

The Threat of Mesmerism

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines how mesmerism and its practitioners invoke social anxieties about gender roles in nineteenth century America in view of two texts. *Confessions of a Magnetiser*, anonymously published in 1845, and “A Pair of Eyes; or Modern Magic,” written by Louisa May Alcott in 1863, share common similarities about how mesmerism complicates power relations between men and women. *Confessions*, however, reinforces masculine control over women whereas Alcott’s treatment of mesmerism grants the main female character, Agatha, control over her husband with doomed results. Along with the discussion of gender relations, the language surrounding mesmerism reflects language used at the time to discuss alcohol addiction.

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Introduction

Mesmerism or animal magnetism offered tremendous promise for medical and social improvement in nineteenth-century America. However, mesmerism also evoked anxiety in Americans and specifically American writers with particular regard to personal agency and changing gender roles. For instance, Deborah Manson explains that feminist thinker Margaret Fuller¹ used mesmerism to relieve pain and, more importantly, as a means of feminine empowerment. Manson states, “[Fuller] claims a power that mesmerism affords specifically to women: ‘[T]he electrical, the magnetic element in woman has not been fairly brought out at any period,’ but if it were to be, a social revolution would occur” (300). While Fuller sees mesmerism as an instrument of social reform positively, the idea that it could cause radical change appears to add another fear regarding mesmerism’s potential. Fuller’s view that mesmerism empowers women contrasts its association with traditional masculine power over women. Through writing during the nineteenth century, mesmerism becomes a vehicle for both reinforcing masculine dominance as well as opening up feminine independence.

Although a number of notable American authors like Fuller write about mesmerism, two less widely investigated works explore the effects that mesmerism had on attitudes toward shifting gender roles and personal agency in both antebellum and post-bellum America. In 1845, an anonymous author, who is referred to in the text as “Mr. S,” published *Confessions of a Magnetiser*. He reveals in this text his desire to use mesmerism to control women. Although these “confessions” end with his finding and stabilizing his marriage, the story shows how mesmerism contributes to oppressive masculine power in a marital relationship. While this story

¹ Bruce Mills goes further in depth with Fuller’s personal and literary ties to mesmerism in *Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts: Transition States in the American Renaissance*. The fourth chapter, “Reading the Self: Fuller’s Magnetic Juvenilia,” investigates Fuller’s interests in mystical/spiritual ideas and self-reflection in her study of mesmerism.

vaguely suggests that women may have the ability to wield mesmerism as men do, women are fundamentally objects of male power fantasy. However, these ideas take a radical turn in Louisa May Alcott's "A Pair of Eyes; or Modern Magic." In this story, published in 1863 anonymously or pseudonymously like her thrillers,² Alcott departs from the traditional masculine mesmerist and gives the mesmeric power to a woman. She uses mesmerism to control her wayward husband. An examination of mesmerism and gender roles in *Confessions of a Magnetist* emphasizes Alcott's significant shift from mesmerism as a primarily masculine advantage to an instrument of feminine self-empowerment that threatens masculine independence in a marital relationship.

Combining these works draws out important synergies on the topic of mesmerism that would otherwise remain underdeveloped if left to a singular analysis of each work. Both *Confessions* and "A Pair of Eyes; or Modern Magic" show how authors used mesmerism to explore threats to the traditional roles between men, women, and their marital roles in a rapidly changing society in mid-nineteenth century America. Theories about unseen powers stir the public's curiosity as well as fear in the unknown. With the human psyche still unexplored by modern psychology, the invisible forces at work were still imprecisely defined. Reformists as well as pseudoscientists took up causes and ideas to create change that ask people to enter into a sympathetic relationship. However, this sympathy seems rife with problems, leaving room for Americans to doubt the authenticity of their feelings and wonder if they were instruments of someone else's control. Discoveries like mesmerism allowed for great liberation of mind and spirit; yet, to some, they embodied fears of a degenerating society, losing itself to intemperate behavior and social upheaval.

² Madeleine Stern's introduction to *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers* explains how Alcott publishes her sensation stories for profit as well as personal release. Many of the stories also focus on strong, powerful women. Stern also refers to a number of other secondary works discussing Alcott's anonymous publishing career.

Brief History of Mesmerism in Late Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century America

Developing his theories of a magnetic cure in France during the 1780's, Franz Anton Mesmer believed that he had found a panacea that came from an invisible substance. Animal magnetism, or mesmerism,³ was based on the theory that “[T]he universe was filled with a magnetic fluid infusing both spirit and matter with a vital force, and mesmerism attempted to harness the fluid for medical and healing purposes” (Gaul 836). Through learning Mesmer's techniques, mesmerists, or magnetists, could supposedly manipulate this energy to relieve pain or cure sickness. Although many Frenchmen were interested in mesmerism, skeptics viewed it at best as a product of the imagination and at worst as a complete fraud.

However, this suspicion did not stop the Marquis de Lafayette,⁴ a French aristocrat who served as a general during the American Revolutionary War, from becoming a pupil of Mesmer in April of 1784. Incidentally, Lafayette, excited about this novel study, intended to share his newfound skill with George Washington. Lafayette writes Washington in May of 1784, “I will obtain permission to let you into Mesmer's secret, which you can count on it, is a great philosophical discovery” (qtd. in Fuller 16). Lafayette wanted animal magnetism to benefit his friend and America. However, Thomas Jefferson also heard about mesmerism coming to America and was skeptical of this miracle cure. He had read the two French commissions, one on which Benjamin Franklin had served, that discredited Mesmer and his magnetic fluid. Jefferson used this information to galvanize successful efforts to prevent animal magnetism from crossing

³ In his “Dissertation on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism,” Mesmer writes, “I named the property of the animal body that renders sensitive to the action of heavenly bodies and of earth ANIMAL MAGNETISM” (46). The terms animal magnetism and mesmerism have slippery definitions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Magnetist generally believed in Mesmer's fluid theory; some mesmerists subscribed to this idea too but also considered psychological causes behind the phenomenon. For this paper, I primarily use mesmerism for the sake of clarity.

⁴ Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834).

over into the United States.⁵ Approximately fifty years would pass before mesmerism came to American shores.

Mesmerism again met some resistance entering American culture in the 1830's. About the same time, Victorian Britain⁶ also became deeply interested in it. Beginning in 1836, Charles Poyen, a French mesmerist, toured New England disseminating his theories on mesmerism. A follower of Puységur,⁷ Poyen's theories on mesmerism focused on psychological influences and "the exertion of the magnetizer's will [as] the principal factor in inducing a mesmeric state" rather than a manipulation of an invisible fluid purported by Mesmer (Hughes and Rothovius 156). American crowds were still resistant to the mesmeric cure that remained associated with the deceit uncovered by Franklin and Jefferson. However, Poyen's ideas would catch on, especially after publishing *Progress in Animal Magnetism in New England* in 1837. Supported by doctors using the cure, Poyen had established some credibility with the public. Unfortunately for Poyen, mesmerism was still viewed as a radical medical practice, and it continued to carry an aura of suspicion and doubt among medical professionals. Dealing with a stubborn American public and medical contingent, Poyen abandoned his efforts to bring mesmerism to America and returned to France in 1839. Regardless, in the next decade, the American public became more welcoming of mesmeric ideas.

⁵ Hughes and Rothovius suggest that Mesmer may have stopped Lafayette from passing on mesmerism. Mesmer guarded his secrets, and prospective students would have to pay largely for his knowledge. Additionally, they suggest that Benjamin Franklin may have advised Lafayette not to introduce this radical medical theory to America for political reasons.

⁶ Alison Winters writes in *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, "Mesmerism was pervasive in Victorian society...Although mesmerists had made sporadic visits to Britain before the 1830s, it was in that decade that mesmerism's British career began in earnest" (5).

⁷ Armand-Marie-Jacques de Chastenet, the Marquis de Puységur (1751-1825) did not believe in Mesmer's magnetic fluid and founded the mesmeric phenomenon called somnambulism. Subjects would respond to commands in a sleep-like state; upon waking, the subject would usually have no recollection of his or her experiences. Mesmer called this state of trance "evil"; however what probably upset Mesmer more about this discovery was that the Marquis dismissed the Mesmer's magnetic fluid and inadvertently lay the groundwork for perceiving mesmerism as an altered state of mind.

In the 1840's, the vogue of mesmerism finally caught on in the United States. The potential for discoveries like mesmerism were unbounded in the American imagination. In *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (1982), Robert C. Fuller points out reasons why Mesmerism developed during that period in American life:

[M]esmerism found America still without institutions cohesive enough to impart order to personal and social life. In a directionless but ever expanding social environment, Americans were in sore need of doctrines that would ease the burden of systematic inner-direction...Americans evidenced what could only be described as a congenital susceptibility to a wide assortment of religious sects and utopian social movements. (15)

Americans during this period, perhaps reflecting values from the second Great Awakening, seemed fixated on self-help and inner guidance. Positive thinking, industry, and individualism were celebrated in this era. People were motivated by intrapersonal change as well as social reform. These qualities compelled Americans to test the boundaries of faith and science in efforts to perfect their ways of life. Mesmerism was another way in which an individual could look within and perhaps even find a divine force that could lead to greater awareness and understanding. Constraints on science were not yet in place, as education in both science and medicine lacked the rigorous standards and regulations of today. Could mesmerism really be the true panacea Mesmer had believed it was? Practitioners and believers in mesmerism, however, had troubles removing past associations with charlatans. Even with the optimism that came from practicing this miraculous cure, mesmerism evoked anxiety in the American imagination.

Mesmerists were aware of the skepticism that the general public held towards mesmerism and so tried to build ethical standards and reputations around it. Professionalizing mesmerism

was a difficult task. Practitioners wanted to avoid the stereotype of, essentially, potential rapists.⁸ J.P.F Deleuze, a French magnetist whose treatise *Practical Instruction in Animal Magnetism* was translated into English in 1843, advises to diminish the threat of inappropriate behavior, “[T]he best magnetizer for a woman is her husband; for a husband, his wife; for a young lady, her sister or mother” as the family is the least likely to evoke through mesmerism “sentiments or attachments which morality forbids” (108). Even with rules set in place, mesmerism still lent itself to potentially improper intimate connections.

The techniques of mesmerists were problematic given their intimate application. Observers would see mesmerists facing their subjects in close proximity, gazing at them, and often lightly touching them for extended durations. This behavior might stir gossip among the public as well as the amorous feelings of a mesmerist. While men were rarely subjects, women were of most concern for violation by a mesmerist since it was generally believed that “hypnotizability was a form of weakness to which mainly women were liable” (Waterfield 216). This suggests a belief that women during that time were penetrable, and men were more inclined to resist a mesmerist’s power with their sturdy minds.⁹ In this sense, magnetism is a masculine force that has the potential to defeat a woman’s will.

The uncertainty of this “will” relates to fears concerning invisible forces at work not outside of a subject, but inside. Could the mesmerist manipulate the very essence of a human’s psyche still greatly unexplored by psychology? Still, Deleuze details other guidelines for conducting mesmeric treatments without trespassing moral grounds or raising public suspicion.

⁸ In *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*, Robert Darnton writes that rumors circulated about the “sexual magnetism.” He explains further, “It was widely believed that mesmerizing was a sort of sexual magic, and a secret report by the royal commission on animal magnetism warned the king about its threat to morality” (52).

⁹ In *Mesmerism and Jewishness in a Novel By George Du Maurier: Trilby*, Anna Maria De Bartolo indicates that women were primarily subjects in mesmeric séances during the later Victorian period. Moreover, she labeled these women *grisettes*, young working class women (56). Class may play a major part in fears related to mesmerism; perhaps in the form of a practitioner using mesmerism to improve his social leverage.

Deleuze even goes on to say that the somnambulist “preserves his reason and the use of his will” (165). However, his conclusions and guidelines failed to halt the stories about wayward mesmerists taking advantage of their subjects.

Associations with rape, crime, and dark experimentation¹⁰ accompanied mesmerism. Daniel Pick points out, “Fictions of mesmerism often played up the connection between alien origins and depravity” (101). Notable mesmerists in fiction during the nineteenth-century are often visiting foreigners who victimize their subjects. However, American literature of this time departs from Pick’s idea of a mesmerist as a foreign other and portrays the mesmerist as a familiar personage, like a medical practitioner or even a wife. Instead of the foreign mesmerist invading American soil and minds, Americans who learn and practice mesmerism become potentially dangerous. In short, the threat of mesmerism in American literature identifies concerns with intimacy. For instance, Nathaniel Hawthorne was highly suspicious of the mesmerism and warned his wife Sophia in a letter written in October of 1841 not to engage in such practices. As Samuel Chase Coale points out in *Mesmerism and Hawthorne*, Hawthorne¹¹ believed that mesmerism was a violation of the individual spirit, and since his wife was united with him in spirit, mesmerism had the potential to violate their relationship (14-16). Would the mesmerist take hold over his wife? Would it destroy their sacred union?

For Hawthorne and others, their fear of mesmerism emerged from worries about sympathy, bridging the divide between the individual and another person. Applied by

¹⁰ Edgar Allan Poe visits the theme of mesmerism in “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845) where mesmerism is used to suspend the life of a dead man. Poe tried to pass this story off as true to the general public. Poe deals with a similar concept in “Mesmeric Revelations” (1844). Poe seems to anticipate the turn from fluidic cures to spiritualism since mesmerism in that story is used to communicate with the dead.

¹¹ Hawthorne contends with these questions in *The House of The Seven Gables* (1851). In Hawthornian fashion, the ancestors of Pyncheon and Maule carry a damning sin in the past that manifests in the relationship between Holgrave and Phoebe Pyncheon. Holgrave’s ancestor Matthew Maule holds a mysterious hypnotic power and exerts it on Alice Pyncheon and drives her to her death. Holgrave, on the one hand, seems to harbor this power and is tempted to use it on Alice; however, he banishes it, opening the path for a genuine romance.

sentimental novelists as well as social reformers of the time, sympathy seemed to be a rhetorical tool that pulled the public into the events of its time, asking them to experience the emotions as well as the ideas of others. In like fashion, the mesmerist had the power to enter into the subject's mind and build within the subject a curious rapport, influencing thoughts and emotions through a mysterious force or skill. Kristin Boudreau links mesmerism with the sympathy movement: "If sympathy could bring together radically separate individuals by means of a mobile, fluid perception that could be poured from one person into another, guaranteeing that we all judge in similar ways, it could also be seen as a way of taking individual perceptions captive in order to replace them with hostile, foreign ways of judging" (9). Mesmerism could be used to supplant the ideas of another and, perhaps, replace and "reform" the actions of a subject. People of the 1840's were swept up in reformist causes like suffrage for women, abolition, and utopian community building,¹² and "reform nonetheless conceived of the individual as both the agent and the site of social transformation" (Claybaugh 23).

Americans during the middle of the nineteenth-century were faced with sudden change in their society, and questions about these radical concepts along with unfettered science left them anxious. The lack of regulated and institutionalized studies opened the way of independent thinkers of varying credibility and moral character (Gauld 179). Were the American people putting their faith in the right place?

¹² In *The Blithedale Romance*, Nathaniel Hawthorne uses his real life experience at Brook Farm, a utopian community, to explore this concept along with mesmerism and women's rights.

Mesmerism and Masculine Power in *Confessions of a Magnetiser*

As a subject of popular interest, stories about mesmerism reveal anxieties over personal agency within a rapidly changing social atmosphere. Did power rest within or outside of the individual? How might new discoveries like mesmerism reshape traditional values? With ties to sympathy and reformist movements, mesmerism in the nineteenth-century American imagination paradoxically supported and challenged longstanding traditions, especially ideas about gender and marriage. In *Confessions of a Magnetiser*, published anonymously in 1845, the mesmerist narrator mostly reinforces masculine dominance over women; however, in mesmeric séances, gender roles would often transfer, giving a mesmeric woman the power over a male subject. In Louisa May Alcott's "A Pair of Eyes; or, Modern Magic," published in 1863, the mesmeric female exerts an "unnatural power," according to her husband, over him that troubles their marriage. Although each story treats mesmerism similarly, Alcott's use of mesmerism differs from mesmerism in *Confessions* inasmuch as it is an instrument for destabilizing masculine dominance over women. In view of these stories, mesmerism threatens traditional patriarchy in marriage and creates an underlying examination into changing power relations between men and women.

The anonymous author of the 1845 pamphlet *Confessions of a Magnetizer: Being an Exposé on Animal Magnetism* appears to have known about the Boston¹³ public's interest with mesmerism and takes full advantage of their fears. The pamphlet itself is forty-five pages long and separated into eleven chapters. Only referred to in the story as "Mr. S," the author/narrator uses first person narration to describe the seedy world of Boston magnetists as well as "confess"

¹³ In *Walt Whitman's America* David Reynolds reports, "According to one estimate, by 1843 there were between twenty and thirty thousand mesmerists lecturing in the Northeast alone. Many of them used their odic force to control the behavior and attitudes of their mesmerized subjects, to the wonder of audiences that often reached two or three thousand" (260).

his transgressive use of mesmerism. The author tries to pass off the events as real, but their authenticity seems doubtful. Mixed with references to mesmeric practice and admonishments about abusive magnetists, the story mainly follows two couples. First, Mr. S describes how practicing mesmerism on a young female patient named Eugenia led to their marriage. Afterwards, Mr. S gives up mesmerism. However, Mr. Milton, a stranger, seeks Mr. S's help with his fickle fiancée Helen. Milton wants Mr. S to use mesmerism to help cure Helen of her fickleness. While Mr. S successfully "treats" Helen, as she marries Milton, Mr. S forms an inappropriate intimate bond with Helen and begins practicing mesmerism on her alone. However, Mr. S's wife Eugenia has secretly been learning mesmerism, and, sensing something amiss with her husband Mr. S, uses it on him to stabilize their marriage.

Despite the happy ending, the author of *Confessions* implies his salacious thoughts and fantasies. Mesmerism allows him to control women and engage in a figurative extramarital affair with his friend's wife. The author's confession is tame by modern standards of decency; however, Robert C. Fuller explains that the narrator believed in the curative powers of mesmerism and, more curiously, "the magnetic condition established a telepathic bond between the subject and the operator" (33). In *Confessions*, this intimate bond between the magnetist and the subject goes beyond a purely mental or spiritual exchange and opens up the possibility for carnal relations.

The preeminent concern was not with the stability of marital union. Bruce Wyse offers a question that showcases the public's major concern over "sexual exploitation afforded by the mesmeric transaction"; he writes, "Might certain mesmerists, alerted to the affective bond established over a series of sessions, be tempted to capitalise on the inherent erotics of mesmeric dependency?" (173). Mesmerism produced a certain intimate contact that might border on

inappropriate behavior insomuch as it had the potential to create a false sympathy between the subject and magnetist, which the magnetist could use for unethical ends. Deleuze suggests that mesmerists stay within the family to avoid this threat. However, problems with magnetism manifest primarily between intimate partners. Nonetheless, the narrator of *Confessions* admits to his moral failings as a mesmerist and also shows us how mesmerism could potentially harm as well as benefit a relationship.

The author of *Confessions* fails to establish his authority as a mesmerist and a dependable narrator. Concerning the narrator, Robert C. Fuller asserts, “It is doubtful that the author had a very deep grasp of mesmerism...His accounts amount to little more than stories of simple stage hypnosis” (190). Fuller makes a convincing point that the narrator seems inconsistent and somewhat unpracticed as a mesmerist. Mr. S fails to present himself in a favorable light to the judgmental public who think that mesmerism could lead to the rape of women. He even warns the public to be wary of magnetists and mesmerists¹⁴: “Heaven protect us from the present use to which this agency is put. If you hear of a person who practices Mesmerism as a business, look well to his moral character before you trust him” (35). As much as he urges caution in dealing with mesmerists, he is in fact one who took up this medical practice, which brings his moral character into question.

Additionally, legitimating magnetism took delicacy on the narrator’s part. He takes strenuous efforts to depict himself in a sympathetic light, as a moral but conflicted practitioner of magnetism who ultimately gives it up to rid himself of guilt. These efforts are not always

¹⁴ In a plot arch that deviates from the marital topic, the author gives an example unethical magnetist. The narrator devotes two chapters to an underhanded magnetist that he happened to meet. In Chapter IX, the narrator spends an evening at Howard’s Hotel in New York where he meets a table of men, one a foreigner who practices magnetism. Many in the company are skeptical of magnetism, until after one agrees to be magnetized. The next day, the magnetist leaves with the money of the man that he had magnetized. In Chapter X, the narrator encounters the foreigner again, now going by the name of Jacques Perrot, who is on trial for seducing another man’s wife and taking her assets. The narrator goes to the stand to testify against Perrot, identifying him as the thief from Howard’s Hotel and thereby helped to put him in jail. Perrot seems to embody the typical magnetic scoundrel publicly feared.

successful. He first criticizes himself to appear humble: “The desultory manner in which we have selected our experience, with a hasty hand, we hope may find an excuse in the fact of our unpracticed pen, and the proscribed limits in which we write” (5). This self-consciousness may reflect a trend of the time, but it sets the grounds for the narrator’s ethos in spite of his dubious profession.

The narrator fails to secure his position as a reliable source on mesmerism. He goes on to discuss the debate about mesmerism as “much truth and much humbug” to gain ground on either side of the argument, but he makes his first claim that brings the issue to the front: “I am one of those who believe that there is a certain will within the cultivation of every powerful mind, which may be exercised over *dormant* powers of another, as to render the object or person, for the time being, subject to the authority or wish of the active agent” (5-6). Although the mesmerist confirms fears of mesmeric domination, he also indicates that subjects possess powers that the mesmerist accesses.¹⁵ Mesmerism is, according to the narrator, a type of sympathetic power in which the mesmerist attaches to his subject and commands an unseen power from him. Unfortunately for his authority on the issue, he offers no solid conclusion or “trade secrets” about the commanding force and its effects on the sympathy or will of a subject.

During the introduction, he goes back and forth between the extent of a mesmerist’s control over his subject, spreading more uncertainty. He then fails to defeat the fears of mesmerism as he explains that a subject must not resist a mesmeric process and the mesmerist must exert his full force of will upon the subject’s mind; yet, this sets up another problem: the subject must be aware of the mesmeric force working upon him to steel against it. Sympathy between the mesmerist and subject appears essential for the trance experience, but how the

¹⁵ Subjects under mesmerism were known to diagnosis their own illnesses, read other people’s mind, and commit other acts of clairvoyance.

sympathy develops and changes over time remains suspect. He then goes on to say that he has found mesmerism “only powerful as I have expressed, in alleviating pain...and in rendering the subject for the time being completely within the control of the Mesmeriser” (6). Again, mesmerists tried to pass off their profession as legitimate science. In turn, his treatment comes in the form of “neuro-vital fluid” keeping in the tradition of Mesmer’s magnetic fluid; the prescriptions take the form of various fluids and the will of the magnetist compels an exterior, invisible fluid to act on people and relieve their ailments. This pseudo-medical language seems appropriate given the specialization of the medical profession and mesmerism, but the corollaries between medicine and mesmerism go beyond medical theories.

The narrator’s confession reveals an attraction based on power in the doctor/patient relationship when dealing with mesmerism. In chapter two, the narrator admits to having discovered the deception of mesmerism, but his pride keeps him from forsaking it altogether; however, his greater confession is: “I possessed a mysterious power over my subject or patient, who oftentimes were of the gentler sex” (9). The narrator again validates the fears of his wide readership; mesmerists use “a mysterious power,” a sort of magic to target women for potentially unethical treatment. He even continues in detailing how a session takes on an intimate, perhaps even borderline erotic,¹⁶ experience between him and a female patient:

[L]et me tell you that to be placed opposite a young and lovely female, who has subjected herself to the process for the purpose of effecting a cure...to look into her gentle eyes, soft and beaming with confidence and trust, is singular entrancing. You assume her

¹⁶ Anonymously published, *The Power of Mesmerism* (1891) is a lurid and graphic piece of erotica from Victorian England in which the mesmerists apply their skill to engage in sexual activity including incest. Mesmerism in *The Power of Mesmerism* is a simplistic narrative tool used to bypass the morals of subjects, who are almost always unaware of having sexual relations with the mesmerists. Mesmeric sex in this case is very similar to rape. Steven Marcus’ *The Other Victorians* (1966) provides useful information regarding Victorian ideas of sexuality and pornography.

hands, which are clasped in your own, you look intently upon the pupils of her eyes, which as the power becomes more and more visible in her person, evince the tenderest regard, until they close in dreamy and as it were spiritual affection...Your will then becomes not only as law to her, but it is the greatest happiness to her to execute your smallest wish; she is perfectly happy...Self is entirely swallowed up in the earnest regard that actuates the subject, and they will stop at no point beyond which they may afford you pleasure should you indicate it by thought or word. (9-10)

Given his description, there is no question about the intimate connection between subject and magnetist; however, the underlying threat seems to resonate through the subject's trust in the magnetist, who may or may not be able to misuse this control. Given his prurient associations with mesmerism, Mr. S may not be able to stop himself from abusing his female subjects. Also, his use of "spiritual affection" raises alarms given Hawthorne's concern that mesmerism could violate the spirit as well as the sanctity of marriage.

Rendering women helpless to mesmeric control is most alluring to him about this mysterious power. It seems startling that Mr. S uses mesmerism to produce sympathy in his patients. For our narrator, while the subject's beauty may factor in, he appears to be attracted to an automaton that follows his desire and whims. Discussing power and sex in *Dickens and Mesmerism*, Fred Kaplan explains:

Individuals of strong will and aggressive energy seek to impose themselves on others, to control the psyches, and the bodies of those to whom they are attracted. One of the basic drives is to manipulate others for one's own gratification, to satisfy the needs of the self to have itself constantly affirmed through having other selves in its control. The threat is

one of nullity: the self may not exist. What better way to provide demonstration of its existence than through the reactions of others to its assertive acts? (188).

Despite his confession, the narrator has a selfish and controlling will, a self-serving, interior facet of his personality that he tries to affirm through practicing magnetism on women. He may have some sort of relationship with his patient beyond this context, but in this particular instance, when the female subject is in trance, her individuality appears to be gone, and she is replaced with a “happy” servant instead of an intimate partner. Moreover, the efforts and the gaze of the magnetist suspend that feminine “self” and leave her open for violation of her body and mind. Instant, uninhibited sexual gratification seems like a tangential fantasy; although the text is not overtly sexual, the private scenes where he mesmerizes women hint at a somnophilic pleasure of acting upon an unconscious woman. He of course leaves explicit sexual contact out of the narrative yet suggests its presence in his mind. Ultimately, he really desires seeing his will done. Magnetic control of this level is still a fiction, yet it is a fear that the narrator explores in his dealings with the relationship between the mesmeric doctor and patient and also in the framework of marriage.

The narrator continues his confessions with references to other magnetists who take advantage of their power. As he tries to distance himself from these magnetists, he brings his character into question as he details the extremes of magnetic control, especially over the emotions of women. Leaving most of the other magnetists nameless, he claims, “I have heard of a practitioner openly avow that he could choose his wife from among his patients when he pleased” (10). Here the doctor/patient relationship is again depicted as corrupt as the magnetist exerts his mysterious knowledge on his willing subject. This fear goes beyond doctor/patient relations and into a discomfoting assessment of marriage. In this case, the mesmerist claims that

he can bypass a subject's free will, which in turn reveals his fantasy about turning a female subject into a subservient puppet. It seems far-fetched that a magnetist could order a subject to marry him, yet it is unsurprising to see women pressured into marriage against their will. While the absolute will of the magnetist in matter of marriage remains doubtful, this passage brings to light the lack of choice that women may have in selecting their marital partners. The male's intentions for selecting a marital partner trump the woman's perspective on the matter. The woman becomes a passive recipient of the male's designs in which she remains a passive object to enact his will.

Mesmerism allows the magnetist to exert his will over women. In one account, the author describes a scene where he completely alters the attitude of a woman through magnetic control. He had somehow offended the woman, who in turn gave him the cold shoulder. Circumstances arose where he magnetized her, and her feeling a renewed sympathy toward him, she asked for his forgiveness (10-11). In another instance, the narrator refers back to when he met a woman completely skeptical of magnetism, and he also magnetized her with success. This scene, though, reveals how magnetism could manipulate a woman's emotions: "Gradually, the stubborn spirit relaxes, the mild blue eyes...close, her heart throbbing to every wish of my soul" (14-15). Again, Mr. S influences his subject's spirit and struggles to hold back his urge to control her. In turn, this mesmeric exchange appears to inspire the female subject with affectionate feelings that "so regardlessly shown before her husbands, friends, and all!" (15). Through this uninhibited display of affection, he brings his unspoken wishes out through his magnetized subject. Still, the narrator has deep reservations about exercising this treatment for selfish ends, and admitting to having been tempted, he claims, "I have never betrayed confidence placed in me by the meanest thing in existence...while in the exercise of the power of Magnetism" (12). Despite claiming to act

ethically, the narrator shows that he is capable of altering the will of another person without his or her knowledge.

Ironically, the narrator starts a romantic relationship first through the use of magnetism. In a story similar to Franz Anton Mesmer's scandal with a nineteen-year-old female subject,¹⁷ the narrator describes how a gentleman approaches him and asks that his daughter, suffering from insomnia, receive magnetic treatment. At first glance of the gentleman's daughter Eugenia, the narrator is smitten. She also comes from economic means far above the narrator, which likely adds to her allure. Upon deciding that she is fit for treatment, he explains, "I threw my whole soul into my eyes, and the object before me was once whose personal beauty called every power of admiration into action" (15). Once again, his gaze works upon the female subject to bend her to his will.

His admiration is founded mainly on physical beauty and his compulsion to use magnetism for controlling women. Consequently, the treatment works, but the mesmeric exchange kindles feelings of intimacy in the narrator and the young girl. After being cured, she "came into [the narrator's] rooms and was operated upon, unknown to her parents" (16). The narrator bends the rules of conducting a session with a female without supervision; their private mesmeric sessions seem very taboo. However, he declares, "She was bound to me by this new sympathy over which she had no control, and was unhappy unless we met at least once a day" (16). Given her susceptibility to his will and her family's wealth, it is not surprising that the narrator grew attached to her in "sympathy" and they married.

Toward the end of *Confessions*, the narrator accounts for the misuses of magnetism in marriage: "How many domestic circles have been rendered miserable through its agency" (48).

¹⁷ Mesmer details his treatment and relationship with Maria Paradis (1759-1824) in his "Dissertation on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism." From 1776 to 1777, Mesmer treated Paradis for blindness. He admits to some success with treating her; yet she lived with him. Her family took her from his care to theoretically avoid a scandal.

Ironically, magnetism brings him and this young woman together. After they marry, in a curious move, the narrator gives up magnetism because of its potential to do harm, yet it brought him to his wife. Perhaps the temptation was too great to continue his practice. He appears to recognize that practicing magnetism might jeopardize his marriage as it might cause him to go astray. However, marriage itself does not cure him of his curious desire. He also swears that although their relationship started through magnetism, his wife's affections are authentic. Since he hardly reveals his wife's perspective, it is difficult to tell whether or not his wife fell under the sway of his mesmeric influence or truly fell in love with the narrator.

After he marries, Mr. S forfeits mesmerism only to pick it up again in order to help another man, Mr. Milton, secure his fickle fiancée, Helen. Through this episode, Mr. S appears to live out another fantasy in which he leads another woman under his mesmeric treatment into marriage. One day after three years of marriage, the narrator receives a letter asking for a consultation with him regarding magnetism. He agrees to meet Milton, who assures the narrator that if he takes magnetism back up again, he "will be doing good thereby" (18). The inquirer, now formally introduced as Mr. Milton, has trouble with an unpredictable fiancée, Helen. He explains, "She possesses every excellence of character and disposition, but has one single fault, and that is a fickleness of purpose, or rather an inconstancy in her affections" (18). Milton, in short, believes using magnetism will help secure Helen's love. He explains that he understands the principals of magnetism but cannot apply them on his own.

Using magnetism to treat the relational problem is highly questionable without Helen's consent. Helen does not clearly agree to be mesmerized; moreover, she does not know that she is being conditioned into Milton's ideal partner. Although she has already agreed to marry Milton, her alleged fickleness may indicate some sort of doubt toward her forthcoming marriage; neither

Milton nor the narrator considers her response toward being a subject of magnetism. As such, the narrator sees no evil in this endeavor and agrees to help Milton through magnetism.

When he meets Helen, the narrator corroborates Milton's diagnosis about her fickleness: "I could detect the one failing of fickleness. Said I to myself, if I can be the agent of fixing her purpose and affections, and thus add stability of purpose to her affections, I shall certainly be doing a good act" (20). How can he see this as a good act given his previous renunciation of corrupt practitioners of magnetism who claim to have used magnetism deceptively to pull women into marriage? He partly recognizes this treatment as a noble cause uniting two people in wedlock. Plus, the narrator is separated from the relationship between Milton and Helen; this detachment lets him loosen any moral hang-ups that he may have and satisfy his urge to control women through magnetism. By attempting to show the benefits mesmerism can have in a loving relationship, he also exposes it as an instrument of masculine control. Furthermore, Mr. S makes a cursory diagnosis, which he tries to confirm when he analyzes Helen's physiognomy.¹⁸ Judging her character from her facial features and external appearance, he gains ethos with his new and unaware patient as she confirms each of his conclusions. Pertinent to her "one flaw," the narrator claims, "I should say that you are fickle in your regard for any object, and sometimes (you know I am translating, not originating) changeable, nay, quite so in your purpose. [Y]our regard is freely given as your confidence, and I should say you were much too ready to share both with those who are almost strangers to you...You are given much to the ideal...forming glowing pictures in a fairy future that never glads your eyes" (22). The narrator not only tells her who she is, but he also reads her future.

¹⁸ The narrator seems to read the face to gain insight into her personality, similar process to practitioners of phrenology, another pseudoscience. Phrenologists examined the shape of the head in order to figure out someone's personality. Mesmerism is paired with phrenology. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain describes the con man the Duke, his counterpart the Dauphin, lecturing on both mesmerism and phrenology.

While the narrator is able to tell Helen things about herself without having met her, he is just applying Milton's ideas on her, rendered all the more believable by the narrator's ethos as a stranger and Physiognomist. The narrator then reveals that he had been subtly preparing Helen for magnetic trance and puts her under without her knowledge (23). This first meeting tests Helen's susceptibility to magnetism, and she has proven to be an adequate subject; the narrator concludes that he will teach Milton the rudiments of magnetism in order to help cure Helen of her fickleness. Again, the narrator inadvertently contributes to the fear of mesmerism that he tries to overcome in his narrative. With the proper training, it would appear that anyone could learn how to use the mysterious power of mesmerism, but not only as a medical treatment but an ability that could control the will of another person without his or her knowledge.

Training Milton, the narrator summarizes that the most important lesson of magnetism is "to create a mutual sympathy" between magnetist and subject (24). However, this sympathy is a misleading euphemism when the will of the magnetist precedes the consent of the subject. In this case, Milton never directly consults Helen in regards to the magnetic treatment for her fickleness: it is our narrator who does. Milton and the narrator visit Helen again and confront her about her fickleness. At first, she believes the narrator's comment about her fickleness is just an offhanded remark about one of her foibles; yet, he leads her into believing that it is a fault. She agrees to this fault; however, she never overtly states that she would undergo magnetic treatment.

Instead, the narrator magnetizes her and draws Milton into this strange magnetic ménage à trois; the narrator is the point of this mesmeric triangle. As the authority on mesmerism, the narrator imparts his knowledge of mesmerism to the ignorant Milton; he has very little training in the subject and the ethics of its application. The narrator describes the scene in which he transfers his magnetic hold over Helen to Milton: "I then placed my hands in those of Mr.

Milton, formed the connection or sympathy in the usual manner...Had we not all three been of nearly the same temperament, this might not have been accomplished, but as it was, it succeeded perfectly, and Helen was now completely in the power of Mr. Milton” (27). Helen is at this point still unaware of the magnetic influence, and even more telling is that Milton carefully rouses her from the trance in order to “not excite her suspicion” (28). In a scene similar to the narrator’s experience with his own wife, magnetism brings the two lovers together, yet it does so in a manner that circumvents the woman’s consent. Moreover, the narrator’s good deed establishes a marriage in which the loving husband has complete power over his wife. Perhaps the erotic overtones of these scenes explain why the author wishes to remain anonymous.

Despite the good deed of the narrator, he encounters problems after renewing his magnetic practice. After Milton and Helen marry, the narrator rejoices in seeing her successfully cured. However, he cannot shake the lure of magnetism. Picking the practice back up will prove threatening to his marriage. Discussing this reawakened urge, he says, “Like an intemperate man who has resolved to banish from him the intoxicating cup, and who by some accident has again got taste of the fatal enemy, I was exercised by a strange desire to put again in practice my power and propensity...I longed for the excitement and secret gratification that I had ever experienced with my practice” (29). The narrator uses the language of alcoholism to convey how deeply rooted is his compulsion to magnetize women. With the temperance movement underway, Americans were faced with an anti-alcohol rhetoric based on morals; at the time, the narrator’s description may have appealed to a wide readership. The Washingtonian group of temperance supporters often gathered and confess accounts of their previous alcoholic lives; regarding the Washingtonian method, Reynolds and Rosenthal write, “Full of graphic descriptions of nightmarish adventures and domestic violence, their titillating confessions drew ever more

people to the movement” (4). A general concern about self-control permeated discussions of alcohol use. Similarly, the narrator becomes addicted to the power mesmerism grants him. As much as he desires to establish his control over women, he admits, “I could not withstand the temptation again to engage in [magnetism]” (30). Like the intemperate drinker, he is compelled to pursue another fix. In other words, he has lost control over the skill that he uses to control others. His confession then reveals an edifying warning for readers against addiction. This edifying message also allows for more salacious material to enter into the public domain.

This addictive behavior goes so far as to cause him to stray from his marriage. For instance, when he goes to visit Helen, now Mrs. Milton, he inadvertently begins to magnetize her. In turn, he laments, “What was to be done? I could not resist the temptation. I found that unconsciously I loved the gentle and lovely woman. I now felt its full force, and by its strange agency, she also revealed to the same regard for me” (30). The narrator again magnetizes a woman unsupervised, and brings out sympathies, to use his term, complicating both their marital relationships.¹⁹ Returning to the language of alcohol addiction, he continues, “What could I do? [M]y whole soul was entranced, yet I knew the sin I was committing...and *drank* the transient bliss of guilty love—guilty? Doubly guilty; for had I not a wife and she a husband?” (30, my italics). Later, Helen reveals that she shares the same feelings toward the narrator; both seem to be addicted to the magnetic relationship first established without her knowledge. Consequently, their passions grew and this affair continued: “We met again and again in secret, and I grew daily more miserable in the strange affection that was thus consuming us both” (31). Accordingly, he

¹⁹ Henry Jones gives his account of this plot of *Confessions* in *Mesmerism Examined and Repudiated* (1846): “Then he tells how, himself a previously married man, and his now married lady, were both well nigh ruined soon after, by their unlawful attachment to each other, which originated during the above magnetic process; and how he was relieved from the wretched condition, by his own wife’s learning magnetism from this books, &c., and then drawing his affections back to herself in the same way; and how the other young married lady, half ruined by her thus divided affections was again won back to her husband by his magnetizing her again and willing her affections to himself, keeping the whole process still a secret from her” (20).

took no “irretrievable” step during their secret meetings, yet this situation mirrors in many ways his nascent relationship with his eventual wife Eugenia. Magnetism brought their intimacy together in a psychic way, creating strong enough intimacy to give him the impression that he was violating his marital vows of loyalty. In this case, magnetism bred an addictive and alluring sympathy with his friend’s wife, a connection that the narrator thought he completely transferred to Milton. Wracked with guilt, the narrator is unable to pull himself away and admits to contemplating suicide.

Mysteriously, his passion for Helen fades, and he begins to sleep better than he had been sleeping. In short, he says, “I found myself again strongly domesticated” (31). In another connection to temperance narratives, women often account for their alcoholic husbands’ destructive behavior as they squander money and time on alcohol instead of the home (Reynolds and Rosenthal 6). This uncontrollable passion disappeared as he stayed more at home; however, another force is at work here. After waking from a quick sleep at home, the narrator notices the uneasy behavior of his wife. She had a secret to reveal to him. After weeks of watching him suffer at night in bed, she admits to using the narrator’s own books to study magnetism in order “to devise a remedy for the unhappy state” the narrator was in (32). His wife had used the very same technique in order to secure her marriage and reform her intemperate husband. In a curious twist, the narrator, instead of growing upset that his power had been taken, was overjoyed: “You have broken the chain that bound me. I was never so thoroughly happy as at this moment” (32). The devotion and will of a loving wife cures the narrator of his dalliance with Mrs. Milton and his addiction to mesmerism; however, in this mesmeric exchange, his wife may also be overturning conventional gendered behavior as a passive woman by taking control of her husband. Mr. S wanting his wife’s control simply reaffirms his control over her.

Were both the narrator and his wife on equal grounds now, since they both possess the ability in a sense to control each other? Magnetism is still a mixed tool for aiding marriage. Later, the narrator encounters Milton, who talks about problems with his wife. She sleeps restlessly and has called out the narrator's name before at night. The narrator, trying to cover his deceit, suggests that Milton use magnetism on Helen once in a while, and Milton responds, "But you told me...that this is not necessary after having once overcome her brain, you said the effect would remain until another should affect her" (33). The narrator passes off his suspicion by mentioning the peculiar transference of magnetic control from himself to Milton; perhaps some of his own will remained in place of Milton's. Magnetizing his wife again, Milton returns to the narrator and says that she has returned to normal. Milton alleviates the threat of infidelity from his wife through magnetism, yet the narrator is unable to overcome this urge on his own. It is his wife who keeps her husband faithful.

Overall, magnetism seems to trouble the power dynamics of marriage. In Milton's case, he is able to learn how to exert his will over his wife to keep her in check; the narrator never indicated whether or not Helen is conscious of the mesmeric influence on her marriage. This seems wrongfully permissible given Milton's genuine devotion. As for the narrator's marriage, he must be "domesticated" by his wife in order to abstain from straying from their marital bed and give up mesmerism. In this case, the feminine power in this relationship maintains the integrity of their marriage. However, the husband did not resist his wife's power; she only helped the narrator realize his own desire. The man never completely relinquishes control, and magnetism seems like a necessary evil in order to keep the marriage intact. Still, this story reveals both an unsettling masculine dominance within a marriage and also the potential for shift

in control within a marriage from husband to wife. What happens, though, when the husband becomes resistant to his wife's magnetic power?

Mesmerism and Marital Competition in Alcott's "A Pair of Eyes; or, Modern Magic"

Similar features in *Confessions of a Magnetiser* appear in Louisa May Alcott's "A Pair of Eyes; or, Modern Magic," first published in 1863. Approximately twenty years following the publication of *Confessions*, Alcott's story came at a time when public fascination with mesmerism had faded. Spiritualism²⁰ took over the public's imagination, but trance phenomena were associated with this new trend (Forrest 160). Still, as it had been in the past, mesmerism found an interesting place in American fiction, and, as in Alcott's tale, it was a tool for challenging social changes, primarily the relationship between men and women. However, with abolitionist and suffragette movements underway, anxieties sweltered around new ways of allowing women power in their own home and their own lives. Ann Heilmann summarizes the use of mesmerism in her article: "By deploying mesmerism as a metaphor for female agency and depicting the power struggle between mesmerist and mesmerized subject as a reflection of sexual and marital relations, Alcott was able to inject feminist undertones into her story" (206). Roles between husband and wife were also changing. By extension, mesmerism is at the center of their competition to control each other and thereby control the marriage. The married couples in *Confessions* also compete for control of their respective relationships; however, in Alcott's story, this mesmeric competition turns their marriage into a spiteful, aggressive battle with damning results. The couple of this story employs mesmerism selfishly to control each other, which inadvertently damages the stability and happiness of their marriage.

²⁰ I refer to the broad religious movement that purported using mediums to contact the dead. Mediums often enter trance in order to lecture or communicate with spirits. For a look into women's empowerment, reform, and spiritualism, please see Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (2001).

The story begins with a male narrator, as in *Confessions*. Max Erdmann is not a magnetist, yet he shares Mr. S's penchant for fantasizing about women. However, Mr. S. desires passive women, and Max seems ironically drawn to strong females. Max is an artist with no intentions of ever getting married or allowing anything to interfere with creating art. He proclaims, "Art is my wife, I will have no other!" (66). Searching for the perfect pair of eyes for his latest painting of *femme fatale* Lady Macbeth, Max complains of lacking the right model to complete his painting: "I could find no eyes that visibly presented the vacant yet not unmeaning stare of Lady Macbeth in her haunted sleep" (59). Alcott uses the allusion to Lady Macbeth to foreshadow the rest of the story. As Lady Macbeth wields power over her husband, Agatha, Max's future bride, also will gain control over Max. Furthermore, his description of Lady Macbeth is similar to a somnambulist woman, sleepwalking to some destination by some unforeseen power. Lady Macbeth walks in a trancelike state to her doom and so will Agatha. Lady Macbeth, much like Agatha, falls to ruin by her ambitions to control her spouse. Max's fantasy of a strong, empowered woman like Lady Macbeth goes awry in his real relationship with Agatha. However, this is just the beginning of the departure from masculine power.

In a reversal of gendered power early in the story, Max does not find a pair of eyes, but a pair of eyes finds him. This is a reversal from *Confessions*, where Mr. S would magnetize women unbeknownst to them. Now it is a woman magnetizing a man unbeknownst to him. As the story goes, Max puts off his painting to go to a play with one of his friends, and while there, as the play goes on, he says, "I slowly became aware of a disturbing influence whose power invaded my momentary isolation, and soon took shape in the uncomfortable conviction that someone was looking at me" (60). Now, the object of an unknown gaze, Max feels discomforted

by the influence of another. This attention eventually attracts him enough to pinpoint a pair of eyes from among the crowd. Louis, his friend, promises to bring him over to meet their owner.

As Max tries to interpret the eyes of his artistic ends, he gets drawn into them and loses his sense of purpose. A prolonged inspection of the woman with his artistic eye finds the woman vacantly staring off. Max becomes fixated on her gaze: “During this examination I had forgotten myself in her, feeling only a strong desire to draw nearer and dive deeper into those tow dark wells that seemed so tranquil yet so fathomless, and in the act of trying to fix shape, color, and expression in my memory, I lost them all” (61).

Although the woman appears to be in some sort of trance, her eyes seem to work upon Max’s will, drawing him into a state of mesmerism. In contrast to *Confessions*, a woman in trance exudes power rather than passivity. Her power continues to attract him as he goes to meet the woman, Miss Agatha Eure. She openly talks with Max, which his friend Louis later remarks as unusual given her high station, education, and general condescension (64-65). Nonetheless, conversing with her, he first comments on how she changes from an absent-looking woman to a lively figure, yet, during their whole conversation, he admits, “[Her eyes] exercised a curious fascination over me and kept my own obedient to their will, although scarce conscious of it at the time and believing mine to be the controlling power” (62). This subtle exchange opens the competition that will later grow from their mutual friendship, over which Max wrongly believes he has control. He eventually works up the courage to ask her to help him finish his painting of Lady Macbeth. She accepts on the condition that he works from her home, explaining that she has an eye condition that prevents her from gazing in the way that Max desires to paint. Max, of course, agrees and makes another step toward a domestic arrangement.

Instead of mesmerism creating conditions to realize the male's control fantasy like in *Confessions*, Agatha exercises her mesmeric powers on Max while he paints in a way that subtly replaces his vision of Lady Macbeth with her own. She takes advantage of his fantasy to help shape him into what she wants: a husband. The willful bachelor, Max enters into the domestic space to find it eerily familiar. Max arrives at Agatha's large home and finds his art supplies in ready. Agatha would later tell Max that she was once an artist²¹ but had to give it up after an illness concerning her vision (69). Taking in his surroundings, Max finds that his painting has taken on a life of its own: "It seemed as if my picture had left its frame; for standing on the narrow dais...stood the living likeness of the figure I had painted" (66). Agatha had dressed up as Lady Macbeth to model for Max's picture. However, this move seems to play into Max's fantasy. Instead of letting Max just paint her eyes, she assumes the role of the dominant and empowered Lady Macbeth, a figure that Max certainly finds attractive. Taking on this persona, Agatha shows that she can bring his creations to life while also subtly setting up herself in a dominant position.

Agatha, playing into Max's artistic intentions, replaces his design with intentions of her own. During the painting session, Max cannot hold his attention for very long on the painting: "[W]ith each moment that I passed I found my interest in the picture grow less and less intent, and with every glance at my model found that it was more and more difficult to look away" (67). His fixation had little to do with her attractiveness since he said before "[b]eautiful she was not" (67) and "she is not pretty, by the way" (64) so his staring came from elsewhere. As he looks more into Agatha's eyes and less at his painting, it is clear that Max is slowly going into a

²¹ Focusing on the role of art in this story, Ann Heilmann "explore[s] the artistic and sexual struggle for mastery that takes place between a painter couple" (205). Agatha can no longer paint, but she does not use Max as a vessel for her creativity and instead wants him to be the ideal husband. The motif for the artistic mastermind gets famously worked over later in *Trilby* (1894) with Svengali using Trilby for his musical talents.

mesmeric trance. His attention focuses completely on her, and he starts to drift into an altered state of consciousness. As such, he experiences a dream-like state in which he says, “I felt the eager gaze searching my face, but it caused no displeasure; for I seemed to be looking down at myself, as if soul and body had parted company and I was gifted with a double life” (67). Was the soul indeed separated from the body? Perhaps Agatha is tampering with the sympathies of our narrator. In either case, he has lost control of his will and slipped into a deep sleep.

Loss of control causes Max to question his masculine identity, a radical departure from the male magnetist in *Confessions*. Instead of using mesmerism to confirm his masculinity, his susceptibility to mesmeric trance diminishes his manliness. Upon waking, he acts surprised to have fallen asleep suddenly; the crafty Agatha passes it off as the pungent scent of an Indian flower causing him to feel faint. This unnerves Max; he had never fainted before. Agatha, in a telling passage, explains, “I took the liberty of treating you like a woman” (69). Max, the mesmerized subject, is placed into the feminine role, passive, sensitive, and obedient to the mesmerist. Discussing the gendered roles between mesmerist and subject in the nineteenth century, Catherine Bordeau writes, “In his *Manuel pratique de magnetisme animal* (1843), Alphonse Teste suggests...that men who can be magnetized tend to be effeminate” (90). Max is upset with being placed in a feminine role. He admits, “I was secretly disgusted with myself for such a display of weakness” (69). What he mistakes for fainting is actually Agatha subduing his will, a fact that he would find difficult to swallow. His attitude that he controls this relationship has been challenged by Agatha’s mesmeric power. Similar to the magnetist in *Confessions*, Agatha employs her mesmeric powers to gain the advantage in a relationship without the subject’s knowledge. The role between male and female has flipped; Agatha is the mesmeric pursuer and Max her unaware subject.

Although Max believes that he is the man in charge of Agatha, Agatha's ability to mesmerize him as well as maintain a superior income adds to Max's feminine qualities. He still holds onto the idea that he has Agatha under his sway. As their visits continue, Max remarks that Agatha's feelings for him are growing, and he believes this gives him control over the relationship: "I soon knew my power, and owned its subtle charm, though I disdained to use it" (70). However, Max's so-called power is questionable, given the invisible forces at work upon his mind. Before his chronic meetings with Agatha, he is a devout bachelor dedicated to his work. That work, or so he thinks, gives him reason to marry her. In another reversal, Max intends to marry Agatha because, "Miss Eure loved me, sympathised in my aims, understood my tastes; she could give me all I asked to complete the purpose in my life and lift me at once and for ever from the hard lot I had struggled with for thirty years" (70). Marrying Agatha means securing the means to sustain and improve his life as an artist. Instead of procuring money on his own, he will rely on his wife's estate and status.

Still, it is unclear how much of an effect mesmerism had on Max's decision. Whether it is Agatha's wealth or mesmeric talents, Max's feelings are based on false sympathy; he wants to make this marriage beneficial for him rather than her. In *Confessions*, the narrator insists his wife Eugenia has genuine feelings for him; however, it is barely suggested how much of a role mesmerism plays in Max's proposal to Agatha. After Max tries to defy these romantic feelings, Agatha mysteriously appears in tears, approaches him, and "touched [his] forehead, as she had done in that earlier dream" (71). In their very first encounter, Agatha had touched his forehead, perhaps creating an anchor for her mesmeric power. Given the similarities to the scene of Max's trance, perhaps these affections are artificial, or at the very least, supplemented with Agatha's own willful intentions to marry him.

Married, Agatha and Max, with their willful spirits and their stubbornness, struggle to control their marriage. Their marital problems turn their relationship into a competition and an emotional prison. Returning home from the honeymoon, Max is overjoyed to return to his work; however, this causes marital discord. He says, “Agatha had become jealous of my art” (71). Again, Max finds adjusting to married life difficult since he had more personal freedom as a bachelor; he finds spending a great deal of intimate time with Agatha oppressive to his independence and his art. Max’s character again departs from the male magnetist from *Confessions*; Mr. S recognizes the problem that mesmerism brings to his marriage and tries to give it up, but Max does not even consider letting go of his art for his wife. Nonetheless, Agatha’s feelings dampen Max’s goal for this marriage: to marry her for “love, wealth and ease”; in other words, he wants to marry her for his own selfish agenda.

Max’s willfulness causes him great trouble with Agatha, who reveals her stronger will. One evening, Max wishes to go see a German painter, but Agatha wants him to stay home. Despite entreaties to stay, he insists on going. Agatha’s sentiments seem to annoy Max, and he goads her to “use what arts you will, make your love irresistible, soften my hard nature, convert me into your shadow, subdue me till I come at your call like a pet dog, and when you make your presence more powerful than painting I will own that you have won your will” (71). Unaware of her mesmeric power, Max incites his wife into collaring him and thereby taking control of their marriage.

Max gets what he asks for after challenging his wife for dominance in their marriage. Once again, Agatha’s use of mesmerism departs from the feminine role in *Confessions*. Instead of rekindling affections between her and her husband like Eugenia did, Agatha seeks to dominate Max entirely. After Max leaves to see the artist, he complains of feeling anxious and yearning for

his wife's company. He cannot stop thinking about Agatha alone. These worries consume him: "It is an acute fit of what women call nervousness; I will not yield to it" (72). Once again, Max is compared to a woman and upset by his "weakness" of mind. Max does indeed yield to this nervousness and rushes home to Agatha's side. He finds that "she sat erect and motionless as an inanimate figure of intense thought; her eyes were fixed, face colorless, with an expression of iron determination" (72). Similar to the scene in the theatre as well as the art studio, Agatha applies her mesmeric powers to draw Max home. Although Max insensitively ignores his wife's request for company, she intrudes on his liberty by drawing him home through her force of will. Agatha mentions this fancy of controlling Max, and Max finds this disturbing and claims his urge to return home on his "conscience" (74). Agatha picks up on Max's anxiety involving this situation, and she comforts him, "It will not happen so again, Max; I am glad, most glad you came, for it proves I have some power over this wayward heart of yours" (74). Max continues feeling emotionally detached from his wife; however, Max follows her around and begins losing interest in his art.

Instead of recognizing his marital problems, Max stays within himself and searches for medical answers to the recent changes in his behavior. Waiting on Dr. L, Max leafs through some medical books and happens upon the cause of his problems: "Mesmerism" (75).²² This revelation filled him "wrath, disgust, and dread" since he had become the puppet of his wife, stripping him of the masculine control that he has consistently tried to exert over his life and his marriage.

This revelation leads Max to confront Agatha about her "unnatural power" over him. Max confronts Agatha who, in turn, confesses her extreme frustration over his frigid treatment

²² Max's belief in mesmerism seems appropriate, yet he also claims, "There was Indian blood in my veins, and superstition lurked there still" (75). Perhaps Max exposes a racist sentiment towards Native Americans implying that they are inherently superstitious and trying to rationalize his weakness to mesmerism.

and neglect. Agatha justifies her reasons for using mesmerism to secure not only her marriage but also her honor: “I soon saw the vanity of such a hope, and this hard truth goaded me to redouble my efforts till I had entirely subjugated that arrogant spirit of yours, and made yourself master where I would so gladly have been a loving subject” (76). Max’s neglect compels Agatha to use mesmerism to hold their marriage together and, at the very least, avoid a public scandal with divorce. However, a contrite but forthcoming Max is not enough to sway Agatha from her iron grip on his will; she will not release him from her mesmeric spell, and she wants to keep him in their unsatisfying marriage. Unable to reconcile their differences, Max vows to break her control and leaves his wife.

Max’s efforts to free himself from his wife’s control ultimately doom their marriage. Apart from his wife, Max spends time in isolation studying the “magic” that his wife used on him. However, his studies, or “prying into the mysteries of human souls” as he puts it, lead him down a sordid path (79). He begins using drugs and drinking alcohol in order to strengthen himself against his wife’s control. In a sense, Max turns into a dead-beat husband; he becomes a derelict, a drunk, and a drug user. This instance reverses the intemperate behavior hinted at in *Confessions*. Mr. S, the narrator of *Confessions*, grounds his addiction to mesmerism in terms familiar to alcohol addiction; however, Max takes up drinking alcohol, pushing him outside the home. Also, instead of the wife drawing the husband back into the home, like Eugenia bringing back Mr. S, Agatha forces Max out. He gains a false sense of liberty, but at what cost? These efforts to drink and take drugs appear to free him from his wife’s control, but the results of his mastery over his wife’s magic proves fatal.

Max’s destructive life outside of his marital home allows for him to reclaim his dominant role in the household at the expense of his wife. On a stormy night, Max exercises his newfound

talents and has visions of his wife; she appears blind and heartbroken without her husband. Max gains the advantage over his wife using his mesmeric pull to lure the sickly woman out of her home and into his new residence (80). Ironically, Max seems to feel affectionate toward Agatha once again only after mesmerizing her from a distance. Before he leaves, Agatha says that when she called to him through mesmerism, he would come; however, the roles have reversed. Instead of order returning to the household, as in *Confessions*, this mesmeric control destroys the marriage. Max regains part of his masculinity in a sense but at a great expense. Agatha cannot resist his mesmeric call and goes to him despite this heavy storm. Entering his room, she says, “‘You have conquered me, I am here!’ and with that act grew still for ever” (80). Agatha only yields to Max in death, and Max lives to deal with the consequences of his actions.

Max and Agatha’s reunion leaves them with a damaged household. While the circumstances are unclear in the text, she apparently has a child before she dies. Ten years later, Max tells the reader that he has a son “dumb, blind, and imbecile” and longs for the comforts of death. The mesmeric contest between Max and Agatha for control over their relationship results in a flawed bloodline. Without the mutual respect of man and woman, the family suffers. Max, previously emotionally evacuated from his dead wife, is now remorseful. Despite his remorse, Max will not yield power to his wife until after she dies: “I know that somewhere in the long hereafter my remorseful soul will find her, and with its poor offering of penitence and love fall down before her, humbly saying: ‘You have conquered, I am here!’” (81). Max grants his wife power in death; however, her influence over him during life is still an “unnatural power.” Unlike reuniting the lovers in *Confessions*, mesmerism dominates the spirit of the relationship and ruins the generation of genuine sympathy and love.

Conclusion

Both *Confessions* and “A Pair of Eyes; or, Modern Magic” take up the matters of personal agency, marital inequality, and female subjectivity. In these texts, mesmerism works as an instrument of male control and female submission as well as the reverse. Conflicting attitudes on shifting women’s roles complicate how mesmerism functions between intimate partners. The narrator of *Confessions* tries to show how mesmerism can be a useful tool for solving relationship problems; however, the questionable consent of the female subjects raises suspicion about the ethics of his magnetic practice. The narrator describes his addiction to mesmerism like that of an alcoholic to his drink. Through the loving mesmerism of his wife, he overcomes his addiction and grants her emotions validity; her actions realize his will to quit mesmerism and stop his mesmeric, extramarital affair. However, Alcott depicts a much different outcome in a “A Pair of Eyes; or Modern Magic.” Max and Agatha are both selfishly doomed as they try to control each other. Mesmerism, perhaps at its most complex, empowers Agatha and also destroys her and her family. Alcott’s story conveys an ambivalent message about a woman’s power in marriage pointing toward the mixed feelings toward mesmerism.

This ambivalent attitude toward mesmerism would continue in American and British literature of the nineteenth century. Henry James employs mesmerism as a plot device in *The Bostonians* (1886) in which a feminist speaks to crowds while magnetized by her father problematizing the position of independent feminine power. Similar to Alcott’s story, Arthur Conan Doyle examines what happens when a selfish female mesmerist outside of a marriage takes control of a curious husband in *The Parasite* (1894). In that same year, George Du Maurier’s transatlantic best-seller *Trilby* is published in *Harper’s*, a high literary publication; the infamous Svengali uses mesmerism to turn the working class Trilby into a singing sensation and

also his wife. American and British nineteenth-century authors return to mesmerism and evil mesmerists to entertain their readership and reveal anxieties relevant to their times and cultures.

While these examples stand prominently out in the literary treatment of mesmerism, *Confessions* and “A Pair of Eyes, or Modern Magic” precede them with an investigation into split depictions of mesmerism as a useful physical and psychological treatment and a harmful weapon against moral decency and tradition. Combined, these “potboilers” also provide an interesting commentary on the threat mesmerism posed to personal agency and gender roles. *Confessions* depicts mesmerism as a masculine skill used to shape women into obedient housewives, and, while it leads Mr. S astray, mesmerism actually helps in the end to maintain the household as well as assert his masculine dominance over his wife. As such, the mesmerism in *Confessions* is less threatening than in Alcott’s story where the female mesmerist rules over her husband with a cold heart, ultimately destroying their marriage. *Confessions* establishes the general idea that male dominance leads to a happy relationship; Alcott later completely changes that idea. Submitting to her husband leads to her demise.

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