

INDIVIDUALISM POSSESSED: THE SUPERNATURAL MARRIAGE PLOT,
1820-1870

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This project focuses on the supernatural marriage plot, a previously unexplored American genre which peaks between 1820 and 1870, the decades between the emergence of the Angel in the House and the rise of the New Woman. This genre deploys metaphoric supernaturalism – equating female characters with supernatural figures such as fairies, elves, and witches – to counter the supernaturalism implicitly associated with angelic True Womanhood, and is embroiled in the cultural debate between selfless angelism and self-interested individualism as models of female identity. The supernatural marriage plot is also engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the hugely popular genre of domestic fiction, a genre which focuses on the process of angel formation. Whereas domestic fiction typically involves the transformation of a rebellious, individualistic girl into a submissive, self-sacrificing angel in the house, supernatural marriage fiction thwarts this transformation, allowing the rebellious heroine to retain the autonomy and self-interestedness associated with individualism. The genre thus aligns itself with Victorian proponents of woman's rights in its concern with promoting an

individualistic identity for women and permitting women to assert power openly and directly rather than covertly. Supernatural marriage fiction also singles out ghostliness as a problematic form of supernaturalism, thus rejecting the figurative disembodiment associated with angeldom. The genre thus replaces the spiritualized angel with a variety of embodied supernatural figures. In so doing, it participates in a broader cultural trend – the shift from an earlier rhetorical model of citizenship, one founded in the notion of equal, disembodied souls, to an embodied version of citizenship – and this insistent embodiment in turn allows female characters access to possessive individualism. Further, the genre’s promotion of physicality – in which its heroines metaphorically inhabit a variety of alternate, supernatural bodies – allows its female individualists both to evade the disembodiment of angeldom and to avoid being pinned down to a single, monochromatic, angelic identity.

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