

Women's Studies, 38:377–398, 2009
Copyright © Taylor & Francis Group, LLC
ISSN: 0049-7878 print / 1547-7045 online
DOI: 10.1080/00497870902835269



MARY BAKER EDDY'S PRAGMATIC TRANSCENDENTAL FEMINISM

KATIE SIMON

University of California, Berkeley

Partway through her autobiography *Retrospection and Introspection* (1891), Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, casts herself out of her text. What begins as a straightforward chronological life-narration—with details about her ancestry and early childhood—turns in this moment into a spiritual autobiography in the Puritan vein. Eddy suddenly deems her own bodily experience and her individual personality irrelevant. The move to excise her body and her life story from her autobiographical text occurs, however, not at all randomly, but precisely at the point in the narration when Eddy, as a young adult woman in the 1850s, begins to experience some profound personal problems, problems that have everything to do with the configuration of white middle-class female bodies and subjectivities in North America in the Victorian era. The historical Eddy finds herself in her early twenties pregnant and newly widowed, penniless, a burden in her family home, ill, and unable to work given the limited options for women generally and her own limitations specifically.¹ In her own narration of events, she dispatches the details of these early years quickly and obliquely, but it is clear that she was moving around, living with various relatives and friends, a complete dependent. When

Many people helped with this article. I'd especially like to thank Dorri Beam, Mitchell Breitwieser, Natalia Cecire, Rebekah Edwards, Hillary Gravendyk, Cynthia Scheinberg, and Hertha D. Sweet Wong.

¹For my characterization of the "historical Eddy" here I draw on biographical as well as autobiographical sources, and distinguish this figure from the autobiographical persona of *Retrospection and Introspection*. Gillian Gill's splendid biography *Mary Baker Eddy* is the most balanced appraisal. Gill includes in her appendix a helpful overview of the biographical tradition on Eddy, which for many years was polarized between sensational, muck-raking negative portrayals, or on the other hand, hagiographies by Christian Science apologists.

Address correspondence to Katie Simon, English Department, 322 Wheeler Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720. E-mail: ksimon@berkeley.edu

an attempt at remarriage failed to provide the stability she had sought, Eddy (then Baker Glover Patterson) lost contact with the by now twelve-year-old son she had been struggling to raise. She details this event in two painful paragraphs:

My dominant thought in marrying again was to get back my child, but after our marriage his stepfather was not willing he should have a home with me. A plot was consummated for keeping us apart. The family to whose care he was committed very soon removed to what was then regarded as the Far West.

After his removal a letter was read to my little son, informing him that his mother was dead and buried. Without my knowledge a guardian was appointed him, and I was then informed that my son was lost. Every means within my power was employed to find him, but without success. We never met again until he had reached the age of thirty-four, had a wife and two children, and by a strange providence had learned that his mother still lived, and came to see me in Massachusetts. (20–21)

Eddy relates the sad details of the story of the “removal” of her son coolly, objectively, without much detail. “A plot was consummated for keeping us apart,” she states, using the passive voice to obscure the agents of the deed. In fact, while there seem to have been people responsible for the actual decision to send her son to live with a foster family in the first place (her father and stepmother), and to eventually remove him to another state (her new husband and the foster parents), the factors leading to the rupture with her son are perhaps so complex that Eddy cannot name them. It may take the benefit of historical distance to notice the intersecting and competing norms of class, gender, and race that form the backdrop to Eddy’s life story, and make her rise from poverty and obscurity to wealth and fame so remarkable. Rather than analyze the political and social issues contributing to the loss of her child, Eddy connects her text to the tradition of Puritan spiritual autobiography,² and eschews any autobiographical project that would concern itself merely with the corporeal or the personal.

Immediately after mentioning the “plot [that] was consummated” for keeping Eddy and her son apart, the tone of the text shifts abruptly. Eddy follows the two paragraphs about the loss of her son with a grandiose, messianic statement denying the importance

²See Shea for a useful study of the self-effacement in Puritan spiritual narratives and Quaker journals.

of this painful “removal” of her son, and she “expunges” any further mention of him. Moreover, she says, she will remove herself as well from her own life story. She will not dwell on “personal events,” she insists, but instead will “illustrate the ethics of Truth”:

Mere historic incidents and personal events are frivolous and of no moment, unless they illustrate the ethics of Truth. To this end, but only to this end, such narrations may be admissible and advisable; but if spiritual conclusions are separated from their premises, the *nexus* is lost, and the argument, with its rightful conclusions, becomes correspondingly obscure. The human history needs to be revised, and the material record expunged. (21–22)

The details of the narration of her life, she concludes, are not so important as the fact that they lead her to the discovery of Christian Science and the revelation that God has been completely misunderstood throughout the history of Protestant Christian thought. The “argument” that Eddy makes here in her autobiography and in her best-selling theological text *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (1875) is that “sin, disease, and death” are but an illusion, a mirage generated by erroneous beliefs and outmoded religious forms. The sad details of her personal story, she states, are but a part of the “human history” or the “material record” that her theories and her religion would “revise” or “expunge”; they are part of a bodily existence she connects with “error” rather than “Truth.” But Eddy goes further than denying the relevance of her own “corporeal personality” and her “so-called life” in her autobiographical project; she argues that material existence in general is illusory, that it has no relevance to a higher truth (*Retrospection and Introspection* 23, 74). She spent her life, after the loss of her son, convinced of her own understanding of this higher spiritual truth, and trying to articulate it for others.

While the autobiographical narrator of *Retrospection and Introspection* casts her own limited body and personality out of her life story, this sacrifice serves a much wider narrative of spiritual human progress, one in which the infinite love of a feminized divine becomes a structural support for a transgressive, authoritative, public female subjectivity. In 1879, Mary Baker Eddy based First Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Science) on her conception of an infinite and benevolent deity combining a superior intelligence with maternal qualities. She stressed the idea of God

as a loving presence rather than a punishing personality, and she held that since God is an impersonal and ungendered principle—both masculine and feminine—women have as much access to God’s power as men. While she insists on the irrelevance of the personal and the corporeal in her autobiography and her theology, she in fact revised her own material record (and thus her own human history) drastically after the loss of her son and the failure of her second marriage. For years Eddy lived in poverty and pain, estranged from her former middle-class position, living in boardinghouses or with acquaintances, and moving from town to town. Chronic ill health and a spinal affliction had her often bedridden for days. In 1866, after a fall on the ice, she suffered from what seemed a concussion and possibly a dislocated spine. Reading the bible, she claimed to have received the revelation that led to her metaphysical system for healing (*Albanese America* 235). She began teaching others, setting up shop as a healer, and in 1875 she published her first edition of the philosophy and description of her program that she would continue revising throughout her long life. She founded the Massachusetts Metaphysical College in 1881, several lucrative monthly and quarterly journals in the 1880s and 1890s, and in 1908, at the age of 87, she founded the international newspaper *The Christian Science Monitor* (*Albanese America* 238). Thus, while denying the relevance of the materiality of the body in her theories and her autobiography, Eddy built a substantial material empire and positioned herself as a public authority at a time when such accomplishments were rare for women.

The impulse to cast out or deny the body coexists in Eddy’s autobiography and theology with a desire to intervene in the symbolic order that creates our ideas about bodies and subjectivity in the first place.³ Her theological system seeks to rearticulate and resignify foundational texts in the Western tradition so as to reflect her understanding of the presence of a feminine divine. Her discussion of materiality and deity in both *Retrospection and Introspection* and *Science and Health* is deeply entrenched in a rigorous theological and philosophical reconsideration of the ideology,

³Here I am gesturing to the Lacanian formulation of the symbolic order, though a detailed consideration of the connection between Eddy’s theories and Lacan’s formulation is outside the scope of this article.

norms, beliefs, and customs associated with gender; she seeks a dismantling of the conventional gender binary, and posits an understanding of gender as culturally constructed and available for resignification.⁴ Eddy uses her conception of deity to dismantle justifications for the subordination of women and to advocate for a view of gender as “mental, not material” (*Science and Health* 508). Though she is focused on a more general critique of materiality and a denial of bodily existence, Eddy mobilizes her theological texts and her conception of a benevolent maternal deity to put forth theoretical formulations of a transcendent female gender and subjectivity, and she uses these formulations to provide pragmatic solutions for the problems many women encountered in the nineteenth century.

God's Gender and the Female Divine

Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, and sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine. There comes a time for destruction. But, before destruction is possible, God or the gods must exist.

—Luce Irigaray

The work of the contemporary French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray illuminates the feminist and philosophical dimensions of Mary Baker Eddy's nineteenth-century theology, and helps clarify the way her reformulations of gender and subjectivity connect to post-structuralist feminist projects. Irigaray insists that the task of feminist philosophy is twofold and argues, according to one recent critic, that a feminist philosophy

must subvert the privilege accorded to the phallus and masculinity, through a feminine miming and mirroring of phallogocentric discourse that subtly displaces its claims to mastery, totality, and wholeness. . . . Yet Irigaray insists that feminist philosophy must also articulate a new symbolic and a new imaginary grounded in the morphology of the body marked as female within male-dominated discourse. (Hollywood 180–181)

⁴My argument here is formulated in response, partly, to Schragger's conclusion that “Eddy's Christian Science . . . merely reverses the gendered hierarchy rather than dismantling the binary altogether” (54).

Irigaray's ambitious feminist project of deconstructing masculine privilege and articulating a new female imaginary and symbolic cannot be undertaken without a new conception of the divine, she argues, because "as long as woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own" (*Divine Women* 43). In "Divine Women," Irigaray draws on the work of Ludwig Feuerbach, in particular his suggestion in *The Essence of Christianity* that God is an expression of man's idealized projections, in order to note the way that the construction of an infinite God who mirrors a masculine subject serves as a structural support of masculinity:

To avoid that finiteness, man has sought out a unique *male* God. God has been created out of man's gender. He scarcely sets limits within Himself and between Himself: He is father, son, spirit. Man has not allowed himself to be defined by another gender: the female. His unique God is assumed to correspond to the human race (*genre humain*), which we know is not neuter or neutral from the point of view of the difference of the sexes. (42)

Without a projection of oneself as an idealized form representing infinite possibilities, Irigaray argues, one is paralyzed; without a kind of imaginative horizon against which to see oneself mirrored and to formulate one's goals, one is constricted, claustrophobically confined to the role of the Other. The Christian theological tradition presents a problem for women in that "[t]here is no *woman* God, no female trinity: mother, daughter, spirit. This paralyzes the infinite of becoming a woman since she is fixed in the role of mother through whom the *son* of God is made flesh" (*Divine Women* 42). In Irigaray's formulation, women need the structural support of a female divine in order to avoid the finitude of the limited roles offered to them in patriarchal culture—indeed the finitude of the limitations of individual subjectivity itself—and in order to engage in the kind of deconstructive and reconstructive projects she envisions.

Eddy undertakes just such a project in her "Keys to the Scriptures" section of *Science and Health*, in a chapter called "Genesis." She mobilizes a reading of the first two chapters of this scriptural text to authorize her conception of a feminized divine, making a distinction between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, and arguing that

the latter verse offers “the history of the untrue image of God,” and that “the proper reflection of God” is to be found in the first verse. She focuses in particular on Genesis 1.27: “So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them” (516). This biblical moment of gender differentiation serves as a launching point for Eddy’s meditation on the gender of God:

To emphasize this momentous thought, it is repeated that God made man in His own image, to reflect the divine Spirit. It follows that *man* is a generic term. Masculine, feminine, and neuter genders are human concepts. In one of the ancient languages the word for *man* is used also as the synonym of *mind*. This definition has been weakened by anthropomorphism, or a humanization of Deity. The word *anthropomorphic*, in such a phrase as “an anthropomorphic God,” is derived from two Greek words, signifying *man* and *form*, and may be defined as a mortally mental attempt to reduce Deity to corporeality. The life-giving quality of Mind is Spirit, not matter. The ideal man corresponds to creation, to intelligence, and to Truth. The ideal woman corresponds to Life and to Love. In divine Science, we have not as much authority for considering God masculine, as we have for considering Him feminine, for Love imparts the clearest idea of Deity. (516–517)

Here Eddy challenges the validity of a traditional argument for a masculine God by showing how the often-overlooked clause “male and female created He them” alters the import of the term “man.” This allows her to develop her own complex vision of a God that is not strictly aligned with either gender—because not anthropomorphic—but that still retains both masculine and feminine gendered qualities with which to mirror human subjectivities. While the qualities of “the ideal man” and the “ideal woman” Eddy invokes here could be read as a consolidation of traditional Victorian gender norms—in that man is associated with “creation,” “intelligence,” and “Truth,” and woman with “Life and Love”—Eddy draws upon such “separate spheres” ideology in order to make the surprising claim that God is probably more feminine than masculine “for Love imparts the clearest idea of Deity.”⁵ This statement posits the idea of a feminine

⁵For more on the use of “separate spheres” ideology by nineteenth-century religious women, including Eddy, see Baym 196–210. For another discussion of the gendering of Eddy’s concept of God, see Piepmeier 70.

God, a God who partakes in the Victorian era's idealization of femininity as an ethereal, maternal, loving and benevolent presence, but who is not limited by these gender roles. Even if one anthropomorphizes God—which Eddy does not—she rhetorically poses a question: why would God's gender assignment be masculine, given that the God of her understanding is synonymous with love? In this way Eddy draws upon limiting conceptions of femininity to create structural support for a radically unlimited female subjectivity.

Further, if God is love and females have equal access to divinity, Eddy suggests, it follows from her argument that women are also aligned with the "masculine" qualities she associates with God such as "intelligence" and "Truth." Women thus have equal, if not superior, access to this feminine/masculine deity, and all the various qualities—like superior intelligence—that her era had insisted on dividing so sharply along gender lines. This concept of the divine then authorizes Eddy as a credible recipient of divine revelation, and suggests that her whole system of theology and mental healing is authorized by God. Over and against the male authorities in the fields of religion, medicine, and literature doubting Eddy's credibility—by disparaging her abilities as an intellect, a theologian, a preacher, and a writer—she structures a rebuttal by calling upon the benevolent deity she finds in Genesis 1. Her concept of a feminized divine ultimately bolsters her own transgressive female subjectivity, enabling her to write, as Gillian Gill puts it, "not the expected textbook on mental healing techniques, not the comfortable compendium of healing anecdotes, but a book that takes on the great questions of God and man, good and evil, and that rejects orthodox verities" (217). In a circular way, her conception of God authorizes her audacious readings of scripture; and her audacious readings authorize her conception of a feminized divine. She denies the body as a material reality; and yet such a denial bolsters her own material experience of female power and authority. The concept of a personal, embodied self is sacrificed here in favor of a wider narrative of spiritual progress in which all agency resides in a transcendent divine; but the loss of this idea of self paradoxically engenders a standpoint from which Eddy can position herself as a credible intellectual, religious, and scientific authority.

Mesmerized Subjects of Gender

Gender is mental, not material.

—Mary Baker Eddy

Mary Baker Eddy's project is both theoretical and practical. Supported by her concept of a feminized divine, she critiques materiality and puts forth a theory of gender that radically revises the relationship between the morphology of the female body and female subjectivity. She also uses her texts to puncture the prestige and authority accorded the institutions of religion, medicine, and science by "miming and mirroring" their rhetoric and discourse, using their own terms to displace their claims to "mastery, totality, wholeness." More practically, in founding institutions such as her church, her school, and her publishing empire, Eddy creates structures and institutions in which the revised female subjectivity she envisioned and embodied received material support. To appreciate how she saw her own spiritual and practical program as so wholly positive—as such an antidote to the plethora of deleterious systems of healing then available—it is necessary to situate Christian Science in the context of the health reform movements and alternative medical practices that proliferated during the nineteenth century.⁶

Many of the health reform movements, like Christian Science, variously conflated ideas about morality and physical health, used scientific or pseudo-scientific discourse, and attracted large numbers of women as constituents.⁷ Almost a third of the members of the American Physiological Society, for example, were women. This organization's mission was to foster health by teaching physiology, and it adopted resolutions specifically giving women power through symbolic roles, as primarily capable of moral influence or uplift:

Resolved, That woman in her character as wife and mother is only second to the Deity in the influence she exerts on the physical, the intellectual,

⁶Catherine L. Albanese situates Christian Science, for example, among medical sectarian movements (hydropathy, Thomsonian herbalism, homeopathy, osteopathy, and chiropractic), mesmerism, and the Transcendentalists. See "Physic and Metaphysic in Nineteenth-Century America."

⁷As Beryl Satter points out, Christian Science drew middle-class white women in disproportionate numbers. In 1890, 75% of professional Christian Science healers were women, and by 1910 the figure had risen to 89% (66, 271n29).

and the moral interests of the human race, and that her education should be adapted to qualify her in the highest degree to cherish those interests in the wisest and best manner. (qtd. in Morantz 158)

Eddy exploits this widespread reformist emphasis on the role of women as second only to the Deity, while at the same time critiquing the materialistic approaches of such movements and setting her own organization apart from them. Many advocates of the health reform movement embraced treatments and techniques such as the water cure, the Graham diet, the rest cure, etc., and Eddy threads references to these alternative medical practices throughout *Science and Health*, writing sarcastically of the water cure, for instance:

We hear it said: 'I exercise daily in the open air. I take cold baths, in order to overcome a predisposition to take cold; and yet I have continual colds, catarrh, and cough.' Such admissions ought to open people's eyes to the inefficacy of material hygiene, and induce sufferers to look in other directions for cause and cure. (220)

Eddy cites her competition throughout her texts to contrast her own program with the variety of alternatives, and position herself as smarter, more effective, and more authoritative. Thus, while many of the reform movements gave women a figurehead role as being closer to God and able therefore to influence men through roles of wife and mother, Eddy uses this same ideology of superior feminine spirituality to assert her own religious, intellectual, scientific, and practical superiority. She depicts herself as a competent religious authority (rather than as a wife or a mother), for example, when she compares herself to a male clergyman who "adopted a diet of bread and water to increase his spirituality." His health failed and he gave his material method up, she writes, advising others "never to try dietics for growth in grace" (220). In this way her text constantly cites and dismisses others, trumping them in order to make its own positive claims. While Eddy cites and derides numerous alternative and orthodox spiritual and medical programs, she takes special pains to deride the alternative medical practice called mesmerism or animal magnetism, perhaps because it was most often confused with her system.

Mesmerism had been popular during the antebellum period, but it had garnered a great deal of negative attention by the time

of the first edition of *Science and Health*, which includes a whole chapter devoted to the system. Eddy had been accused of being a mesmerist, but she also used the charge herself as an epithet to describe former partners and students who strayed from her system (Gill 202). By the end of the nineteenth century, the figure of the mesmerized subject had become ubiquitous. If the dynamic between an entranced, hypnotized mesmeric subject under the control of a despotic, trespassing, and predatory mesmerizer was a terrifying image for many Americans—including Eddy—it also provided her with a major metaphor to describe the dangers of not adhering to her theological and healing systems. Despite her condemnation of mesmerism and her disavowal of any link between it and her own theological system, Eddy's articulation of Christian Science is bound to the idea of mesmerism—so much so that she can hardly define herself without recourse to it, cannot measure where she is without situating herself in relation to it. Mesmerism serves as the trope through which Eddy can establish her own program, and one could almost say that she stylizes Christian Science as everything that mesmerism is not.

Franz Anton Mesmer, a German doctor, first introduced animal magnetism. His system involved the manipulation of magnetic fluids in patients' bodies; he experimented with and documented cures involving the use of magnets, physical touch, and hydrotherapy. In 1784, the French government conducted an investigation of his theories and techniques after he had relocated to Paris and had begun instructing other doctors in his fledgling system (Fuller 8). Benjamin Franklin was on the commission that found in 1784 that there was “no proof of the existence of the animal magnetic fluid,” and that whatever effects one could observe from the therapy were the result of “the power of the imagination” (*Science and Health* 100–101).⁸ Despite this critique and other attempts to publicly discredit the method, it morphed and flourished in the hands of various disciples and teachers, and became popular in the United States, especially in the Northeast (Fuller 20). Though Mesmer had not emphasized techniques such as hypnotism and displays of clairvoyant powers, these

⁸For a discussion of the various governmental commissions and their dismissal of Mesmer see Crabtree 12–37. For a general overview of mesmerism in the United States see Fuller.

became key features in the showy demonstrations of the itinerant mesmerizers traveling up and down the Eastern seaboard during the antebellum period of Eddy's youth and young adulthood (Fuller 30). After the Civil War, various alternative medicines and religions such as Spiritualism, Harmonialism, and Mental Mind Cure⁹ would appropriate some of the features of mesmerism, and Christian Science arose in the context of these competing systems. The dynamic of a hypnotized or entranced mesmeric subject under the nefarious power of a Svengali-like figure becomes, for Eddy, a metaphor for the deceptive power of the unreality of material existence. Eddy deliberately invokes the negative associations the public by now had of mesmerism in order to highlight what she sees as the totally positive and benevolent aspects of her system and her own conception of the divine. Ritually conjuring up and then dismissing the alternative program, Eddy authorizes Christian Science by way of contrast.

In "Animal Magnetism Unmasked," the fifth chapter of *Science and Health*, Eddy derides mesmerism as being unscientific. As Alison Piepmeier points out, Eddy engages in a "polyvocal approach—often pitting one discursive model against another, and aligning herself with them strategically" (64). This polyvocality allows Eddy to appropriate the jargon and authority of the medical and scientific community's condemnation of this once popular therapeutic system; she uses this authority to assert the superiority of her own theological standpoint. Eddy includes in her critique of mesmerism (or animal magnetism) the French commission's language dismissing it as "one more fact to be recorded in the history of the errors of the human mind, and an important experiment upon the power of the imagination" (101). But she also appropriates this language to build her own metaphysical healing system in which she theorizes that "the power of the imagination" and the false beliefs of outmoded religions and misguided, ignorant physicians could actually make people sick. Indeed, the language of the commission's condemnation of mesmerism and her own articulation of her methods seem uncannily similar, as if Eddy's

⁹On Spiritualism see Braude and Carroll. The term "Mental Mind Cure" was widely used by a number of practitioners both inside and outside of Christian Science circles. Beryl Satter's history of the New Thought Movement stresses the debt that practitioners of Mental Mind Cure and New Thought owe to Eddy.

theory arose in the wake of not only her own criticisms of the theological, medical, and scientific institutions of her day, but in response, as well, to their own criticisms of one another. The commission's phrase "the history of the errors of the human mind" recalls the proto-psychological aspect of Christian Science, the part of her theology that is suspicious about "belief" (more on this later) and sees the human mind as a source of both "error" and healing. Eddy builds on this idea and emphasizes as well the delusory nature or "unscientific" understandings of the relationship between spirit, body, and mind:

If animal magnetism seems to alleviate or to cure disease, this appearance is deceptive, since error cannot remove the effects of error. Discomfort under error is preferable to comfort. In no instance is the effect of animal magnetism, recently called hypnotism, other than the effect of illusion. Any seeming benefit derived from it is proportional to one's faith in esoteric magic.

Animal magnetism has no scientific foundation, for God governs all that is real, harmonious, and eternal, and His power is neither animal nor human. Its basis being a belief and this belief animal, in Science animal magnetism, mesmerism, or hypnotism is a mere negation, possessing neither intelligence, power, nor reality, and in sense it is an unreal concept of the so-called mortal mind.

There is but one real attraction, that of Spirit. The pointing of the needle to the pole symbolizes this all-embracing power or the attraction of God, divine Mind. (101–102)

Eddy here appropriates the language of orthodox medicine—which was actively consolidating its power in part through debunking as quackery, superstition, or "magic" anything not aligned with its methods and teaching—and she echoes its critique of alternative methods such as mesmerism by calling them "unscientific."¹⁰ And yet she asserts that true science would acknowledge that "God governs all that is real, harmonious, and eternal," claiming for her own program the use of the term "science." Her focus on the "seeming" benefits and illusory effects sometimes produced by mesmerism enables a critique not simply leveled at the fringe medical practice, but one pointed more generally at an entire system of *materia medica* as well (including more orthodox

¹⁰See Winter for an overview of the medical profession in the U.S. and Britain during the nineteenth century, and its attempts to consolidate its power.

medicine). Just as beliefs or a powerful imagination could be observed sometimes to fake a mesmeric cure, she argues, so too could these mental states create an “erroneous” idea of illness or disease in the mind of the patient in the first place. Her system thus stresses the relationship between mental states and bodily experience of illness or wellness; even as she asserts the unreality of matter and material existence, she acknowledges the way that their “acts” or imaginary effects can be convincing. In asserting that “error cannot remove the effects of error,” she simultaneously names as “error” both the belief in the illness and the imaginary effects of the mesmeric or even the orthodox medical cure. Her method, she asserts, is more efficacious because it advocates the reality of God’s power and punctures belief in human powers or “mesmerizers” of every kind, removing not only the “effects” of erroneous beliefs, but their cause as well.

In her “Genesis” chapter of *Science and Health*, Eddy uses the trope of the mesmerized subject to launch her critique of materiality, specifically highlighting the negative associations of mesmerism with mind control and loss of individual agency. She turns the familiar association of mesmerizer with male seducer and dominator on its head, and uses the language of her time to radically deconstruct the creation story responsible for providing a biblical justification for gender hierarchy. She critiques Genesis 2, looking specifically at the controversial moment in which Eve is made from Adam’s rib:

Genesis ii. 21,22. And the Lord God [Jehovah, Yawah] caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib, which the Lord God [Jehovah] had taken from man, made He a woman, and brought her unto the man. (528)

Once again, Eddy makes a problematic scriptural passage the occasion for radical exegesis, rereading Adam not as the source of woman but as the dupe of his own mesmeric delusion:

Here falsity, error, credits Truth, God, with inducing a sleep or hypnotic state in Adam in order to perform a surgical operation on him and thereby create woman. This is the first record of magnetism. Beginning creation with darkness instead of light,—materially rather than spiritually,—error now simulates the work of Truth, mocking Love and declaring what great things error has done. Beholding the creations of his own dream

and calling them real and God-given, Adam—*alias* error—gives them names. Afterwards he is supposed to become the basis of the creation of woman and of his own kind, calling them *mankind*,—that is, a kind of man. (528)

Invoking her previous discussion in “Animal Magnetism Unmasked,” Eddy uses mesmerism as the major metaphor for the reproduction of “error,” and as a description of the way that erroneous material ideas can simulate spiritual truths. Eddy presents Adam, the original man, as the mesmerized subject of an erroneous understanding of God in that he beholds “the creations of his own dream” and calls them “real and God-given.” The supposed birth of Eve from Adam’s rib is the “first record of mesmerism,” she states, having already established that mesmerism is synonymous with delusion. In her theological system, God cannot be a kind of “mesmerizer” who manufactures showy spectacles of unreality masquerading for the real. She sees the idea of Eve coming from Adam rather than God as a foundational error in that it gives rise not only to a belief in the power of man (or materiality) over deity, but to a belief in the divinity of the fictitiously gendered male as well.

By emphasizing that God, not Adam, created “man” or “mankind,” Eddy is able to assert her own scripturally-based theory of gender. If Adam erroneously appropriates the power of God’s creativity and claims to name God’s creations and give birth to a woman, Eddy here asserts the power of her own analysis over that idea, renaming Adam as “Error.” If Adam, “*alias* Error,” she asserts, is merely one of God’s creations like all others—an idea and a reflection or image of a non-anthropomorphic deity—then the hierarchy of man over woman is rendered fictitious, and the reproduction of such a fiction, the reiteration and repetition of a mythology of two genders, is merely a feature of illusory materiality. In a glossary at the back of her text, Eddy parses the name “Adam” as “a product of nothing as the mimicry of something; an unreality as opposed to the great reality of spiritual existence and creation; a so-called man . . . the opposer of Truth, termed error; Life’s counterfeit, which ultimates in death; the opposite of Love, called hate” (580). Eddy thus conjures up negative popular perceptions of the mesmerized subject as subordinated to the will of another human being in order to distinguish her idea of a

benevolent, feminized God from the more masculine, punishing God of the Calvinist tradition. She suggests that those unable to grasp the reality of her image of divinity and her method of healing are in a position like that of Adam, in that they are entranced by a system of illusory beliefs that lead to death. Adam, she writes, succumbs to an idea of deity that is “nothing,” and that notion of deity bolsters masculine authorities that merely engage in a “mimicry of something.”

If counterfeit claims like Adam’s structure a fictional binary gender system, Eddy goes even further to assert that Adam’s “mimicry of something” extends to the heteronormative model of sexual reproduction as well. Thus, for Eddy, both gender and sexual reproduction are socially constructed, and therefore susceptible to human “error.” Against these entrancing fictions, Eddy mobilizes the image of procreation in Genesis 1.12: “And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good” (508). Her gloss of the quote argues for gender as a social construct, rather than a biological essence:

God determines the gender of His own ideas. Gender is mental, not material. The seed within itself is the pure thought emanating from divine Mind. The feminine gender is not yet expressed in the text. *Gender* means simply *kind* or *sort*, and does not necessarily refer either to masculinity or femininity. The word is not confined to sexuality, and grammars always recognize a neuter gender, neither male nor female. The Mind or intelligence of production names the female gender last in the ascending order of creation. The intelligent individual idea, be it male or female, rising from the lesser to the greater, unfolds the infinitude of Love. (508)

Eddy reverses the conventional hierarchy of gender subordination, asserting that if God names “the female gender last in the ascending order of creation” it is only because ideas must rise “from the lesser to the greater.” As it has elsewhere in her text, Eddy’s conception of a divinity here partakes of both masculine and feminine qualities—combining the stereotypically masculine “Mind or intelligence” with the stereotypically feminine quality of possessing an “infinitude of Love.” But both men and women are equally capable, she asserts, of being “intelligent, individual” ideas of God. Since God is the all-intelligent Mind, and all life

forms are “ideas” of God, she argues, their particular genders—or kinds or sorts—are mental, not material constructs.

On one hand, since for Eddy spirit is real and matter is unreal or erroneous, it follows in her formulation that gender is a kind of man-made construction—attributable to the deluded Adam and his heirs. This idea of the unreality of gender has certain echoes in the social constructionism of recent gender theorists and feminist philosophers, much of which is grounded in linguistics and psychoanalysis, in which the body is read as a discursive or textual site. Read this way, Eddy’s phrase “gender is mental, not material” means that both the body and gender are products of erroneous human ideology, an ideology that her system seeks to resignify for the benefit of both spiritual and physical health. However, she also figures gender as being a “mental” construction not of man but of God the idea producer, and as such she could be seen as attributing to gender a kind of essential, God-given quality.

One could therefore read the phrase “God determines the gender of his own ideas” as meaning, contrary to my gloss above, that gender is in fact a God-given, spiritual essence rather than a delusory, man-made construction. Some confusion centers on Eddy’s use of the term “mental” here, as she clearly associates it with a non-human, non-corporeal quality of the “divine Mind.” If “gender is mental, not material,” she suggests, then gender consists of particular qualities that are God-given, and these qualities will be determined by none other than her feminized divine. The idea of Adam creating a female version of himself is thus laughable. In other words, gender is “mental” but the “mind” she valorizes here is non-human. Whether gender is a human construct or an idea of God for Eddy, it is significant that she again asserts the notion of a third term here—a neuter gender—and she associates a transgressive kind of subjective and bodily freedom with the possibility of a “kind or a sort” not strictly aligned with either the masculine or the feminine pole in a binary gender system. Whether neuter, masculine, or feminine, she asserts,—wherever we are on the gender continuum—we are all emanations of “divine Mind.” For Eddy the “pure thought” of God—this most intelligent of thinkers—makes our illusory ideas about men, women, and bodies seem insignificant.

The utopian propensities of Eddy’s project are clear in the passage above, in that she envisions a world in which gender distinctions not only do not matter but also are not registered as

real. She goes further, however, when she asserts that God creates human life spiritually, via individuals rather than via heterosexual contact. Her vision of a genderless principle of love multiplying individuals as an extension of divine thought eliminates the need for heterosexual contact in human procreation. Like “the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in it,” the sufficiently enlightened human being attains a radical kind of self-sufficiency through depending on God. If each individual contains “the seed within itself” already, the whole heteronormative system of sexual reproduction proves illusory, unnecessary, a convenient “allegory” to support a patriarchal dream of erroneous power that operates through its mesmerizing effects. “Did God at first create one man unaided,—that is, Adam,—but afterwards require the union of the two sexes in order to create the rest of the human family? No! God makes and governs all,” she writes (531–532).

The Status of Belief

In calling attention to the false beliefs associated with gender and sexual reproduction, Eddy’s nineteenth-century philosophy and theology bear remarkable similarities to the social constructionist strain in the work of more recent gender theorists and feminist philosophers. Judith Butler, for example, argues that there is an illusory quality to the “abiding gendered self,” and she sees gender as a series of acts that merely present an “*appearance of substance*” (*Performative Acts* 402). Like Eddy, Butler stresses the idea of gender as a compelling fiction in which “entranced” actors perform and promote error through their own erroneous beliefs:

Because there is neither an “essence” that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis. The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness. The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied and disguised under duress. (*Performative Acts* 405)

Eddy, like Butler, is suspicious about the category of belief, and both writers stress the way that fictitious beliefs about gender can produce material effects, illusory dreams of reality that are systemic and constitute embodied subjects.

In appropriating the figure of Adam as a trope for the ultimate mesmerized subject, deluded by materiality and erroneously imputing to himself the powers of God, Eddy surely draws upon and consolidates the gender norms of her day, but she does so in order to radically undo them. She specifically codes the “error” of materiality as masculine, associating femininity with an etherealized spirituality. However, she uses this etherealized spiritual standpoint to usurp the masculine role and perform a female subjectivity with access to masculine power in the form of reason and intelligence. Her texts intervene in nineteenth-century patriarchal institutions and critique their authority, positing her own ideas about God and gender to counter the debilitating and limiting conceptions she encounters. Thus Eddy works within her own narrow grid of intelligibility to resignify key terms and create a new understanding of gender and female subjectivity. This reformulation of a familiar narrative, and her use of it to enact a theological system with practical implications for female embodiment, is bolstered by her conception of a feminized divine. Her conception of God not only mirrors her own transgressive subjectivity, but enables a theoretical reconfiguration of the relationship between bodily existence and states of consciousness.

Eddy's deconstruction of the erroneous beliefs undergirding the sex–gender matrix is part of her wider project of dismantling illusory material existence, though she does code matter as masculine. Eddy wants to do more than simply dismantle false beliefs about gender and sexuality; she wants to dismantle all erroneous beliefs that lead to death. In seeking to dismantle a belief in the primacy of material existence and inaugurate an “abiding” relationship to the realm of spirit, Eddy constructs a system of absolute affirmativeness and infinitude, one that envisions radical possibilities for embodiment and subjectivity. Her concern is with the limiting conceptions that in her lifetime made life less livable in general, and made death such a preoccupation. She connects Adam's “dream,” his erroneous belief in a binary system of genders, to an entire “history of error” in which the self is assumed to be material.

The order of this allegory [in Genesis 2]—the belief that everything springs from dust instead of from Deity—has been maintained in all the subsequent forms of belief. This is the error, that mortal man starts materially, that non-intelligence becomes intelligence, that mind and soul are both right and wrong. (*Science and Health* 531)

In her typically sweeping fashion, Eddy eschews “all the subsequent forms of belief” that human beings might hold as erroneous, in that they are predicated on the “dream narrative” of a binary gender system that a mesmerized subject concocts to aggrandize himself. Such an absolute statement acknowledges the way that erroneous or outmoded beliefs can constitute reality—or one’s experience of reality—through “maintaining” other beliefs. Eddy derides the category of belief in general, for its reliance on materiality: “Belief is less than understanding. Belief involves theories of material hearing, sight, touch, taste, and smell, termed the five senses. The appetites and passions, sin, sickness, and death, follow in the train of this error of a belief in intelligent matter” (*Science and Health* 526). The greatest error for Eddy is “this error of a belief in intelligent matter.” Belief is a too-easy “mental state,” she insists, and “[t]here is danger in this mental state called belief” (*Retrospection and Introspection* 54). She proposes, instead, the unfolding of a spiritual understanding of the divine intelligence of her feminized divine, a more “scientific” process she contrasts with the lulling effects of prayer, or the unenlightened position of blind faith. “Millions are believing in God, or good, without bearing the fruits of goodness, not having reached its Science. Belief is virtually blindness, when it admits Truth without understanding it” (*Retrospection and Introspection* 54).

If, as Butler suggests, the fiction of gender resides in “one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness,” then surely her project of “undoing gender” (or undoing the norms, regulations, and restrictive conceptions of gender) necessitates a rethinking of the concept of belief itself. If the entrancing, mesmerizing, hypnotic effects of beliefs can create fictions that constitute gendered subjects and gendered bodies, how can a material transformation take place without intervening at the level of belief? How can one “undo restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life” without undoing the beliefs that undergird and impel those norms in the first place (Butler *Undoing Gender* 1)? In positing a

system in which a belief in a feminized divine structures an “undoing” of a whole host of inherited, restrictive beliefs, Eddy presents a complex relationship to the concept of belief. Her production of an enabling belief structurally supports the dismantling of debilitating beliefs; belief becomes a strategic device to intervene at the level of the symbolic and enact material transformation. In jettisoning the limited female body from the category of reality, Eddy's theory expunges, as well, all the entrancing fictions that would have kept her from living a more livable life.

Works Cited

- Albanese, Catherine L. “Physic and Metaphysic in Nineteenth-Century America: Medical Sectarrians and Religious Healing.” *Church History* 55 (1986): 489–502.
- . *America: Religions and Religion*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 1992.
- Baym, Nina. *American Women of Letters and the Nineteenth-Century Sciences: Styles of Affiliation*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002.
- Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury. New York: Columbia UP, 1997. 401–418. Orig. published in *Theater Journal*.
- . *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Braude, Ann. *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*. Boston: Beacon P, 1989.
- Carroll, Bret E. *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997.
- Crabtree, Adam. *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993.
- Eddy, Mary Baker. *Retrospection and Introspection*. Boston: A.V. Stewart, 1909.
- . *Science and Health with Keys to the Scriptures*. Boston: The Writings of Mary Baker Eddy, 2000.
- Fuller, Robert. *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1982.
- Gill, Gillian. *Mary Baker Eddy*. Radcliffe Biography Series. Reading, MA: Perseus, 1998.
- Hollywood, Amy. *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002.
- Irigaray, Luce. “Divine Women.” *French Feminists on Religion: A Reader*. Ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon. London: Routledge, 2002. 40–48.
- Morantz, Regina Rarkell. “Making Women Modern: Middle Class Women and Health Reform in Nineteenth-Century America.” *Religion*. Ed. Nancy F. Cott. Munich: K.G. Saur. Vol. 13 of *History of Women in the United States: Historical Articles on Women's Lives and Activities*. 20 vols. 1992–1994. 156–173.

- Piepmeier, Alison. *Out in Public: Configurations of Women's Bodies in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004. See especially Chapter 2: "Woman Goes Forth to Battle with Goliath: Mary Baker Eddy, Medical Science, and Sentimental Invalidism," originally published in *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.
- Satter, Beryl. *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875–1920*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999.
- Schrager, Cynthia D. "Mark Twain and Mary Baker Eddy: Gendering the Transpersonal Subject." *American Literature* 70 (1998): 29–62.
- Shea, Daniel. *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1968.
- Winter, Alison. *Mesmerized: Power of Mind in Victorian England*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.

Copyright of *Women's Studies* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.