy days. They rang as cold as steel upon the warm needs of an afflicted man. Brought face to face, and sharply, with the blank heaven of his belief, he stood up from before his dead, and groped about it, and cried out against it in the bitterness of his soul.²²

¹⁶ Oliphant, Margaret. *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*. Toronto: Broadview Press, 2002., p6

¹⁷ *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, p123

¹⁸ Benham, W M. *Catharine and Crauford Tait*. London: Macmillan, 1888, p26

¹⁹ *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, p128

²⁰ *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, p37

²¹ Stuart Phelps, Elizabeth. *Three Spiritualist Novels: The Gates Ajar, Beyond the Gates, and the Gates Between*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000, p xv

²² Phelps, p121

Similarly, Amos Barton in *Scenes of Clerical Life* is the victim of “that terrible handwriting of human destiny, illness and death,”²³ when his wife passes away. Despite being a clergyman, Amos has no words of solace for their children. He feels utterly alone, and devoid of any comfort that might be gleaned from the idea of an afterlife. His only consolation comes from the humanitarianism of his parishioners. He describes his wife’s absence as a “blank interval,”²⁴ and his preoccupation with her grave indicates that he is concerned with the physical, rather than the spiritual. Faith in itself is simply not enough.

In *Dombey and Son*, Florence Dombey’s impassioned refrain of “What have you done with my Mamma?” is answered with a rather terse: “Died, never to be seen again by anyone on earth, and was buried in the ground where the trees grow.”²⁵ Young Florence is unimpressed with the summary description of her mother’s fate, and is consoled only when Polly produces an overwrought account of her mother turning into a bright angel and flying away to Heaven, where she was happy and still capable of loving her daughter. For many, it was difficult to grasp the finality of death, and there was a reluctance to believe that loved ones were rendered inaccessible. It was easier to imagine that life continued in some shape or form:

Why should it be a matter of wonder that the dead should come back? The wonder is that they do not. Ah that is the wonder. How can one go away who loves you and never return nor speak nor send any message – that is the miracle.²⁶

It was all very well to believe that they had gone to a better place, but this inquisitive and pioneering age of consumerism and scientific endeavour required immediate and empirical proof, and was frustrated by the inaccessibility of Heaven. As Mrs Oliphant wrote, “my heart yearns for sight rather than faith.”²⁷ There was, therefore, a reluctance to accept the irrecoverableness of death.

The emergence of teletechnologies made the idea even more tantalising. As Thurschwell writes: “the telegraph and the telephone suggested that science could help annihilate distances that separate minds and bodies from each other.”²⁸ The corollary of this suggestion was a belief, or at least a desire to believe, that since it was possible to communicate with people across great distances, it might just be possible to speak to the dead. Technology appeared to have provided a solution to the separation of death, and acceptance such a possibility required no greater leap of imagination than that demanded by belief in some of the biblical miracles. Indeed, one of the uses Edison predicted for his newly invented phonograph was to record the words of the dying.²⁹ Hearing the disembodied words of a loved one can only have reinforced the idea that death was not final.

Spiritualism

*Do we indeed desire the dead
Should still be near us at our side.³⁰*

²³ Eliot, George. *Scenes of Clerical Life*. London: Penguin, 1999, p110

²⁴ Eliot, p114

²⁵ Dickens, p77

²⁶ *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, p57

²⁷ *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, p41

²⁸ Thurschwell, p23

²⁹ Thurschwell, p23

³⁰ Tennyson, p38

Paradoxically, scientific progress seemed to increase belief in spiritualism; indeed, the many challenges to the materialist world view indicated that the idea of a tangible afterlife was not entirely fatuous. Specific technological inventions facilitated the emergence of certain types of communication with the dead. As Thurschwell writes, “the tapping spectres of the spiritualistic séances with their messages from the realm of the dead, appeared quite promptly at the moment of the invention of the Morse alphabet in 1837.”³¹ As the ability of the telegraph cable to span long distances improved, so did that of the dead to communicate with those they had left behind. Science and spiritualism could thus form a community between the living and the dead and ease the fear of unknown. Another Morse, this time the so-called ‘Bishop of Spiritualism’ J J Morse, explained that “spiritualism was really a method by which you are enabled to solve the problem of death without dying.”³² Death, therefore, did not have to be the end.

For spiritualists, death was simply a state through which we all pass on our journey to the next world. Despite the controversy it provoked, spiritualism was able for many people to mitigate the dread of death. As Alex Owen writes, “a belief in the naturalness of death and a certainty of the soul’s survival was a source of inestimable comfort to all adherents, but especially to the bereaved.”³³ For Florence Marryat, death was “only like going into the next room and shutting the door.”³⁴ Even those, like Margaret Oliphant, whose scepticism prevented them from embracing spiritualism, sought comfort from the fact that communication with the dead might not be entirely impossible. To her it seemed degrading to suggest that the departed spirit would communicate “with its nearest and dearest through the legs of a table”.³⁵ However, as Merryn Williams writes, “as her own need for consolation grew greater she became ever more conscious of the emotional continuum which led other seemingly sophisticated friends to confuse the levities of table-rapping occasionally practised in her own drawing room with naïve belief in the spirit world.”³⁶ Even the normally rational could appreciate the support that spiritualism could offer. If such beliefs were indeed naïve, they could provide much needed comfort at times of sorrow.

The fact that at least some were prepared to countenance the possibility of such a spirit world led Catherine Crowe to declare: “The contemptuous skepticism of the last age is yielding to a more humble spirit of inquiry.”³⁷ The concepts of time and space, it was suggested were at best “adequate fictions”³⁸ and, in the absence of a definitive theory, anything was possible. Whilst Christianity struggled to make its voice heard amidst the chatter of Darwinism, Spiritualism managed to align itself neatly with the new ways of thinking. The idea espoused by some spiritualists of the dead progressing through ever higher spheres emulated the theory of evolution, and the notion that human progress would continue even after death must have been enticing when the degeneration debates of the fin de siècle suggested that humankind was on a downward trajectory. As Owen suggests, “they were seeking to complement the laws of physics, not confound them.”³⁹ At the same time, spiritualism was uniting a number of

³¹ Thurschwell, p23

³² Barrow, Logie. Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebians 1850-1910. London: Routledge, 1986, p229

³³ Owen, Alex. The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, p95

³⁴ Marryat, Florence. There is No Death. Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2007, p192

³⁵ Williams, p126

³⁶ Jay, Elizabeth. Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p149

³⁷ Crowe, Catherine. The Night Side of Nature. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000, p8

³⁸ Armstrong, p117

³⁹ Owen, Alex. The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004., pVI

different denominations and blurring some of the lines that separated them. Florence Marryat enthusiastically proclaimed:

Creeds are some of the wickedest things on earth. They have caused more bloodshed, and wrangling, and hatred, and wrong, than all the wicked people put together. Do you suppose there will be any creeds in the spheres?...Not a bit of it!"⁴⁰

In her defence of spiritualism, *There is No Death*, Marryat trumpets Summerland, the ultimate destination of the spirits, as being "a place where every man may hold his opinion, and no-one is permitted to dispute it."⁴¹ Conversely, Christianity, in a case of Foucauldian reverse discourse, focused on who should be excluded from the Church, thus drawing attention to contentious issues and causing conflict.⁴² Spiritualism, however, was all-embracing, including everyone from British atheist socialists to American Calvinists, like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. The Church of England was doctrinally opposed to spiritualism and its apparent condonation of communication with the dead. The Archbishop of Canterbury asserted that "the higher spiritual phenomena are approachable by the way of faith and intercourse with God,"⁴³ and there was, therefore, no need for spiritualism.

However, for Marryat, the Bible "teems and bristles with accounts of [spiritualism] from beginning to end."⁴⁴ Despite being a Catholic, she was able to reconcile her spiritualistic experiences with her faith, even though the Church "strictly forbids all meddling with necromancy or communion with the departed."⁴⁵ In fact, her priest gave permission for her to pursue her research in the name of science. Oppenheim supports the suggestion that the established Church was able, in some instances, to turn a blind eye:

The marvels of spiritualism...might be just what was needed for the wasting sickness of the Anglican church. They might provide...the excitement, the sense of spiritual immediacy and efficacy, needed to draw Anglicans back inside their house of worship. A few Anglican ministers, in any case, determined that the aid proffered by spiritualism should not be ignored, and they were not drummed out of the establishment for their determination.⁴⁶

It was this ability of spiritualism to amalgamate scientific progress and religious beliefs that ensured its mass appeal. For the ordinary individual, the idea that there was a palpable and better world for their loved ones provided inestimable comfort. This was a new idea and one that was highly attractive to those lacking the unquestioning faith of Catharine Tait. As Florence Marryat claimed in *The Spirit World*:

If Spiritualism served no higher purpose than to dismiss this causeless fear of Death, and what comes after it, from the minds of men, it would accomplish what *nothing else has ever done before it*.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Marryat, Florence. *The Spirit World*. London: F V White & Co, 1894., p85

⁴¹ *There is No Death*, p3

⁴² Knight & Mason, p8

⁴³ *The Other World*, p68

⁴⁴ *There is No Death*, p13

⁴⁵ *There is No Death*, p19

⁴⁶ Oppenheim, Janet. *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p81

⁴⁷ *The Spirit World*, p23

Spiritualism could thus reach out to everyone, regardless of creed, and make the unpalatable more bearable, seemingly through the combined force of religious faith and advances in human understanding.

This palliative effect of spiritualism led to an outpouring of works, both fictive and apparently veridical. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps in *The Gates Ajar* likens spiritualism to a cup of tea in its ability to sooth and comfort.⁴⁸ Such was the novel's popularity in Britain, a Church of England Dean was moved to denounce it as "manuscriptural, sensational, and spiritualist in its teaching."⁴⁹ This and her other novels, along with the spiritualist tracts of the period, present a positive view of the afterlife and portray heaven as a happy community. Phelps thereby discarded the central tenet of her Calvinist upbringing which dictated that the majority of people had been damned by predestination and were going to hell. Her message of universal salvation in the hereafter similarly appealed to Quakers, Unitarians and, naturally, Universalists. Although perhaps spiritual rather spiritualist, Elizabeth Jay also detects "vague popularism" in Mrs Oliphant's attempts "to give topography to the world beyond the grave". She continues:

It is true that her landscape of the afterlife offers a curious mixture of Dantean allusion, travel brochure writing, and illustrations in primary colours occasionally obscured by the filmy mists of angelic presences.⁵⁰

For parents particularly, such a heavenly vision was appealing, as they were able to imagine their children to be in a better place. If they were able to give credence to spirit communication, they could also continue to interact with their infants:

These parents can now more fully realise that their circle is *not broken*, but that continual, loving communion is still carried on; and we believe we may give comfort to other parents who are suffering from like sorrow, by publishing the series of messages we have received from our dear little group in the Spirit Land.⁵¹

Tracts such as *Heaven Opened: Messages for the Bereaved from Our Little Ones* cited above encouraged the idea that families were inextricably linked to one another, and that nothing, not even death, could separate them. The writing is evangelical in tone and the content repetitive, as though offering a comforting and soothing refrain to bereaved parents. It describes "a cord, which appears like light or magnetism, and binds the family groups together"⁵² and suggests "direct communication from the dear little spirits."⁵³ Such warm visions were in marked contrast with bleak clerical sermons proclaiming that God's will had been done. A discourse such as spiritualism promoting everlasting love could, however, reach out to the bereaved and reunite them with those they had lost.

Family

*They can but listen at the gates,
And hear the household jar within.*⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Phelps, p81

⁴⁹ Wheeler, Michael. *Heaven, Hell, and the Victorians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p133

⁵⁰ Jay, Elizabeth. *Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p174

⁵¹ F.J.T. *Heaven Opened: Messages for the Bereaved from Our Little Ones in Glory through the Mediumship of F.J.T.* London: Progressive Library, 1870, p4

⁵² F.J.T, p61

⁵³ F.J.T, p4

⁵⁴ Tennyson, p68

For some, the strength of the family circle was such that nothing could break it, even the untimely demise of one of its youngest members. As Braude writes, “sentimental values and an increasing emphasis on the nuclear family as the focus of emotional life encouraged a rebellion against death.”⁵⁵ The Theobald family, who were not untypical of the period, lost seven of their eleven children, and sought comfort in the messages they conveyed from the spirit land. They described themselves, in an echo of some of the spiritualist tracts, as “connected together by a bright cord of light” and being joined in “one magnetic circle”.⁵⁶ It was as though domestic life has continued across the divide and Morell Theobald, the children’s father, recorded how they “came at every meal and joined in our conversation.”⁵⁷ Family life could thus continue undiminished, despite the intervention of death.

This denial of death smoothed what Mrs Oliphant referred to as “the roughest edge of grief,” with many of the communications from the spirit land depicting the happiness of the departed:

Through Louisa the Theobalds learned, to their great joy, that their babies were safe and continued to grow and develop in the spirit land. Louisa explained that they went to school in the usual way, acquired wisdom and learning, and became useful members of their community. She and a second daughter...constantly reassured the family that death was simply a veil that hid the reality of continued existence, and reiterated that they were united across the divide.⁵⁸

Death, then, became a state of mind, rather than an ending; a thin veil, rather than a final curtain. Furthermore, parents’ guilt that they were somehow instrumental in the premature demise of their infants could be assuaged by a timely spiritual intervention. Morell Theobald and his wife were greatly relieved to learn that their daughter Louisa’s death had not resulted from her catching a cold whilst riding her pony, and was instead the result of a lingering childhood illness and therefore providential. In such situations, spiritualism could salve the conscience and resolve any issues surrounding sudden deaths. Florence Marryat’s dead daughter, also called Florence, was able to give her a sense of being needed by informing her “I want to feel I have a mother still” and assured her that continued communication would improve her happiness.⁵⁹ Mrs Oliphant, with no such connections with the spirit land, had nothing to temper the prejudice against intellectual women which suggested that her prodigious literary output had contributed to the early deaths of her children. Mary Howitt had warned her that babies could be born with defective hearts if their mothers performed “too much mental work” during pregnancy.⁶⁰ She was unable to assuage her guilt and felt completely bereft once her children had departed, writing: “I have no child. I am a mother childless.”⁶¹

As Carol Denver writes “mothers were often a source of transgression rather than a passive ideal”; in their absence, however, they can be “constructed retrospectively as virtuous.”⁶² Although hers is a feminist argument based on the Freudian idea represented in many Victorian

⁵⁵ Braude, p52

⁵⁶ Owen, p84

⁵⁷ Theobald, Morell. Spirit Workers in the Home Circle: An Autobiographic Narrative of Psychic Phenomena in Family Daily Life Extending over a Period of Twenty Years. London: T Fisher Unwin, 1887, p19

⁵⁸ Owen, p84

⁵⁹ *There is No Death*, p67

⁶⁰ Oppenheim, Janet. Shattered Nerves: Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p198

⁶¹ *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, p121

⁶² Denver, p130

novels that domesticity begins after the death of the mother, Spiritualist literature enabled not only her reconstruction, but also her apotheosis. Many of the spiritualist tracts portray departed mothers as benevolent maternal spirits, continuing to care for their own and other families from the other side of the veil.

My dear mother was surrounded by little children and young people, who looked to her for knowledge and instruction, and hung on to her words and treasured them up in their minds as jewels of priceless value. I thought her beautiful upon earth, but here she is exquisitely lovely, youthful, and graceful; her long golden hair floats around her, forming clouds of loveliness and glory, her robes are of spotless white, and all around seems pure and spotless, and unsullied by evil.⁶³

In Florence Marryat's novel *The Dead Man's Message*, the late Susan Aldwyn continues to watch over her children and manifests herself in a photograph to draw attention to her daughter's unfortunate choice of suitor. Her husband, the recently deceased Professor Aldwyn, finds himself sidelined and lacking in authority when he discovers that his earthly powers are negated in the afterlife. Susan also watches over the Professor's second wife to support her in her trials, and he is horrified by this spiritual sorority.⁶⁴ She finds herself in an elevated position, physically and metaphorically looking down on the man who was once her lord and master. Whilst he is forced to atone for the sins committed during his time on earth before he can enjoy the benefits of the spirit world, Susan's virtue has been rewarded by the complexion of a twenty-year-old and a partner more worthy of her wifely devotions. The Professor is confronted with his lack of parental responsibility and encouraged to avail himself of any opportunity to remedy his mistakes in the next life. At the novel's conclusion, he is described as a "repentant child,"⁶⁵ relegated to the lowest position in the family unit.

In Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Gates Opened*, Doctor Thorne, formerly an inveterate man of science, realises the limits of his knowledge. His son, having recently joined him in Heaven is perturbed when his father is unable to teach him to sing. "I thought boys' fathers knew everything," he objects, discovering that his own is able to impart only Gradgrindian facts.⁶⁶ The Doctor finally admits "your father is not a learned man."⁶⁷ He is confounded by the power of fellow spirit Mrs Faith's love for her son and how this has proved stronger than his medical reasoning. Mrs Faith, both by her actions and her name, demonstrates the importance of not relying on science alone. The Doctor finds himself "unmanned" by events and is further perplexed by his sudden childcare responsibilities. His medical training has not prepared him for the complexities of preparing an evening meal and other hitherto feminine cares, and he is reliant upon Mrs Faith to point out the obvious.⁶⁸ Concepts of the afterlife could thus reshape family dynamics and suggested that whilst parents might escape responsibility on earth, they would be called to account in the hereafter.

Just as God's authority and omnipotence was being questioned, so was that of the father in the microcosm of the family. Spiritualism represented a challenge to the vengeful Jehovah-style father synonymous with the nineteenth century. As Oppenheim writes, "the angry God was another remnant of ancient paganism, to be swept aside by the truly modern religion of progressive spiritualism."⁶⁹ People were starting to question the authority not only of their

⁶³ A.M.H.W, p43

⁶⁴ *The Dead Man's Message*, p64

⁶⁵ *The Dead Man's Message*, p122

⁶⁶ Phelps, p325

⁶⁷ Phelps, p329

⁶⁸ Phelps, p303

⁶⁹ *The Other World*, p95

fathers and husbands, but also of God himself. Dickerson writes that “women writers contributed to the tremendous output of ghost stories that provided a counter to the scientism, scepticism, and materialism of the age.”⁷⁰ One could go further and assert that they also countered the long-held belief in an omniscient transcendental deity, and his temporal representative in the home. Both spiritualism itself and some of the literature it inspired allowed writers to experiment with ideas concerning gender. Spiritualism implied that whatever inequities existed on the temporal plane, might well be redressed in the afterlife.

In many of Margaret Oliphant’s *Tales of the Seen and the Unseen*, the male characters, just like Phelps’ Doctor Thorne and Marryat’s Professor Aldwyn, are confronted with the inadequacy of their masculine materialist knowledge and the arrogance it engenders. They are forced to rely instead on “humility, tolerance, love, care and forgiveness – all the virtues which the age prescribed to the feminine sphere, the realm of the mother.”⁷¹ Whilst many of the men interpret women’s spiritual receptivity as gullibility, Oliphant portrays it as a strength which should be seen as complimentary, rather than as a threat. It is only when her male characters are in a weakened state and their natural rationality is suppressed that they are able to “see”. In *A Belaguered City*, where the dead rise up to confront the living with their sins, the scales fall from their eyes only temporarily and, once the ghosts have departed, the inhabitants soon return to the depths of materialism. At the end of the tale, the town’s mayor Monsieur Dupin is disparaging about what he regards as superstition and gullibility on the part of the womenfolk. Unlike his wife, he was unable to see the ghost of their dead daughter, Marie. However, as he fumbles both physically and metaphorically in the darkness, he spies an olive branch hanging from her veiled portrait. This symbol suggests that peace can be achieved if only men are prepared to come together in a spirit of sympathy and tolerance.

There is a sense that Oliphant herself felt that a union between the maternalism of spiritualism and the strength of Christianity would offer the ideal religion. Throughout her supernatural fiction, ineffectual clergymen and doctors are emasculated by women whose perspicacity and intuition prove superior in times of crisis. The extraordinary emotional suffering she endured undermined her faith in a benign God, and she sought something to alleviate her doubt. Elizabeth Jay writes: “the ambiguity of her own position opened up what at times threatened to be a theological abyss.”⁷² Unable to fully embrace spiritualism, she espoused instead the idea of a feminine or maternal spirit existing beyond death.

Conclusion

Margaret Oliphant’s idea of the maternal spirit supports Owen’s “paradigm of sacred maternity” which, she claims, was central to late nineteenth-century feminist thought.⁷³ Florence Marryat had described Christianity as “the tool of a paternalistic state”⁷⁴ and she, and other writers such as Oliphant, were seeking to suggest alternatives through their writing. Traditional male clerical authority had already been challenged by the Non-Conformists and now it was under further scrutiny. However, this is not to say, as is often suggested, that Christianity had been dismissed. Rather, advances in human understanding had altered the image of God, and Christianity was forced to adapt accordingly. Changing views of the material world and scientific progress had extended the parameters of the known universe and

⁷⁰ Dickerson, Vanessa. *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996, p5

⁷¹ Dalby, Richard, ed. *Victorian Ghost Stories by Eminent Women Writers*. New York: Carroll Graf, 1988, pxvii

⁷² Jay, p152

⁷³ Owen, p34

⁷⁴ Dickerson, p43

the possibilities were seemingly endless. Briggs asserts that supernatural literature reflects “the variety and ambivalence of different responses to the crisis of faith.”⁷⁵ In many cases, however, it was not so much a “crisis” as a need for a more malleable faith that would respond to the needs of a population undergoing rapid change. There had been a “reconfiguration of time and space by technology,”⁷⁶ and this had given people latitude to consider the world around them. Despite their mania for measurement and classification, the Victorians had found themselves in a “supersensual world”⁷⁷ in which they could measure nothing, and new possibilities arose.

Although the great advances in human understanding had brought about improvements in living conditions and unravelled some of the mysteries of life, death remained uncontrollable and final. It was the ability of spiritualism to reach out those in need and transcend religion and science that perpetuated its appeal throughout the late nineteenth century. It solved “the most agonising of Victorian problems: how to synthesise modern scientific knowledge and time-honoured religious traditions concerning man, God, and the universe.”⁷⁸ Although its popularity waned after the turn of the twentieth century, there was a revival in interest at times of mass mourning, such as during World War One. This period of flux made people yearn for the presence of the departed, and the possibility of communication across the great divide comforted them. An emphasis on the supernatural could “assert continuity at a time when it seemed threatened on many fronts.”⁷⁹

Spiritualism offered what Florence Marryat called “the cure for death”,⁸⁰ and its bright vision of life after death was more engaging than the traditional Christian eschatological model which threatened hellfire and damnation. One could instead slough off earthly imperfections and ascend to a better life, reunited with loved ones. For many, it therefore “allayed their most fundamental fears of death and loss.”⁸¹ For families like the Theobalds, life could continue unabated and their circle remain unbroken, yet within the framework of their Congregationalist beliefs. As Owen writes, “they were a closely-knit, loving, and pious family who found in spiritualism an answer to religious and emotional needs.”⁸² People still needed religion in their lives, but spiritualism enabled them to question death and mitigate their anxiety by rendering it less threatening and imbuing their faith with a spirit of maternalism. For those like Margaret Oliphant, who were unable to find solace in either religion or spiritualism, death was a lonely experience.

⁷⁵ Briggs, p152

⁷⁶ Armstrong, p129

⁷⁷ Armstrong, p117

⁷⁸ *The Other World*, p59

⁷⁹ Briggs, p111

⁸⁰ *The Spirit World*, p23

⁸¹ *The Other World*, p109

⁸² Owen, p106