

Facing the Divide: Turn of the Century Stage Magicians' Presentations of Rationalism and the Occult

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Publicity posters for turn of the century magicians such as Harry Kellar, John Nevil Maskelyne, and later, Harry Houdini, often showed them at work with little devils whispering helpful secrets in their ears. A poster for magician Howard Thurston posed the question: "Do Spirits Return?" Despite the exotic and supernatural possibilities such posters implied, the magicians made it clear that their effects were the result of trick mechanisms, practice, and stagecraft. Their denial of "occult" status offered several gains. First, it deflected the public's fascination with Spiritualism and the occult towards their own acts. Second, the performers were no longer in danger of having authorities lock them up as sorcerers, as occurred to the German illusionist Oehler in the early 19th century when performing in Mexico.¹ Finally, by establishing themselves as the honest counterparts to the era's Spiritualist frauds, magicians positioned themselves as allies of science, helping to free the public from superstition.

Historians often describe the turn of the century as an age in search of order. Ultimate authority, whether civic, scientific or religious, was in contention. This paper will examine how one magician, Houdini, positioned himself as an individualist whose "natural" humanity freed him from most forms of authority: whether the encroaching regimentation and "feminization" of daily life; the powers of police and their jails; or the charlatans of the religious or occult worlds. Houdini, like stage magicians before and since, posed as a manly follower of a simple, positivist brand of science, accepting the public verdict that the new wizards of the age were people like Thomas Edison, Luther Burbank, Nikola Tesla, and Marie Curie.

Spiritualism was launched in 1848, when the Fox Sisters in upstate New York began to hold séances in which spirits "rapped" responses to questions. Soon other houses in the area were subject to ghostly "rappings." Spiritualist societies blossomed, and séances were held, both as a form of worship, and as a money-making method for mediums to help supplicants communicate with spirits of the dead. The invention of the telegraph the same year the Fox Sisters began to receive their messages provided an easy metaphor for such renewed interest in long distance communication—one early Spiritualist publication was called The Spiritual Telegraph. Within a few years, thousands of mediums set up shop in the United States. The advent of the Civil War, with its high casualty rates, also helped business.

Spiritualism soon sprawled into show business. In the 1850s and following decades, young and pretty Spiritualist "trance speakers" such as Cora Hatch and Achsa White Sprague

¹ Milbourne Christopher and Maurine Christopher, *The Illustrated History of Magic*. (Portsmouth, N.H., 1996), 61. Unless otherwise indicated, most of my information about the history of stage magic comes from this sourcebook.

became the equivalent of rock stars, when they lectured in an inspired and purportedly unconscious state about women's rights.² Spiritualism was also a natural for entertainment, and the Fox Sisters were presented at Barnum's Museum in New York. Mesmerism, which had earlier pointed the way to the spiritualist's "trance," was often involved in the act. Prior to a séance, assistants or handlers might make mesmerizing passes before the mediums to help them reach their trance state. Mesmerists and Spiritualists insisted that they were conducting scientific experiments and asked observers to draw their own conclusions from the evidence.

Mesmerism and Spiritualism had detractors from the beginning, but not all scientists were hostile. Many scientists and inventors who had millennial hopes for their discipline refused to draw a clear line between the supernatural and science. The chemist William Crookes, psychologist William James, and physicists Oliver Lodge and Joseph Thomson formed the Society for Psychic Research, intent to study and, if possible, verify occult forces.³ Co-developer of the theory of Natural Selection, Alfred Russell Wallace was a believer in Spiritualism, and inventor Nikola Tesla dabbled in mysticism.⁴ Engineers introduced contraptions to measure auras, spirit presences or willpower, and dubbed them Volometers, Sthenometers, Howlers and Fluidic Motors.⁵ When credible witnesses began to describe wonderful occurrences at séances, stage magicians recognized an opening. In their stage acts, they began to duplicate the effects that spiritualists supposedly achieved at séances through occult power. Stage magicians also often adopted "mesmeric" techniques to the stage.

What are some examples of mesmeric and Spiritualist effects borrowed by magicians? At about the same time that a New York physician, David Reese, in his 1838 book Humbugs of New York was fulminating about mesmerists and their entranced assistants who claimed clairvoyant abilities, French magician Robert-Houdin added the feature "Second Sight" to his act, in which his son, blindfolded on stage, identified items that audience members gave the magician. In the early 1850s, magician John Henry "Professor" Anderson mocked the Fox Sisters, calling them "conjurers in disguise," and soon added spirit rappings to his own act.⁶ By now it is a cliché that prior to levitating a maiden in flimsy nightgown, a magician must make passes to place her into a somnambulistic trance, then show his complete power over her by commanding her to float in the air, titillating the audience with the erotic dynamic. This trick can be traced back to "Professor" Anderson who featured "the wonder of the 19th century SUSPENSION MESMERIC" on an 1852 stagebill. This suspension act is a reworking of the "human plank" trick of the deep mesmeric trance—in which a hypnotized subject goes stiff and can be placed like a plank over two horses. The plank trick was the climax of most stage hypnotism shows. Often, the hypnotist would stand on the subject, or place a large rock on his chest and smash it with a sledge hammer. On an even less sublime level, turn of the century American magician Howard Thurston included "hypnotizing a duck" in some of his performances.

After the Fox Sisters, the Davenport Brothers, also from upstate New York, were perhaps the most famous of all performing spiritualists. In their act, which they launched in the 1850s, and performed before spiritualist societies, variety audiences, and royalty, a "committee" tied

² Ann Braude, Radical Spirits: Spiritualism & Women's Rights in 19th Century America. (Boston, Beacon Press: 1989), 84-98.

³ Marc J. Seifer, Wizard: The Life and Times of Nikola Tesla. (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishers, 1996), 93.

⁴ In 1876, Wallace appeared as a witness for the defense at the trial of American psychic Dr. Henry Slade, accused of defrauding seance participants. English magician John Nevil Maskelyne tried to help the prosecution unmask Slade. The psychic was convicted, but that ruling was later overturned. See Richard Milner, "Charles Darwin and Associates, Ghostbusters," Scientific American, October, 1996, 96-100.

⁵ Kenneth Silverman, Houdini!!! (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 259.

⁶ Christopher, 118-20.

their hands behind their backs and fastened their ankles, and they were then placed inside a large "cabinet" (essentially a large wardrobe with seats) that held suspended musical instruments. Shortly after the stage lights were lowered and the doors of the cabinet closed, audiences heard guitars, violins, bells, and tambourines playing inside the cabinet. But when the doors of the cabinet were opened, the Davenport Brothers sat calmly, hands and feet tied in place.

Magicians such as the Englishman John Nevil Maskelyne, and American Harry Kellar – who had been an assistant to the Davenports – were soon demystifying the Davenports' séance cabinet routine with similar cabinet séance effects during their shows. With such mimicry, magicians became entertaining champions of rationality, giving their audiences thrills equal to that found at séances, and the additional feeling of superiority inevitable in such "unmasking" – or stripping bare of the phenomena of the occult. An 1876 handbill for Harry Kellar includes the note, "Kellar and the Wonderful Cabinet - introducing startling and unaccountable phenomena by invisible agencies, which, through ignorance and superstition, have been attributed to witchcraft and demonology."⁷ An 1893 cartoon featuring Maskelyne shows him in one corner strangling a serpent labeled 'humbug' with the subtitle: *He is rough on Spiritualists*. Further down some matronly looking women surround the conjurer above the subtitle: *The Ladies of the Spiritualistic Societies Will Persist in Claiming Him as One of their Own*. One of the matrons says, "Why should you not own that you are a medium?"⁸

Houdini followed his mentor Kellar into Spiritualist-outing only in the second stage of his career. As a young performer, he had appeared in dime museums as a hypnotist and conducted seances while traveling with a circus in the Midwest. After such ignoble beginnings, Houdini forged his heroic images as "Handcuff King," and later as the great "Psychic Investigator." In the first phase, he staged great escapes—whether freeing himself when handcuffed, sealed in a milkcan and thrown in a river; stuffed into a large envelope; a large tank of beer; or after jumping from a bridge in manacles. Then in the 1920s, he became the great "outer" of phony psychics and spiritualists. Although seemingly disparate, these two phases of his career share common ground.

The Davenports—and other spiritualists who insisted on having their hands and feet tied or who had themselves bound in sacks then nailed to stages to convince audiences that no trickery was involved—directly inspired Houdini's escape act.⁹ While other magicians had taunted Spiritualists, or quietly joined them, Kenneth Silverman, a recent biographer, argues that Houdini's genius was in steering his act entirely away from spiritualism. "Had Houdini kept his escapes within the setting of Spiritualism, he might have lost his identity in the crowd of other mediumlike magicians of the time."¹⁰ While audiences might have willingly accepted that he – like the Davenports or some of the Indian "yogi" performers of the period – had mystic powers, by insisting that his escapes were a product of physical training, skill, and a powerful will, Houdini set himself more firmly in the currents of his age, and, ironically, further guaranteed that his escapades would take on the aura of myth. Houdini showed off his physique, conditioning, ingenuity, and bravery in his escapes, his many publicity photos, and in dime novel renderings.

Houdini's escapes from prisons and jail cells, attested to by police officers and prison officials, appealed also to public concerns about the corruption represented in civic authority at the century's turn. Endless muckraking exposés of the era revealed police graft, brutality and complicity in prostitution and racketeering. Houdini kept a file of clippings from English and

⁷ Ibid., 209.

⁸ Christopher., 173.

⁹ Silverman, 39-41.

¹⁰ Ibid., 42.

American newspapers titled "Police," which largely describe acts of police crookedness, misconduct, false imprisonment, and brutality. Cops as robbers was a favorite theme. For example his 1912 clipping from the New York Evening Telegram is headlined, "Held, Accused of Robbing Garage While Policeman." Clippings from 1913 include such articles as: "Action Against a Police Inspector—Damages Awarded;" and "Two Policemen Accused of Night Robberies."

Some of the clippings are light-hearted, for example a story which describes how "two members of the [Bristol] city police force ...[were] charged with breaking into a bakery, and stealing a sponge cake, value one penny." More ominous is a 1912 front page cartoon from the New York Evening Journal, showing a line of huge, headless policeman holding clubs, with the word BLACKMAIL over their heads. A body lies on the ground behind them, with the sign "A Dead Man Tells No Tales" on it, while a small figure of Justice before them is ignored.¹¹

In an era when muckrakers and reformers were exposing police corruption in dozens of cities, the public enjoyed hearing about how Houdini, handcuffed and locked naked in a prison cell, his clothes locked in another cell, was soon able to stroll out to the street fully clothed, a free man who even had spared himself from lawyer's fees. In identifying himself with lock-pickers, jail-breakers, and other thieves, Houdini took on the aura of the heroic anti-hero appropriate to an age of muckraking. And by insisting that he achieved his results not through 'magic' but through strength, skill, and trickery, his feats became suggestive symbols. Such self-liberations were liberating to audiences worldwide.

If the nineteenth century cult of the strenuous life was based on fears that modern life was overly-regimented, effeminizing men and making them into slaves of technology and bureaucracy, Houdini was one of the cult's exemplars. His advocacy of manliness and avocation of publicity hound made for a playful confrontation with London feminists. In 1908 Houdini responded to a public challenge from London's suffragettes, who complained that "so far, only men have tried to fasten you." Relying on tools of the domestic sphere, his six female challengers promised to bind him "to a mattress with sheets and bandages." An early biographer remarked, "He regarded this as one of his most difficult escapes."¹²

Houdini's interest in Spiritualism, which coincided with his late middle-age desire to spend less time in strait-jackets hanging upside-down from skyscrapers, was also well-timed to keep his name in the public realm. The aftermath of World War One led to a resurgence of interest in séances and attempts to contact the dead. As Houdini commented in a 1925 article in the New York American, "There's a regular tidal wave going around the world. There should be a law passed that anyone pretending to be able to communicate with the spirits ought to prove it before a qualified committee."¹³ In fact, Boston, Chicago, and several other cities did pass anti-fortune telling laws, and officials often included séances within the jurisdiction of such laws. Houdini testified before congressional sub-committees in early 1926 when a similar bill for Washington D.C. was under debate.

Houdini first became interested in Spiritualism after befriending Sherlock Holmes's creator, the physician and author, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was an ardent defender of Spiritualism in the 1920s. According to most accounts, Doyle, led to Spiritualism after the death

¹¹ These clippings are from the police file in the Houdini Collection, cabinet 112, at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.

¹² Walter S. Gibson, The Original Houdini Scrapbook. (New York: Sterling Publishing, 1976), 39. One challenge that might elude any attempt at cultural analysis came from the Hogan Envelope Company of Chicago, as follows, "We believe a giant envelope can be made by us which will enclose Houdini and successfully prevent his escape." Gibson, 32.

¹³ August 15, 1925. Humanities Research Center, Houdini Collection, Box 11.

of his son in World War I, was a dupe, whom fraudulent mediums easily fooled. Claiming he had an open mind on the subject, Houdini attended his first séances with the help of Doyle. Houdini's fourth film, *The Man from Beyond* (1922), which followed *The Master Mystery* (1918), *The Grim Game* (1919), and *Deep Sea Loot* (1919), included some Spiritualist influences and a nod to the writings of his friend.

In the film, Houdini plays a seal hunter, lost at sea and frozen into the Arctic ice in 1820, whose body is found and revived in 1920 by the scientist Dr. Strange. The explorer breaks up the wedding of the scientist's daughter, desperate to marry her because she looks exactly like his fiancée of a century earlier. Her enraged father locks him up in a lunatic asylum. After grappling with mad scientists and escaping, the film ends with the hero and his young love at peace, while a "ghostly" superimposed image of the sealer's 19th century fiancée eases into Felice Strange's body. As this miracle occurs, the camera cuts to a book Felice is reading, Doyle's *The Vital Message*, and the quote, "The great teachers of the earth—Zoroaster down to Moses and Christ...have taught the immortality and progression of the soul."¹⁴

A séance was at the heart of Houdini's eventual split from Doyle. Houdini and his wife joined Doyle and his family in Atlantic City in the summer of 1922, and during a séance in the writer's hotel room, Doyle's wife contacted Houdini's beloved and dead mother Cecilia Weiss, and recorded her pronouncements in a bout of automatic writing. The fifteen page transcript included, "God bless you, too, Sir Arthur, for what you are doing for us—for us, over here—who so need to get in touch with our beloved ones on the earth plane."¹⁵ While the Doyles thought the séance a great success, and Doyle's wife surely meant well, Houdini seethed. His "mother's" elocution seemed oddly formal to him; he also claimed she should have spoken in German, not English, which she didn't know; likewise, the content of her message didn't include any personal references; further, Houdini had chosen his mother's birthday for the seance, and he felt "If it had been my dear mother's Spirit communicating a message, she, knowing her birthday was my most holy holiday, surely would have commented on it."¹⁶

When Doyle returned for his second lecture tour of America in 1923, Houdini finally began to air his skepticism about Spiritualism, and about the Atlantic City séance as well. Soon, the two friends were exchanging angry retorts via the New York Times letters page, at turns denouncing and upholding both Spiritualism and each other. The newspaper war continued throughout Doyle's lecture tour, aiding their mutual needs for publicity, but ending any semblance of a friendship.

Houdini's book A Magician Among the Spirits, published in 1924, continually pointed to Doyle's credulity. Doyle's copy of Houdini's book, on the title page, has this handwritten comment from Doyle, "A malicious book, full of every sort of misrepresentation." In his margin comments, Doyle frequently used the words "bosh!" and "rubbish!"¹⁷ Doyle notes that Houdini never explained what would be credible evidence. Here's Houdini: "were I at a seance and not able to explain what transpired it would not necessarily be an acknowledgment that I believed it to be genuine Spiritualism."¹⁸ Doyle's exasperated margin note, "This really means that nothing could convince him."

¹⁴ Silverman, 263-4.

¹⁵ Houdini, A Magician Among the Spirits. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1924), 154.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁷ The copy of A Magician Among the Spirits in the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle collection at the Humanities Research Center is full of Doyle's—sometimes lengthy—margin comments.

¹⁸ Houdini, Magician, 247.

Houdini forged ahead. Arguing that it took a trickster to spot another trickster, Houdini insinuated himself into the public eye as a writer of articles denouncing spiritualists in Popular Science Monthly, Scientific American, and daily newspapers. He also gave lecture tours debunking fraudulent spiritualists, and served on committees investigating – and ultimately rejecting as phonies – spiritualists who wished to claim prizes for their genuine abilities – often mediums that had previously been approved by more-gullible men of science and business. Houdini also incorporated medium-busting in his stage acts. As with the 19th century efforts of Robert-Houdin, Kellar, and Maskelyne to reproduce occult effects by natural means, Houdini helped re-establish the magician's positivist critique of Spiritualism. And in a parallel to his earlier escape acts, Houdini was now metaphorically freeing the public from the bondage of superstition.

The efforts of Houdini and other stage magicians to either replicate spiritualist effects or unmask them, arguably had a misogynist aspect, in keeping, perhaps, with fears of the "effeminization" of daily life in the progressive era. The cartoon featuring Maskelyne, earlier mentioned, stressed that Spiritualist societies members were predominately female, past their prime and laughable. If stage magicians were virile, top-hatted gentlemen, spiritualists were matronly, superstitious women –or effeminate men—prone to "intuitions" and romantic views of the world.

Regardless of his intentions, Houdini approached all his work—whether debunkings or escapes—with a fetishist's fervor. A case could be made that he was as interested in being bound up with handcuffs, chains, and straps during his reign as the Handcuff King as he was in freeing himself. A typed 1905 testimonial from the Chief of Police of Rochester, New York, is suggestive: "We, the undersigned, certify that we saw Harry Houdini, the bearer of this note, stripped naked, searched, locked in one of the cells...handcuffed with three paris (sic) of cuffs; also strapped with a strap extending from pari (sic) of cuffs and buckled at the back...."¹⁹ Houdini approached the second phase of his career, as a spirit investigator, with similar fetishistic zeal. His 1924 pamphlet "Houdini Exposes the tricks Used by Boston Medium "Margery" to win the \$2500 prize offered by the Scientific American," describes some of the rigors he underwent in order to reveal her frauds; one of her feats involved a box with an electric bell in it that could only be activated when the top was pressed. Other experts believed that Margery kept her feet far from the box when the bell rang in the dark under the seance table. Houdini thought otherwise and carefully prepared:

Anticipating the sort of work I would have to do in detecting the movements of her foot I had rolled my right trouser leg up above just below my knee. All that day I had worn a silk rubber bandage around that leg just below the knee. By night the part of the leg below the bandage had become swollen and painfully tender, thus giving me a much keener sense of feeling and making it easier to notice the slightest sliding of Mrs. Crandon's ankle or flexing of her muscles.²⁰

He remarked that for the séance she "wore silk stockings and during the séance had her skirts pulled well up above her knees." And when he did feel her foot moving in the darkness, the moment of recognition had a conceivably erotic charge. "I could distinctly feel her ankle slowly and spasmodically sliding as it pressed against mine." Houdini's thrill during this game of footsie

¹⁹ Humanities Research Center, Houdini Collection, Box 11.

²⁰ Harry Houdini, *Houdini Exposes the Tricks...* (New York, 1924), 6. Humanities Research Center, Box 11.

was at the very least that of the hunter that had finally caught his prey. The pain that he had submitted himself to helped to guarantee this pleasure.

Houdini's interest in Spiritualism also became a part of his final touring shows. A playbill for a Houdini night of magic at the Shubert Princess Theatre in Chicago for 1925, included large stage illusions and escapes in the first two acts, and a third act dedicated to the exposure of the tricks of fraud mediums. Under the sub-heading of "Do The Dead Come Back?", the program noted, "He is not a skeptic and respects genuine believers. He does not say that there is no such thing, but that he has never met a genuine medium." The program also included Houdini's \$10,000 Challenge, "open to any medium in the world (male or female). He will wage the above-mentioned sum, the money to go to charity, if the spiritualists will produce a medium presenting any physical phenomena that he cannot reproduce or explain by natural means."²¹ Perhaps reflecting frustrations with hecklers he'd faced during his lecture tours, the playbill included the notice, "...At no time, however, will he discuss the Bible, or Biblical quotations, before the audience."

While no medium ever collected on Houdini's \$10,000 challenge, a challenger of a different sort proved his undoing. In 1926, when Houdini brought his show to Canada, several McGill University students visited him backstage in Montreal. One of the students, Wallace Whitehead, subjected Houdini to a grilling. He first tested Houdini's publicized skill of being able to predict the plot of an entire mystery novel, if only given a summary of events from the first few pages. He next asked Houdini "his opinion of the miracles expressed in the Bible, and looked taken aback when Houdini declined to comment on 'matters of this nature.'" And while Houdini lay on his side on a couch, nursing a broken leg, Whitehead asked if it was true that the performer could withstand hard punches to the abdomen. Before Houdini could rise to his feet, Whitehead began to viciously punch him. The magician's appendix was ruptured and he died a few weeks later. The myth of Houdini's own physical invincibility, heralded in dozens of dime novels and publicity posters, finally led to his death.²²

Many textbooks would argue that "realism" reigned in America at the turn of the century, and that notions of progress rooted in simple facts and rational laws prevailed. However, throughout most of the nineteenth century, the scientific vision of progress overlapped with a more mystical vision of the progress of the soul. Spiritualism, as well as mesmerism and other psychic phenomena, were taken seriously by many serious people. Even some scientists and inventors had millennial hopes for their discipline, and refused to draw a clear line between the supernatural and the natural.

Yet the age was also one of industrialization, of an increasingly diluted mainstream religions and, as sociologist Max Weber diagnosed, the further "disenchantment" of daily life. The stage magicians chose sides accordingly. Though masquerading on posters and stage as necromancers—disciples of swamis and Chinese sages—and masters of occult Egyptian lore, they also quite-publicly declared themselves "honest tricksters" who only simulated occult wonders with natural means. Oddly, by taking away the occult as an explanation and substituting mirrors, Houdini and other stage magicians increased the audience's "thrill." Not only could these men duplicate the Spiritualists' spectacular effects, but they also offered another form of—possibly-misogynist thrill—as the male magician stalked, then stripped the garments of honesty off of the Spiritualist medium, exposing her as a naked fraud. They weren't exactly educating their audiences, but "wising" them up. Having recognized the disenchantment of the world, the

²¹ Humanities Research Center, Houdini Collection, Box 11.

²² Silverman, 407-09.

stage magicians were offering a new form of enchantment: one based firmly in the natural world, and in human ingenuity and potential.

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