Spiritualism and Will(s) in the Age of Contract

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ABSTRACT

Spiritualism was one of the most salient cultural phenomena of late-nineteenth-century American life. The belief of considerable numbers of respectable citizens that they could communicate with the dead via an entranced medium called into question both popular and scientific conceptions of rationality, volition, and freedom. In turn, these changing ideas about the mind challenged American law’s commitment to its belief in free and reasonable legal actors. This Article, the first to consider Spiritualism’s implications for American law, examines the legal reaction to the anxieties Spiritualism generated for the age of contract. Principally, it looks at the judicial response to cases of Spiritualists’ wills that were challenged on the grounds of insanity and undue influence. In dealing with such cases, I argue, American judges adopted a realist, pragmatic strategy of promoting polyphonic discussion and preserving democratic decision making. Approaching the subject from the perspective of cultural legal history, I suggest that popular culture, science, and the law were mutually constitutive discourses in which nineteenth-century Americans enacted their anxieties about the mind, the will, and the family. Finally, I argue that a contextualized understanding of these nineteenth-century debates can suggest much about current legal debates about rationality, responsibility, and volition engendered by recent discoveries in behavioral economics, the psychology of emotions, and cognitive neuroscience.

INTRODUCTION

Concepts fundamental to the law – rationality, responsibility, volition – are under attack. Recent developments in the human sciences have called into question these and other core features of modern jurisprudence. Behavioral economics has challenged the long-held belief that humans are rational actors with
fixed, knowable desires.\textsuperscript{1} Work on the psychology and physiology of the emotions suggests that emotional responses play a considerable role in seemingly rational decision making.\textsuperscript{2} Perhaps most significantly, recent neuroscientific research has discovered “neural correlates” for a considerable variety of emotions and behaviors, suggesting that our actions are determined by the hard-wired material of our brains.\textsuperscript{3} Free will seems like only an illusion.\textsuperscript{4} If this is so, how can the law punish conduct that isn’t freely chosen? We seem to be on the verge of the Second Death of Contract.\textsuperscript{5}

Although the controlled experiments and dazzling brain images\textsuperscript{6} associated with modern research might be taken as signs that these scientific challenges to law are new, in fact, they are not matters of first impression. Indeed, they parallel quite closely

\textsuperscript{1} See Cass R. Sunstein, Behavioral Law and Economics (2000); Heuristics and the Law (Gerd Gigerenzer & Christoph Engel, eds. 2007). For an application of these insights to the realm of legal settlement see John Bronstein, Christopher J. Buccafusco, & Jonathan Masur, Hedonic Adaptation and the Settlement of Civil Litigation (forthcoming 2008) (manuscript on file with author).


\textsuperscript{3} See Law and the Brain (Semir Zeki & Oliver Goodenough, eds. 2006); Jeffrey Rosen, The Brain on the Stand, N.Y. Times, March 11, 2007. Rosen quotes Joshua Greene as saying, “The official line in the law is that all that matters is if you’re rational, but you can have someone who is totally rational but whose strings are being pulled by something beyond his control.” Id.


\textsuperscript{5} On contract’s previous demise see Grant Gilmore, The Death of Contract (1974).

similar debates that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century. Then, as now, new research on the mind threatened to erode fundamental legal notions about how and why people act as they do. Based in large part on their experiences with people who believed in Spiritualism, nineteenth-century scientists challenged widespread popular and legal ideas about rationality, freedom, and volition. The law’s response to such challenges has more than historical relevance in light of the similar situation the law currently finds itself in. This Article, the first to fully address the subject, explores nineteenth-century American law’s response to Spiritualism and the new mental science. Such an exercise promises to shed light on twenty-first century concerns.

When they weren’t concerned with Reconstruction or “the woman question,” and often even when they were, late-nineteenth-century Americans were concerned about the human mind. New scientific theories about insanity, hysteria, and volition filled the pages of newspapers, novels, and judicial opinions. As newly emergent psychological experts challenged traditional notions of rationality and novelists put forward theories about psychological realism, legal actors were wrestling with conflicting notions of responsibility and mental disease. In each of these three fields – science, popular culture, and the law – debates about mind, interpersonal influence, and the will attracted extraordinary attention during the last quarter of the nineteenth-century.

It should not be surprising that the mind attracted so much attention during this period. This was, after all, the so-called “Age of Contract.” Emancipation had promised to remove the last

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9 See JAMES WILLARD HURST, LAW AND THE CONDITIONS OF FREEDOM IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY UNITED STATES (1956); GILMORE, supra note 5;
vestiges of status-based society; from this point forward, social order would be based on exchanges between “free and independent men.”\(^{10}\) According to the received view of this era, American law became more objective and formalist, dealing with abstractions instead of actual legal actors.\(^{11}\) Yet, the American obsession with freedom of contract necessarily raised fundamental questions about liberty, volition, and influence that forced their way through the curtain of formalist objectivity. Indeed, the age of contract placed the mind at center stage. Society’s success would depend on the uncoerced exertion of independent will, and Americans were understandably anxious about anything that threatened to constrain the will. Although historians and legal scholars have written voluminously on contractarian jurisprudence and its influence on legal doctrine, the economy, and society, they have largely overlooked fundamental questions about the era’s understanding of freedom and the will. Like objectivity, rationality, and credibility,\(^{12}\) freedom has a history.\(^{13}\) Thus, to fully understand what Americans meant by “freedom of contract,” we must study what they thought about the mind. To that end, this Article will explore the legal construction of mind, reason, and volition in late-nineteenth-century America. As Ariela Gross has shown in her study of race in nineteenth-century law, when popular and scientific conceptions conflicted, people often looked to trial courts for resolution.\(^{14}\) So too with the anxieties engendered by Spiritualism.

The phenomena associated with the rise of modern Spiritualism provided one of the most culturally salient stages for late-nineteenth-century Americans to discuss their anxieties about

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10 WILLIAM GRAHAM SUMNER, WHAT SOCIAL CLASSES OWE TO EACH OTHER (New York, Harper 1883).
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11 See generally HORWITZ, supra note 9.
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12 See LORRAINE DASTON & PETER GALISON, OBJECTIVITY (2007).
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13 See Eric Foner, The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation, 80 J. AM. HIST. 435, 436-437 (1994) (“...freedom has never been a fixed category or predetermined concept. Subject to multiple and conflicting interpretations, it has always been a terrain of struggle, its definition constantly created and re-created.”).
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freedom, influence, and the will. The popularity of Spiritualism – a heterogeneous system of beliefs and practices devoted to communication with souls of the deceased – forced Americans to confront serious challenges to the age of contract. Reports of respectable Americans seeking the personal and financial advice of dead relatives channeled through the bodies of entranced mediums called into question fundamental political, legal, and scientific beliefs about individual rationality and the freedom of the will.

This Article examines legal, scientific, and literary responses to Spiritualism in an attempt to put nineteenth-century America’s obsession with freedom into broader cultural context. Part I describes the age of contract in American law and society, focusing on the legal ideas about the rational mind, the law’s role in protecting freedom of contract, and the legal limits of contractarian ideology. According to the received historiographic view of this period, courts were to treat contract litigation abstractly, avoiding a particularized inquiry into the underlying facts of the case. The remainder of this Article examines this claim in light of the law’s treatment of Spiritualist wills. The phenomena associated with Spiritualism and the various popular and scientific theories about Spiritualistic belief are the subject of Part II. I explore how psychological theories that were developed in response to Spiritualism threatened foundational legal notions of rationality, independence, and volition. Spiritualism was a significant cultural phenomenon, and before describing the legal treatment of Spiritualists, it will be useful to examine how the


16 On cultural legal history see Ariela Gross, Beyond Black and White: Cultural Approaches to Race and Slavery, 101 Colum. L. Rev. 640, 649 (2001) (noting, “Analyzing the stories of trial participants, the stories’ cultural provenance and their cultural resonance can provide a window into the complex relationship between legal institutions and processes on the one hand, and the wider culture on the other.”).

17 The threats to the age of contract associated with popular and scientific responses to Spiritualism emerged contemporaneously with other developments in Darwinian heredity, statistics, and sociology that were calling into question the myth of rational, independent agents. See infra notes 107-108.
subject was treated in popular literary culture. In Part III, I analyze William Dean Howells’s 1880 realist novel *The Undiscovered Country* in an attempt to put Spiritualism in broader cultural context. Part IV then explores the law’s dealings with Spiritualists in cases of disputed wills. In these cases, disappointed heirs challenged the wills of Spiritualist testators on the grounds that the wills were the products of insane delusions and undue influences. Such cases highlighted fundamental anxieties about the age of contract. Specifically, they emphasize the law’s conflicting desires to safeguard freedom of choice while also protecting families from “unnatural” testaments. Confronted with these challenges, I argue, judges generally adopted strategies similar to Howells’s realist treatment of Spiritualists. Both the novel and the cases presented anxieties about Spiritualism and freedom polyphonically through the voices of multiple actors. They both also converted questions of religious belief into questions of psychology, but in doing so they refused to recognize scientists and their theories as the final arbiters of disputes. Instead, Howells and the courts assigned ultimate judgment to their most democratic institutions, the readers and the jury, respectively. Accordingly, anxieties about freedom could be resolved broadly through social consensus rather than scientific, legal, or authorial fiat. Moreover, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, American courts were often opting for an individualized and nuanced approach to concerns about free will, influence, and the mind.

By reuniting three discursive spaces that contemporary academia treats in separate disciplines, I will attempt to contextualize the mutually constitutive relationships between law, science, and popular culture in the age of contract. Doing so suggests new ways of interrogating late-nineteenth-century American culture’s characteristically pragmatic response to the challenges of widespread religious unorthodoxy, increasingly unified and authoritative scientific opinion, and changing conceptions of gender roles and the family. Moreover, understanding the anxieties that nineteenth-century psychology raised for the age of contract will add perspective to current debates about the presumption of rationality in law and economics scholarship, the role of emotions in the law, and the impact of “neurolaw” on legal responsibility.
I. FREEDOM, REASON, AND THE WILL IN THE AGE OF CONTRACT

In his oft-quoted aphorism, the legal historian Henry Maine declared “that the movement of the progressive societies has hitherto been a movement from Status to Contract.” According to nineteenth-century legal and political theorists, whereas status-based societies apportioned rights and duties on the grounds of membership in distinctly identified and immobile classes, societies based on contract allowed members to make their own place in the world through individual effort unencumbered by social categories. The belief that contractarian societies could succeed itself rested on an optimistic assessment of an individual’s ability to reason properly and make wise judgments. Even with this sanguine view of humanity’s rational faculties, however, there remained some realms, notably those associated with the family, where freedom of contract was prevented from entering.

According to the legal historian James Willard Hurst, “The years 1800-1875 were...above all else, the years of contract in our law.” In the United States, the movement from status to contract seemed to reach its apogee with emancipation, as the ratification of the 13th and 14th Amendments symbolized the victory of individual liberty and entitlement over the tyranny of coercion and dispossession. The promise of contract, to borrow Brook Thomas’s phrase, meant that individuals would be granted the autonomy to run their own lives and make their own decisions freed from the encumbrances of inherited social status. Society would be based on the autonomous choices of people acting in their own self interest. Yet as contractarian ideology increasingly

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18 Henry Sumner Maine, Ancient Law, 170 (10th printing 1901) (1861).
19 Hurst, supra note 9, at 18.
21 Brook Thomas, American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract (1997).
22 P.S. Atiyah describes “a society rapidly becoming highly atomistic in its social organization. The individual stood or fell as the unit of organization. His relationships with his fellow man were increasingly of a bilateral rather than a
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became the organizing narrative for legal, economic, and social relations in postbellum America, \(^{23}\) slavery retained its symbolic power. As Eric Foner notes, “In a world in which personal freedom increasingly meant the opportunity to compete in the marketplace in the pursuit of economic gain, slavery remained the master metaphor for describing impediments to individual advancement.” \(^{24}\)

Contract appealed to a nation grappling with the challenges of emancipation and Reconstruction, in part because the essence of nineteenth-century contract law was the concept of consent. Although historians debate its origins, \(^{25}\) the will or consent theory of contract law dominated the subject’s jurisprudence throughout the nineteenth century. According to consent theory, in order to be valid, a contract must be the product of consensus or, as it was often expressed, a “meeting of the minds.” \(^{26}\) The ability to consent

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\(^{23}\) See *Stanley*, supra note 20, at x (noting, “In the age of slave emancipation contract became a dominant metaphor for social relations and the very symbol of freedom.”).

\(^{24}\) Foner, supra note 13, at 446.


\(^{26}\) See *Gordon*, supra note 20, at 172. According to Gordon:

Consent, manifested in a series of contractual agreements (the ‘social contract,’ the marriage contract, the employment contract), was so closely identified with freedom and civic responsibility that lack of consent described lack of freedom. In the nineteenth century, theories of consent and contract traveled across venues and genres, coloring the analysis not only of polygamy and slavery but also of poverty, prostitution, and free labor. The ‘will theory’ of contract, for example,
requires both volition and freedom, which distinguished the contractual relationship from the status-based relationship.\textsuperscript{27}

The jurisprudential commitment to freedom of contract was characterized by the judicial prohibition from considering the details of particular transactions. As Lawrence Friedman puts it, “Contract law is abstraction—what is left in the law relating to agreements when all particularities of person and subject-matter are removed.”\textsuperscript{28} Judges were not to inquire into the fairness of the deal, nor were they to consider the relative bargaining power of the parties.\textsuperscript{29} Classical contract law, according to Friedman, treated individuals as autonomous units, and the law’s role was simply to ensure that agreements were indeed freely entered into and not the products of insanity, fraud, or duress.\textsuperscript{30}

The willingness to ground social progress on voluntary exchanges between contracting parties and the refusal to protect individuals from the consequences of unprofitable bargains rested on American law’s faith in man’s rational faculties. As Susanna

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the notion that there must be some ‘meeting of the minds’ to form an enforceable agreement, was peculiarly a creature of the nineteenth century. The will theory implied that contracts were based on positive choice—that a contract was the child of consent.
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\textit{Id.}\textsuperscript{27} See LAWRENCE M. FRIEDMAN, CONTRACT LAW IN AMERICA: A SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CASE STUDY (1965) (hereinafter FRIEDMAN, CLIA). Friedman writes, “Older land law was characterized by rules leaving little room for voluntary arrangements. Thus, in the descent of lands, when a landowner died, his property descended according to a set statutory scheme. The classic common law recognized primogeniture: it gave the land to the decedent’s oldest son, who inherited by virtue of his status as oldest son. Volition, intention, had nothing to do with the matter.” \textit{Id.} at 18.

\textit{Id.} at 20.\textsuperscript{28}

\textit{Id.} at 20.\textsuperscript{29} See HORWITZ, supra note 9, at 180-183.

\textit{Id.} at 20.\textsuperscript{30}

According the Lord Wynford’s much-cited statement:

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The law will not assist a man, who is capable of taking care of his own interest, except in cases where he has been imposed upon by deceit, against which ordinary prudence could not protect him. If a person of ordinary understanding, on whom no fraud has been practiced, makes an imprudent bargain, no Court of justice can release him from it. … But those, who from imbecility of mind are incapable of taking care of themselves, are under the special protection of the law.”
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Blumenthal has shown, early nineteenth-century American jurists were heavily influenced by Enlightenment and Scottish Common Sense philosophy’s “optimistic vision of man’s mental ability.” According to Thomas Reid, the influential Scottish philosopher, men were universally endowed with rational faculties such as memory, emotions, and will that “Nature hath given to the human understanding.” Wishing to defend the grounds of rational judgment, Reid defined “common sense” as “that degree of judgment which is common to men with whom we can converse and transact business.” Rationality and contractual good sense were thus for Reid identical. Moreover, sanity and insanity were seen as widely divergent intellectual states. Combined with the utilitarian belief that man is a rational calculator of various hedonic outcomes, the confidence of Enlightenment philosophy encouraged the faith American law placed in the contracting individual. Although differences in intellectual capacity could not be ignored, contract theory assumed that parties to contracts could rationally measure the costs and benefits of proposed transactions.

31 Blumenthal, DoW, supra note 7, at 973. John Mikhail has challenged Blumenthal’s focus on Scottish Common Sense philosophy, noting that:

‘one could probably replace ‘Scottish Common Sense philosophy’ in Blumenthal’s formulation with something as diffuse as ‘The Enlightenment’ or even ‘Western jurisprudence’ without significantly altering its import, because the assumption that rational and moral faculties are innate and universal is common to most writers in these traditions.


33 Id.

34 The utilitarianism of Bentham and the Mills was part of a longer tradition of associationist psychology that extends back to John Locke and David Hartley. Roger Smith notes that nineteenth-century associationist psychology “was an attractive form of analysis because it represented change and progress in human life as the necessary outcome of past experience. Belief that ideas and feelings of pleasure and pain associate together and determine conduct provided authority for belief that human nature itself guarantees progress through experience – progress at the level of the individual, at the level of society and even at the level of nature as a whole.” Id. at 251-252. On the influence of associationism on American legal thought, see Anne C. Dailey, Holmes and the Romantic Mind, 48 DUKE L.J. 429, 472 (1998).

35 See HORWITZ, supra note 9, at 183.
and that they could freely choose whether to contract or not.\textsuperscript{36} According to Blumenthal, this “default legal person” possessed the innate capacity to “master [his] passions and act in accordance with higher dictates of reason.”\textsuperscript{37} Because American law took such an optimistic view of human rationality, inquiring into the specifics of contractual volition seemed unnecessary. Just as judges were to assume that transactions had been wisely and rationally entered into, they were also to assume that such acts were fully volitional. As Thomas Haskell notes, the period’s legal formalism presumed that “the self’s every act was deemed voluntary insofar as will was in it, and scarcely anything other than direct physical coercion was thought capable of displacing the will and emptying an act of its voluntary character.”\textsuperscript{38} Accordingly, antebellum American law followed English common law in its shallow approach to questions of volition.\textsuperscript{39} Although the doctrine of undue influence was emerging during this period, it was primarily concerned with protecting parties in certain fiduciary relationships (such as husband and wife, attorney and client, guardian and ward\textsuperscript{40}) and with others thought to be particularly susceptible to imposition (such as seamen,\textsuperscript{41}) the

\textsuperscript{36} See Roy Kreitner, Calculating Promises: The Emergence of Modern American Contract Doctrine (2007). He suggests that “part of the classical project was the advancement of an image of the economy in which participants made strictly rational choices based on bargained-for exchange.” Id. at 91.


\textsuperscript{38} Thomas L. Haskell, A Brief Excursus on Formalism, in Objectivity is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History, 310 (1998).

\textsuperscript{39} The treatment of volition in English law is itself an interesting, and as yet unexplored, subject for historical inquiry. It developed, in large part, out of the Ecclesiastical Law’s approach to marriage, coverture, and wills of personal property. See R. H. Helmholtz, Marriage Litigation in Medieval England (1986). Interestingly, the canon law applied an objective standard to claims of duress. The threat of force must have been “such as would have moved a constant man.” Id. at 91.

\textsuperscript{40} See 1 Story, supra note 30, at 239-40; Leonard Shelford, A Practical Treatise on the Law Concerning Lunatics, Idiots, and Persons of Unsound Mind (Philadelphia, J.S. Littell 1833).

\textsuperscript{41} John Fonblanque writes that “seamen dealing for their prize-money or wages, are considered entitled to as much favour and protection in equity as young heirs, they being, as Sir Thomas Clarke observes, a ‘race of men loose and unthinking, who will almost for nothing part with what they have acquired.
very old, and “imbeciles” whose disability does not amount to complete incapacity). \(^{42}\) Moreover, the law relating to volition between presumably capable parties was limited for the most part to issues of fraud and coercion. \(^{43}\) In case of the latter, mid-nineteenth-century jurists focused on physical coercion and on psychological coercion that paralleled physical force, \textit{i.e.}, compulsion resulting from fear. \(^{44}\)

Although it promised to expand freedoms to larger classes of American society and although it placed great faith in the rational abilities of individuals, the promise of contract did not extend to all facets of nineteenth-century American law and society. As recent research by Amy Stanley and others has shown, when taken to its logical extremes, freedom of contract threatened to rend the country’s social fabric. \(^{45}\) America had granted slaves their freedom and encouraged them to market their labor for paid wages, but granting the same rights to women would have “stripped a free man of the right to be master of a family.” \(^{46}\) According to Stanley, nineteenth-century American treatise writers “sharply distinguished the wage contract and marriage contract from purely commercial transactions, defining both as \textit{domestic relations} that presupposed not simply consent and exchange but perhaps with their blood.” \(1\) \textsc{John Fonblanque, A Treatise of Equity} 135, n. k (3d ed., Philadelphia, R. Byrne 1805).

\(^{42}\) \textit{See Henry Home Kames, Principles of Equity} 81 (2d ed. Edinburgh, A. Millar 1767) (“The weakness and imbecility of some men make them a fit prey for the crafty and designing.”); \textsc{Thomas Peake, A Compendium of the Law of Evidence} 431 (Am. ed., Josiah Randall ed., Philidelphia, P. Byrne 1812) (noting, “Persons, indeed, of but little better understanding [than ‘perfect idiots’], may be, and often are, imposed on, or intimidated by those around them; but such cases may more properly be considered as falling under the head of \textit{undue influence} or \textit{coercion} than under that of incapacity in the testator.”).


\(^{44}\) \textit{See id.} Williams writes, “If it can be demonstrated that actual force was used to compel the testator to make the Will, there can be no doubt, that although all formalities have been complied with, and the party perfectly in his senses, yet such a Will can never stand. So, if there were at the time of bequeathing, a fear upon the testator, it could not be, as it ought, \textit{libera voluntas}.” \textit{Id.}

\(^{45}\) \textit{See Stanley, supra} note 20, at 16.

\(^{46}\) \textit{Id.} at 58-59.
unique rights of authority and obligations of obedience.” Thus, despite the era’s commitment to contractual freedom and individual rationality, significant spheres of social activity – particularly those related to the family – remained barred against the intrusion of contract. The promise of contract would, thus, be circumscribed by traditional expectations about family life. Freedom of contract ended where familial duty began.

The age of contract held out the hope of a dynamic and progressive society based on the free and rational exchange of goods and services. Contractarian jurisprudence was grounded on the notion of mutual consent and supported by widespread optimism in the abilities of the human mind. Yet just as the age of contract began to flower in American law, this sanguine view of mental function would be challenged by a diverse group of popular phenomena that threatened traditional ideas about rationality, freedom, and volition. Spiritualism – as well as associated phenomena such as mesmerism, hypnotism, and electro-biologism – attracted significant attention as scientists, journalists, politicians, jurists, and regular folks disputed subjects such as the line between eccentricity and insanity, the extent of interpersonal influence, and the limits of volitional capacity.

II. SPIRITUALISM AND THE SCIENCES OF THE MIND

Very often, the phenomena associated with modern Spiritualism were at the center of nineteenth-century debates about the mind. The origin of modern Spiritualism can be conveniently

47 Id. at 16.
48 According to Thomas: Indeed, in the late nineteenth century legal thinkers developed a sophisticated system that claimed to determine scientifically the natural boundaries between various spheres of social activity. The aim of this ‘boundary’ thought was to minimize governmental interference by allowing individuals to act freely in accordance with laws of natural necessity appropriate to each sphere. THOMAS, supra note 21, at 37-38 (emphasis in original).
49 As Gordon puts it, “Freedom of contract contained the power to participate in domestic relations, not to restructure them at will.” GORDON, supra note 20, at 173-174.
50 On the role mesmerism played in the science and society of Victorian Britain see generally WINTER, supra note 15.
dated to March 1848 in Hydesville, New York, near Rochester.51 Kate and Margaret Fox, sisters aged twelve and fourteen, convinced their neighbors that they could communicate with spirits of the deceased by raps made by the spirits in response to the girls’ questions. News of the phenomena spread rapidly, and within a year the Fox sisters were touring the country competing for attention with other newly discovered “ mediums.” 52 Following only “the race question” and “the woman question,” Spiritualism was perhaps the most salient feature of the second half of the nineteenth century.53

A. Spiritualism in American Culture

In a movement so heterogeneous, it is perhaps impossible to describe a typical Spiritualist meeting, but the numerous contemporary accounts of séances give us a good sense of what attendees, or as they were known in Spiritualist parlance, “investigators,” were likely to experience.54 A group composed of both men and women would meet in a private residence and take seats around a table, alternating genders and holding hands, in a darkened room. The medium, usually a young woman in her teens or twenties, would then enter a trance state either on her own or with the assistance of a mesmerizer. In this unconscious state, it was widely believed, she became a passive conduit for the forces that enabled communication between the earthly and spiritual worlds.55 Once the medium was fully entranced, the investigators would wait patiently, often for hours, for evidence of the spirits’ arrival, usually heralded by knocks or raps that seemed to come from the walls, floor, ceiling, or table. The spirits were asked to identify themselves, either by rapping at appropriate points as the

51 A number of histories of Spiritualism are available. More or less contemporaneous treatments include DOYLE, supra note 15; FRANK PODMORE, MODERN SPIRITUALISM (1902). The subject has recently attracted the attention of social historians in both America and Britain. See JANET OPPENHEIM, THE OTHER WORLD: SPIRITUALISM AND PSYCHICAL RESEARCH IN ENGLAND, 1850-1914 (1988); BRAUDE, supra note 15; OWEN, supra note 15.
52 1 DOYLE, supra note 15, at 62.
53 See BRAUDE, supra note 15, at 27.
54 For accounts of séances, see BRAUDE, supra note 15, at 19-25; WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS, THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY 19-33 (Boston, Houghton, Mifflin & Co. 1880).
55 See BRAUDE, supra note 15, at 85.
alphabet was scanned or by writing on slates held by the medium. Often the spirits would be the investigators’ deceased relatives, but just as often they might be famous personages from the past (Benjamin Franklin was a favorite guest56). Investigators could then interrogate the spirits about aspects of the afterlife or seek advice regarding more earthly matters. If they were lucky and had gotten the attention of a game spirit, the investigators might then be treated to a materialization of the spirit who exited a closet that the medium had entered moments before.57

More than other new religions of the period,58 Spiritualism59 attracted the extended notice of people throughout American society. As one historian notes, “Every notable progressive family of the nineteenth century had its advocate of Spiritualism, some of them more than one.”60 Perhaps the most perplexing aspect of Spiritualism for its skeptical contemporaries as well as its skeptical historians was the belief of “intelligent and truthful persons such as would be regarded as trustworthy on all other subjects,”61 including the physicist William Crookes, the naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace, and New York State Supreme Court Judge John Edmonds, whose treatise on the subject was immensely popular.62 According to Arthur Conan Doyle, himself a Spiritualist as well as one of the movement’s first historians, the “conversion...of such well-known men” as Judge Edmonds,

56 See id. at 5.
57 See id.
59 It is perhaps not correct to refer to Spiritualism as a religion. While many avowed Spiritualists did adopt specific cosmological beliefs, including those propounded by Andrew Jackson Davis’s Harmonial Philosophy, other investigators thought of Spiritualism as simply an extension of their Christian beliefs or as a scientific attempt to prove the existence of life after death. See BRAUDE, supra note 15, at 32-55. Braude lists three factors that provoked popular interest in Spiritualism: “the desire for empirical evidence of the immortality of the soul; the rejection of Calvinism or evangelicalism in favor of a more liberal theology; and the desire to overcome bereavement through communication with departed loves ones.” Id. at 33-34.
60 Id. at 27.
Wisconsin Senator Nathaniel Tallmadge, and University of Pennsylvania professor of chemistry Robert Hare “gave enormous publicity to the subject, while at the same time it increased the virulence of the opposition, which now perceived it had to deal with more than a handful of silly, deluded people.”

Public exhibitions were staged, both skeptics and believers offered rewards for unimpeachable proof, and commissions composed of respected clergy, scientists, and other public figures were organized to investigate the phenomena. As Spiritualism’s popularity spread, the phenomena evolved from word spelling raps to table-turning, planchette writing, and materializations. Although its status occasionally waned with the exposure of fraudulent mediums, Spiritualism remained culturally salient throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.

Whether it would ultimately prove true or false, Spiritualism was threatening to many nineteenth-century Americans, and it was particularly threatening to essential aspects of the age of contract. Of course, if all of the manifestations were concocted by charlatan mediums to dupe the excessively credulous, it would have raised difficult questions about the public’s susceptibility to fraud, one of the mortal sins against freedom of contract. But if, as even skeptics often believed, “there was something in it,” more than fraud was at stake. In order for mediums to contact the spirits, they often assumed trance-like or mesmeric states, shutting down their own wills to allow the spirits a channel for communication. Describing his powers, the famous medium Daniel Dunglas Home claimed, “I have no control over [the spirits]. They use me, but I do not use them. … I am a passive instrument—no more.”

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63 I DOYLE, supra note 15, at 123.
64 One of the most famous, if ultimately inconsequential, commissions was the Seybert Commission organized by the University of Pennsylvania in the 1880s. See UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA SEYBERT COMMISSION FOR INVESTIGATING MODERN SPIRITUALISM, PRELIMINARY REPORT (Philadelphia J.B. Lippincott Company, 1887).
65 Quoted in I DOYLE, supra note 15, at 190.
susceptibility to the devious plots of spirits from lower realms.\textsuperscript{66} Similarly, “investigators” were encouraged to suspend their own wills and judgments to create an inviting atmosphere for the spirits. In such a state, investigators seemed to be perfect subjects for mind control.\textsuperscript{67} In a society committed to freedom of contract, the submission of the will to external influences was dangerous, but for Spiritualists, submission of the will was a necessary and desired act for communication with the spirits.\textsuperscript{68}

Like Mormonism, Shakerism, and the varieties of utopian new religions that emerged in the middle of nineteenth century, Spiritualism provoked concerns about gender and family life.\textsuperscript{69} Spiritualism came to national attention at a time when Americans were beginning to rethink the proper role for women in social, economic, and political life. Rightly or wrongly, in the minds of many Americans it was linked with radical challenges to traditional family life, such as those proposed by the celibate Shakers, the communal Oneida Perfectionists, and the advocates of “Free Love.”\textsuperscript{70} Certainly many Spiritualists traveled in the same circles as these reformers,\textsuperscript{71} and the Spiritualist periodicals often carried essays criticizing the unequal burdens that the law placed

\textsuperscript{66} See Braude, supra note 15, at 87-88. Braude quotes a Spiritualist editorial that looked forward to the day when a medium could achieve communication with the spirits “in a more advanced and spiritualized condition…fully awake and conscious.” Id. at 88. William Howitt warned that God “has servants of all grades and tastes ready to do all kinds of work, and He has here sent what you call low and harlequin spirits to a low and very sensual age.” Quoted in 1 Doyle, supra note 15, at 226.

\textsuperscript{67} The eminent legal treatise writer Francis Wharton published an article on Spiritualism’s implications for criminal jurisprudence where he discussed the possibility of using a mesmerized subject to commit crimes. See Spiritualism and Jurisprudence, 12 ALB. L. J. 216 (1875). The subject became intensely popular during the late 1880s and 1890s, especially in France.

\textsuperscript{68} See Carol Weisbrod, The Boundaries of Utopia, 188 (1980).

\textsuperscript{69} For excellent legal histories of these groups, see id.; Gordon, supra note 20. Weisbrod notes, “Underlying the attacks on Oneida was the idea that the practices of the community were not only immoral but also unnatural, and violative of the rules of familial relationships.” Weisbrod, supra note 68, at 37.

\textsuperscript{70} According to Braude, “Most Spiritualists did not support free love, but most free love advocates were Spiritualists, so the movements were widely linked in the popular mind.” Braude, supra note 15, at 129.

\textsuperscript{71} For example, the well-known feminist reformer Victoria Woodhull also served as president of one of the Spiritualist associations.
on wives in conventional marriages.\textsuperscript{72} Less visibly than Spiritualist doctrine, but perhaps more importantly, Spiritualist practice also threatened accepted gender norms.\textsuperscript{73} The séance room placed members of opposite sexes in intimate and clandestine physical contact with one another, and, contrary to orthodox religious practice, Spiritualist meetings were led by women. Even the committed Spiritualist Arthur Conan Doyle was concerned with such “promiscuous sittings.”\textsuperscript{74} As the historian Alex Owen puts it, “What the séance promised was the ritualized violation of cultural norms.”\textsuperscript{75} Accordingly, Spiritualism posed an attractive target for social conservatives and defenders of the status quo.

\textbf{B. The Psychology of Spiritualistic Belief}

Men of science from every specialty also found Spiritualism alluring. Some, like Crookes and Wallace, and eventually William James and the Society for Psychical Research, were intrigued by the promise of empirical proof of the existence of an afterlife.\textsuperscript{76} By far the larger class of scientists, however, saw in Spiritualism the opportunity to gain credibility for scientific practices and scientific authority by discrediting such phenomena and their practitioners.\textsuperscript{77} While much of their effort was aimed at exposing fraudulent mediums by revealing the sleight-of-hand techniques used to create various spiritual manifestations, skeptics were equally fascinated by the “thoroughly honest and competent”\textsuperscript{78} believers who attended séances hoping to commune with the departed. What was it about such people that allowed them to hold beliefs that were “completely in opposition to the

\textsuperscript{72} See Owen, supra note 15, 33. According to the Spiritualist James Burns, “Spiritualism does not annul the marriage relation, but puts it on a firm and natural basis, declaring it to be a crime to form a union on external or conventional grounds, but only on that spiritual affinity, which makes the very beings of the beloved dear to each other.” \textit{Quoted in id.}

\textsuperscript{73} Owen notes, “the Victorian séance room became a battle ground across which the tensions implicit in the acquisition of gendered subjectivity and the assumption of female spiritual power were played out.” \textit{Id.} at 11.

\textsuperscript{74} 1 Doyle, supra note 15, at 297.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Id.} at 203.

\textsuperscript{76} See Alan Gauld, \textit{The Founders of Psychical Research} (1968).

\textsuperscript{77} See Winter, supra note 15.

\textsuperscript{78} William B. Carpenter, \textit{Mesmerism, Spiritualism, &c. Historically & Scientifically Considered} 56 (New York, D. Appleton & Co. 1877).
universal experience of Mankind?” As Alison Winter describes, phenomena such as mesmerism and Spiritualism were instrumental in motivating scientists to develop psychological explanations of seemingly unaccountable belief.  

Among the first to suggest an explanation for Spiritualist belief were the physicians who worked with the insane. With the growth of publicly-supported insane asylums, the psychiatrists who specialized in “mental alienation” were emerging as increasingly authoritative experts on pathological mental states. These “alienists” classed Spiritualist mediums and believers among the growing categories of maniacs. Although most believers were respected members of their communities, Spiritualists seemed to suffer from hallucinations and delusions regarding only one subject, a condition alienists referred to as monomania. The various nosologies of Spiritualist monomania ascribed the delusions to “disordinate, abnormal, or…unnatural function” of the brain. According to the American professor of medical jurisprudence Frederic Marvin, who coined the term “mediomania” as a specific class of Spiritualist monomania that affected hysterical women, the disease “is usually preceded by a genito or veneral-pathological history.” Emphasizing the threat such delusional women posed to society, Marvin claimed that a small

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79 Id. at 57.
80 See Winter, supra note 15, at 99. She writes:
Some historians have faulted the observers for not considering the possibility of ‘suggestion,’ in the modern sense of a physical response caused by anticipation. But such causal explanations did not exist at the time. In fact, they came into being in consequence of experiments like this one [on a mesmeric subject].

Id.
81 According to Alfred Taylor’s treatise on medical jurisprudence, monomania is “that form of insanity in which the mental alienation is partial. The delusion is said to be confined either to one subject or to one class of subjects. … Monomania varies much in degree; for many persons affected with it are able to direct their minds with reason and propriety to the performance of their social duties, so long as these do not involve any of the subjects of their delusions.” But, he continues, “it is not to be supposed that a man is insane upon one point only, and sane upon all other matters. … In monomania, the mind is unsound; not unsound in one point only, and sound in all other respects, but this unsoundness manifests itself principally with reference to some particular object or person.” Alfred Swaine Taylor, Medical Jurisprudence, 632 (5th Am. ed., Philadelphia, Blanchard & Lea 1861).
change in the angle of a believer’s womb could cause her to become so possessed by her delusion that she “forsakes her home, her children, and her duty, to mount the rostrum and proclaim the peculiar virtues of free-love, elective affinity, or the reincarnation of souls.”

It was thus not unusual during this period for female mediums and believers to be committed to asylums on the grounds of religious monomania. Nonetheless, Spiritualism’s immense popularity across American society suggested that the line between insanity and mental health was less distinct than had previously been thought.

The second half of the nineteenth century also witnessed the efforts of scientists in Britain and America to explain mental functioning according to the same kind of deterministic physical laws that governed the material world. As Lorraine Daston notes, nineteenth-century philosophy of science posited a continuance of physical causation throughout material existence, so if psychology was to rise to the status of the natural sciences, it seemed as though psychologists would have to jettison metaphysical concepts such as the will which presupposed the ability to disrupt necessary cause-and-effect relationships. Simultaneously, research on reflex action by Marshall Hall and others radically enlarged the sphere of unconscious, automatic mental functioning, making the role of volition appear increasingly limited.

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84 The anti-Spiritualist psychiatrist L. Forbes Winslow claimed that there were 40,000 Spiritualists confined in American asylums. See Roy Porter, Introduction – Georgina Weldon and the Mad Doctors, in Women, Madness and Spiritualism, 6 (Roy Porter, et al., eds. 2003). Owen describes the successful suit of the Spiritualist medium Louisa Nottidge to get herself released from a British insane asylum. Owen, supra note 15, at 152-153.


86 Id. at 195. Even the libertarian political thinker (and eventual psychical researcher) Henry Sidgwick had to admit the influence of recent psychological research on the scope of volitional conduct. He writes:

The belief that events are determinately related to the state of things immediately preceding them is now held by all competent thinkers in respect of all kinds of occurrences except human volitions. It has steadily grown both intensively and extensively, both in clearness and certainty of conviction and in universality of application, as the human mind has developed and human experience has been systematized and
Some psychologists were happy to do away with the chimera of free will. According to the influential psychologist and professor of medical jurisprudence, Henry Maudsley, cognition is governed by immutable laws of perception, sensation, and association, such that present mental states are invariably caused by previous mental states and so on back “to a great first cause.”\textsuperscript{87} The notion of “an ideal will unaffected by physical conditions” is, to Maudsley, “a deliberate fooling of one’s self.”\textsuperscript{88} Contrary to traditional ideas about the mind held by Enlightenment and Common Sense philosophers, volition “is not a self-generating, self-sufficing force,” but rather a force determined by antecedent, and potentially knowable, causes.\textsuperscript{89} The implications of Maudsley’s theory were considerable:

If it were possible for anyone to enter thoroughly into the inmost character of another person and to become exactly acquainted with the moving springs of his conduct in his particular relations of life, it would be possible not only to predict his line of action on every occasion, but even to work him, free will notwithstanding, like an automaton, by playing on his predominant passion, interest, or principle.\textsuperscript{90}

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\textsuperscript{87} Maudsley writes:

As in nature we pass from event to cause, and from this cause again to an antecedent one, and so on till we are driven to a great first cause, so, in the sincere observation of the mind, we see that it is determined to will this or that by a cause or motive, which is again determined by another, this again by another, and so on till we have gone through the whole series of desires, aversions, hopes, and fears, the sum of which is deliberation, and that have precede the last appetite or aversion, which we call an act of will.

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Id.} at 149.

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Id.} at 151.

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Id.} at 160.
Moreover, in a world without free will, moral, and thus criminal, responsibility would be inconceivable.  

Although Maudsley’s thesis found support with the great scientific popularizer Thomas H. Huxley, whose essay “On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata and Its History” drew considerable public attention, it is not surprising that most British and American scientists refused to go so far down the road to determinism. The emphasis Maudsley and Huxley placed on unconscious and involuntary mental activity, however, resonated deeply with other contemporary psychologists. Indeed, such “unconscious cerebration” was central to the many psychophysiological accounts of Spiritualist belief put forward during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The most widely read scientific author on Spiritualism, the British mental physiologist William Benjamin Carpenter, rejected the idea that Spiritualist belief was a matter of displaced wombs or

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91 *Id.* at 412. He writes, “there would be no reason to be surprised at any act which a man might do, or to reprobate it, however criminal...[it] would be to suppose him worse than a madman.” *Id.*

92 T. H. Huxley, *On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata, and its History*, 16 (n.s.) FORTNIGHTLY REV. 555 (Nov. 1874).

93 Among those prominent American scientists who maintained a belief in free will while acknowledging the considerable role of unconscious and involuntary action was the physician Oliver Wendell Holmes, father of Supreme Court Justice. *See Oliver Wendell Holmes, Mechanism in Thought and Morals* (2d. ed., London, Sampson Low, Son & Martin 1871). Holmes writes, “Like the general-in-chief, [the will’s] place is anywhere in the field of action. It is the least like an instrument of any of our faculties; the farthest removed from our conceptions of mechanism and matter, as we commonly define them.” *Id.* at 27. *See also Martin J. Wiener, Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law, and Policy in England, 1830-1914* (1990). Weiner notes, “Victorian physiologists developed models of human functioning and particularly of mental process that, although increasingly materialist and determinist, left an important, even decisive, role for self-mastery and self-creation.” *Id.* at 42.


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Like the more radical theories put forward by Maudsley and Huxley, Carpenter’s “mental physiology” was influenced by functional accounts of the nervous system that gave little scope to conscious, volitional action. The role of unconscious cognition was not limited simply to various supportive functions such as digestion and respiration; instead even “intellectual operations of a high order may go on automatically—one state of consciousness calling forth another in strict accordance with the ‘laws of thought.’” The will had only a restricted role to play in the selective mustering of attention toward particular mental representations automatically offered to it. In certain circumstances, however, the will can be directed at a particular idea for so long that the idea becomes “dominant,” usurping the attention and holding the selective power of the will in abeyance. When this happens, the automatic processes of cognition continue without interruption. The power of dominant ideas, Carpenter suggests, explains the testimony regarding mesmeric and Spiritualist phenomena. Either willingly or at the suggestion of a medium, believers focus their attention on a particular idea, for example, that they will hear a certain noise. In time, the idea of the noise becomes dominant, and unconscious processes overwhelm the will and judgment, now held in abeyance by the idea, until the believers actually think they hear it.

According to Carpenter, the opinion of medical men that believers are “all hysterical” “has now been fully proven to be incorrect by the fact, that steady, sensible, middle-aged men, having all their wits about them, are sometimes found to be as good subjects of certain of these operations, as the susceptible young females who are deservedly regarded with so much suspicion.”

Carpenter, MP, supra note 61, at 612.

Id. at 377.

Id. at 420. He writes, “[The will] can select, among the motives which present themselves, those which the Moral Sense approves as the most worthy, and can intensify the force of these by fixing the attention upon them…”

In his words:

...the characteristic which is common to all of these states being the more or less complete surrender of the guiding and controlling action of the Will, while there is a greater or less degree of receptivity for external impressions. The current of mental activity thus comes to be essentially automatic; and the corrective action of Common Sense—which is the general resultant of antecedent experience—being thus suspended (as in dreaming), the Ego comes to believe implicitly the ideas which may possess him at the time, whether these have been directly suggested to him by external prompting, or have been evolved by the operations of his own mind.
The influential American psychiatrist George M. Beard put forward a similar theory of hypnotic and Spiritualist trance in a paper presented to the New York Medico-Legal Society in 1876. Influenced by recent theories about the conservation of energy, Beard believed that individuals were endowed with a finite amount of nervous force, and if that force was overtaxed by one area of the mind, other areas would suffer. Beard believed that the dissipation of nervous force normally directed at the will explained what happened to people in Spiritualist trances. He claimed that trance “is a functional disease of the nervous system, in which the cerebral activity is concentrated in some limited region of the brain with suspension of the activity of the rest of the brain, and consequent loss of volition.”

When the attention is directed by some exciting cause—“fear, or wonder, or expectation”—toward a particular object or idea, it drains the nervous force from the rest of the mind and especially the will causing the subject to act automatically in response suggestions by the medium: “he sees and hears whatever he is told to see and hear.” Accordingly, “The fully entranced person has no will; what he wishes to do he cannot; what he wishes not to do he does; he is at the mercy of an external or internal suggestion.”

The social and ethical implications of these psychological explanations of Spiritualist belief were considerable. Unlike the alienists’ accounts of Spiritualist delusions, the psychological theories offered by Carpenter and Beard did not only apply to those who, through environmental or hereditary factors, were predisposed towards insanity. As Beard argued, “Trance is not, as many suppose, the peculiar gift of certain temperaments. It is the property of the human race. All persons are liable to become entranced, just as they are liable to become paralyzed or

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100 On Beard see CHARLES E. ROSENBERG, NO OTHER GODS: ON SCIENCE AND AMERICAN SOCIAL THOUGHT (1997).
101 Beard, supra note 99, at 319.
102 Id. at 323.
103 Id. at 326.
epileptic, although all do not suffer in this way.104 While the development of certain habits of mental action could, Carpenter suggested, protect people from the nefarious influence of dominant ideas, the essential lesson of his research was that even seemingly trustworthy people could be made to believe they saw tables levitate. Moreover, everyone recognized that if people could be influenced to see and hear things without conscious awareness that they were acting according to external suggestions, they might also be influenced to do things unconsciously, thus calling into question individual responsibility.105 Although Beard doubted that people could be unwittingly forced to commit crimes through the influence of hypnotic suggestion, he did believe that less morally critical actions, such as signing a contract or will, could be compelled.106 Given the apparent feasibility of such conduct, it should not be surprising that Spiritualism provoked so much anxiety in the age of contract.

The influence of Spiritualist phenomena on both popular and scientific notions of rationality and volition were substantial. Their experiences with Spiritualists caused late-nineteenth-century Americans to substantially rethink their ideas about personal independence. Yet Spiritualism was, of course, not alone in challenging the mythical rational, independent agent at the center of the age of contract. Contemporaneous developments in Darwinian heredity, statistics, and sociology were also developing a picture of the world as highly interconnected and determined.107

104 Id. at 333.
105 The French psychiatrists were particularly intrigued by the question of whether a person could be made to commit a crime under the influence of hypnotic suggestion. See RUTH HARRIS, MURDERS AND MADNESS: MEDICINE, LAW AND SOCIETY IN THE FIN DE SIÈCLE (1989). Common law writers were also concerned about the possibilities of unconscious or hypnotic crime. See JOEL PETER EIGEN, UNCONSCIOUS CRIME: MENTAL ABSENCE AND CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY IN VICTORIAN LONDON 156 (2003) (noting “…the world of mesmerism, of hypnotism ‘beheading’ the will, of the possibility that someone else had committed the crime, offered the defendant a way to comprehend what had happened in the period that was ‘simply a blank to me.’”).
106 Beard writes, “It is conceivable that so simple a movement as the signing of one’s name to a false document of terrible import, might be automatically made by a mesmerized subject, at the suggestion of the person whom she supposed put her into the trance.” Beard, supra note 99, at 352.
107 See DANIEL J. KEVLES, IN THE NAME OF EUGENICS: GENETICS AND THE USES OF HUMAN HEREDITY (1995). The British polymath Francis Galton was at the
Crime, insanity, and drunkenness no longer appeared to be consequences of individual choice but rather the regular (and measurable) effects of hereditary and/or social influences. The age of contract was under attack from all sides.  

III. SPIRITUALISM AND REALIST LITERATURE

As it had for American psychologists, Spiritualism also proved irresistible to nineteenth-century American novelists. The leading lights of American literature – Hawthorne, Melville, James, Twain, Howells – as well as those that shone less brightly, were captivated by the behavior they witnessed around them. Given the variety of literary talents the subject attracted, it is no wonder that the fictional treatments of Spiritualism varied greatly. In this Article, I will examine the treatment of Spiritualism in American realist literature to more fully situate the center of this trend. His work on heredity and statistics was foundational for both fields. It was, in fact, entirely interconnected. He was also, however, the founder of the eugenics movement. See id. See also Thomas L. Haskell, The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority (1977); Stephen M. Stigler, The History of Statistics: The Measurement of Uncertainty Before 1900 (1986); Ian Hacking, The Taming of Chance (1990). Haskell writes, “To insist on the interconnectedness of social phenomena in time and in social space is to insist on the improbability of autonomous action. This presumption against autonomy applied to all social phenomena, including especially the irreducible constituent atoms of the social universe, individual human beings.” Haskell, supra note 107, at 13.  


The Blithedale Romance (1852).

The Apple-Tree Table; or, Original Spiritual Manifestations (1856) in The Complete Shorter Fiction (1997).

The Bostonians (1886).

Life on the Mississippi (1883).

The Undiscovered Country (1880).


See id.
movement’s place in American culture and to suggest comparisons with the legal response to Spiritualist belief. Although my argument would hold for other realist treatments, I will focus on one of the novels that dealt with Spiritualism most centrally, William Dean Howells’s *The Undiscovered Country* (1880).

Howells’s novel, set “at a time when the rapid growth of the city was changing the character of many localities,” opens on a séance in Boston on a street “inhabited by fortune-tellers and charlatans of a low degree.” The skeptical amateur scientist Ford and his friend Phillips have been invited to witness the spiritual manifestations associated with the mediumship of the beautiful Egeria Boynton. Upon arriving, the visitors are greeted by her father, Dr. Boynton, who describes their spiritual “investigations” and his use of mesmerism – “the application of exterior will” – to sustain his daughter during the spirit communications. With the assistance of a professional medium, Mrs. Le Roy, the séance proceeds with the expected raps and materializations. During the final display, Ford, intent on exposing the fraud, tricks the Spiritualists and injures Egeria while trying to catch the charlatan in the act. A dispute ensues, Ford threatens to inform the authorities about the charade, and Boynton challenges Ford to a scientific test, which the latter declines.

Disappointed by his failure in Boston, Boynton decides to quit the company of “professional mediums” to continue his investigations in a more conducive setting. He and Egeria eventually settle in with a Shake community, the only people, according to Boynton, who “have conceived of spiritism as a science and practiced it as a religion.” Boynton insists on demonstrating his daughter’s powers to the Shakers, but she is reluctant and, when he questions her faith, she admits her own doubt: “How can I tell father? It is you who do it. I see, or seem to see, whatever you tell me. I have always done that. It began so long ago, when I was so little, that I can’t remember anything

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116 Henry James’s *The Bostonians* (1886) would also be particularly fitting, although it is more concerned with trance-speaking than Spiritualism, per se.

117 HOWELLS supra note 54.

118 *Id.* at 1, 7.

119 *Id.* at 15-16.

120 *Id.* at 181.
different. I want to please you; I want to help you; but I don’t know if I can, father.”121 Boynton eventually convinces Egeria to “yield [herself] passively to [his] influence,” but their trial before the Shakers is a failure. The following day Boynton learns that Ford had been in the camp the previous night, and he concludes that the skeptic’s negative influence had caused their failure. He attacks Ford but injures himself instead. Ford’s sense of duty commits him to staying with Boynton in the Shaker camp during the latter’s convalescence. In time, Boynton turns away from Spiritualism, and Ford learns to accept him as a “singularly upright and truthful man” who had “the hope that the world has had for eighteen hundred years.”122 Simultaneously, Ford courts Egeria, and she too disowns her Spiritualist past, stating, “I think the great thing is to be free … It was slavery even if it was true.”123 Flushed with her newfound freedom from her father’s influence, Egeria is reluctant to accept the possibility of Ford’s.124 After her father’s death, Egeria overcomes her misgivings about Ford’s influence over her and agrees to marry him.

Howells’s treatment of Spiritualism in *The Undiscovered Country* fits nicely into Brook Thomas’s analysis of American literary realism. For Thomas, realist fiction represents both the promise of living in the age of contract and the limits of that promise. It does this, he asserts, without the help of a transcendent moral order; the challenges of the age of contract are confronted immanently and democratically.125 In *The Undiscovered Country*, the anxieties associated with modern life are everywhere on display. “The changing character of many localities” has separated families and splintered communities. Boynton and Egeria, we learn, were forced to leave their family home in Maine in the face of Egeria’s maternal grandfather’s disapproval of their “researches.” In a society based on impersonal contractual relationships, questions of trust, consent, and influence loom large. Spiritualism becomes Howells’s vehicle for addressing these questions.

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121 *Id.* at 68.
122 *Id.* at 394, 364.
123 *Id.* at 302-303.
124 See *id.* at 323.
Although believers treated the phenomena as matters of religion, for Howells Spiritualism presented a “psychological rather than a supernatural problem.” 126 Both Egeria’s and Boynton’s beliefs are manifestations of their psychologies. Egeria desires to please her father and has never known anything but his influence, and Boynton longs for contact with his deceased wife and empirical verification of the afterlife. Howells represents social and familial ties – the bonds between friends, families, and lovers – as forces, influences, and exertions of will. In doing so, however, Howells refrains from adopting the scientific, materialist position initially advocated by the character Ford. 127 The multitude of opinions – by Ford, Boynton, Egeria, the Shakers – creates a polyphonic discursive space that serves to individualize particular cases of Spiritualistic belief. 128 On one hand, Boynton’s lifelong manipulation of Egeria’s innocent sense of familial duty is, to Howells, “play[ing] the vampire.” 129 His coercive control is not based on fear but rather on Egeria’s emotional commitment to him and on the length and nature of their relationship. As Egeria’s statement makes plain, Spiritualist belief could become a form of intolerable slavery, 130 still, as Foner notes, a salient cultural concern. 131 Yet, in Ford’s ultimate recognition of the value of

126 KERR, supra note 114, at 21.
127 As Tom Quirk notes:

[T]he scientific mindset was equally eager for abstract generalizations, the enunciation of natural laws that hovered above and apart from lives as they are lived but somehow explained those lives nonetheless. The universe, it was supposed, was composed of Energy and Matter, and the relation between them could be understood in exclusively mechanistic terms. Science and technology, however, often proved desiccating and diminishing to actual experience and to familiar acquaintance. Though generally empirical in their attitude, realists, unlike naturalists, were not willing to allow scientists the final word on matters of value and human freedom.

128 On polyphony, see MIKHAIL BAKHTIN, PROBLEMS OF DOSTOYEVSKY’S POETICS (Carlyn Emerson, ed. & trans. 1984). For a discussion of polyphony and the law, see e.g. MILNER S. BALL, THE WORD AND THE LAW, 144 (1993).
129 HOWELLS, supra note 54, at 318-319. Boynton admits, “I seized upon a simple, loving nature, good and sweet in its earthliness, and sacred in it, and alienated it from all possible human happiness to the uses of my ambition. I have played the vampire!” Id.
130 See supra note 123.
131 See Foner supra note 13, at 446.
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Boynton’s character, Howells charts a path of criticism of Spiritualism’s frauds but respect for its honest and reasonable believers.\(^\text{132}\) Howells depicts Boynton as a man of character who, despite his eccentric beliefs, exercises his judgment and his will. In so doing, he withholds any transcendent moral order and encourages an individualized, democratic approach to Spiritualists and their place in modern society.

### IV. SPIRITUALISM AND THE LAW

Given its popularity, it should not be surprising that Spiritualism eventually made its way into American courts.\(^\text{133}\) Many of the initial cases were criminal prosecutions of fraudulent mediums\(^\text{134}\) that some commentators hoped would settle the truth of the matter once and for all.\(^\text{135}\) The bulk of litigation surrounding Spiritualism, however, involved challenges to the wills of Spiritualist testators.\(^\text{136}\) Disappointed heirs sought to overturn

\(^{132}\) KERR, *supra* note 114, at 138-139.

\(^{133}\) The most curious case is, without doubt, a copyright dispute about a play composed by the aid of automatic writing. Although the plaintiff claimed that the true author of the play was in fact a spirit, the judge felt compelled to assign her rightful ownership of the composition. *See* Blewett Lee, *Copyright of Automatic Writings*, 13 VA. L. REV. 22 (1926).


\(^{135}\) *See* Some Legal Points in the Buffalo Spiritualist Trial, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 28, 1865, at 4 (hoping, “It is not impossible, therefore, but that this trial may have a perceptible effect in diminishing the number of those who attend these mystic sessions. It will not lessen the number of fools.”); Judge Hall on Spiritual Mediums, N.Y. TIMES, Sep. 30, 1865, at 4 (“Truth would not fear a cross-examination. Let us see whether spiritualism fears it.”).

\(^{136}\) A number of cases have been reported in appellate opinions, and I have found newspaper accounts of many more. *See* Denson v. Beazley, 34 Tex. 191 (1870); Chafin Will Case, 32 Wis. 557 (1873); Leighton v. Orr, 44 Iowa 679 (1876); Greenwood v. Cline, 7 Or. 1 (1879); In re Smith’s will, 52 Wis. 543 (1881); Thompson v. Hawks, 14 F. 902 (Cir. Ct, D. Ind. 1883); Otto v. Doty, 61 Iowa 23 (1883); Baylies v. Spaulding, 6 N.E. 62 (Mass. 1886); In re Storey’s will, 20 Ill. App. 183 (1886); Middleditch v. Williams, 45 N.J. Eq. 726, 17 A. 826 (1889); In re Keefer’s will, 3 N.Y.S. 629 (1889); In re Trich’s will, 165 Pa. 586 (1895); Whipple v. Eddy, 161 Ill. 114 (1896); Steinkuehler v. Wempner, 169 Ind. 154 (1907); O’Dell v. Goff, 149 Mich. 152 (1907). The most widely reported
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wills written by believers on the grounds of insane delusion and undue influence. The trials of Spiritualist wills thus provided an ideal forum for nineteenth-century Americans to debate questions of sanity, influence, and familial duty.

A. Delusion and Undue Influence

Although it may seem odd for an article on the age of contract to turn to testamentary law, there are, in fact, good reasons to do so. As a matter of substantive and procedural law, contracts and wills cases are fairly similar. Although both fields have their unique doctrinal issues, both also revolve around the intentional disposition of real or personal property. Accordingly, the law’s inherent psychological presumptions about capacity and willfulness, the focus of this Article, have been sufficiently analogous that American jurists addressing either subject matter often refer to case law in both fields. Furthermore, although American law had removed a number of the common law’s prohibitions about the ability of parties to challenge a contract on the grounds of incapacity, i.e., to assert their own incapacity, it was still less likely that such disputes would arise in contracts cases than in wills cases. Moreover, most of the contracts cases in which incapacity or undue influence were alleged are brought by

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137 See Blumenthal, *DLP*, supra note 37, at 1233-1234. Blumenthal writes, “To a significant degree, capacity challenges brought with respect to contracts and deeds mirrored those involving wills, both at the level of procedure and substance. This was due, at least in part, to the fact that a good number of the disputed conveyances and agreements were likely intended to operate as gifts or will substitutes. Further inclining the courts in this direction was the identity of the disputants; as in will contests, they tended to be relatives of the grantor, whose death was often the occasion for the suit.” *Id.*

138 See *id.* at 1149. Blumenthal suggests that “judges tended to apply a more demanding standard of capacity to marketplace transactions that those that took place within the family circle, generally holding that more ‘mind’ was needed to make a valid contract than a will.” *Id.*

139 See Hamburger, *supra* note 25, at 285-286. He notes, “In cases of duress and mental incapacity, litigants and judges availed themselves of consensus theory relatively infrequently, because existing precedent and doctrine greatly reduced the advantages of such analysis.” *Id.* at 285.
the heirs of the contracting party as a part of broader disputes about the estate. Finally, because cases of disputed wills inevitably impact testators’ families, they offer a valuable portrait of legal interactions with domestic life in the age of contract.

As Susanna Blumenthal notes, the substantive and procedural law relating to wills was in flux during this period. Because contractarian jurisprudence discouraged courts from examining the specific provisions of a contract or will, the judge’s role was limited to ensuring that testaments were freely made and not the products of insanity or undue influence. Blumenthal has shown how American courts responded to developments in psychiatry in their treatment of insanity. Courts began to recognize concepts such as “partial” and “moral” insanity, and so-called “unnatural” wills became increasingly vulnerable. In addition, following English practice, American law adopted “delusion” as the appropriate standard for gauging insanity.

The rules relating to undue influence were also changing during the nineteenth century. The phrase “undue influence” was originally appended to the broader defense of “fraud, imposition, and undue influence,” although during the early nineteenth century, most juristic writing on the subject was devoted to fraud or fear-inducing coercion. Also, as noted above, the defense was primarily applied to certain fiduciary relationships that generated power imbalances such as husband and wife or ward and guardian. Courts “jealously” guarded contracts and wills that granted benefits from the weaker to the stronger member of such relationships, because they were anxious about the use of “surprise, trick, cunning” or psychological imposition “tantamount to force and fear.”

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140 Blumenthal, DLP, supra note 37, at 1219.
141 Blumenthal, DoW, supra note 7, at 1004-1005.
142 According to Isaac Redfield, the leading American wills treatise writer, “The belief in the existence of mere illusions, or hallucinations, creatures purely of the imagination, such as no sane man could believe in, are unequivocal evidences of insanity.” ISAAC F. REDFIELD, THE LAW OF WILLS 59 (3d. ed., Boston, Little, Brown & Co. 1869) (hereinafter REDFIELD, LW).
143 See supra notes 39-44.
144 Id.
145 2 TUCKER, supra note 43, at 411.
146 SHELFFORD, supra note 40, at 209. Shelford writes:
century, however, undue influence became the primary subject for discussion in treatise literature, with fraud falling to the wayside.\textsuperscript{147}

Although a complete proof would stretch this Article beyond its intended scope, there is good reason to believe that the growth of undue influence coincided with and drew heavily upon contemporary concerns about the very same psychical phenomena that have been discussed above. Undue influence included both broader and less direct influence than was required to prove fraud or duress. Judges and treatise writers were reluctant to specify the precise nature of the influence, and, unlike with fraud and duress, they did not explain how the influence had to operate psychologically. It became clear, however, that, just as Beard had suggested,\textsuperscript{148} undue influence did not require fear; any “feeling that [the testator] is unable to resist” would suffice.\textsuperscript{149} Yet, in their descriptions of its action, they drew, occasionally explicitly, on language used by scientific and popular writers on mesmerism, hypnotism, and Spiritualism, defining undue influence as “moral coercion”\textsuperscript{150} and looking for evidence “that the testament speaks the mind of another”\textsuperscript{151} or that “the mind and the will of the testator have been overpowered and subjected to the will of another.”\textsuperscript{152} The professor of medical jurisprudence at Columbia Law School, John Ordronaux, was particularly explicit in his reliance on psychology in his description of undue influence:

The influence, to vitiate a testamentary act, must amount to force and coercion destroying free agency, it must not be the influence of affection and attachment, nor the mere desire of gratifying the wishes of another, for that would be a very strong ground in support of a will; further, there must be proof that the act was obtained by that coercion, by importunity which could not be resisted; that it was done merely for the sake of peace, so that the motive was tantamount to force and fear.\textsuperscript{146}

\textit{Id.} (emphasis in original).

\textsuperscript{147} See REDFIELD, L\textit{O}W, \textit{supra} note 142, at 474. Redfield states, “Fraud, and undue influence, are so nearly synonymous, that it will not be important to enter into the definition of possible distinctions between them, since the result of either must be the same upon the testamentary act.” \textit{Id.} The remainder of Redfield’s discussion is devoted to undue influence.

\textsuperscript{148} See Beard, \textit{supra} note 99, at 323.

\textsuperscript{149} JAMES SCHOULER, \textit{A TREATISE ON THE LAW OF WILLS} 237 (2d ed., Boston, Boston Book Co. 1892).

\textsuperscript{150} Potts v. House, 6 Ga 324 (1849).

\textsuperscript{151} 1 H.C. UNDERHILL, \textit{A TREATISE ON THE LAW OF WILLS} 180 (Chicago: T.H. Flood & Co. 1900).

\textsuperscript{152} SCHOULER, \textit{supra} note 149, at 239.
It is a well-known principle of mental philosophy, that a strong mind always overpowers a weaker mind with which it is brought into contact by a process akin to benumbing, so that the closer the relationship the sooner the subjugation. And this may all happen without, as well as by, intentional effort. We all surrender to our mental masters as soon as we meet them face to face. … The law practically recognizes this canon of our mental constitution by attaching to undue influence a meaning synonymous with constraint. It recognizes it as the exercise of such a power over another’s mind as serves practically to dethrone his will and to substitute ours in its place. In other words, it is a real transfusion of mind. 153

Similarly, James Schouler notes in his Treatise on the Law of Wills, “influences of one kind or another surround every rational being, and operate necessarily in determining his course of conduct under every relation of life.” 154

Perhaps in recognition of the pervasive influences that affect everyone, the bounds of the defense were expanded from the specific relationships previously enumerated to cover all cases of contractual or testamentary disposition. 155 Moreover, courts and commentators consistently invoked the notion that enumerating precise rules for undue influence would be impossible. Instead, judges were persuaded to undertake detailed and specific examinations of the underlying facts. 156 The intricacies of interpersonal influence could not be masked by a wall of

154 SCHOUER, supra note 149, at 237.
155 See REDFIELD, LOW, supra note 142, at 142.
156 See e.g. Greenwood v. Cline, 7 Or. 17 (1879) (noting, “It becomes necessary to look into the documents, the relations of the parties to each other, and the circumstances surrounding the whole transaction, in order to ascertain whether there exists any grounds for imputing fraud and undue influence in the execution of the will.”). See also UNDERHILL, supra note 151, at 179 (“No precise principle can be enunciated, no distinct rule can be laid down, which will be applicable to all cases. Every case depends wholly upon its own particular facts and attendant circumstances.”); REDFIELD, LoW, supra note 142, at 478 (“In regard to undue influence…the cases are almost infinite, in number and variety.”).
abstraction. According to Allan McLane Hamilton and Lawrence Godkin:

> Just how much pressure may be considered undue is of course a matter for judges and juries to decide; yet it is a grave question whether any one is capable, without a deep insight into the character and mode of life of a particular individual, to estimate his susceptibility or powers of resistance, and to say how much he has been made to do anything against his will and at the dictation of others.  

Thus, cases where the court must decide which influences are in fact undue, and specifically those directly dealing with Spiritualists, enable us to see late-nineteenth-century American jurists grappling with fundamental questions about volition, suggestion, and interpersonal influence. Although it would be too much to suggest that undue influence doctrine evolved in direct response to popular and scientific notions of interpersonal influence, it seems likely that the law assimilated these ideas into its existing legal framework.

### B. Spiritualism on Trial

The leading case of a disputed Spiritualist’s will, *Robinson v. Adams*, coincidently comes from Maine, the Boyntons’ home state. Under dispute was the will of Mary Green, which partially disinherited her only daughter and her grandchildren. The testatrix believed this was necessary in order to protect her money from her son-in-law, whom she believed was possessed by an evil spirit that he used to control her daughter’s mind and alienate her affections. Before her death, Mrs. Green admitted that she had consulted the spirit of her deceased husband about the will and that he had directed her regarding its provisions. According to the

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158 For another example of the refraction of psychological ideas in legal doctrine see EIGEN, supra note 105, at 13. Eigen writes, “Over time, however, one can glimpse the absorption of clinical terms and innovative meanings given to familiar forms of behavior, as they become the focus of courtroom deliberation.” *Id*. See also Blumenthal, *DoW, supra* note 7.
159 62 Me. 369 (1870).
160 *Id*. at 374.
C.J. Buccafusco, *Spiritualism and Will(s) in the Age of Contract*

contestants, Mrs. Green’s belief that she could communicate with spirits who told her how to draft her will should amount to insane delusions and undue influence as a matter of law.\(^{161}\) The contestants requested that the judge refuse to “give this system of spiritualism a standing in court” and instead follow the lead of a recent English decision in judicially declaring Spiritualism “mischievous nonsense, well calculated...to delude the vain, the weak, the foolish, and the superstitious.”\(^{162}\) “No mind,” the contestants asserted, “can be sound and free from undue influence which is moved, constrained or restrained, in business transactions by this diabolical system.”\(^{163}\)

The trial judge, however, was unwilling to take the case from the jury. Had he ruled against the will as a matter of law, he noted, “undoubtedly there would be a very large number of people in the country incapable of makes wills.”\(^{164}\) Instead, he instructed the jury on the law relating to insane delusion: “insanity is where a person believes something to exist, which not only does not exist, but of which he has no evidence sufficient to satisfy any healthy mind, and he acts upon it, reasons upon it, and holds it as a reality.”\(^{165}\) It was thus up to the jury to decide if the testatrix

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\(^{161}\) *Id.* at 382. The appellant’s lawyer asserted:

About the essential facts, there is no dispute. It is not every thing which is to be left to a jury in such a trial as this; nor in any trial. The court will not ask the jury whether there are such facts in nature as life and death; nor whether a dead man can speak, or can make a contract, or a will; nor whether he can dictate or advise a living person how to do either.

*Id.* He continued, “This is not only good logic and sound sense, but good orthodox christianity [sic] also; and we therefore respectfully submit, that it ought to be declared by this court to be good law.” *Id.* at 383.

\(^{162}\) *Id.* The English case was Lyon v. Home, 6 Eq. Cs. 655 (1868). It involved a conveyance from an elderly woman to the famous Spiritualist medium Daniel Dunglas Home. She argued and the court held that the conveyance was the result of undue influence and fraud. Although he described the case as “remarkable,” the great British jurist Frederick Pollock found the case “more curious than instructive.” FREDERICK POLLOCK, *PRINCIPLES OF CONTRACT AT LAW AND IN EQUITY* 516, n. a (London, Stevens & Sons 1876).

\(^{163}\) 62 Me., at 383.

\(^{164}\) *Id.* at 391.

\(^{165}\) *Id.* at 402. The judge added a further instruction given the impossibility of proving that spiritual communication does not exist: “That may be an insane delusion; that is to say, where it is so palpable that he believes it without reason;
believed what could not possibly be true. On the matter of undue influence, the trial judge instructed the jury as he would have with a purely earthly influence: “if she did have what she deemed directed communications on the subject of this will, and implicitly followed them, yielding her own will and judgment and exercising no free agency then it would not be her will, but another’s, in the same manner as if actually dictated by a living person.”

Following these charges, the jury found in favor of the will. On appeal, the Supreme Court of Maine affirmed the trial court’s refusal to take the questions from the jury. According to the Court, “the very purpose of [the jury] is to have [it] inform the court as to the truth of certain allegations.” Such questions as these were simply not for the Court to decide. Justice Kent noted:

we were called to deal with this matter not theologically – or in one sense, morally or scientifically – but legally, as bearing on the single point of insanity, or insane delusion. What our individual or collective opinion as to the facts, truth, possibilities, or evidence, or claims, of this so-called spiritualism, may be, has nothing to do with the questions before us. It is only as to the proved effect of this belief on another person’s mind, that is before us.

Accordingly, the Court supported the trial judge’s decision to allow “great liberality” in the evidence admitted to determine the state of Mrs. Green’s mind. Justice Kent explained, “To enable the jury to determine the real state of mind, the action of that mind, as shown best by conversations, declarations, claims and acts, is the most satisfactory evidence.” When dealing with assertions of insanity or undue influence, courts should be allowed to make particularized inquiries into the testator’s mental function by admitting diverse and often conflicting evidence from her life.

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any reason sufficient to satisfy a healthy mind; and he acts upon it, when it cannot possibly be true; that is an insane delusion.” Id. at 402.

166 Id. at 407.
167 Id. at 403.
168 Id. at 404.
169 Id. at 413. The Court declared, “Much is necessarily left to the discretion of the presiding judge, and it is impossible to lay down any general rules which would cover all cases.” Id.
170 Id.
From the “great mass of evidence” before it, the Court had little trouble upholding the jury’s findings regarding insanity and undue influence. Although Mrs. Green believed that she was receiving advice from her deceased husband, “she did not yield implicitly and blindly to these suggestions, but regarded them—as she would have regarded such letters if they had been written during life—as friendly suggestions, which had some effect on her mind, but not to the point of destroying her own free will and deliberate judgment.” Her will would stand.

Isaac Redfield, the leading American treatise writer on the law of wills, was appalled by the decision in Robinson. He was clearly familiar with the work of mental physiologists on Spiritualism, and he would have liked to bar the courthouse doors against a belief “which is extending, every day almost, to greater numbers and more highly cultured portions of the native as well as foreign population of the country.” Its popularity, however, belied the fact that such phenomena violated the “daily and ordinary experience of ordinary persons.” Wills drafted by Spiritualists should be immediately suspect, according to Redfield, because “[believers] feel themselves entirely incapable of going counter to their dictation. … They become, either willingly or unwillingly, commonly the former, the complete slaves of such influence.” In any event, juries could not be trusted with such decisions, and courts should rule on them as a matter of law with the aid of “experts conversant in such topics.”

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171 Id. at 412.
172 Id. at 408-09.
173 Interestingly, a note at the end of the case indicates that the proponents eventually withdrew prosecution of the will and agreed to let Mrs. Robinson have the property if she paid them $3000. The estate was valued at $27,000. Id. at 414.
ISAAC F. REDFIELD, LEADING AMERICAN CASES AND NOTES UPON THE LAW OF WILLS 365 (Boston, Little Brown, & Co. 1874).
175 Id. at 367.
176 Id. at 387.
177 Id. at 387. Other commentary on the Spiritualist wills cases includes Ardemus Stewart, Belief in the Preternatural, and Its Effect Upon Dispositions of Property, 40 AM. L. REG. & REV. 505 (1892); Blewett Lee, Psychic Phenomena and the Law, 34 HARV. L. REV. 625 (1920); Charles Gordon, Wills as Affected by Belief in Spiritualism, 4 N.Y.U. L. REV. 58 (1927).
In cases concerning Spiritualists’ wills, however, courts were more likely to follow Robinson than Redfield. For the most part, courts tended to uphold Spiritualists’ wills when there was evidence that the testator had freely chosen his beliefs however unusual they may seem, but they were also willing to invalidate wills when they believed that testators were wholly in the power of another party. For example, in the case of In re Smith’s will, the Supreme Court of Wisconsin reinstated a Spiritualist’s will that disinherited his children. Although the Court found him to be a man of “some peculiarities and eccentricities,” it relied on the fact that “[h]e brought [the spiritual communications] to the test of his judgment, and acted accordingly.” In Thompson v. Hawks, however, the testator’s will, disinheriting his children in favor of his spiritual medium, was invalidated on the grounds of incapacity and undue influence. Unlike the testator in Smith, here the testator “embraced spiritualism as practiced by the spirit medium, and instead of merely believing in it as an abstract proposition, he became possessed by it and suffered it to dominate his life and override every other consideration.”

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178 See, e.g., Denson v. Beazley, 34 Tex. 191 (1870); In re Smith’s will, 52 Wis. 543 (1881); Middleditch v. Williams, 45 N.J. Eq. 726, 17 A. 826 (1889); 179 See, e.g., Thompson v. Hawks, 14 F. 902 (Cir. Ct. D. Ind. 1883); Leighton v. Orr, 44 Iowa 679 (1876). Blumenthal’s findings are in substantial agreement. See Blumenthal, Dow, supra note 7, at 1027. Regarding the Chafin’s Will Case (38 Wis. 557 (1873)), she writes:

The judges seemed to construe narrowly the legal definition of insane delusion so as to exclude most forms of human perversity. In other words, the judges enforced a rule of reasonableness even as they claimed only to be effectuating Chafin’s will. They thus gave broad scope to the principle of testamentary freedom, while still preserving courts’ power to define and police the borderline cases and thereby protect vulnerable individuals from the worst impositions.

Id. 180 In re Smith’s Will, 52 Wis. 543 (1881). The Court continued, “It is difficult to find evidence of insane delusion, or of any peculiar exposure of liability to undue influences in a faith thus absolutely subordinated to the judgment.” Id. 181 14 F. 902. 182 Id., at 905. This case was published with a note on the presumption of undue influence. Wayland E. Benjamin, The Presumption of Undue Influence, 14 F. 905 (1883). The author concluded:

Where, as in the principal case, the spirit medium is a beneficiary under a will made in accordance with such communications, the burden is upon those seeking its probate to show that it was the voluntary and well-understood act of the testator’s mind. From such a relation, the
The courts in *Robinson* and these other cases enacted many of the same strategies for dealing with the anxieties associated with Spiritualism in the age of contract that Howells had in *The Undiscovered Country*. Concerns about volition, influence, and family and social structure were aired polyphonically through the voices of contestants, proponents, witnesses, and judges. And like Howells, the *Robinson* court converted matters of belief into matters of psychology. Specifically, the Court was not concerned with the truth or falsehood of Spiritualism, only with its effects on the minds of believers. To a considerable extent, the courtroom was a site for psychological evaluation of legal actors. Even so, like Howells, the *Robinson* court resisted the temptation to deal with Spiritualism scientifically. Although late-nineteenth-century American law was irresistibly drawn to the language associated with psychological accounts of mesmeric and Spiritualist phenomena, it remained reluctant to adopt those accounts as a matter of law. These were, after all, still matters of religious faith, and the courts were not the place for scientists to decide which beliefs were correct and which delusions. Instead, the Court turned the case over the jury, the legal system’s most democratic institution. People would be judged not by abstract legal principles nor by fashionable scientific theories but rather by their fellow citizens who faced the same opportunities and anxieties.

In her superb history of insanity and the law of wills, Susanna Blumenthal has suggested that by the late nineteenth century, American courts were liberalizing the rules of testamentary capacity and allowing more wills to stand. They turned away from scientific explanations of insanity and adopted a more pragmatic and specifically legal approach to capacity.\footnote{Blumenthal, *DoW*, supra note 7, at 1034.} By paying attention to contemporaneous developments in popular culture we can put such changes in a broader historical context. The age of contract valued freedom and rationality above all else, yet the phenomena associated with Spiritualism proved a threat to both. Unseen forces seemed able to make people do things unconsciously, and scientific theories about Spiritualistic belief

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exercise of dominion and influence by the medium over the mind of the testator is implied.

*Id.* at 907.
suggested that people were not as rational as had been previously believed. Mental health and mental disease looked more like differences in degree than differences in kind, and people no longer seemed as independent as they once had. As the age of contract’s psychological foundations began to crack, the jurisprudential doctrines that rested upon them gave way. In particular, the abstraction of mid-century law no longer seemed as tenable.

American law’s response to Spiritualism, its believers, and its critics offers a fascinating portrait of the interaction between law, science, and popular culture. Changing ideas about rationality and volition encouraged judges to liberalize the law relating to capacity and undue influence even if they did not fully incorporate the implications of novel scientific research. In fact, the courts became one the principal battlegrounds for debates between popular and scientific belief. In such cases, judges preferred to withhold moral judgment in favor of democratic, jury-based decision making. These choices are in keeping with wider trends in late-nineteenth-century American thought.

V. CONCLUSION: CULTURAL LEGAL HISTORY AND SECOND DEATH OF CONTRACT

The pages of novels, scientific treatises, and judicial opinions became the stages on which nineteenth-century Americans enacted their anxieties and argued about the human mind. By reuniting these sources that contemporary academia studies in separate disciplines we can tell a more contextualized story about the history of nineteenth-century law, science, and popular culture. In the decades following emancipation, America held out the promise of a contract-based society grounded in free exchange and an optimistic vision of human rationality.

184 For other challenges to the age of contract’s belief in free and independent legal actors, see HORWITZ, supra note 108; WELKE, supra note 108; FRIED, supra note 108.

185 For examples of similar work see THOMAS, supra note 21; GORDON, supra note 20; LAURA HANFT KOROBKIN, CRIMINAL CONVERSATIONS: SENTIMENTALITY AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY LEGAL STORIES OF ADULTERY (1998).
The rise of modern Spiritualism threatened the core tenets of the age of contract, both in the anxieties about influence and control that it raised and in the challenge that psychological explanations of Spiritualistic belief posed to human rationality and volition. In the treatment of Spiritualism by both realistic fiction and the American courts, we see similar strategies for coping with these anxieties. Concerns about freedom, influence, and the family are articulated polyphonically and the tension between individual freedom and familial duty is highlighted. Questions of religious belief are converted into ones of psychological influence, but both Howells and the Robinson court are reluctant to embrace purely scientific explanations of Spiritualism. Finally, ultimate resolution of the conflict rests in the democratic readership and jury without the guidance of transcendent moral principles. These strategies indicate one of the important ways that Americans dealt with anxieties about freedom, the will, and interpersonal influence in the age of contract. They also suggest new ways of interrogating important aspects of late-nineteenth-century American legal culture, including its characteristically pragmatic responses to the challenges of widespread religious unorthodoxy, increasingly unified and authoritative scientific opinion, and changing conceptions of gender roles and the family.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on this study’s implications for current debates about rationality and freedom. As noted above, recent research on the human mind has again challenged fundamental principles of American jurisprudence. Following new work in behavioral psychology and the psychology of emotion, people no longer appear as rational as legal theory, with its emphasis on cost-benefit analysis, suggests. Moreover, cognitive neuroscience, by demonstrating the essentially material basis of human behavior in given brain states, is contesting the very notion of freedom and responsibility. Although much has changed in the relationships between law, science, and popular culture since the nineteenth century (perhaps most importantly the vastly increased orthodoxy and authority of modern science), it

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186 Thomas notes, “The only action that the [realist] aesthetic point of view prescribes is the act of presenting to readers differing points of view and the web of interconnected actions that make it impossible to achieve sovereign control over our actions.” Thomas, supra note 21, at 278.

187 See supra notes 1-5.
seems likely that American law will and should respond to these challenges in much the same way that it did to those associated with Spiritualist phenomena. That is to say, once again, popular perceptions matter greatly, and they should be able to make themselves felt in the jury room. No matter how unified scientific opinion may become on subjects like free will, determinism, and responsibility, science must be filtered through layers of the “moral intuition”\textsuperscript{188} of popular belief and the “artificial reason”\textsuperscript{189} of legal process to have practical effect. And since, as I have suggested, science, culture, and the law are mutually constitutive, each field will be affected by the effort.