

‘Spirit Verse’ Apocryphal Poems and Marketing in Composing Lizzie Doten’s Poems from the Inner Life

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Abstract

This paper discusses Lizzie Doten’s book *Poems from the Inner Life* in which she had claimed that the spirits of dead famous poets, majorly Edgar Allen Poe, wrote most of the poems. I argue that Doten was successful in selling her book. She was able to accomplish this by taking advantage of the public interest of spiritualism during the 19th century and Edgar Allen Poe’s fan base.

Keywords: Fandom, fan culture, literature, marketing, 19th century poetry.

Introduction

In 1909, *New York Times* newspaper published an article in its November issue under the name *Laureate of Spookland: Strange Case of Lizzie Doten, Writer of ‘Spirit Verse.’* They acknowledged Lizzie Doten’s ability of communicating with dead poets and publishing their poems in her book titled *Poems from the Inner Life* (New York Times, 1909). Even though forty-five years had passed since the publication of her book, Doten still received notice from one of the leading newspapers. However, her popularity derived from communicating with spirits was not uncommon. Along with being seen as a movement that has helped in promoting radical political and cultural beliefs such as women’s rights and abolitionism, spiritualism, the belief in the possibility in communicating with the dead, has provided a profession and fame through many mediums.

I.

Finding fame by being part of spiritualism was not uncommon during the 19th century in America. An example of a medium which found both profession and fame in claiming the ability to communicate with spirits were the Fox sisters. In 1848, their practices marked the beginning of spiritualism as a phenomenon in America. Consequently, they were the center of interest

by local and transatlantic newspapers throughout their life including the American newspaper, *New York Times* and the British newspaper, *The Athenaeum*¹. Furthermore, people from all over the country, whether out of belief or curiosity, came to see their séances including Horace Greeley, the editor of one of the influential newspapers during that time, *New York Tribune* (Doyle, 1975). This practice began a ‘cultural practice that took place with increasing frequency in the decades that was followed by individuals who claimed special powers for themselves’ (Bennett, 5) that have helped most of them in finding profession and fame.

Even though that the Fox sisters’ practices were discovered to be hoax, séances performed by mediums continued to be famous and they were being used as ‘livelihood’ (*The Athenaeum*, 1877). In addition, they were used by many mediums including Lizzie Doten (Braude, 1989)². The medium, Lizzie Doten, attributes most of the poems in *Poems from The Inner Life* (1853) to Edgar Allen Poe’s spirit, a well-known American poet and writer. She used Poe’s and other well-known literary figures’ popularity to promote her own writing by claiming that she was channelling their words from beyond the grave. Thus, the aim of this paper is to discuss the motivation behind falsify attributing these poems to Poe’s spirit. I am fully aware that Lizzie Doten’s contribution to the literary arena has disappeared from notice in recent years. It was preserved only through her curious claim regarding the process of composing her poetry using spirits’ agency, especially Poe’s. I see Lizzie Doten as a cunning businesswoman who used two phenomena, Edgar Allen Poe’s fan base and spiritualism, to sell her book titled *Poems from The Inner Life*. After illustrating Doten’s fabrication of Poe’s poetic style, I am going to look at the reasons behind choosing Poe specifically. Moreover, I am also going to explore the motivation behind using the name of a popular figure in composing her poems. I argued that she used Poe in her claim in order to have a better chance in selling her book in the competitive reading market.

Examining the motivation behind Doten’s claim requires, at first, an analysis of the nature of composing the poems in her book titled *Poems from the Inner life*. Upon describing the nature in which these poems were composed, Doten proclaims that they were ‘given under direct spirit influence before public audience. For many of them, I could not obtain the authorship, but for such as I could, the names are given’ (Doten, 1865). Therefore, her book contains rewritten versions of Poe’s poems. Six poems

1 Locally: ‘The Fox Sisters’, *New York Times*, 29 April 1886 – internationally: ‘The Rochester Rappings’, *The Athenaeum: British Periodical*, 9 June 1877, p.737

2 *New York Times* had many articles that talks about spiritualism and séances issued in 19th century, including an article that talks about a medium who claimed that spirits took the items that he stole. A Serious Séance, *New York Times*, 28 Jan 1872.

were composed with Poe's spirit and a lecture under the name 'The Mysteries of Godliness' (Doten, 1865). This was dedicated to discuss Poe's supposedly last poem 'Farewell to Earth' (Doten, 1865). Doten asserts in the preface to *Poems from Inner Life* that she 'had never read, to my knowledge, any of his [Poe's] poems, save "The Raven," and that I had not seen for several years' (Doten, 1865). Her claim of being ignorant to Poe's work is dubious given the similarities between Doten and Poe's styles of writing. Related to this point, many critics argue that her poems are recreated versions of Poe's poems. Professor Shawn James Rosenheim, for instance, argues the impossibility of accepting Doten's prior statement without acknowledging her mediumship (Rosenheim, 1997). Rosenheim continues his argument by pointing out the similarities between Poe and Doten's poetic styles. In addition, he listed the similarities by pointing out that "The Cradle or Coffin" [by Doten] adopts the metrical structure of "Ulalume" [by Poe]. On the other hand, "The Street of Baltimore" offers another revision of "The Raven", even down to its 'evermore.' "Farewell to Earth" is a slick rewriting of "The Bells" (Rosenheim, 1997). Therefore, the resemblance of Doten and Poe's writings suggests that Doten recognizes Poe's work and tries to mimic his writing style.

Unfortunately, Rosenheim does not offer any elaboration regarding the similarities between their writings. However, just by looking at Doten's "Farewell to Earth" and Poe's "The Bells", one could see the resemblance. For instance, both of these poems were divided into five sections. Also, these two poems share similar structure and repeated words. The word 'bells' is repeated frequently in these poems. Therefore, by looking at two lines from Doten's *Farewell to Earth* 'Like the chiming of the bells/ Which a tale of triumph tells' and Poe's *The Bells* 'Oh, the bells, bells, bells!/What a tale their terror tells', it can be noted that Doten's poem is a rewritten version of Poe's poem. Thus, both extracts share the same structure and rhyme scheme which challenges Doten's claim of not reading any literary work by Poe except 'The Raven.'

Her version of the manner in which these poems were composed is problematic. In describing the process of composing the poems attributed to Poe, Eliza Richards agrees with Rosenheim's argument regarding the fabrication of Poe's poems. In describing the process of these poems' creation, Richards uses the term 'collaboration' (Richards, 2005) instead of the word 'channelling.' He attributed it to the dubious source of these poems. Thus, I hesitate using this term because using it implies the acknowledgment of Doten's mediumship which this paper rejects. Likewise, it vis-à-vis the study of collaborative literature proposed by Wayne Kiestenbaum in his book titled *Double Talk* (Kiestenbaum, 1989). He argues that 'a text is most precisely and satisfyingly collaborative if it is composed by two writers who

admit the act’ (Kiestenbaum, 1989, emphasis mine). In Doten’s case, we have a medium who claims that she is an ‘instrument’ (Doten, 1865) that articulates a dead poet’s voice which makes her a passive receptive. Therefore, she detaches herself from participating in the process of literary creation accordingly, not ‘admit[ing] the act’ (Kiestenbaum, 1989) of writing these poems. Although Doten withdraws from admitting the act of creating the literary text, it is impossible for Poe to ‘admit the act’ (Kiestenbaum, 1989) of composing these poems because he is dead. This illustrates the complex process in composing these poems and the reasons I often hesitate in using the term ‘collaboration’ proposed by Eliza Richards. In her preface, Doten keeps emphasizing that she is a mere ‘instrument’ (Doten, 1865) for Poe and other dead poets. Yet, she had the liberty to ‘modif[y]’ (Doten, 1865) these poems according to her ‘nature and character’ (Doten, 1865). Also, she ‘ha[s] not necessarily lost ...[her] individuality’ (Doten, 1865) which suggests that these poems are hers and Poe was an inspiration and not the source of creation. In describing this complex relationship, I prefer using the term “apocryphal poems” in referring to these poems rather than “collaborative poems.” However, this term suggests the dubious authorship of these poems that causes the complex process of the literary creation.

After discussing the nature of the composition of these apocryphal poems, it is equally important to discuss the reasons behind Doten’s choice of Poe, specifically to whom to attribute these poems to. It is misleading to think that Doten only attributed poems to Poe. In fact, she attributed poems to other deceased poets including William Shakespeare and Robert Burns. However, according to Rosenheim, she was more successful in fabricating Poe’s work more than any other deceased poets (Rosenheim, 1997). Rosenheim argues that Poe’s cultural similarities with Doten’s and their close association with spiritualism justify this success. Consequently, both Doten and Poe are Americans living in the 19th century. Yet, Rosenheim argues that Doten not being successful in fabricating Shakespeare’s style can be attributed to the same reason, the cultural differences between them. Thus, this makes the fabrication of Shakespeare’s style harder than that of Poe. In justifying her incompetent attempt in ‘voicing’ (Doten, 1865) Shakespeare, Doten argues that ‘this influence [Shakespeare’s] seemed to overwhelm and crush me. I was afraid, and shrank from it’ (Doten, 1865). Doten continues justifying her unsuccessful attempts by blaming her inferiority and not being able to contain Shakespeare’s strong presence. If she had been ‘a stronger and more effectual instrument’ (Doten, 1865), voicing Shakespeare would have been successful. This was because there is a cultural gap between Shakespeare and Doten. Also, attributing most of the poems in *Poems from the Inner Life* (Doten, 1865) to Poe seems reasonable.

Along with their cultural similarities, Poe's literary works reflect spiritualism which Doten was part of. Spiritualism had been seen as a scientific religion. In a society that values rationalism, it 'provided the physical evidence of life after death necessary for the formation of a scientific religions' (Farrell Bednarowski, 1989). Many of Poe's fictional stories and poems dealt with these topics and many of them were published in scientific journals as authentic reports. Both of his stories, 'Mesmeric Revelation' (1849) and 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (1845), narrated the consequences of mesmerizing a dying patient in an authentic tone, thus, receiving notice from scientific periodicals such as *Popular Record of Modern Science*. They were treated as authentic reports rather than hoaxes (Rosenheim, 1997). The purpose of Poe's concealing the nature of these 'reports' is still a mystery. Some critics argue that it was out of mockery (Walker, 1996). Others argue that Poe was just curious about these new inventions and he reflected his curiosity in his fiction (Bennett, 2007). Nonetheless, he had attracted the attention of many spiritualists including Doten who justifies choosing him as the object of her claim (Bennett, 2007).

Yet, one may argue that Poe was not the only one who treated these topics during the 19th century. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, had treated the theme of mesmerism and mediumship in his novel titled *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). This was portrayed in the character of the veiled lady, mesmerized medium, who communicates with spirits. In order to answer this question, it is essential to look at Doten's circle of connections. Doten was part of a group of female poets who claimed the ability to communicate with Poe telepathically. Thus, these women include Sarah Helen Whitman, Poe's former fiancé; Mary Forest; Sarah Gould; and Lizzie Doten. They express their fascination with Poe by exchanging letters and poems, and conveying messages from Poe from the spirit world. David Haven Blake refers to this circle by using the phrase 'fan community' (Blake, 2012) and uses the critic Richard Schickel's term 'illusion of intimacy' (Schickel, 2005) in describing their assumed relationship with Poe. Their fascination with Poe established an 'illusion of intimacy' (Schickel, 2005) with the deceased poet. While Blake describes this practice with Schickel's 'illusion of intimacy', Schickel describes this activity as an attempt to form a 'mystic kinship' (Schickel, 2005) among the members of this circle. I argue that being part of this circle has a significant contribution to Doten's choice of Poe. This is especially based on the fact that Sarah Helen Whitman was part of this circle. Whitman was Poe's former fiancé and she wrote a book titled *Edgar Poe and His Critics* (1860) that defends Poe against his critics. She was also an attentive reader of Poe. Upon reading Poe's works for the first time, Whitman commented by saying 'This terror took the character of fascination—I devoured with a half-reluctant and fearful avidity every line that fell from his

pen' (Walker, 1996). The fact that Whitman 'devoured ... every line that fell from his [Poe's] hand' makes her a potential expert in Poe, thus, giving Doten the sources she needed in composing these poems.

Along with providing an 'illusion of intimacy' and 'mystic kinship' to its members, this circle 'developed a method of reading and writing' (Blake, 2012). By reading Poe's work, the members of this circle produced similar poetry. Sarah Gould wrote her poem 'The Serpent Horror' to describe the influence of Poe's spirit on her. Unlike Doten, Gould does not attribute this poem to Poe. Instead, she merely describes her spiritual experience in performing séances. One of the writing methods this group had developed is automatic writing using mesmerism. Sarah Helen Whitman performs this kind of experience whereby Poe was believed to possess her body and guide her in writing. Automatic writing using mesmerism and séances was first discussed in a book entitled *Massages from the Unseen* (Holden, 1913) by Arthur Holden. The book was published years after this group activity in an attempt to defend spiritualism against fraud. Holden proclaims that a literary work is composed by automatic writing if medium is passive receptive that is controlled by a powerful soul. This condition agrees with Helen's practices but vis-à-vis Doten's practices. As it was mentioned before, Doten was not a passive instrument. She still had her individuality and these poems dictated on her were modified according to her 'nature and character' (Doten, 1865). I argue that the way this fan community was experimental in writing, using their fascination over Poe, encouraged Doten to claim the authorship of her poems to Poe.

Doten understood that without a male authority, especially a popular one, there is a high chance that her literary work will not be taken seriously. This was despite the fact that women were best sellers during the 19th century such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Stowe's novel was not the only novel written by a woman which received the society's attention. Yet, 'many men were still incapable of even imagining a woman writing professionally' (London, 1999). Upon discussing this notion, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote to his publisher and friend, William D. Ticknor, in 1855 stating: 'America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women ...they sell by the 100,000' (T. Frederick, 1975). By the time this letter was written, 8 books were considered the best sellers books in America by selling over 225,000 copies (Luther Mott, 1947). Five of these books were written by women: '*The Wide, Wide World*, by Susan B. Warner (1850), *The Curse of Clifton*, by Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth (1850), *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Stowe (1852), *The Lamplighter*, by Maria S. Cummins (1854), and *Tempest and Sunshine*, by Mary J. Holmes (1854)' (T. Frederick, 1975). Since the majority of the bestseller books were written by women, this begs the question why Doten

needs to detach herself from the act of composing these poems. Thus, the answer could be found within Hawthorne's statement. Even though two of eight best sellers books were written by him, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, he still felt frustrated because 'a damned mob of scribbling women' found a place within the competitive literary market in which Hawthorne believes that it is not a place for women to be part of. Therefore, this implies that Doten needed a male authority in composing these poems.

Her tendency to point out her inferiority in gender compared to those male authors' spirits suggests her recognition of this ideology implied in Hawthorne's letter. This notion is connoted in her *Poems from The Inner Life's* preface. Upon explaining the nature of composing her poetry with the agency of male descended poets, she claimed that the ownership of these poems should not be thought that they are hers simply because she is unable to produce such wisdoms: 'my [Doten's] utterance of a wisdom, *higher than my own...*' (Doten,1865, emphasis mine). Even though the poems were articulated by her, she was a mere 'instrument' (Doten,1865). This is because she does not have the 'wisdom' (Doten,1865) those male poets had. Thus, this gives rise to her need of a male authority in publishing these poems.

After discussing the possible reasons for choosing Poe specifically, I will dictate this section to discuss the motivation behind such a claim. Consequently, most recent studies on spiritualism argue that many women's choice of mediumship were deprived from the liberty women had within the spiritual community. Upon discussing spiritualism and women's rights in 19th century in her book *Radical Spirits*, Ann Braude argues that spiritualism is the first religious movement that gives women a leading religious position. At a time women were forbidden to speak in churches, 'spiritualist women had equal authority, equal opportunities, and equal numbers in religious leadership' (Braude, 1989). Therefore, spiritualists could pass radical political beliefs supporting women and attribute it to spirits. Under this perception, Doten attacks the economic inequality practiced on women in 19th century America. She proclaims that few women would marry if they had an equal wages to men suggesting that women's entering the matrimonial life can be accounted for financial needs. Subsequently, she uses this movement to articulate her political belief according to this study. In addition, she chooses a famous male author to attribute her poems to.

Rosenheim proposes a similar notion in his book titled *The Cryptographic Imagination* upon discussing the motivation behind Doten's choice of mediumship. He argues that spiritualism 'liberated the pen, as female spiritualists turned to the use of a *nom d'ame* to circumvent the gender and class restrictions places on their writings' (Rosenheim ,1997). Even though Rosenheim argues that this movement 'liberated the pen' of

female authors, their pen was not fully ‘liberated.’ Ironically, Braude points out that the manner in which women spoke was different to that of men (Braude, 1989). Men could step up the podium by being fully conscious and deliver lectures. On the other hand, women step up the podium as passive receptive of spirits. Even if they were conscious, their lectures were believed to be guided by spirits’ agency since ‘few believed a woman could do such a thing unaided’ (Braude, 1989). In Doten’s case, her ‘pen’ was partly ‘liberated’ because she only articulates her poems through spirits’ agency. However, it can be noted that Doten’s political beliefs are related to economic reformation which suggests that she wanted to gain financial independence.

While Braude and Rosenheim argue that spiritualism partly liberated women’s pen including Doten, I argue that Doten’s joining spiritualism is derived from her eagerness to gain financial independence. Rosenheim points out that spiritualism ‘provided a career [for Doten]... [She] made a better living through trance-lecture and royalties received from volumes of poems, a novel ..., and a collection of short fiction that she ever had as an impoverished needleworker and teacher’ (Rosenheim, 1997). Doten’s political statements were related to economic reformation and equality of wages. This suggests that she was concerned about gaining financial independence which justifies the way these poems were of apocryphal authorship. Doten found a chance to gain money in being part of this movement and in using the fan base of Poe to fabricate the poems.

I argue that these apocryphal poems were attributed to a male well-known author, Poe, out of Doten’s understanding of the competitive reading market. As a result, she gained a chance in selling her book titled *Poems from the Inner Life*. In order to explore this further, I believe it is essential to discuss the practice of reading and book trade in 19th century America. Furthermore, Ronald J. Zboray discusses the growth of book trade and the reading community in antebellum America (J Zboray, 1989). He proclaims that ‘literature and the bulk of the book trade advanced ten times faster than the population’ (J Zboray, 1989). As a result of this growth, the percentage of American authors raised. Also, being a writer became a profession. This raises the question on what types of books were sold. Zboray asserts that American masterpieces were sold at a high percentage including Poe’s literary works and critical essays (J Zboray, 1989). This suggests that books by popular authors are usually sold.

Another reason that promises selling books other than the popularity of its author is the topic that these books deals with. Usually, books that provoke the public opinion are sold at high percentage. An instance of this is Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. It was considered one of the best sellers because it discusses a controversial topic, slavery. Similarly, spiritualism was

considered a controversial phenomenon during that period as well. While many people converted to this belief, others viewed this belief with doubt. Nonetheless, they still attend séances and read spiritual related books including the popular writer, Nathaniel Parker Willis (Braude, 1989). Choosing a controversial topic to write a book promises that both parties, those who agree and those who are dubious, might buy the book. This, thus, increases the chance of selling the book.

Doten used these two strategies in her book. She wrote a book by communicating with a popular author's spirit, Poe, thus, combining controversy and author's fame in composing this book. Doten's awareness of Poe's popularity can be seen in her book's preface: 'he may no longer manifest himself as he *was*, yet doubtless as he *is*, he will yet be felt as a Presence and a Power in the "Heaven" of many a human heart.' (Doten, 1865). Even though he is dead, his work is remembered by 'many a human heart' which suggests that Poe is a popular figure read by many people. Also, Doten's emphasis was on detaching herself from the act of creation in her preface to her book:

under necessity of doing this, [explaining the nature these poems were composed] lest some over-anxious friend, or would-be critic, should undertake the work for me, and thereby place me... in false position before the public' (Doten, 1865)

This extract illustrates Doten's awareness of the claim she is making and her consideration of her readers. She is concerned that her claim will be challenged and she would be put 'in a false position before the public.' Her concern with 'the public' implies that she realizes that her credibility is essential in selling her literary works, even if this credibility is questionable. Doten understood that Poe's popularity and the curious method these works were claimed to be composed with would attract both the reading community of Poe and those who are interested with spiritualism, whether out of belief or doubt.

By using these two strategies, Doten was able to promote her writings by claiming the use of popular spirit's agency, thus, having a better change in the competitive literary market (Rosenheim, 1997). Her claims of the agency of Poe's spirit in composing her books has helped her in advertising her book in many leading periodicals. Accordingly, Doten's book occurred regularly in newspapers such as *New York Times*. Many people attended her lectures and read her work mainly because of her trance speaking and her claim of being able to communicate with dead literary figures including Poe

3. Fritz explores this notion in her study of trance poetry in the 19th century by saying:

3 This claim was made by critics such as Rosenheim, Braude, Blake, and Richards.

Trance poetry caught the press attention. “By the end of the century, over a hundred periodicals had reported news of spiritual manifestations,” (Braude) including poetic utterances. Some of these periodicals had wide circulation—for instance, “The *Banner of Light* claimed subscribers in every state and territory”—and almost all of them devoted a significant amount of space to trance poetry. (J Zboray, 1989)

By using a popular figure’s spirit in composing her poetry, Doten was able to sell her book. The edition that was used in writing this paper was published in 1865. However, records show that this book was first published in 1863. If we take into historical account the number of editions that were printed in 1853 and later on, it shows that the average printed editions of books is approximately 10,000 for each edition (J Zboray, 1989). Books are reprinted if only they were under demanding by the reading community. Having two editions show that Doten’s book was successful enough to pursue publishers to reprint for at least two editions.

Conclusion

As can be seen, Doten was able to sell her book in the competitive reading market by using two phenomena, Edgar Allen Poe and spiritualism. The material available to me has guided my discussion of Lizzie Doten. This, by no mean, means that all mediums practiced spiritualism for financial reasons.

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