PROJECT MUSE®

Sinking "Like a Corpse" or Living the "Soul's Full Desire":
Shaker Women in Fiction and History

Richard M. Marshall

Utopian Studies, Volume 21, Number 1, 2010, pp. 57-90 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/utp.0.0011>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/382289>

Sinking “Like a Corpse” or Living the “Soul’s Full Desire”: Shaker Women in Fiction and History

RICHARD M. MARSHALL

Abstract

This article examines the disparity between fictional and historical accounts of Shaker women. The fiction, influenced by pervading social beliefs like the cult of true womanhood, usually portrays a woman who becomes dissatisfied with her Shaker life, concluding that it is a sort of living death that isolates her from love, marriage, and motherhood. Historical records reveal independent and fulfilled women who became Shakers for religious reasons but also for secular opportunities unknown in the outside world, including companionship, refuge from sexual predation, and a chance for professional or governmental fulfillment.

When well-read Americans in the 1850s heard the name Shakers, strange images arose in their minds: reclusive religious zealots, fanatical whirling dervishes, or cold and emotionless adherents to an outlandish faith. For the next one hundred fifty years readers of fiction about the Shakers would not have taken serious exception to these images, unless they had actually become acquainted with some real Shakers, who seldom resembled their fictional counterparts. By the 1790s the historical Shakers, some twenty years after arriving in America with their founder Ann Lee, had developed a system of communal living that enabled them to establish in the next half century nearly twenty flourishing communitarian villages from New England through Ohio to Kentucky. Novels and short stories about Shaker life seldom describe the success of these communities, focusing instead on members who felt trapped and frustrated. These stories, examined in the first third of this essay, particularly distorted the image of the Shaker woman by showing how Shakerism extinguishes her soul, if not her life, how its faith and customs restrict her to an isolated village life, and how it denies her the fulfillment of love and motherhood. Historical documents, described in the last two-thirds of this study, contradict most of the published fiction, specifically revealing that Shaker women seldom remained interned in an isolated village, that they

found social and even political power denied them in the outer world, and that they often enjoyed a satisfying life without becoming mothers, sometimes finding in the Shaker village an escape from the sexual pressures of the outside society.

Virginia Woolf notes a similar literary–historical dichotomy throughout the ages: powerful women fill the pages of “fiction written by men” but never appear in books of history. She wonders how male authors could create such dynamic women as Antigone and Lady Macbeth when the real world of the time period in which they wrote so restricted women’s existence.¹ Woolf conjures up a picture of the life of Shakespeare’s fictitious sister and speculates that if she had desired to live his life, she would have been “an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself” and the society of the time.² She would have been forced to marry the “son of a neighboring wool stapler,” would have been “severely beaten by her father” when she refused, and would have eventually killed herself because social restrictions would have crushed her poetic spirit.³ Fiction about Shaker women and the historical documents that describe their lives demonstrate a similar disparity, but the American authors reverse the age-old relationship that Woolf delineates: the historical records—private diaries, official journals, letters—describe women who wielded considerable social influence, but the fiction portrays lifeless and powerless Shaker women.

In these stories, the Shaker community threatens the very existence of women. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who once “half seriously considered joining” a Shaker community, describes such a fate in two stories, “The Canterbury Pilgrims” and “The Shaker Bridal” (1852).⁴ Each story strongly implies that life without the love of a man, marriage, and motherhood threatens a woman’s very being. When the husband in “The Canterbury Pilgrims” speaks of his intent to join the Shaker community, he laments only that he must escape from the economic hardships of a cruel world, not that he will be separated from his wife and children.⁵ His wife, however, views their impending separation in the celibate Shaker village as a living death. In fact, the young Shaker girl and boy, who in the story are fleeing the Shaker village, initially presume the wife is dead when her husband fails to mention her in his lament. Although the young couple soon realizes that she is not *actually* dead, the wife furthers the notion that her entrance into the Shaker village will be a *figurative* death when she tells them that she speaks “as if these were

my dying words.” This “dying” wife warns the young couple of the problems they will encounter in the world but concludes by saying that it is “almost against nature for a woman to try to part lovers” and thus tacitly advises them to continue on their flight away from the Shakers.⁶

In “The Shaker Bridal,” this same unnatural parting of lovers seems to kill Martha Pierson, Hawthorne’s other reluctant Shaker woman. Conspicuously, she is introduced as “thin and pale, as a Shaker sister almost invariably is, and not entirely free from that corpse-like appearance, which the garb of the sisterhood is so well calculated to impart.”⁷ As the story’s title suggests, the elevation of Martha and Adam, her longtime fiancé, to village leaders seems a sort of Shaker marriage, which ironically becomes for the woman both a worldly divorce and a funeral. After Father Ephraim, the village patriarch, pronounces the two to be new elder and eldress, Adam withdrew “his hand from hers, and folded his arms with a sense of satisfied ambition,” while “paler and paler grew Martha by his side, till, like a corpse in its burial clothes, she sank down at the feet of her early lover; for, after many trials firmly borne, her heart could endure the weight of its desolate agony no longer.”⁸ Martha’s life seems to end her with her separation from her betrothed, even though as a Shaker eldress, a historical one at least, her life of authority and influence would just be beginning, a consideration never mentioned in Hawthorne’s story.

William Dean Howells in *The Day of their Wedding* (1896) similarly describes a woman whose life as a Shaker is likened, if not to a death, at least to the extended suffering of a serious illness. This woman, like Hawthorne’s Shakeresses, defines her existence only in terms of her relationship with a man. In the story, a young couple, Althea and Lorenzo, steals away from a Shaker community and rides a train to Saratoga, the nineteenth-century resort town that catered to eloping couples. Before they seek out a preacher, and while they ambivalently sample with mixed enthusiasm and disdain the materialistic foolery of Saratoga, the couple becomes increasingly sensitive about the attention people give to the girl’s short hair. A shopkeeper and a fellow tourist both suppose that her hair was cut off in sickness, suggesting that by nature a Shaker woman is somehow diseased, at least in the eyes of the world.⁹

The novel *does* paint a favorable picture of the young Shakers, in that they reject the shallow Vanity Fair values of the outside world, but it

concludes, as do Hawthorne's stories, with an erroneous view of Shaker women, that they depend on men for the meaning of their existence. When this Shaker couple finally marries but agonizes over whether to return to their community, Althea exclaims: "I'm nothing! What do I care for myself?" She admits, using Shaker terminology that condemns the worldly life, that an existence outside the society would be the life of darkness, but she also depends on her new husband's definition of the "truth" and the "light" even if it goes against Shaker doctrine: "But if you say so, Lorenzo, the light of the world shall be my light, the darkness shall be my light!" Hearing his wife almost admit she will follow him to hell, to darkness, Lorenzo begins to worry that he might be unfairly pulling her "down to the earthly." Althea persists, however, showing that her whole allegiance is to a man, not to any doctrine: "The angelic life wouldn't be anything without you, Lorenzo."¹⁰ Althea relinquishes all decisions to Lorenzo, believing that a separation from him would cause her to become "nothing." Howells's young Shakeress, in short, chooses a subordinate position in the world over the position of equality that she could have held inside the Shaker community, a status that the story never mentions.

In another of Howells's Shaker novels, *The Undiscovered Country* (1880), a similar danger looms, but it is examined from the perspective of a man who worries that the Shakers will separate him from his woman. The protagonist fears that his beloved has joined the celibate community: "An image of Egeria in the Shaker garb, with her soft young throat hidden to the chin, and the tight gauze cap imprisoning her beautiful hair, rose in the young man's thoughts, and would not pass. It was with something like the . . . waking from an odious dream that he saw the girl enter the room in her usual dress."¹¹

Many authors of fiction suggest even more serious consequences than the loss of love, marriage, and motherhood, depicting that Shaker life exposes the nubile ingenue to the danger of rape. In the mid-nineteenth century, one male author and one female author with astounding similarity describe this threat, and it surprisingly comes from the elder of the Shaker community. In D. P. Thompson's "The Shaker Lovers" (1848), Elder Higgins, an archetypal villain of nineteenth-century melodrama, with his "thick, dumpy figure, little hooked nose, whitish, gloating eyes and ill-omened countenance," ominously takes a special interest in one particular Shakeress, "the young, innocent and

lovely Martha” Hilson.¹² The salacious nature of his attention is confirmed when, “to the great horror of the distressed maiden,” she was “several times” required by Elder Higgins “to meet him at the confessional alone, and in one of the most secluded rooms in the” Shaker dwelling.¹³ Similarly, in Catherine Sedgwick’s *Redwood* (1850), the “monastic seclusion” of the Shaker community affords a cover for the evildoings of another elder. The village also becomes both a jail from which the ingenue must flee and an icy fortress for a frigid older woman.¹⁴ To physically escape the village, the nubile and docile Emily Allen, whom the lecherous Elder Reuben Harrington later actually abducts and locks in a cage in the woods, must first break free of the psychological influence of an older Shakeress, her aunt Susan Allen, whom Sedgwick describes as extremely independent and self-possessed, traits certainly attributable to the historical Shaker woman. Her self-assurance, however, is hardly admirable. Such self-confidence and her staunch adherence to Mother Ann’s doctrines cause two problems: one, she influences Emily to stay in the community, exposing her to the threat of Harrington’s advances; and two, her zealous beliefs lead to the ruin of her lover, a fate that Sedgwick suggests he does not deserve. When Susan informs him that she is joining the Shakers instead of marrying him, “he fell into a weakly way, and then took to ruinous habits,” meaning that he begins drinking and loitering about the door of Susan’s Shaker dwelling. One morning, after a “cruel cold night,” the brethren find him “lying . . . across the door-stone—frozen to death.” Sedgwick adds that his death occurs on “a Sabbath morning too,” a comment that of course helps readers implicate the frigid and unnatural Shaker celibacy as a contributing factor in the lover’s death.¹⁵

Giles’s *The Believers* (1957) also closely associates death and Shaker women, the death again being caused by the enforced separation from men. In particular, one young Shaker girl kills herself after the Shaker authorities bring her and her lover, who have eloped, back to the village. She leaves the following suicide note to her betrothed: “Dear Lucien . . . I do not want to live without you, and they [the Shakers] will never let us be together.”¹⁶ The heroine of the novel, Rebecca Fowler, witnessing her young friend’s love for Lucien, realizes that she herself is withering “in the sheltered world of a Shaker village.”¹⁷ Becky’s forced separation from the outside world, however, is less a concern than the rejection of her by her fanatically devout Shaker husband. She comes alive again when she falls in love with Stephen, her

fellow non-Shaker village schoolteacher. Rebecca explains the necessity for a woman to be loved, romantically and sexually, that is: "To be loved—to love, it is life to a woman. Without it she dies in some part of her, shrivels away, and becomes sterile and brittle. I felt every pulse of my blood, every beat of my heart, new and more living than they had been in years. I felt alive again."¹⁸

A similar view, that a woman lives for love and marriage, lies at the center of Jane Yolen's late-twentieth-century Shaker novel for young adults, *The Gift of Sarah Barker* (1981). Yolen's portrayal of Sarah's mother, Agatha, suggests that those women who cannot succeed at motherhood can retreat to a Shaker village, a proper place for such social misfits. Sarah explains to Brother Abel, with whom she will later abscond and marry, how she and her mother became Shakers. During her mother's confinement, she and her "Worldly father" had slept in a barn: "The next morning, when we went back to the house, the midwife said that . . . the baby had died. . . . It was the fourth . . . in five years. Three before me and one after. . . . I knew only the last, poor little thing. . . . And then Mother brought me here." With simplicity typical for Shaker fiction, Abel asks if she means "Mother Ann [Lee]," but Sarah explains that it was her "Worldly mother." Sarah's worldly mother, however, does indeed become a latter-day Mother Ann, the Shaker's founder whose own numerous stillbirths, as many biographers have asserted, influenced her founding of a celibate sect. Such a connection becomes clear as Sarah continues the tale: "She [Agatha] said my father was dead as well, though she would not let me . . . stay for the burying. . . . She said the Shakers would take us in so long as we had no father."¹⁹

To this point in the story, readers could readily sympathize with Agatha, who has failed to give birth to live children and who has thus suffered physical and psychological trauma. Her mental instability, however, only increases when living in the Shaker village, and the believers' theology and lifestyle, suggests Yolen, intensify her erratic behavior. During one of the evening services while the congregation dances around her, Agatha reveals the depth of her madness, which Shaker doctrine against marriage, if it did not inspire it, certainly exacerbated after the fact:

Agatha drew herself up. . . . "But my father gave me away to him, to Satan, to Abraham Barker. And so I was Agatha Lanyard no longer. It did

not matter to them that I wanted to remain pure. . . . They forced me. They said it was my duty [to marry and procreate]. But how can *that* be duty that horses and cows . . . do, but angels do not?” She turned and held her hands up, pleading, looking into the faces of the sisters one . . . , as if seeking understanding. *Then her voiced dropped.* “And I liked it. Dear Mother, I *enjoyed* it. . . .”

“And then there were the babies. One and two and three dead before her—” She pointed to Sarah with a shaking finger. “And after her, one more dead. I wanted none of them. Just him. . . . But you lived . . . and I prayed to God that you would die, too. . . . But you lived . . . and he played with *you* and loved *you* and I was forgotten.”

In this strange masquerade of the Shakers’ confession and dance worship, Agatha both reveals her sexual obsessions and explains how the Shakers, at least temporarily and very unhealthily, helped repress them. Finally, she explains why she is destined to be a Shaker, even a Shaker leader: “‘And then the revelation came to me . . . with the new little baby dead at my side. . . . I had heard of the Shakers. . . . And I . . . was Agatha Lanyard again. The same initials. A. L. I was to be Ann Lee reborn. I should have been Mother to you all, all of you.’ She gestured wildly around the room with her right arm. ‘These are my children, Lord. Only these.’”²⁰

Poignantly, after Agatha’s very public confession of sexual pleasure, her death wish for her only child, and finally a provocative sexual dance in front of the aghast village elder, the Shakers begin shouting “woe, woe” at the poor deluded woman. Later that night Agatha kills herself. Although Mother Jean, the senior eldress, shows great compassion for the orphaned Sarah and comforts her, Yolen does not focus on this kindhearted leader but on Agatha, whose depression over numerous stillborn children should elicit pity but she receives only scorn from the one people she thought would harbor her: the Shakers. And readers of the novel, young adults and adults alike, see in this plot that a woman’s madness and demise are the sequelae of the believers’ celibate theology and practices.

The Gift of Sarah Barker and other stories perpetuate the narrow notion that women could only find a meaningful life in romantic love, marriage, and motherhood, a notion that in belief and action the real-life Shakers contradicted. Although most Shaker journals only sparsely describe daily and domestic activities, even these tedious, official accounts reveal that many nineteenth-century women found life in a Shaker community quite attractive and rewarding. Documents other than the sanctioned, society-kept journals occasionally reveal more overtly and emotionally the contentment many women found in Shaker life. One such document is a series of poems written by Hortency Hooser, a Shakeress who lived her entire adult life (1809–84) in the community at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky. Hooser's poems, which she placed in the back of the community's school roll book, are indeed historical documents, in that they record many details on their author's nearly seven decades of life as a Shaker. Furthermore, many of her verses express a sense of purpose and satisfaction that sharply contrasts with the image of dependency and helplessness voiced by the women protagonists in the various stories about the Shakers. In "Reflections," for instance, Hortency Hooser presents a positive, albeit brief, description of her fulfillment as a lifelong Shakeress, especially in her role as teacher at Pleasant Hill's school:

The greatest pleasures
Of my life have been
...
To rear up poor orphans
In virtue and truth
To love and serve God
...
To teach them to read
To write and to spell
To cease to do evil
And learn to do well.²¹

Hooser's position as a teacher demonstrates the Shakers' elevation of women because in the early nineteenth century educators of young children were often male. For instance, in 1815, only a decade and a half before Hooser began teaching at Pleasant Hill, Abraham Lincoln attended a public school "for several weeks" at Knob Creek, Kentucky, about sixty miles west of Hooser's residence in Pleasant Hill.²² Although Lincoln "was largely

self-educated,” in his brief encounter with public education he was instructed by two male “teachers—Zachariah Riney and Caleb Hazel.”²³

Hooser’s poems often reveal that she knew of worldly practices beyond the Shaker village boundaries. “Reflections” reveals her cognizance of the outside world, to a degree seldom seen in the sheltered Shaker women described in fiction. She compares her Shaker life favorably to that of an Old World ruler:

Had I been the Queen
Of European soil
...
I ne’er could have lived
To my soul’s full desire
As here I’ve enjoyed
With the meek of the earth
While we’ve wrought for salvation
The pearl of great worth²⁴

American authors of fiction have presented no protagonists that find the fulfillment expressed by Hooser and other historical Shakeresses. Even Giles’s Rebecca Cooper, who initially felt great “pride in being singled out” by the Shakers as “the most qualified” to become a schoolteacher, flees the village with her new love the first chance she gets.²⁵

The real Shaker communities, unlike fictional settlements, offered women of the nineteenth century (and later) opportunities for accomplishments and influence unknown in the outside world. Shaker doctrine, as well as the sect’s governmental structure, established the equality of men and women. James Prescott, a Shaker and one of the sect’s historians, explains that the Shakers “hold that God is dual, male and female, Father and Mother; . . . that these two principles are exhibited throughout the universe of God.”²⁶ Jean M. Humez in *Mother’s First-Born Daughters* explains that Shaker theology about a Mother god, much of it formulated by early *male* leaders, serves as a balance for “the Father god of Jewish and Christian tradition. One of the functions of the ‘second appearing in the female [Ann Lee]’ of the Christ spirit had been precisely to reveal for the first time the existence and nature of this Mother Spirit.”²⁷ The belief in a dual-gender godhead survives into the twenty-first century; the few remaining Shakers at the Sabbathday Lake, Maine, community still address their prayers to “God, Our

Mother and Father.”²⁸ On a more secular level, Frederick Evans, the great Shaker spokesman and social reformer of the late nineteenth century, argued that the United States should have a female and a male president; that each state should have two governors, one from each sex; and that the state and federal governments should have female senates legislating alongside of male houses of representatives.²⁹

Throughout the sect’s history, each Shaker village put these religious and political theories into practice. Every community was ruled by two elders and two eldresses, and Shaker women in numerous communities had real influence, often the dominant influence, in the lives of numerous men and women. Lucy Wright, the national leader of the sect for more than two decades, directed policy that was followed even though male leaders felt that other policies might be wiser. Priscilla Brewer observes, for instance, that Wright sensed wisdom in leaving the religious dictums of the society unpublished even though a leading elder, Freegift Wells, urged that all rules be written out. Wright believed that such codification would only foster contention between leaders and the members.³⁰ Stephen Stein describes Wright as “perhaps the most influential leader in all of Shaker history.”³¹ She expanded Shakerism into the western states and solidified the structure of the national organization during her twenty-five-year tenure as national leader: “She . . . shaped a strategy for dealing with the problems at hand, and moved the society toward the future. As first in the ministry, her influence extended to every area of Shaker life.”³²

Furthermore, unlike the cold Susan Allen in *Redwood* and Sister Prissy, a petty and autocratic leader in *The Believers*, these real Shaker eldresses were often revered for their kindness by the people they led. Journals and letters in many communities speak of the village inhabitants’ loving affection for the leading eldress. A Union Village, Ohio journal describes the affection of the community’s inhabitants for their eldress: “The Society sustained a great loss in the death of Ruth Farrington. As first in the ministry on the sisters’ lot, she had so won the hearts of the people that they called her by the endearing name of Mother.”³³ Samuel Turner, an early leader at Pleasant Hill, in an 1810 letter to Wright expressed his reverence for this leader of the entire sect who had sent him west to help establish a new village: “One thing I can say with safety . . . is if ever I felt thankful for a Mother, it has been so since I have been in this Western country; I believe

that none but such as have had the sweet providedge [*sic*] of living near to so kind a parent, and then been sepperated [*sic*] from her, can tell how to prize such a privilege.”³⁴

If one is a bit suspicious of the sincerity of these two tributes to women leaders—Turner is after all an underling writing to a superior, and Farrington is eulogized in a society-sanctioned journal—corroboration that some eldresses earned the affectionate title of “Mother” and were loved as much as a biological parent comes from a more objective source. William S. Byrd, a member of the Pleasant Hill society in the 1820s, in numerous letters to his father speaks with similar affection of Mother Lucy Smith, the leading eldress at that society.³⁵ In his critical edition of Byrd’s letters Stein observes that both William and his father considered “Mother Lucy . . . the paragon of holiness and virtue.”³⁶ Mother Ruth and the two Mothers Lucy, unlike so many of the female characters in Shaker fiction, did not have to leave the society to enjoy the fulfillment of motherhood.

In their roles as “Mother,” furthermore, they did more than serve as mere substitutes for the real mothers the believers had left behind in the world. Certainly many maternally nurtured their Shaker “children,” but many often obtained positions of authority in Shaker communities that were closer to the traditional father roles of directing and commanding. Suzanne R. Thurman notes that Hannah Kendall administered the Harvard and Shirley Shaker villages as coequal with Elder Eleazer Rand until his death in 1808, when she became “the sole ‘parent’ of the bishopric. Although John Warner became Ministry elder, he had none of Kendall’s authority, and he remained subordinate to her.”³⁷ In the early nineteenth century Pleasant Hill’s leadership was also female dominated. Similar to Mother Lucy Wright’s firm decision making for the entire sect, Lucy Smith at Pleasant Hill initiated action that helped free the society of a debt that had been incurred by the unwise decisions of male leaders. The economic crisis arose when deacons “went unbeknown to anyone but themselves,” invested money in grain futures, and lost it when the bank holding the society’s money failed. By the middle of November 1819, “the Believers . . . found themselves upwards of \$6,000 in debt to the world.” Eldress Smith’s solution was to organize a massive sales venture in which brothers went forth from the village with “such things as they had on hand . . . like . . . shuttles, temples, basket, pipes, carpets. . . . This was the 15th of November and they stured lively and picked up their little things and

loaded their waggon. . . . And by the 15th of the next November, they had all their debts pay'd off."³⁸

Humez's discussion of the power struggle between leaders in the Shaker hierarchy also reveals the predominant role Lucy Smith played in Pleasant Hill administration until the turmoil of democratic movement led by a John Whitbey caused her removal.³⁹ When the senior elders of each western village were asked by Wright to discontinue the use of the titles "Father" and "Mother," South Union complied and Pleasant Hill did not. Benjamin S. Youngs at South Union complained about Pleasant Hill's defiance, and Wright in 1818 removed the senior male elder, John Meacham, but retained Lucy Smith, who as we see in William Byrd's letters was still affectionately called "Mother" into the mid-1820s.⁴⁰

Even though, in the aftermath of the Whitbey turmoil in 1828, Lucy Smith would be removed as senior village eldress, the letter about her solution to the Pleasant Hill economic crisis and William Byrd's letters to his father testify to both the secular authority she wielded and the spiritual sway she possessed at Pleasant Hill. Certainly, in daily life the rank-and-file Shakers generally conformed to the expected division in gender roles: the men worked in the fields; the women cooked and cleaned dwellings, but Lucy Smith in the early 1820s held a position of authority far from the traditional distaff role and unheard of in the outside world.⁴¹ Since Pleasant Hill in 1823 contained "almost 500 Shakers, . . . making it Kentucky's sixth-largest town," it is not an exaggeration to state that Smith was in essence the mayor of a small city a century before women were even allowed to vote.⁴²

In fact, her removal might also prove her lingering influence and popularity. Stein asserts that Lucy Smith in the first decade of Pleasant Hill's existence held the predominant authority in the community, that Elder Samuel "Turner stood in her shadow during their period of joint leadership," even though each Shaker village was ostensibly governed by two equal leaders, one male and one female.⁴³ Humez speculates that her removal was "the result of . . . a genderized power struggle," in this case the triumph of "disgruntled male Shakers, some of whom used the 'petticoat government' threat to win support" for the checking of influential women leaders. Humez also maintains that earlier the national leader, Lucy Wright, also faced such challenges but had withstood them.⁴⁴

A reader of Shaker fiction who has read about numerous trapped, powerless, and almost lifeless female protagonists might accept the exceptional

case of a powerful Shaker eldress, like Lucy Smith, or a dominant national leader, like Lucy Wright, but might still believe that the average Shakeress led a restricted, monotonous, and regimented life. The extant journals, letters, and especially travel diaries, however, reveal that many rank-and-file Shaker women did not suffer the soul-draining existence portrayed in fiction. The Shaker life, especially in the early nineteenth-century American frontier, offered many advantages to Shaker women like Hortency Hooser and her fellow female believers. Not the least of these benefits was daily companionship, a simple pleasure offered Shaker women anywhere but especially for those in the sparsely settled western lands. Non-Shaker women there often suffered a benumbing or even frightening isolation on remote homesteads. Andrew R. L. Clayton in *Frontier Indiana* examines a particular family, the Van Arsdales, and how the population density of an area influenced their selection of a place to live. While living in Kentucky in 1816 and contemplating a move farther west, Peter Van Arsdale “concluded that Missouri land was better, [but], his wife’s desire to be near people overruled his preference for new land.”⁴⁵ Christina Tillson in *A Woman’s Story of Pioneer Illinois* also related how pioneer women in lightly populated areas dreaded the complete uprooting of their household to move to even more thinly settled lands.⁴⁶ Daniel Drake in *Pioneer Life in Kentucky* described how all of his family felt the isolation of their homestead, but it especially affected his mother, probably because she remained at the cabin while the men experienced the occasional pleasure of a trip to a trading post or small town: “None . . . can fully estimate the feeling of loneliness which comes into the heart when only trees and a few domestic animals can be seen. This feeling was ours, and especially mother’s.”⁴⁷ Most frightening for the woman settler was the situation described by Rebecca Burlend in *A True Picture of Emigration*. She explained the desperation that the pioneer wife felt when her husband became ill or injured, as did her husband after he cut his leg severely while harvesting: “My situation requires no comment: I could not but perceive I was likely to lose my dearest earthly friend, and with him all visible means of supporting myself, or maintaining my family. I was almost driven to frenzy.”⁴⁸

By contrast, Shaker journals and letters describe pleasant communal activities that surely offered women members, contemporaries of these frontier women, a sense of belonging and security that the lonely and frightened Rebecca Burlend would envy. Note the following day spent at

the New Lebanon, New York, Shaker community, described from the point of view of a visiting sister, Lucy Hammond, from the Harvard society: "After dinner [I] went out with the Sisters to pick apples;—there was the good Elder Br. [Brother] and a number of the Brn. [Brethren] and Srs. [Sisters]. . . . I stopped on the side of the mountains and they sung two new songs."⁴⁹ A couple of weeks later Hammond described how she and another sister visited the "William Taylor's, an english family," and how when they returned to the office, "Br. Seth came in and smoked with us."⁵⁰ Such images of a Shaker woman strolling the mountainside, visiting families outside the village, and smoking with a brother dispel the picture popularized by fiction of the repressed, imprisoned, or almost lifeless Shakeress.

Women in the western Shaker villages, with their proximity to the frontier, certainly savored even more than their eastern sisters such a pleasant communal existence, but many eastern non-Shaker women recognized the advantages offered by the communities. Glendyne Wergland notes that single women understood "that Shakerism provided women with many benefits that worldly life lacked, such as . . . food, housing, medical care, and lifetime support."⁵¹ Thus, one visitor to the New Lebanon community, Anne Royall, "a gentleman farmer's penniless widow," was quite impressed by the extremely self-possessed eldress, Miss Betsy, "a female of good information, unaffected in her manners and conversation, affability and sweetness itself," quite a contrast to the coldness of Sedgwick's Susan Allen or the timidity of Hawthorne's Martha Pierson.⁵²

Hortency Hooser and other Pleasant Hill inhabitants would find nothing unusual either in the non-Shaker Royall's experience or in the Shaker Sister Hammond's description of her visit to a Shaker village other than her own. As seen in the personal journal of Zachariah Burnett, a Pleasant Hill contemporary of Hooser, women regularly traveled outside the village's picturesque stone walls. Burnett observed that one Tuesday in 1846 two women, Sarah Poole and Jane Ryan, left the village with two brothers and "Elder George" "to preach by Candlelight" at a nearby town and then went on to preach "Wednesday night at Stanford, Thursday night at Danville, Friday night at Harrodsburg" and returned home on Saturday.⁵³ In addition to such proselytizing trips, Shakeresses occasionally had the opportunity to travel, albeit accompanied by brothers, for pleasure visits to other Shaker communities.

Hooser’s long poem about her travels outside the village dispels the fictional image that most Shakeresses led a restricted life sequestered behind Shaker stone walls. In 1870 she traveled in the company of five Pleasant Hill sisters and two brothers to the Ohio Shaker communities of Union Village, Watervliet, and Whitewater.⁵⁴ With the accustomed meticulousness of an official Shaker family journalist, Hooser documents the statistics of the trip—the participants, length of stay, means of travel—but on the whole, the poem is delightfully light in tone and unusually personal. The text throughout displays a mixture of official voice and personal impressions. Sometimes Hooser’s descriptions sound like the voice of the country person, wide-eyed at the sights and comforts of the more populated greater world, but often we hear descriptions that the more seasoned traveler would make: comments on the small irritations of travel and descriptions of interesting but commonplace people. The train ride itself was a point of interest:

I was delighted while I rode
In cars with cushion’d seats refined
And Kentucky central Rail Road
Was very charming to my mind.⁵⁵

Other aspects of journey, in particular the “buss” from Cincinnati to Union Village, were not as pleasant; the group left the Queen City,

. . . crowded in o’er twenty one
And several on the top

This jolting ride help’d keep us down
We were so buoyant high
With thoughts that in this noted town
Our dearest friends were nigh.⁵⁶

The Shaker woman in fiction is seldom shown traveling outside the community and consequently is quite naive about the world. Obviously, Hooser is happy to be traveling to visit fellow Shakers, but she is not so awe-struck by the wide world that she refrains from an honest appraisal of it. After the group departs Covington in the company of an additional Shaker brother who met them at the train station, she criticizes fellow travelers:

We had three [Shaker] brethren now, they sat
Like angels on their guard

We thought to have a social chat
But scarcely could be heard

For here sat three great gentlemen
Who talk'd with louder voice
But soon the Buss dispensed with them
And really we rejoiced⁵⁷

Such detailed descriptions of travelers along with observations on the present size of cities like Covington, which “3 and 40 years ago” had “houses very few,” suggest that Hooser had earlier traveled here and elsewhere. True, parts of her account express a Shaker joy in visiting “the lovely society of Mother’s children here . . . in Ohio,” but on the whole her “Day Journal” reveals a fairly worldly author, one who has certainly not lived a cloistered life among saintly hermits, who “maintained an attitude of insult to the world at large,” as the Shaker women are described in *Diana’s Livery*.⁵⁸ Hooser made her excursion north to Ohio with her Pleasant Hill companions sixty years after she arrived with her parents at that Kentucky Shaker village, dispelling the gloomy pronouncement made at the conclusion of *The Believers* that the Shakers as a people “are doomed . . . for you cannot withdraw from life without sickening and fading.”⁵⁹ Instead Hooser’s poem paints a picture of a group of traveling Shakers who have journeyed beyond their very porous village boundaries and who show much the same joys and irritations that any group of travelers might display.

Other Shaker historical documents, which often contain folklore and anecdotes, suggest that their women authors hardly removed themselves from the affairs of the world but instead showed a lively interest in the larger society outside. In 1847 Prudence Morrell and Eliza Sharp, eastern Shakeresses on their way to the Kentucky Shaker communities, recorded the following story: “About . . . 150 miles from Cincinnati . . . we saw a house where a man . . . feeling unwilling to have any enjoy his riches excepting his family . . . made his wife promise him before his death that she would never marry while he was above ground; so he . . . requested to be put into this iron coffin and placed back of his house above ground. . . . There it remained 14 years, and about one year ago the woman hired a man in the neighborhood to bury the coffin out of her sight under ground, which he did for 100 dollars.”⁶⁰ It is an interesting story, enjoyable to read in its own right,

but it is especially revealing of actual Shaker life. According to the popular fictional image, a naive Shakeress would not tell tales of marriage. The retelling of this anecdote suggests even more about Morrell's rather worldly perspective. Morrell, a celibate who has forsaken matrimony, condemns this dying man's machinations for preventing his wife's remarriage. The story also tacitly applauds the wife's gumption, as tardy as it is, to finally bury him below ground so presumably she could marry another.

The travel diary and other historical documents describe Shaker women venturing outside the village, but what about the Shaker woman who never traveled? Does she not fit the image that fiction has described? It is difficult to answer that question with certainty because preserved Shaker documents, unless they were travel journals or letters, most often lack the author's name and are written in an impersonal third-person voice. Even in the rare instances when a name does appear, the authoress who is writing as scribe for a Shaker family usually just describes the day's events without adding opinions or comments, recording the dry details with the community's voice, not the individual's. Even for these faceless and nameless women journal keepers, who possibly never traveled far from the center of the village, the advantages of life in a Shaker community were numerous. We know that women with large families and no husband often came to Shaker villages because they had few opportunities for employment in the outside world. Stein explains that in his search through numerous Shaker journals, he noticed a certain pattern in a family's departure from a community.⁶¹ If a family joined a community and over the years certain members of a family apostatized, they would leave in the following order: oldest son, other male children, father, daughters, and finally the mother if she would depart at all. Reasons for a mother staying longest or permanently are many, but certainly one advantage had to be that in a Shaker village women could avoid the very real physical dangers of dying during childbirth and the psychological trauma associated with motherhood in an age of high infant mortality. Even if a woman was fortunate enough to continually give birth without medical complications, she still faced the constant burden of pregnancy, delivery, and child rearing. Finally, Shaker women could escape sexual predation, a problem, if not rampant in the nineteenth century, at least recognized by prominent national personalities such as John Humphrey Noyes and by the Shakers at Pleasant Hill and elsewhere.

Of course, traditional nineteenth-century society would hardly have acknowledged such an escape as an advantage, instead seeing it as a woman's shirking of the expected and traditional role of motherhood. Even late in the century, Eva Wilder McGlasson's Shaker novel, *Diana's Livery* (1891), hardly looks positively on women choosing a celibate life. Naamah, the young Shakeress and love interest of the protagonist, presents what the general public saw as the harsh and cold Shaker attitude toward maternity and the solution to the dangers therein. Speaking of her aunt's continued grieving over a young son lost "twenty years ago," Naamah sounds like a latter-day Ann Lee, whose experience of stillborn childbirth certainly contributed to her theological condemnation of marriage and sex: "It [her Aunt's grief] made me think . . . how much pain is in the world, all because people will set their hearts on what is earthly. . . . If Aunt Jane had never had a child, she would have been spared all these years of grieving." McGlasson's novel, of course, denounces Naamah's (and Lee's) position. The denunciation comes through the male protagonist, Darrow, who, as he listens to Naamah's solution to her aunt's and other women's grief, filters her thoughts through a veil of sexuality: "The young man looked at her cool young face . . . [and] considered the incongruity of stoic doctrine with those delicately curved lips which, even as he smiled upon them, parted with a little sigh."⁶² Later, however, with the fear that this tenet of celibacy will prevent his union with Naamah, Darrow's smile disappears: "He felt almost as if [the Shakers], living in an isolated state of superior purity, maintained an attitude of insult to the world at large."⁶³ Naamah's lover finds "himself suddenly and actively in arms against all institutions which like Shakerism made a glory of crucifying human hearts on the tree of cold sectarianism."⁶⁴

Whatever one thinks of the cold Shaker tenet that required celibacy of *all women*, the fiction almost never explores the idea that *some women* found sanctuary with the Shakers and refuge from the outer world's sexual expectations. Simply put, a woman could choose not to be a mother by becoming a Shaker. Giles does include in *The Believers* such a minor character, Permilla Bennett, a friend of the main character, Becky. Giles's central focus, though, remains on Becky and her childless marriage with Richard, a union that, because they join the Shakers, will of course remain barren. Permilla had married a "thin, gaunt, straggly-whiskered" older man to escape a "step-mother [who] had made her life almost unbearable."⁶⁵ Certainly, a woman

like Permillia might have joined a Shaker community “at some time, in some location,” the words Giles uses in her preface to show how her plot has its “origin in actual happenings,” but Giles chose not to fully develop those particular “happenings.”⁶⁶ The brief description of Permillia’s life, her extraordinary fecundity (“she bore children easily and quickly”), and her husband Thomas’s lingering sex drive, even when as a neophyte Shaker he is supposed to begin striving toward chastity, serve mostly as a foil to Becky’s gloom about her childless marriage to a husband who accepts too enthusiastically the sect’s condemnation of sex and who practices abstinence even before the Shakers required it of him.⁶⁷

In the age before reliable contraception, some women certainly found in a Shaker village a welcome respite from the continual childbearing that many faced. Permillia, when she and Becky are finally gathered in and housed away from their husbands, “was . . . glad to be shut of Thomas finally, glad even to have her children off her hands.”⁶⁸ Giles gives, however, short shrift to Permillia’s appreciation for Shaker life (“Hit ain’t such a bad place”), having Becky dismiss her as “unlearned, easygoing.”⁶⁹ In failing to flesh out the Shaker life of the likes of Permillia, Giles misses the chance to fully imagine discussions that probably took place in quiet corners of a Shaker kitchen or washhouse between a few real Shaker women, conversations about the burdens of sex and endless childbearing of which their Shaker life had freed them.

In *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880–1910*, Elizabeth Hampsten notes that women often discussed “birth control, that enterprise made commercially illegal by the Commstock Act in 1873.” In two women’s correspondence between 1895 and 1904, “Gwendoline [Kinkaid] wrote as though she and her acquaintances fairly consistently had pregnancy on their minds, and while she lovingly describes the antics of small children, she almost always dreaded the prospect of another confinement.”⁷⁰ In the first six years of her correspondence with Mamie Goodwater, her friend “had [only] a second Child,” but Kinkaid gave birth to three, so she writes to Goodwater for tips on contraception: “I wish I could see you and find out your remedy. I think you might write it to me on an extra sheet and I will promise you I will not tell. . . . I am so anxious to learn everything I can to prevent for I don’t want to have any more.” Kinkaid was apparently able to find some answers on her own, despite the illegality of the enterprise, for she writes to Goodwater about commercial contraceptives that

are disguised as remedies for other ailments: "What Isabelle sells is in a liquid tablet. . . . I think the pills would be fine, for just what they say in case any one should get caught."⁷¹ Hampsten cites more letters to demonstrate that other women, not just Goodwater and Kinkaid, conferred with each other about birth control and the dangers of pregnancy. One was Mary Kincaid, a cousin of Gwendoline but also a correspondent of Mamie Goodwater: "O Mamie I wish there was no such thing as having babies. I wish I took George Willard's receipt [presumably a recipe for contraception]. . . . I will next time you bet . . . if I live through this time. . . . Well Mamie it is there and it has to come out where it went in. Well might as well laugh as cry."⁷² Hampsten does explain that women exchanged ideas on "a far broader variety of ailments," but "when women concentrated on their own female complaints, what they most wanted to know, apparently, was what doctors least wanted to tell them: how their reproductive organs worked and how they might prevent conception, and sometimes even how safely to induce abortion."⁷³

The sexual plight of women throughout the nineteenth century was poignantly expressed at the close of it in the Goodwater-Kinkaid letters, but the Shakers, including male leaders, understood this plight much earlier in the century. In its first decade, Elder Eleazer Rand reminded the sisters in "worship meeting" at the Harvard Shaker community to "be thankful that you are delivered from bondage to the filthy lusts of men" while at the same time admonishing the men: "The Sisters are pure in their faith, and we will always keep them so."⁷⁴ Francis Voris, the male Shaker trustee during the Whitbey legal case in 1828, suggested that Pleasant Hill might have served as a haven for women who faced unwanted pregnancies. In a deposition, Voris asked a former Pleasant Hill Shaker, Jeremiah Culbertson, about the seemingly uncontrolled birth of illegitimate children among his acquaintances in the lawless hills of Virginia from which they came. Culbertson along with Whitbey and other plaintiffs were suing the Shakers for back wages, accusing the believers of promising them a good life in the village but delivering a harsh one. When Voris asked him about the prevalence of children born out of wedlock in his pre-Shaker life, he admitted that his sister-in-law "was the mother of illegitimate children." Voris then asked, "Do you not believe that she lived more chaste while . . . under the tuition of the Society than she did before or since?" Culbertson assented that she did live more chaste "than she did before and it is likely than she has since."⁷⁵

In a culture that expected men to seldom or never show sexual restraint, certainly many women found, or might have found, the celibate Shaker community an attractive haven. As Suzanne R. Thurman reports in *“O Sisters Ain’t You Happy,”* one “sympathetic legislator” from Massachusetts told “a Shaker brother that he was surprised that more women did not leave their husbands [and come to a Shaker village] ‘to get clear of abuse and to save their lives.’”⁷⁶ Molly Randolph, the sister of the young Pleasant Hill Shaker William S. Byrd, had maybe heard of the refuge that a Shaker community offered women since she wrote in distress to her brother there asking for him to come pick her up in Louisville. We cannot be sure whether she knew much about the Shakers, but she would certainly have found such refuge there. In a letter to his father, Byrd criticizes Molly’s husband, Patrick, for his lack of sexual restraint and his mistreatment of his (Byrd’s) sister. When he receives a letter from Molly delivered “by a stranger from a tavern in Louisville” asking him to rescue her and take her back to Pleasant Hill, he balks at the request for two reasons: “I would no doubt be encouraged by the Believers. But how could I endure the thought of having her in this Society . . . in her situation, and more especially as we know from experience almost, that Patrick could persuade her off again in a few months, and keep her like a prostitute, until she would again become pregnant.”⁷⁷ Byrd certainly recognized the sexual sanctuary that Shaker life at Pleasant Hill would offer his beleaguered sister. Since Byrd’s brief two-year residence at Pleasant Hill before his death at the young age of twenty-three coincided with the Whitbey troubles, he might have personally known Culbertson’s sister-in-law, Betsy Sawyer, and Patty Abbot, the sexually preyed-upon women mentioned in Francis Voris’s deposition of Jeremiah Culbertson who found at least a temporary haven at Pleasant Hill. Even if he did not know the women personally, he most likely knew of them since Byrd was quite close to Voris, who as a Shaker trustee had purchased a bureau, leggings, and other personal items for him.⁷⁸ Byrd refers to Voris by first name in his letters to his father and had likely heard about the trustee’s role in deposing Culbertson.⁷⁹ Consequently, Byrd understood that Shakers accepted women in straits like his sister, accepted them as residents, even as postulants, and that, as he admitted, he “would no doubt be encouraged by the Believers” to bring his sister there, too. Unfortunately for Molly Byrd Randolph, her brother felt that her residence at Pleasant Hill and the possible link that she

might establish between him and more unseemly residents would cause him great personal embarrassment.

The Shakers, including male believers like Francis Voris, certainly sympathized with the sexual predicament of women, but they were not alone in recognizing it. John Humphrey Noyes, the founder of another utopian society at Oneida, New York, was another male who similarly commiserated. Undoubtedly propelled by his wife's giving birth to four stillborn children within "the first six years of the[ir] marriage," Noyes formulated the concept of male sexual restraint.⁸⁰ As described by his granddaughter, Constance Noyes Robertson, Noyes as founder of the Oneidan communal society could not "accept" that such "suffering was the natural lot of women," that they should "be forever the victims of brute nature."⁸¹

Noyes's ideas certainly did not sit well with the populace surrounding Oneida, but long-held ideas on sexuality were changing, and the Shaker practices either helped propel those changing notions or were a reflection of them. William Sims Bainbridge asserts that "the very celibacy of the group was part of nineteenth-century women's liberation, because it freed women not only from the pains and dangers of childbirth, but also from sexual domination by men."⁸² Sally Kitch in *Chaste Liberation* amplifies Bainbridge's suggestion that Shakers' ideas coalesced with changing notions in the larger society when she observes that during the nineteenth century, women quietly challenged this cultural norm: "Historians have suggested that the 50 percent decline in the fertility rate of white American women between 1800 and 1900 may have resulted from women's increasing willingness to assert their . . . rights to self-determined lives." Kitch suggests that one reason for their assertion of control came within the three celibate communities she examines as well as in the society outside of them: "Nineteenth-century women also increasingly interpreted ideals of feminine morality in terms of chastity and modesty. . . . This voluntary control of reproduction is one important link of celibate Shaker, Koreshan, and Sanctificationist women to women in the mainstream who were seeking autonomy through a modification of the reproductive mandate."⁸³

Unlike the fictional Shaker village, the historical one often served as a shelter from the sexual expectations of the outer society. A Shakeress like Hortency Hooser probably never witnessed the public condemnation of someone like the fictional Agatha Lanyard Barker, a woman who had failed to

live up to this “reproductive mandate.” Instead she probably saw the Shakers extending a welcome and shelter to such women. No works of fiction sympathetically examine the stories of women like Culbertson’s sister-in-law or Molly Byrd Randolph, but some of Hooser’s poems probably allude to their history. As Hooser states in her poem “Reflections,” which briefly summarizes her life at Pleasant Hill, many found a refuge at Pleasant Hill:

Near on to a
Thousand have dried up their tears
Within this community
The past seventy years.⁸⁴

Why, then, was the opposite image of the Shaker village so often portrayed in fiction? Why did the stories transform the Pleasant Hill Shaker “community” and others like it, so loved by Hooser and other Shakeresses, into bleak and depressing prisons? Why did Sedgwick and Thompson ironically reverse the circumstances of the sexual plight facing nineteenth-century women, suggesting that the Shaker community represented not a refuge from sexual predation but a threat of it, specifically in the persons of the male leaders? Although a desire to write an engaging story and to sell books is partly the answer, authors also feared confronting engrained social beliefs, especially the “cult of true womanhood.” According to Barbara Welter, author of the still regularly cited “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” which defines this widely endorsed public concept, the cult prized “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.” So strong was this social imperative in the nineteenth century that “if anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues . . . he [or she] was damned . . . as an enemy of God . . . and . . . the Republic.”⁸⁵ A plot that applauded Shaker women, who in the public’s view violated most of these principles, would also have been “damned.” Apparently, a general appreciation for such virtues persisted well through the twentieth century since authors in that century, like Giles and Yolen, as well as those in the nineteenth chose to ignore the historical evidence of successful and fulfilled Shaker women, all of whom defied these virtues.

Authors who created stories about the Shakers were not alone in their support of the “cult of true womanhood”; countless other nineteenth-century writers applauded the values. James Kirke Paulding, co-author with

William and Washington Irving of *The Salmagundi Papers*, wrote in *Letters From the South* that woman is “a gentle household divinity . . . [who] reigns over the happiness of man, not by leading armies . . . or vindicating the right of women to be as vicious and immodest as men . . . [but] by the exercise of those gentle female virtues that pass unheeded by the world.” Woman’s “reward,” according to Paulding, is “the gratitude of children, the smiling happiness of the domestic circle, the lofty and affectionate estimation of the husband, and the blessing of Heaven.”⁸⁶ Women writers also lauded the sanctity of this familial role. One of the most famous, Catherine Beecher, defended such values in *The American Woman’s Home* (1869). Although she does urge readers to reconsider their demeaning attitude toward the woman’s role in society, she does so while still emphasizing that woman’s influential sphere should remain within the home as wife and mother. She argues that the “duties of woman,” in particular the “training of the human mind in . . . the period of childhood,” “are as sacred and important as any ordained to man” and that “the wise woman seeks a home in which to exercise this ministry.”⁸⁷ At Pleasant Hill Hortency Hooser, herself a teacher, might have recognized her own life in this description. Beecher is careful to remind her woman reader that “her great mission is self-denial” and that “she has a husband, to whose peculiar tastes and habits she must accommodate herself,” but Shaker women such as Hortency Hooser would have objected to these principles.⁸⁸ Finally, in “An Appeal to American Women,” the last chapter of *The American Woman’s Home*, Beecher advises women not to focus on “the ballot and the powers of office.” She queries: “Would it not be a wiser thing to *ask* for what we need, before trying so circuitous and dangerous a method?”⁸⁹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, Beecher’s sister, uses the character of Senator Bird’s wife in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) as a mouthpiece to argue that the proper way for a woman to influence politics is in the privacy of her parlor. Although Mrs. Bird does upbraid her husband for supporting Ohio’s fugitive slave law, she does so not in some public forum but only when her husband has made a quick trip down from Columbus to enjoy “a little comfort at home.” Stowe’s description of “this timid, blushing little woman” emphasizes the propriety of this hearthside method of persuasion and explains that even in this domestic environment her involvement in a political issue was quite extraordinary: “Now, it is a very unusual thing for gentle little Mrs. Bird ever to trouble her head with what was going on in

the house of the state, very wisely considering that she had enough to do to mind her own.”⁹⁰

Even Anne Royall, who so admired the self-possessed Eldress Betsy of the New Lebanon Shaker community, thought women and politics should not mix: “There is something so masculine and opposed to feminine delicacy, in meddling with affairs of state, that I view it with sovereign abhorrence.”⁹¹ Although Royall stayed long enough in a Shaker community to appreciate the grace and self-confidence of her Shaker hostess, she probably never witnessed the political power that many eldresses like Hannah Kendall or Lucy Smith wielded in their communities or which Lucy Wright maintained for over two decades as the national head of the entire sect. The sway that such women possessed might not have been as public as if they were clamoring in the “house of the state” for the right to vote, but they were in essence governmental leaders of small cities, a portrait of dynamic women that novelists could have easily constructed from historical records. They chose not to, presumably because the general public, so attuned to the virtues of pure womanhood, would not have been receptive to such portraits. As Jessie Bernard points out, most middle-class women, trained to be submissive and pious, considered the political arena with its verbal confrontations and forthright requests for change an anathema.⁹² In the nineteenth century, such potential women readers and their middle-class husbands would have been quite disturbed to encounter on the pages of a novel a Shaker eldresses who directed the daily lives of both women and men.

Equally disquieting in a novel or short story would have been a protagonist whose piety lay not in the sacred duties as a mother in a Christian home but in her worship of the female manifestation of Christ’s spirit, a worship Hooser reveals in her poem “Mother Ann’s Birthday.”⁹³ For the Shakers, Ann Lee was “the true Bride of the Lamb, and the first Mother of all the children of Christ.”⁹⁴ As Linda A. Mercadante points out, some Shaker beliefs did reflect the nineteenth century’s customary “subordination of female to male,” but Shaker theologians argued that “their recognition of the female principle in God . . . [was] a distinct advance over traditional Christian theology.”⁹⁵ For novelists, however, to portray such a worshiper in a positive light would not have been accepted by a conservative nineteenth-century audience. Apparently, considering her portrayal of the delusional Agatha Lanyard, Yolen also felt that a late-twentieth-century reader would reject the

presentation of a sane and devout female worshiper of a feminine deity. And Mercadante, writing nine years after the publication of Yolen's novel, agrees: "Today the movement to . . . expand gender imagery for God is . . . stirring a wide range of emotions," causing "some people in the church" to be "gripped by an almost apocalyptic fear, convinced that introducing female images for God would be tantamount to forsaking the Christian faith."⁹⁶

That a woman might choose to worship Mother Ann would be bad enough, but a woman who embraced Shakerism suffered other dire consequences, at least according to most Shaker novels and short stories. Traditional readers would be drawn to authors who condemn a woman who chooses a pallid, spiritual motherhood over the customary biological motherhood. In the former, a woman shockingly does not care for her own children but merely for orphans and other Shakers' children. This choice was a direct affront to the "cult of true womanhood." Accordingly, male authors, like Hawthorne and Howells, but also female authors, like McGlasson, Giles, and Yolen, develop their plots around characters who reject this Shaker option. Authors in the nineteenth as well as the twentieth century assumed audiences were much more likely to be attracted to reading about the reluctant Shaker woman who ultimately chooses the kind of motherhood embraced by the outer society. For many male readers the essential threat that Shakerism posed was that women would become unavailable as sexual partners. These readers would be drawn to characters like the protagonist of Howell's *The Undiscovered Country* and McGlasson's Darrow, both of whom worry that a religious community would snatch lovers away from them. Men, however, are not alone in their antipathy to women who turn their backs on the virtues of "true womanhood." Women characters in Shaker stories and the female authors who created them also align themselves with this social imperative, and the social milieu that enforced these values seems to have persisted well past the four decades that Welter identifies in her famous article's title. Cecilia Macheski, in her introduction to Giles's *The Believers*, observes that Sedgwick's plot about Emily Allen is the first of many similar female-authored stories about women who become Shakers but eventually "return to . . . the world, counting motherhood too highly to sacrifice . . . for religious convictions."⁹⁷ These other works are Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Susanna and Sue* (1909), Margaret Deland's *The Way of Peace* (1910), and Giles's *The Believers* (1957).

Indeed, the legacy of “the cult of true womanhood” endured well into the twentieth century, even into an era when the historical novelist attempted to use records of a time to develop a plot that re-created the past. Apparently, many early nineteenth-century authors of Shaker novels and short stories, like Sedgwick and Thompson, when they created Shaker elders who threatened nubile postulants with rape, worried very little about seriously distorting historical evidence. A historical novelist like Janice Holt Giles was not so dismissive of the records, but even she bends to her purpose the historical records. In the preface to the novel she claims that *The Believers* has its origin “in actual happenings” of Shaker life, but she nonetheless produces a skewed portrait of the life of Shaker women.⁹⁸ The “actual happenings” that Giles selected to portray are extraordinary rather than representative. Authors like Giles and Yolen, who also claims that her characters are based on “real Shakers,” could easily find in the voluminous Shaker records any sort of event around which to create an engaging story.⁹⁹ Among this wealth of documentary evidence any author can find an unusual event or two to buttress claims of historical accuracy, even though their stories hardly present an image of the average Shakeress.

Even though Giles, Yolen, and other authors hardly seemed to try, it must be acknowledged that it is indeed quite difficult for any author of fiction to plumb the depths of Shaker documents thoroughly and produce a representative portrait of a Shaker woman. To present the actual life of a typical Shakeress remains problematic because there was such a wide variety of the women’s experiences within each village. One can certainly not claim that the “real” Shakeresses were only the Lucy Wrights, the Lucy Smiths, and the Hortency Hoosers. Certainly, women like Giles’s Rebecca Cooper, Howell’s young eloping Althea, and possibly even Agatha Lanyard Barker lived at, and departed from, one or more of the numerous Shaker villages at some time in the believers’ long history. However, those who know the historical Shaker woman know the misconception these stories produce. The fictional accounts suggest that the coldhearted, the prudish, or the morbidly shy woman, the trapped wife, and the sexually threatened nubile girl *were the only female Shakers*. Strong and independent women freely chose to become Shakers for religious reasons, but many also recognized the secular opportunities unknown in the outside world. More than likely, a combination of spiritual and practical reasons attracted many women to join or, if their husbands

brought them into the community, caused them to conclude that the Shaker life was agreeable enough to stay. In Shaker communities they found companionship and a sense of belonging, and many found a respite from the tasking demands of motherhood or even sanctuary from a sexually abusive spouse or male companion. Shakeresses like Lucy Hammond, Prudence Morrell, and the Pleasant Hill itinerant preachers found opportunities to travel that the typical woman of the time seldom experienced. Women like Ruth Farrington and other village eldresses became beloved spiritual “Mothers” to hundreds of grateful “children” of the faith. Many women, like the teacher Hortency Hooser, found a chance for professional accomplishments, and some, like Pleasant Hill’s Lucy Smith, Harvard’s Hannah Kendall, or national leader Lucy Wright, wielded governmental authority in the early nineteenth century. Such opportunities drew women to Shaker communities, and these women, unlike their fictional counterparts, often stayed for a lifetime.

Endnotes

1. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), 74.

2. *Ibid.*, 88.

3. *Ibid.*, 82.

4. Flo Morse, *The Shakers and the World’s People* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1980), 191.

5. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Snow-Image, and other Twice-Told Tales* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1852), 155.

6. *Ibid.*, 156.

7. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-told Tales* (Boston: James Munroe and Co., 1842), 260. Glendyne Wergland observes that visitors “who drove in only to watch [the Shakers] dancing on the Sabbath” wrote condemnatory accounts of what they saw, but “those who stayed longer with the Shakers admired them” for many reasons. One “minister . . . who was on a committee to investigate the Shakers as ‘irregular and disorderly’” after a few years of investigation concluded that they were “harmless, . . . good citizens, and honest, industrious, peaceable members of society” (Glendyne Wergland, *Visiting the Shakers, 1778–1849: Watervliet, Hancock, Tyringham, New Lebanon* [Clinton, N.Y.: Richard W. Couper, 2007], 10). The disparaging descriptions

of the Shakers written by those “who drove in” and departed quickly were often very similar to the stories created by the literati. Wergland observes that St. John Honeywood’s “understanding of Ann Lee and her sect was marginal” (ibid., 25); he described the Shaker sisters in cadaverous images very similar to what Hawthorne would present in his Shaker short stories some three decades later: “The women were mostly dressed in white, . . . suggest[ing] the idea of a throng of discontented ghosts hovering round the gloomy shores of the *Stygian lake*” (ibid., 27–28).

8. Hawthorne, *Twice-told Tales*, 267.

9. William Dean Howells, *The Day of their Wedding: A Novel* (New York: Harpers and Brothers, 1896), 46.

10. Ibid., 154–55.

11. William Dean Howells, *The Undiscovered Country* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1880), 292.

12. Daniel Pierce, *The Shaker Lovers, and other Tales* (Burlington, Vt.: C. Goodrich and S. B. Nichols, 1848), 9, 12.

13. Ibid., 15.

14. Catherine M. Sedgwick, *Redwood: A Tale*, author’s rev. ed. (New York: George P. Putnam, 1850), 17.

15. Ibid., 254.

16. Janice Holt Giles, *The Believers* (1957), ed. Cecilia Macheski (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1989), 192.

17. Ibid., 163.

18. Ibid., 203.

19. Jane Yolen, *The Gift of Sarah Barker* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 62.

20. Ibid., 127–28.

21. Hortency Hooser, “School Roll Book Poems,” in *Shakers. United Society of Believers in Ohio Records, 1808–1904*, MS 119, Box 8, Folder 6, Ohio Historical Society Library and Archives, Columbus.

22. Wade Hall, “Lincoln Chronology,” *Kentucky Humanities*, October 2008: 44–77, at 44.

23. John E. Kleber, “Shall Any Claim Come Before the Mother?” *Kentucky Humanities*, October 2008: 6–16, at 8–9.

24. Hooser, “School Roll Book Poems.”

25. Giles, *The Believers*, 127.

26. John P. MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio* (1907; Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1975), 152.

27. Jean M. Humez, *Mother's First-Born Daughters: Early Shaker Writings on Women and Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), xxi.

28. Brother Arnold, "Closing Prayer," Shaker Worship Service, Sabbathday Lake, Maine, July 21, 2008.

29. Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 233.

30. Priscilla Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (London: University Press of New England, 1986), 40.

31. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 117.

32. *Ibid.*, 57.

33. MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio*, 69–70.

34. Samuel Turner, "Letter to Lucy Wright (20th August 1810)," *Western Reserve Historical Society Microfilms IV: A 52.7* (7th letter in series).

35. Stephen J. Stein, ed., *Letters From a Young Shaker: William S. Byrd at Pleasant Hill* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985), 31, 33, 63.

36. *Ibid.*, 31.

37. Suzanne R. Thurman, *"O Sisters Ain't You Happy": Gender, Family, and Community Among the Harvard and Shirley Shakers, 1781–1918* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 54.

38. "Letter of January 29, 1821 from Pleasant Hill Ministry to Mount Lebanon Ministry," *Western Reserve Historical Society Microfilms*, Section IV, A: reel 53.

39. For more information on the problems at Pleasant Hill caused by the lawsuit brought by John Whitbey, who was expelled from the society in November 1825, see Stein's *Letters From a Young Shaker* (27–33) and Voris's deposition of Jeremiah Culbertson ("Deposition of Jeremiah Culbertson," sworn in front of William Wood, Justice of the Peace, Suit in Chancery, *John Whitbey v. Francis Voris, agent for Society of people called Shakers*, 1828, copy in the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill Archives, Pleasant Hill, Ky.).

40. Humez, *Mother's First-Born Daughters*, 75; Stein, *Letters From a Young Shaker*, 75.

41. William Sims Bainbridge states that the societies set up a “very traditional sex-based division of labor” (“Shaker Demographics 1840–1900: An Example of the Use of U.S. Census Enumeration Schedules,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21, no. 4 [1982]: 352–65, at 357). Stein notes that “the majority of Shaker women during the Time of Transformation [1876–1947], still were preoccupied on a daily basis with domestic tasks” even while some women Shaker leaders contributed to the national women’s movement. Anna White, for instance, in a letter to the “Equal Rights Club of Hartford, Connecticut,” assailed “that ‘horrible man-made monster of cruelty,’” the vindictive deity of “Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards” (Stein, *Letters From a Young Shaker*, 268).

42. Cait Murphy and Rosanne Haggerty, “Starting Over,” *Preservation*, November/December 1999: 51–61, at 56.

43. Stein, *Letters From a Young Shaker*, 127.

44. Humez, *Mother’s First-Born Daughters*, xxii–xxiii. Stein also discusses the problems that Wright faced: “Her appointment as first in the ministry . . . challenge[d] . . . the traditional principle of male dominance in religious matters.” Stein claims that “the issue of ‘petticoat government’ would not go away during Wright’s tenure in the ministry” (*Letters From a Young Shaker*, 53).

45. Andrew R. Clayton, *Frontier Indiana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 268–69.

46. Christian Holmes Tillson, *A Woman’s Story of Pioneer Illinois* (1919), ed. Milo Milton Quaife (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley and Sons, n.d.), 142–44.

47. Daniel Drake, *Pioneer Life in Kentucky, 1785–1800: A Series of Reminiscential Letters from Daniel Drake, MD of Cincinnati to his Children* (Cincinnati: Clark and Co., 1870), 176.

48. Rebecca Burlend and Edward Burlend, *A True Picture of Emigration* (1919), ed. Milo Milton Quaife (New York: Citadel Press, 1968), 89–90.

49. Lucy Ann Hammond, “Journal kept . . . while on a journey to New Lebanon, Hancock, and Enfield, 1830,” *Western Reserve Historical Society Microfilms*, Section V, B.39: 21 October 1830.

50. *Ibid.*, 6 November 1830.

51. Wergland, *Visiting the Shakers*, 4.

52. *Ibid.*, 205.

53. Zachariah Burnett, "Personal journal 1846–1853," *Pleasant Hill Records of the Harrodsburg (KY) Historical Society* 21. Also on Microfilmed Records, "Shaker, Pleasant Hill, Kentucky," Reel 6. (A copy of the original manuscript is in the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill archives; Larrie Curry, collections curator at Pleasant Hill, copied the journal in chronological order—the original journal was not—and numbered the pages.)

54. Hortency Hooser, "A day journal, kept of a tour thro' the south-western part of the state of Ohio," in *Shakers. United Society of Believers in Ohio Records, 1808–1904*, MS 119, Box 2, Folder 2, Ohio Historical Society Library and Archives, Columbus.

55. *Ibid.*, verse 17.

56. *Ibid.*, verses 36–37.

57. *Ibid.*, verses 23–24.

58. Eva Wilder McGlasson, *Diana's Livery* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891), 122.

59. Giles, *The Believers*, 213.

60. Prudence Morrell and Eliza Sharp, "Account of a journey taken . . . to the West, 1847," *Western Reserve Historical Society Microfilms*, Section V, B.141: n.p.

61. Stephen J. Stein. Presentation on William S. Byrd and Charles W. Byrd. *Utopia in Literature and History Class*. University of Indianapolis, May 1996.

62. McGlasson, *Diana's Livery*, 69.

63. *Ibid.*, 122.

64. *Ibid.*, 123.

65. Giles, *The Believers*, 39.

66. *Ibid.*, xxi.

67. *Ibid.*, 74.

68. *Ibid.*, 81.

69. *Ibid.*, 195.

70. Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880–1910* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 104.

71. Ibid., 105.
72. Ibid., 106.
73. Ibid., 107.
74. Thurman, “*O Sisters Ain’t You Happy*,” 55.
75. “Deposition of Jeremiah Culbertson,” September 27 and 29, 1828.
76. Thurman, “*O Sisters Ain’t You Happy*,” 119.
77. Stein, *Letters From a Young Shaker*, 83.
78. Ibid., 138.
79. Ibid., 56–57.
80. Lawrence Foster in *Religion and Sexuality* notes that some of the theory for Noyes’s “male continence” came from “Robert Dale Owen’s *Moral Physiology*, an early birth control pamphlet, as well as works of the Shakers” (*Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* [Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984], 93).
81. Constance Noyes Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography, 1851–1876* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970), 8.
82. Bainbridge, “Shaker Demographics 1840–1900,” 360.
83. Sally L. Kitch, *Chaste Liberation: Celibacy and Female Cultural Status* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 34.
84. Hooser, “School Roll Book Poems.”
85. Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151–74, at 151.
86. James Kirke Paulding, *Letters From the South*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1835), 48–49.
87. Catherine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home; or, Principles of Domestic Science* (New York: J. B. Ford and Co., 1869), 14, 23–24.
88. Ibid., 19, 221.
89. Ibid., 468.
90. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852; New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 76.
91. Anne Royall, *The Black Book; or, A Continuation of Travels in the United States*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Printed for the Author, 1828), 5.
92. Jessie Bernard, *The Female World* (New York: Free Press, 1981), 364.
93. Hooser, “School Roll Book Poems.”

94. Calvin Green and Seth Young Wells, *Summary view of the Millennial Church; or, United Society of Believers (commonly called Shakers) comprising the Rise, Progress and practical Order of the Society: together with the general principles of their faith and testimony. Published by Order of the Ministry, in Union with the Church* (Albany: Packard and Benthuyesen, 1823), 219.

95. Linda A. Mercadante, *Gender, Doctrine, and God: The Shakers and Contemporary Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 99.

96. *Ibid.*, 14.

97. In Giles, *The Believers*, vii–viii.

98. *Ibid.*, xv.

99. Yolen, *The Gift of Sarah Barker*, ix.