

Influential Force: *Shafts* and the Diffusion of Knowledge at the *Fin de Siècle*

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The illustrated cover of the first issue of the liberal-feminist newspaper *Shafts*, from November 1892, amounts to an announcement that this publication has inherited the mantle of the Enlightenment (see figure 1).

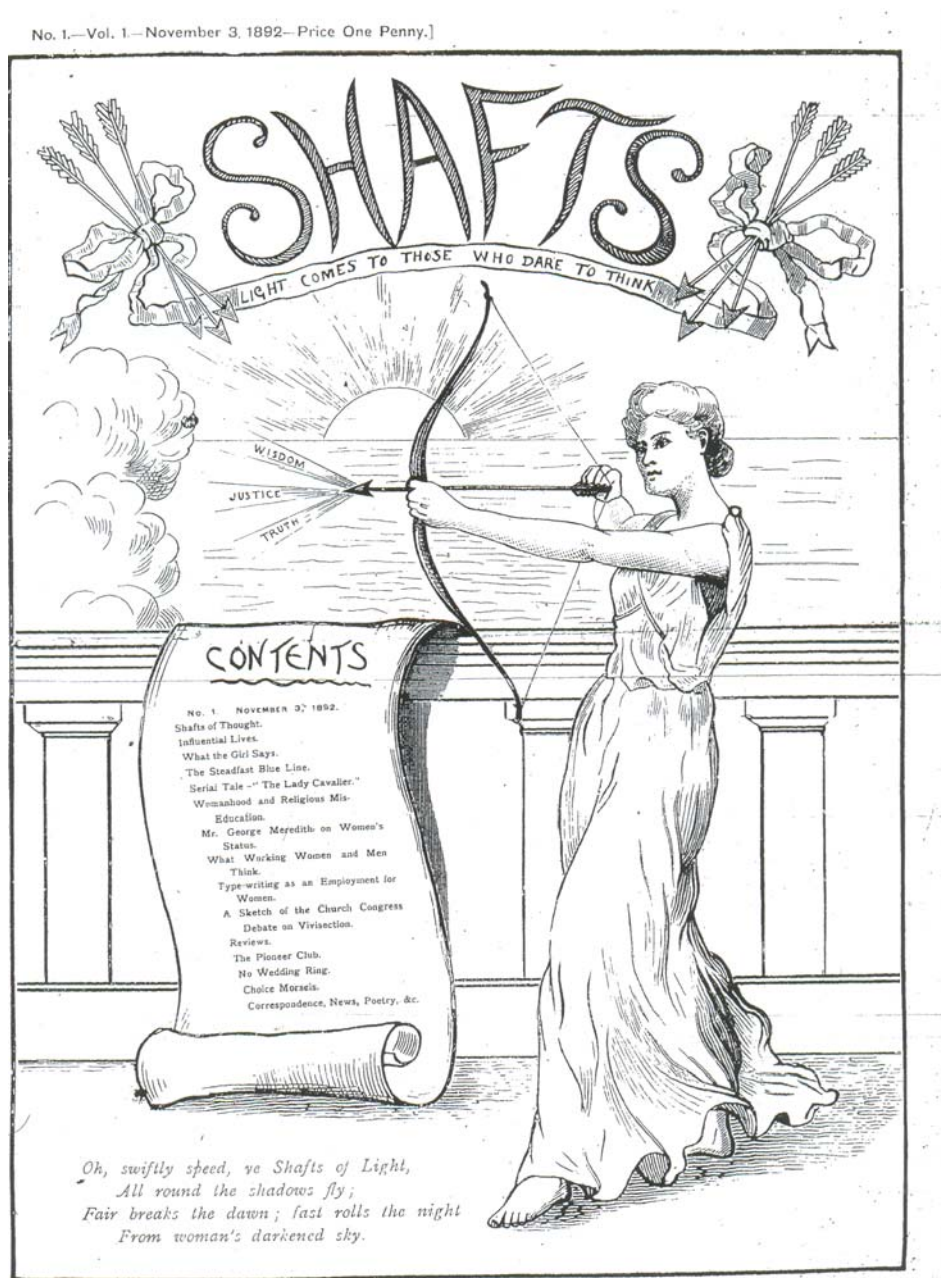


Figure 1

It is characterized by a distinctive neoclassicism, which it appropriates, almost exactly a century after this aesthetic became fashionable in Britain, at the precise moment that the term ‘neoclassicism’ was coined so as to denigrate the late eighteenth-century obsession with antiquity (the OED claims that it was first used in an article from the *Times* in May 1893). The illustration is a deliberately chaste testament to the antique, quite unlike either the Hellenism that Oscar Wilde invoked in ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’ in 1891, for instance, or the Hellenism that Aubrey Beardsley excavated as art editor of the *Yellow Book* from 1894. This is a cerebral neoclassicism, seemingly unaffected by a range of ideological challenges, at the *fin de siècle*, to the intellectual mission of the Enlightenment.

The woman on the front cover of this issue of *Shafts*, who is wearing simple, loosely fitting classical robes, and who draws the string of a horn bow (like the ones described in Homer and found on Greek coins), is quietly triumphant, at once authoritative and calmly combative. She has neither the languid sexuality associated with decadent images of women at this time, nor the sexless aggression associated with caricatures of Amazonian feminists – for example, the infantile image of ‘Miss Amazon’ in James McGrigor Allan’s *Woman Suffrage Wrong* (1890).¹ Instead, and in spite of the illustrator’s incompetent use of perspective, she embodies a perfectly restrained energy, as she coolly leans back to take aim and at the same time steps forward with impressive poise. She is an appropriately clean representative of the social purity campaign pursued by many contemporary middle- and upper-class feminists. Behind her, a neoclassical balustrade separates the terrace on which she stands from the serene sea beneath it, at the horizon of which the sun rises dramatically. The sun’s rays appear almost to have dispelled a cloud that bubbles up at the left of the composition, even as the female archer’s arrow, which radiates Wisdom, Truth, and Justice, is on the point of dispatching the enemies of Enlightenment, the monstrous allegorical forms of whom can be imagined indelicately scrambling in the direction of the receding darkness.

This is an image, then, of female enlightenment.² ‘Light Comes to Those Who Dare to Think’ is the periodical’s masthead, inscribed across an elaborate ribbon that on either side knots together three further arrow shafts (this subtitle was subsequently altered twice, first to ‘A Journal for Women and the Working Classes’, and secondly to ‘A Monthly journal of Progressive Thought’). The periodical’s title, *Shafts*, which substitutes the emblematic arrow for light, also substitutes the emblematic light for knowledge, in a metaphorical conflation

typical of late eighteenth-century empiricism (which, because it regarded vision as the primary sense, regarded light as the precondition of knowledge). A poetic legend, imprinted beneath the list of contents that unscrolls from the ledge of the balustrade, ingenuously summarises these Enlightenment associations in doggerel: ‘Oh, swiftly speed, ye Shafts of Light, / All round the shadows fly; / Fair breaks the dawn; fast rolls the night / From woman’s darkened sky.’

As this sprightly peroration indicates, *Shafts* appears positively to fetishize, and not merely to venerate, knowledge as the instrument of political or social emancipation. Its belief in the process of enlightenment, which it apostrophises in those Shafts of Light, seems almost religiously zealous. This suspicion is reinforced on looking again at the masthead, which implicitly posits ‘those who dare to think’ not only as the active agents of enlightenment but also as its passive recipients: ‘Light Comes to Those Who Dare to Think.’ It is as if ‘to dare to think’ is not to use knowledge so much as to make a declaration of faith in it, one that instantly translates the thinker into an epiphanic state of enlightenment. The periodical’s commitment to empiricism seems to be premised on an idealist conviction in ideas as the engine of social change. And from these ideas, from this conviction, as Marx put it in a celebrated critique of philosophical idealism, “‘the idea”, the notion’ is abstracted, and this idea, this notion, becomes ‘the dominant force in history’. On the front page of *Shafts*, as the slightly tautological quality of the masthead’s slogan signals, knowledge begins to acquire what Marx satirically called a ‘mystical appearance’.³

This mystical appearance deepens the more closely one examines the periodical. The Enlightenment vocation that it takes up, it transpires, is inseparable from ideological assumptions that, today at least, appear to be quite alien to the principles of the Enlightenment. Its politics are steeped in the science of superficially ‘irrational’ types of inquiry, like psychical research, and in the poetics of spiritualist faith, in particular Theosophy. The opposition, at the *fin de siècle*, between rationalism and irrationalism, between *séances* and scientific experiments, it should be remembered, was scarcely a stable one (though the rapidly increasing professionalisation of science in this period aimed precisely to cement it). And it is at the shifting boundary between science and dissident forms of religion that *Shafts* conducted its attempt to initiate a female readership in hidden knowledge. This knowledge was hidden in a double sense: some of it was unavailable to

women because they had limited access to education at this time; and some of it seemed unacceptable because, officially at least, it was classified as occult.

Once I have sketched the representative form and content of *Shafts*, I intend to use this article to explore the convergence of enlightenment and anti-enlightenment discourses in its pages. Their relationship is knotted together in particularly complicated and elaborate configurations around the concept of ‘influential force’, which is of signal importance to the argument of the opening article of the journal’s inaugural issue, entitled ‘Shafts of Thought’. I am going to contend that, to the main contributors of *Shafts*, in its earliest incarnations at least, the metaphorical significance of the notion of ‘influential force’, which I hope to be able to unpack, lies in its capacity for reconceptualising the social and intellectual relations that obtain, at the end of the nineteenth century, among the readers of a progressive periodical. *Shafts* was collaborative in its outlook, and required its readers to be intellectual activists. ‘A bond of purpose between editor and readers makes a paper powerful to accomplish its work,’ is a typical editorial imprecation. (September 1893, p. 125) This ‘bond of purpose’ is implicitly a spiritual connection as well as a common intellectual commitment. In August 1893, an editorial demanded that its readers ‘help by writing letters to the paper, and short articles, and to enter into the spirit which lies at the very root of SHAFTS’ existence; namely, that women must first *know* all things, ere they can judge of an evil, or any proposed remedy for an evil’ (p. 106). The paper was a feminist attempt to redefine the prevailing processes of cultural transmission, the dissemination of so-called progressive ideas, and of alternative ethical values, at the *fin de siècle*.

Although it sounds like a casual cliché, the phrase ‘enter into the spirit’ is the one most charged with meaning in the sentence that I have just quoted, because this ‘spirit’ can be taken to refer to the spiritual *per se* as well as simply to the periodical’s sense of vocation, or even its characteristic mood (its ‘mood of production’, so to speak). Ontological metaphors are mixed to significant effect in the claim that either a particular spirit or the spirit in some less specific sense ‘lies at the very root of SHAFTS’. For in the pages of this periodical, as I have implied, enlightenment is a spiritual and not only an intellectual enterprise. This can be seen in the opening stanza of a poem entitled ‘The New Woman’, published in the February 1895 issue:

Pausing on the century's threshold,
 With her face towards the dawn,
 Stands a tall and radiant presence;
 In her eyes the light of morn,
 On her brow the flush of knowledge
 Won in spite of curse and ban,
 In her heart the mystic watchword
 Of the brotherhood of man. (p. 378)

This image is typical of the politics and aesthetics of *Shafts*, which combine neo-classicism and romanticism. The watchwords of the New Woman hymned in this poem are spiritual as well as intellectual. The knowledge that she has finally and triumphantly acquired is a gnostic force as well as an empirical one. In its admixture of the rational and the supra-rational *Shafts* itself is distinctively a product of the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle*.

In an important discussion of the Society for Psychical Research, which had been founded in 1882, Pamela Thurschwell has contended that 'occult ways of imagining cultural transmission and communication ... [were] used by a wide variety of writers of the period to create phantasmatic spaces in which they [could] redefine intimate, sexual, familial and national ties between people against the usual patriarchal models of inheritance and community via marriage and the nuclear family.'⁴ She is thinking principally of people like Oscar Wilde and Henry James, some of whose writing explored the interrelationship of technology and magical thinking, of telephonic and telepathic communication; but *Shafts* can itself be seen as a contribution to, and a collective intervention in, contemporary debates about cultural transmission, insofar as it proposes that its readers 'enter into the spirit' of the publication. It too creates a 'phantasmatic space', one in which women in particular can redefine social relations in opposition to a public sphere from which they are effectively excluded. If this space is utopian, its creation is nonetheless a quite practical task.

The history of *Shafts* is inseparable from the life of its founder and editor, Margaret Shurmer Sibthorp, about whose biography, it has to be confessed, pitifully little is known. Margaret Shurmer was born in Scotland, probably in 1851. She married Stephen James Sibthorp, a chemist, in roughly 1873, living with him in Liverpool and Wolverhampton before they moved to London. She gave birth to two children, in 1873 and 1875, but by the time of the 1891 census, when they would both have been reaching independent adulthood, her occupation is listed as 'writer and secretary'. Sibthorp's husband died in 1902, but

absolutely nothing is known about her own death. It could not have occurred much before the end of that decade, however, because in 1909 she is listed as a founding member of the League of Isis, an organization for promoting the ideas of Frances Swiney on women's rights both to healthy motherhood and to an active sex life. As the author of her entry in the *DNB* mournfully concludes, little more than 'her own thoughts remains to us, arising out of obscurity and sinking back into it.'⁵

Sibthorp edited *Shafts* – which she once described, in revealing rhetoric, as 'the outgoing of my vital breath; the result of the anxious yearning of my inmost spirit; the manifestation of my deep desire to serve the cause of women' (August 1893, p.105) – from 1892 to 1899. Initially funded by an anonymous female friend, the periodical was quickly forced to appeal for financial support to its readership. Typically, the 'Editor's Appeal' in June 1893 insists: 'Shafts [sic] is still in urgent and immediate need of funds. Help even in the shape of small sums will save it. It must not die' (p. 71). Ultimately, these petitions appear to have been incapable of raising a sufficient amount of money, in spite of the expressions of loyalty printed in its correspondence pages. 'Dear Mrs Sibthorp,' wrote one characteristically ardent reader, 'You are becoming so familiar to us in the pages of SHAFTS, where we all declare we can see your own strong, beautiful soul, that I feel I must address you by name. SHAFTS improves every month, and I seem to see the people grow who read it. In any case, I know that it has that effect upon myself, my mother, sisters, and brothers' (August 1893, p. 123). It might well have been steadily improving, but in fits and starts it was also expiring. From early 1893, some three months after its first appearance as a weekly paper, it rather apologetically became a monthly; from 1898 it became a bi-monthly; and in 1899, after poignantly failing to appear for a couple of months, it announced that henceforth it would be published quarterly. Instead, it petered out altogether, perhaps because, in rejecting 'the "New Journalism" formula of information, gossip and entertainment' so firmly, it could not compete with other publications.⁶

Throughout the 1890s, its editorials are moreover sporadically dominated by sad announcements that the offices of *Shafts*, in Arundel Street off the Strand, have had to be moved, first from its 'pleasant, airy rooms' to 'one room in the stair below', then, in 1895, to Sibthorp's home in West Hampstead. Before this slightly humiliating retreat to the suburbs, and to an embattled private sphere, the office seems deliberately to have been conceived as an

inspirational centre for debate. ‘Visitors’ days’, arranged ‘by special appointment’, are advertised in the periodical’s pages. Classes on ‘all humanitarian and other subjects’ were held at the office; and so were lecture courses, including one on ‘THE NEW WOMAN / And what the Term Implies’, conducted on Wednesdays at 5pm, at the cost of ten shillings for the course and one shilling and six pence for individual sessions (February 1895, p. 376). These meetings constitute the social core of an imaginary community. And it is as if the periodical’s premises on the Strand form the concrete centre at which the ‘phantasmatic space’ that it idealistically attempts to float is anchored.

Shafts cost one penny a week, and it can therefore be inferred that it was ‘intended for shop assistants, office workers and a lower middle-class readership’, as Elke Schuch speculates in the only piece of scholarship that has engaged with the periodical at any length. Schuch’s useful account of it centres on what she refers to as its interest in ‘New Wifestyles’, as reflected in ‘articles about avant-garde issues such as suffrage, free union, birth control, anti-vivisection and vegetarianism’.⁷ In practice, I suspect that, in spite of the paper’s attractive price, and its educative programme, these kinds of issues, which are indeed pretty representative of the contents of *Shafts* (though self-consciously ‘progressive’ might be a more fitting designation than ‘avant-garde’), appealed to slightly more affluent and educated members of the middle class too – though it is difficult to speculate because, leaving aside the scholarly difficulty of ascertaining its readership, most contributors as well as correspondents, male and female, adopted pseudonyms. There can be little doubt however that, as an intellectual tool-kit designed to enable women, if not to change the world, at least to reinterpret it, Sibthorp’s paper is principally aimed at the generation of lower-middle class readers forged by Forster’s Education Act of 1870.

Its ideal readers then were New Women, but ones that, even after 1894, when the label was invented, probably would not have identified themselves as such. Talia Schaffer has emphasised that most feminists at the *fin de siècle*, ‘agitat[ing] for greater autonomy in everything from etiquette to employment,’ did so anonymously and in comparative social isolation:

Working as clerks, typists, teachers, college students, journalists, or perhaps even shopgirls, they often lived in painfully spartan flats, struggling to earn enough money for genteel gowns and living primarily on bread and tea. They walked without chaperones, carried their own latchkeys, bicycled, and the more

daring ones smoked cigarettes, cut their hair, or wore divided skirts and plain costume in accordance with the principles of rational dress.⁸

It is to these people that *Shafts* reached out, trying to create a community of readers. One regular column, 'What the Girl Says', which offered aphoristic pronouncements on the political implications of women's everyday lives, provides interesting glimpses of the female reader hailed or interpellated by the periodical. She seems to be unmarried; she rides trams, and goes to 'evening parties'; and she 'knows the meaning of genteel poverty, though, of course, she is well-dressed'. 'The Girl says,' runs one piece of advice, 'if a woman be prepared to do the real work of the world to the best of her ability she need not long remain a distressed gentlewoman.' It goes on to recommend that women 'come forward and keep grocer's, baker's, fruiterer's shops' (24 December 1892, p. 117). No doubt it would have been inconsistent of the editor to advise its readers to keep butcher's shops too, given the periodical's commitment to vegetarianism and the movement against vivisection (one article printed the previous month was entitled 'Our Comrades, the Horses').⁹

Shafts did far more than appeal to the professional or social aspirations of spartan women from the industrious lower-middle class – in short, to their 'wifestyle' fantasies. Its enlightenment mission to equip women with the instruments of an education that might emancipate them from patriarchal assumptions extended to feminist revisions of social and literary history (its regular column on 'Influential Lives' is typical of this, as is the 'Plea for Lady Macbeth' made in consecutive issues at the end of 1892). Kate Flint, who briefly discusses *Shafts* in her book on *The Woman Reader*, notes that it proved to be an original intervention in late nineteenth-century debates about women largely because of its significant attention both to gender biases in language and to the fact that 'women may have different priorities from men in their methods of reading and in the aspects of texts which they stress'.¹⁰

Underlying these commitments, according to Flint, was an emphasis on the 'rational analysis of social facts'.¹¹ This claim seems to be supported by many of the paper's editorial statements, like this one from September 1893, a few months after *Shafts* was first forced to appear as a monthly rather than a weekly:

I hope to succeed in impressing on the understanding and kind intentions of my readers the very serious fact that SHAFTS is being carried on 'against fearful odds' for the purpose of bringing hidden things to light, that earnest and intelligent light which means death to all noxious life. Through the diffusion of

the knowledge of conditions of things, now existing, unknown to some, unregarded by many, women and good men will learn with astonishment and sorrow how much they might have done had they *known*; – how much they can still do when they *know*. (p. 125)

As I have already hinted, ‘bringing hidden things to light’ does not only mean recovering knowledge that has been suppressed, either more or less conspiratorially, in a patriarchal society. It means disseminating occult knowledge. And it is on the occultist aspects of *Shafts* that I intend to concentrate this necessarily brief discussion.

The opening article of the first issue of *Shafts* is particularly revealing in this context, not least because it effectively provides the periodical’s manifesto; and it will consequently act as the focus of this essay. Entitled ‘Shafts of Thought’, as I have already noted, its author is Edith Ward, whose regular contributions in subsequent issues make it seem probable that she was personally as well as politically close to Sibthorp. Ward’s feminist politics, like Sibthorp’s, were those of the social purity movement. She conceived this movement as an enlightenment campaign, as a pamphlet from 1892 about the moral dangers of the prevailing sensuality of the age reveals:

Let us consider the question in its practical aspect, and without emotion or excitement, calmly and dispassionately look into the physiology of vice, weigh the advantages of virtue, and discover, if we can, that golden mean of conduct which nature and experience alike declare to be the only guarantee of health and happiness while we are here, and the only means of ensuring the continual upward evolution of the race.¹²

Significantly, however, in the early 1890s both women were also members of the Theosophical Society, as the passing reference in this passage to an afterlife, in the apparently casual phrase ‘while we are here’, quietly hints. Sibthorp was affiliated to the Blavatsky Lodge in London from 1891 to 1894, though thereafter she seems not to have participated in the Society’s formal activities. And Ward was secretary and then president of the Athene Lodge in Bradford between 1893 and 1896, when she moved to London to serve as the Society’s treasurer there.¹³ Their shared commitment to Theosophy at this time helps to explain the prominence of Ward’s name in the opening number of *Shafts*, and also perhaps the conspicuous quantity of articles on occultist subject matter thereafter, from adulatory reviews of books by H.P. Blavatsky, the charismatic founder of Theosophy in the mid-1870s, to expository articles on Gnostic topics like ‘The Occult Genesis’.

Ward's inaugural article is a rich *mélange* of apparently conflicting ideas, in which scientific and religious metaphors, from contemporary germ theory, for example, and from Theosophy, are energetically, un-self-consciously mixed. In a lecture on 'Theosophy and Modern Science' delivered in 1906, Ward complained that 'in much of the early literature of the Theosophical Movement the exponents of Modern Science were held up to scathing ridicule', and this editorial can therefore be understood in part as an early effort to articulate her belief 'that in physical science would finally be found the greatest demonstration of the Truth of Theosophy to the Western World'.¹⁴ I am not going to catalogue the diversely different discourses that, in devising a sort of syncretistic language for addressing the readers of *Shafts* at the *fin de siècle*, it so freely and creatively cross-fertilizes. I intend instead to explore the notion of 'influential force' that it promotes, which seems to me to be central to the periodical's often contradictory attempt to make *Shafts* into an instrument of feminist emancipation.

'Shafts of Thought' opens with a series of positive references to scientific discoveries 'which are revolutionising the world', and in this it seems, quite explicitly, to be consistent with the enlightenment mission emblematised on the periodical's front cover. It quickly becomes apparent however that its enthusiasm for these scientific discoveries, which have occurred even as 'the century is rolling to its close', is of a peculiarly millenarian kind:

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the application of steam to the industries of mankind produced what is known to mankind as the Industrial Revolution. The latter part of the nineteenth century has seen the application of electricity to a thousand and one new and wonderful uses, and, undoubtedly, its last decade is destined to see developments of force as much more marvellous than electricity, as electricity is than steam. Those mysteries of the ether, into which Western science is just beginning to penetrate, have wonders to reveal to the world at large, which have been but little 'dreamt of in our philosophy'. The experiments of Mr. Crookes, F.R.S., and of Professor Zöllner, the hints thrown out at the Cardiff meeting of the British Association by Professor Lodge, the reports of Edison's latest working hypothesis, all tend to show that we stand upon the verge of new and wonderful discoveries in that mysterious medium which, for want of a better title, our scientific teachers term 'The Ether.' Such discoveries appertain to the realm of thought and point to the existence of psychic powers in man before which electric thunderbolts will seem but toys (3 November 1892, p. 2).

The phenomena that Ward celebrates in the opening paragraph of the article, particularly the force that is later referred to as 'the realisation of mind-power', do not seem to be strictly scientific; but, as I have emphasised, scientific and occult theories were tightly tangled up with one another at this time,

This is in particular the case when they were knotted together around the idea of telepathic communication. The eminent scientists that she cites, though not necessarily *soi-disant* spiritualists, were all committed to psychical research of one kind or another. The chemist William Crookes, for example, conducted experiments on spiritual mediums in the 1870s; and, although he denied that he was ‘a convert to spiritualism’, he became convinced of the existence of ‘a hitherto unrecognized form of Force – whether it be called psychic force or χ force is of little consequence.’¹⁵ The spiritual séance had become a semi-legitimate, if still largely unrespectable, laboratory site for the physical sciences. As Roger Luckhurst has insisted, ‘in the late Victorian period not only were disciplinary boundaries for demarcating scientific and non-scientific terrain in the process of formation [...], but also conceptions of occult intercommunications lodged at junctures where phenomena and the theories proposed to them were in a suspensive state.’¹⁶ It is in these unstable intellectual conditions – when the act of communication was radically complicated, and rendered experimental, by the mediation of the spiritual medium as much as the telephone¹⁷ – that the editor and leading contributors to *Shafts* reconceived the mode of transmission characteristic of periodical literature.

Hypnotism in particular provided a model of communication that, in spite of its anti-enlightenment mystique, offered to extend and deepen the educative programme of a paper like *Shafts* that aligned itself with the enlightenment tradition. As we have seen, Ward’s editorial commences by pointing to scientific developments in the medium of ether, that substanceless substance in which, according to a number of scientists at the *fin de siècle*, all human and non-human relations are held in a state of exquisite though unconscious tension.¹⁸ It subsequently insists that ‘in another direction the investigations of the Salpêtrière into the mysteries of hypnotism, the keen interest which is being taken in the phenomena of clairvoyance, of telepathy, and of double consciousness show that the less material part of man is claiming study and investigation on other than purely material or theological bases’ (3 November 1892, p. 2). The reference here is of course to the neurologist Jean Martin Charcot, Freud’s intellectual guide in the mid-1880s, who proposed a close link between hysteria and the hypnotic state in his research at the Salpêtrière. However, Ward’s faith in hypnotism, it becomes apparent, is actually closer to the ideas promulgated in the 1880s by Charcot’s arch academic rival, Hippolyte Bernheim of the Nancy school, who argued instead that all people

are susceptible to hypnosis, and that this susceptibility is habitually exploited by professional casuists like priests and politicians.

Ward seems to have believed in the redemptive potential of this Bernheimian conception of hypnosis, in so far as it describes a normal rather than a pathological state. She dismisses the cheap theatrical tricks practised on the masses by commercial hypnotists, but maintains that, if the select number of people who have successfully grasped the salvational value of 'mind-power' can demonstrate its positive influence to like-minded people, it might ultimately be possible to transform society through a gradual process of enlightenment:

Out of the thousands who flock open-mouthed to the more or less disgusting exhibitions of hypnotic influence, how few realise the fact that within themselves there lies the power of influencing the world around them, and the liability of being influenced for good or evil by the conscious or unconscious or conscious will of others. It would be safe to assume that there is only here and there one who is awake to the mighty possibilities of thought-influence. (3 November 1892, p. 2)

Ward's notion of 'thought-influence' is at the same time democratic and elitist. The ether in which we all have our being is constantly pulsing with what she later calls 'thought vibrations'(p. 2); theoretically, these are available to all of us; in practice, only those who are enlightened have the ability to emit as well as to receive them. Women must therefore strive to conjoin 'mind-power' with the 'power of its unvarying accompaniment, responsibility', and so to act as 'mind-influencer[s] in the cause of purity and justice'(p. 2).

Ward's triumphant, teleological survey of contemporary developments in scientific and psychical research is in effect an attempt to persuade the potential readers of *Shafts* to constitute themselves as a spiritual and intellectual elect that can promote progressive ideas and positive emotional impulses and so transform society. Collectively and individually, the readers of this periodical must constitute what she calls 'affinitive conditions' for the transmission of feminist and other progressive ideas. A review of Annie Besant's *Autobiography* in the January 1894 issue of *Shafts* provides a paradigmatic example of these conditions. 'Madame Blavatsky,' its author emphasises, 'exercised no power, no influence, that was not already forged in the soul of Mrs. Besant' (p. 195). The ideal conditions for the reception of what Ward had described as 'vibrations' obtain in Besant, because of her 'spiritual purity', her 'moral strength' ('beside which physical force withers to pales' [sic]), and her perpetual openness to positive influence like that of Blavatsky (p. 195). 'The light came, because she had barred no window wherein light could come' (p. 195).

Ward's editorial implicitly envisages *Shafts* itself as an engine of 'influential force':

The belief that every human soul is creating by its inmost thoughts an actual influential force which goes forth for good or evil, travelling far and wide, like the most ethereal thistledown, only with far greater certainty of fructuation than any physical seed, till it finds congenial soil in which to grow to action, is one of the most solemn creeds that the world has ever known. If we try to define the idea of the power of thought we find that, briefly expressed, it is the belief of many wise minds that we are on the verge of discoveries which will prove that thought creates on the ethereal plane vibrations which travel until they are neutralised by transformation into action on the material plane. To be so transformed, it is necessary that they meet with affinitive conditions, or they may be neutralised by opposing thought vibrations of counter tendencies. The germ theory of which we now hear so much in the physical world will serve as an illustration of the working of this doctrine of thought-creative-power. (3 November 1892, p. 2)

The analogy between hypnotic thought and germs in this paragraph is not original. Ward energetically synthesises recent scientific theories in order to develop her concept of influential force. There was extensive debate at the end of the nineteenth century about ordinary people's disturbing susceptibility both to dangerous ideas and dangerous bacteria. As Laura Otis has explained, 'infectious foreign bacteria threatened to penetrate and destroy individual bodies, and it occurred to many physicians in the 1880s that infectious thoughts might destroy an individual mind in an analogous fashion.'¹⁹ Ward shares the physicians' fear, a fear that George Du Maurier stages some two years later in *Trilby* (1894). But she believes that people can protect themselves against the malign thoughts of a Svengali, accommodating benignly progressive thoughts instead. 'All around us waves of thought are being set up,' she explains, 'and we either keep open house to receive the suggestions of evil, or we carefully guard the portals of our souls and accept only the germs of purity and justice' (p. 2). Her editorial attempts to redeem this depressing vision of people's promiscuous openness to alien intellectual and physical influences, imparting an inspiring utopian dimension to it.

The germ theory, which had first challenged the reigning miasma theory of infection among scientific specialists during the 1860s, when Louis Pasteur demonstrated the existence of pathogenic organisms, only gained widespread support in the 1890s. It consisted of two related propositions, according to Nancy Tomes: 'first, that animal and human diseases were caused by distinctive species of microorganisms, which were widely present in air and water; and second, that these germs could not generate spontaneously, but rather always came from a previous case of exactly the same disease.'²⁰ The rhetorical effectiveness of Ward's 'illustration' obviously rests on these increasingly popular assumptions. It also however

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exploits an older understanding of the semantics of 'germs'. For it relies on the reader making a double identification of germs, both as microbes proliferating among unhealthy bodies and as seeds fructifying in healthy soil. The 'germs of thought' can therefore be both malignant and benign. They are at the same time potentially parasitic and symbiotic. Ward freely and un-self-consciously mixes her metaphor:

Every human being is constantly engaged in creating and throwing off germs of thought, good or bad, exactly as germs are being created and thrown off by the physical system, these traverse the ether as microbes traverse the atmosphere, and fall upon the soil of other minds as physical germs upon the body. In both cases, if the receptive organ be affinitive, the germs find congenial soil for development, if, on the other hand, in the one case, the germs of physical disease fall upon a perfectly sound body they find no conditions suitable for their growth, or in the other the thought germs are fructified or sterilised according to their character, good or bad, meets with minds receptive to their influence. (3 November 1892, p. 2)

The rather clotted syntax of these sentences is an indication of the conceptual confusion that Ward runs into as she doggedly pursues this analogy between physical and psychological or psychical germs. The problem is that, if physical germs require a comparatively weak body to provide the affinitive conditions necessary for the process of infection, psychical germs require a comparatively strong mind to provide the affinitive conditions necessary for the process of transmission. Mental strength is thus at some level implicitly equated with physical weakness and ill-health, in spite of contemporary social purists' paradoxical insistence on the healthiness and cleanliness of the female body and on its invisibility. Indeed, physical weakness even acquires a redemptive value in this context, because it enables women to focus all the more effectively on 'mind-influence'. 'To the invalid who reads *SHAFTS* upon a couch of suffering which incapacitates her for active philanthropic work,' Ward emphasises, 'it may perchance bring weekly re-assurance that from her own room she can send forth germs of helpful vigour to men and women engaged in active work' (p. 2). Those whose bodies are peculiarly responsive to disease, it seems, can be especially proactive in the process of making other people's minds receptive to progressive thoughts and ideas.

As a metaphor for the diffusion of ideas this image of intellectual or spiritual germs is considerably more complicated, and more productive, as well as more contradictory, than the enlightenment emblem of shafts of thought or light that is emblazoned on the periodical's cover. The final sentence of Ward's manifesto, at once sloganistic and confused, concentrates some of the metaphorical associations that I have briefly canvassed above: 'And so to each

may it [*Shafts*] carry “Shafts of Thought” that will in turn give rise to myriad germs of purity and good intent’ (3 November 1892, p. 2). Each shaft of thought is ultimately reconfigured as a sort of sting, or even a kind of syringe, one that, in penetrating the reader’s mind, through a thick protective membrane of unquestioned ideological assumptions, cultivates progressive, if morally respectable, ideas with which to infect those with whom she comes into contact. *Shafts* is both an arsenal of enlightened ideas and a laboratory setting for the experimental production of ‘germs of purity and good intent’. It is also the medium by which these ideas are disseminated, and these germs are spread. Military and scientific associations taken from the late-eighteenth century are thus replaced with mystical and scientific ones more characteristic of the late-nineteenth century. The periodical is the site on which a kind of séance is conducted, wherein ‘thought-creative-power’, as it is called in the opening article, circulates under the direction of the editor, who acts as the presiding medium, like Blavatsky perhaps.

Shafts functions as a medium for enlightenment, then, in a dual sense: as an agent both of intellectual emancipation and of spiritual elevation. The emblem of enlightenment with which the illustration on the cover of the first issue established the paper’s vocation is consequently undermined as well as reinforced by the opening article, though Ward herself had insisted with evangelical confidence that ‘the design upon its outer page should be emblematic of a grand and all-pervading truth’ (3 November 1892, p. 2). Even the paper’s title comes to seem slightly inappropriate in retrospect (though to have called it *Germes* rather than *Shafts* would have been to invite an inadvisable comparison with the ‘fleshly’ periodical published by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood half a century earlier). So perhaps it is not surprising that within two months of its appearance, on the 24th of December 1892, it is replaced with a richer and more ambiguous image on the periodical’s cover (see figure 2).

The new design signals a shift, to put it approximately, from classical to romantic imagery. The stately fair-haired archer, whose serene triumph I described earlier, gives way to an embattled dark-haired archer, a Wollstonecraftian figure seemingly engaged in a far more militant struggle to impose Wisdom, Justice and Truth on the world. Poised in a dynamic instead of a static attitude, she stands a little insecurely on a fragile promontory above the sea. She models a rather romantic costume, surmounted by swirling, wind-swept drapery. In contrast to the first female representative of *Shafts*, this woman’s bow is not obviously Greek

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SHAFTS

1. PAPER FOR WOMEN

THE WORKING CLASSES

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WISDOM
 JUSTICE
 TRUTH

LIGHT COMES TO THOSE WHO DARE TO THINK

SWIFTLY SPEED, YE SHAFTS OF LIGHT,
 THE HOSTS OF DARKNESS FLY
 AND BREAKS THE DAWN: FAST ROLLS THE NIGHT
 FROM WOMAN'S DARKENED SKY.

Figure 2

in style; and she carries a full quiver of arrows on her shoulder. In the background a distinctly stormy cloud still threatens to obscure the rays of the rising sun. This illustration could almost be a portrait, in historical costume, of Besant, probably the most celebrated champion, at the end of the nineteenth century, of progressive causes, including Free Thought, Socialism, and, famously, from the late 1880s, Theosophy. The review of Besant's autobiography

subsequently identifies her ‘as one of the women of the future even now in our midst, strong, faithful, pure-hearted’ (January 1894, p. 192).

This image seems to reflect not only the deepening struggle that Sibthorp confronted in producing the periodical at all, but an increasing singleness of purpose too. It is a less confident illustration than its predecessor, but a more militant illustration too. It seems to emphasise the importance of passion in the struggle for women’s rights, albeit in a spiritualised form, in spite of the fact that, as a committed advocate of the social purity movement, Sibthorp was, in Lucy Bland’s formulation, ‘one of the relatively few feminists to see passion in a purely negative light, equating it with sensuality as opposed to love.’²¹ In addition, it is surely an attempt, necessarily simplistically, to complicate, and even to critique, the enlightenment model for disseminating ideas from which the periodical evidently started, the appositeness of which Ward’s opening article had immediately, if implicitly, questioned. In the second paragraph of her editorial Ward refers directly to the illustration that I discussed at the beginning of this essay:

The design which forms the cover of this paper is suggestive of active work on many lines for the good of humanity, but of none more than of woman as the mind-influencer in the cause of purity and justice. The female figure who hurls the shafts of light into the dark places of sin, injustice, and ignorance, typifies the position in which every human souls stands, whose thoughts are pure and true, and whose will is strong to follow the path of duty. (3 November 1892, p. 2)

On the one hand, this is the description of an image of what I have called ‘female enlightenment’. On the other hand, as the odd formulation ‘mind-influencer’ indicates, the transmission of the truth is in this description implicitly envisaged as an occult phenomenon. The light of truth acquires darker shades. Reading the periodical therefore comes to seem like a kind of initiation. And appropriately, in the second cover design, the shaft that, in an attempt to create the illusion of depth, protrudes through the dramatic black letters of the paper’s title, seems to point to the reader, threatening perhaps to prick her fingers as she peels open the pages. The reader is thereby implicated in the symbolic economy that Ward’s article sketched out and that Sibthorp subsequently sponsored in commissioning pieces on occultism. She is made open to infection, and, it is hoped, to incubating germs of purity and good intent that can be passed on, more or less promiscuously, to like-minded acquaintances. Enlightenment is not only an intellectual process; it is also apparently both a spiritual and a physical one. It is an ‘influential force’ created by the ‘inmost thoughts’ of the human soul and diffused through the material agency of a weekly paper.

Shafts is an exemplary, if at the same time apparently anomalous, periodical of the *fin de siècle*, because it ascribes what might be called a mediumistic function to a literary medium whose relationship to truth, in the epoch of the New Journalism, seemed to be increasingly compromised by the cheapening effects of the expansion of the press.

¹ See James McGrigor Allan, *Woman Suffrage Wrong: In Principle, and Practice: An Essay* (London: Remington, 1890).

² For an examination of some aspects of female enlightenment in the context of the early Romantic period, see Mary Jacobus, “‘The Science of Herself’: Scenes of Female Enlightenment,” in *Romanticism, History, and the Possibilities of Genre: Re-forming Literature 1789-1837*, ed. by Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 240-69.

³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. by C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), pp. 66, 67.

⁴ Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 2.

⁵ Lesley A. Hall, ‘Sibthorp, Margaret Shurmer (b. c. 1851),’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/57831].

⁶ This description is taken from Barbara Onslow, ‘Preaching to the Ladies: Florence Fenwick Miller and her Readers in the *Illustrated London News*,’ in *Encounters in the Victorian Press*, ed. by Laurel Brake and Julie F. Codell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 88-102 (p. 100).

⁷ Elke Schuche, “‘Shafts of Thought’: New Wifetypes in Victorian Feminist Periodicals in the 1890s,” *Nineteenth-Century Feminisms* 4 (2001), 118-134 (p. 120).

⁸ Talia Schaffer, “‘Nothing but Foolscap and Ink’: Inventing the New Woman,” in *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms*, ed. by Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 39-52 (p. 39).

⁹ One historian has noted that ‘the roots of the link between vegetarianism and feminism lay in the 1890s, as manifested in the radical journal *Shafts*.’ See Leah Leneman, ‘The Awakened Instinct: Vegetarianism and the Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain,’ *Women’s History Review* 6 (1997), 271-287 (p. 276).

¹⁰ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 152.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹² Edith Ward, *The Vital Question: An Address on Social Purity to All English-Speaking Women* (London: Lund, 1892), p. 8.

¹³ She remained a leading member of the organization until 1908, when she resigned because of the scandal associated with the so-called Leadbeater Case, in which one of the most eccentric, if charismatic of Annie Besant’s associates, Charles Leadbeater, was accused of making boys for whom he had spiritual responsibility masturbate.

¹⁴ Edith Ward, *Theosophy and Modern Science (Being the Substance of a Lecture Delivered for the West London Lodge of the Theosophical Society, October, 1906)* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906), p. 5.

¹⁵ William Crookes, *Psychic Force and Modern Spiritualism: A Reply to the "Quarterly Review" and Other Critics* (London: Longmans, Green, 1871), pp. 5, 1.

¹⁶ Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 82.

¹⁷ On the interrelations of these modes of communication, see Steven Connor, 'The Machine in the Ghost: Spiritualism, Technology and the "Direct Voice",' in *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, ed. by Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 203-25.

¹⁸ On the ether, see Steven Connor, "'Transported Shiver of Bodies': Weighing the Victorian Ether,' a paper given at the conference of the British Association of Victorian Studies, University of Keele, 3 September 2004 [<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/english/skc/ether/>].

¹⁹ Laura Otis, *Membranes: Metaphors of Invasion in Nineteenth-Century Literature, Science, and Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 6.

²⁰ Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 33.

²¹ Lucy Bland, 'Heterosexuality, Feminism and *The Freewoman* Journal in Early Twentieth-Century England,' *Women's History Review* 4 (1995), 5-23 (p. 21, n. 31).