Shakers as Feminists? Shakerism as a Vanguard in the Antebellum American Search for Female Autonomy and Independence

Several recent commentators have suggested that religious sectarianism and utopian communities may point towards central and fundamental tensions within the society from which they emerge.¹ Those who embraced a sect such as the Shakers must have had pressing reasons for rejecting their social milieu. The identification of these pressures may expose severe problems within mainstream society which were otherwise incompletely addressed. The historian Frank Manuel has noted with insight, ‘the utopia may well be a sensitive indicator of where the sharpest anguish of an age lies’.² In many ways, this seems to have been true of the Shaker quest for both spiritual and worldly perfection.

For much of the nineteenth century, it is clear that Shaker communities were particularly attractive to women. By the 1860s, women outnumbered men in some Shaker villages by almost two to one.³ Why should thousands more women than men choose to lead a celibate life remote from their natural families? Remote also from the expanding opportunities of antebellum society? Could this marked imbalance of the two sexes point to deep female dissatisfaction with mainstream social realities? Certainly analysis of the differences between Shaker and mainstream structures and ideas reveals a set of particularly female concerns which also came to be articulated by early feminists in the 1840s and 1850s. Shakers and feminists, then, were independently approaching the same underlying problems and tensions, which revolved around questions of religious doctrine, the legal, political and economic status of women, and their sexual and familial roles. I intend to suggest that Shakerism did indeed provide satisfying and valid solutions to pervasive social problems which women in the wider society could address only partially.

Firstly, how did Shaker theology differ from orthodox Christianity in
regard to women; and secondly, in what ways could these differences provide a more genial and sympathetic belief-system for female Believers? Christianity has tended to insist on a godhead consisting of a male trinity. In addition, women have more often than not been identified as the root cause of the fall from grace because of the biblical doctrine that Eve was the first to disobey God. Thus, within this framework, there is no feminine element within the godhead to reflect the feminine in creation, and women themselves have been chastised from the earliest centuries of the Christian era for being innately sinful and bearing prime responsibility for the fallen state of the world. In nineteenth-century American evangelical Christianity, a marked feminisation of the concept of Christ gradually took place, wherein Jesus began to be imbued with culturally stereotypical feminine qualities of submissiveness, gentleness and sacrificial purity. This did not, however, give women an unequivocally female figure with whom to identify. Shakerism, by contrast, openly postulated a dual godhead of male Father and female Mother. This duality was reflected in the human incarnations of the Christ-spirit, firstly in Jesus Christ and secondly, as Marjorie Procter-Smith’s essay in this collection emphasises, in Ann Lee. Eve was still accorded by the Shakers prime responsibility for the Fall. However, the fact that they believed Ann Lee had ushered in the Millennium and built the New Jerusalem meant that Shaker women were not burdened with any inherited sin. They had chosen the regenerate, purified life, and thus were freed from the fallen and cursed state of their sisters in the World. Within the Shaker context, therefore, men and women were equal before God and equally able to travel along the spiritual path to perfection. The concept of ‘travel in the Gospel’, moreover, meant that Shaker women were not only held to be superior to the men and women of the World. Individuals could also achieve a spiritual status above those Shaker men who had not progressed so far. By contrast to other women, then, Shakeresses could identify with a female element within the godhead and also command respect because they no longer bore the taint of responsibility for the Fall.

At this stage it is important to recognise that the legal and political position of Shaker and Worldly women differed. Feminist historians have clearly shown that the Age of Jackson actively excluded women from many of the opportunities which opened up to men in that period. Furthermore, the legal and political status of women actually deteriorated as formal national political structures superseded the informal village or town politics of colonial times. In the nineteenth century, native white men were able to participate in formal regional and national political parties. Women, on the other hand, did not have
the right to vote and went unrepresented in the channels of political power structures. Their informal voice had been of more influence when most men also lacked suffrage and when the local town meeting and the local church had been the highest authorities of real relevance in the community. This informal female voice was radically devalued when the local arena lost importance in the face of formal regional and national political hierarchies. In legal terms, married women became ‘dead to the law’, having no legal rights over their own property, person, or children. Being subsumed in their husbands’ identities, they were unable to sue or be sued and could not easily seek divorce. In colonial times, closeness of community ties and lack of privacy had generally meant that in most cases domestic relations proceeded relatively smoothly. Community pressure usually sufficed to ensure a husband’s reasonable behaviour within his family. However, greatly increased rates of geographic mobility and the comparative isolation of the nuclear family in both frontiers and city, made it more and more likely in the nineteenth century that such informal communal pressure could not be exerted. For innumerable women in the antebellum era, these grave legal and political disabilities must have been the source of much unease.

What was the Shaker alternative? Far from being excluded from political power, Shaker women had equality of representation in the dual hierarchy which Shaker celibacy necessitated. Throughout the authority structure, equal numbers of men and women held positions of equal status. This was so from Lead Ministry level to that of the individual Family. It is a singular fact that during the crucial period 1796 to 1821, a woman was the acknowledged overall leader of the whole Society. Mother Lucy Wright not only oversaw the extension of Shaker mission to the West, but was also the source of many of the revered rules of Shaker life. Inherent in celibacy, moreover, was the negation of the institution of marriage. Thus, no woman was the legal ‘property’ of any man, and Shaker women were certainly not ‘dead to the law’. Shakeresses enjoyed the same rights and were held to the same discipline as their male counterparts. Spirituality and ‘travel in the Gospel’, as well as meekness and obedience, were the qualities sought after in potential leaders, not the attributes of drive, intellect, guile or ambition so useful in the World. Nevertheless, this was no democracy, and leaders were not chosen by common consent. Promotion in the Shaker hierarchy relied upon the unquestioned decisions of superiors. Since a high level of spirituality was the most important criterion, and since women were in no way discriminated against in the spiritual sphere, it was quite possible for them to progress right up the authority structure. Significantly, during ‘Mother Ann’s Work’ it is possible that women exerted
much more influence than men because they were far more likely to receive visions and spiritual gifts. Shakers accorded great respect to those who received such signs of spiritual blessing. Clearly, then, since these 'gifts' frequently came in the form of legalistic rulings and moral exhortations, women could be seen in this context to have held a near monopoly of such power and influence.

Shakerism's main source of contention with the wider society had been the sexual exploitation and subordination of women within marriage. The excruciating experiences of Ann Lee herself reflected those of countless other women who resented the lack of autonomy and the inability to control their own sexuality which marriage entailed. They also feared the repeated exposure to the dangers and discomforts of pregnancy and childbirth. In identifying sexual intercourse as the Original Sin, Lee was surely articulating deep-seated fears and ambivalences which were common to many women in an era of unreliable contraception and often dangerous medical practices. A distinct predominance of women of marriageable and childbearing age has been noted within Shaker communities. It is possible that this reflected areas of wider concern within antebellum society as a whole. As Lee Chambers-Schiller's study of spinsterhood in this era indicates, a sizable minority of women in the nineteenth century chose to remain single; for those born between 1865 and 1875, this minority encompassed 11% of women. A romantic ideal of marriage had arisen as familial and communal controls began to break down in town and urban areas. In theory, this left young men and women more freedom in choice of partner, and great stress was placed in advice literature to women on the choice of a pious, industrious, modest, and domestically-oriented husband. In practice, however, the young women were in no position actually to search for such men. The realities of economic life for the professional middle classes at least, meant that the social mobility and trappings which these texts also recommended were likely to come only to self-consciously ambitious men who spent less time at home. Prescriptive literature also tended to emphasise the need to exert strict control on sexuality even within marriage. The most popular, if extreme, writers recommended near abstinence, and asserted that 'True Women' were too sensitive and pure to be subjected to their husbands' more 'bestial' cravings. Not surprisingly, given these factors—and the obvious mortal dangers in childbirth—an increasing number of women anticipated marriage with increasing trepidation. Shaker celibacy, therefore, could well be viewed as only a more extreme form of control than that advocated by many writers in the World. In addition, it enabled women to evade the difficulties of finding suitable husbands, and
gave them a much greater autonomy than their married sisters.

Yet Shakerism did not entail a total rejection of the concept of the family. The nuclear family, certainly, was perceived as a ‘prison’ within which ‘enslaved’ women served out their ‘sentences’ as wives, mothers, and household drudges. Shakers themselves harkened back to an idealised type of rural extended family, where all Believers were spiritual ‘Brothers’ and ‘Sisters’, led by their ‘Mothers’ and ‘Fathers’ in the Ministry.\textsuperscript{13} Shaker women could enjoy an even closer and more supportive female world than that which Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has observed among their middle-class counterparts elsewhere. In these latter circles, in any case, an informal near-segregation of the sexes increasingly held in antebellum times. Husbands and wives spent most of their lives inhabiting different working and social environments.\textsuperscript{14} These women found it excruciatingly difficult to adjust if they left their particular circle for the frontier or another urban setting. Their diaries and correspondence speak eloquently of their extreme loneliness, a loneliness which their husbands only rarely dispelled. Shaker women, by contrast, were always surrounded by their sisters-in-faith. Even those who had travelled West to help found the new communities did not suffer the numbing isolation of their non-Shaker counterparts. Shakeresses always had their larger Shaker Family for companionship, support, and help.

In the economic sphere, however, Shakers made no real break with the World. Here, their prescription differed markedly from that of the feminists at mid-century. Feminists criticised the lack of intellectual and economic opportunity open to middle-class women, and some also recognised the gross exploitation of the members of the female working class, most of whom could not earn a living wage. That the otherwise so innovative Shakers retained the so-called traditional sexual division of labour and roles has been a source of speculation and sometimes censure, since this division has so often been associated with the economic exploitation and subordination of women. In the Shaker context, however, this division of labour need not be viewed in such a light. Feminists were addressing the results of industrialisation and urbanisation, which had not only created a wretchedly poor urban proletariat, but had also removed any meaningful economic contributions from the homes of more affluent middle-class women. Their resultant critique of the increasingly capitalistic economic structure was thus valid. Shakerism, however, had arisen in the agrarian context of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century frontier, and consequently had not needed to address such problems in its formative stages. Therefore, following the agrarian model, Shaker women tended
to perform tasks familiar to farmers’ wives within what could broadly be described as the ‘domestic sphere’, whilst the men performed the duties outside. This domestic sphere was not the narrow space so familiar to the nineteenth-century middle classes. Shakeresses made vital contributions to the communal economy in textile and household production, as well as in goods for commercial sale. Far from being the drudges they felt their Worldly sisters to be, these women performed domestic tasks in teams on a rota system, thus minimising boredom and fatigue. Some possessed innovative imaginations and produced labour-saving devices to lighten their workload: Shaker women invented the buzz saw, cut nails, and a revolving oven.¹⁵ Not being averse to technological development, Shakers also imported knitting and sewing machines, ovens and washers from the outside world as soon as they appeared.

Possibly the retention of the traditional division of labour was also necessitated by the demands of a celibate and segregated community. Men and women who joined the Shakers tended to use the skills they had already acquired, and those which needed the least intermixing of the sexes. Within this framework, however, cooperation between the sexes was normal, the basic goal being the performance of tasks as efficiently as possible. Thus, for example, men would be assigned to help with heavy domestic labour and would even card wool if they had the time, whilst women frequently took to the fields to speed up the fruit-picking process, or give assistance should natural disaster strike the community. D’Ann Campbell, however, has probably pointed to the most significant reason why feminist prescriptions were not relevant to the Shakers:

The division of labour was traditional, because Shakers did not have to allocate fifty percent of their blacksmith, carpenter or field jobs to women to achieve equal status for them . . . The point is that on the basis of their religious doctrines and government structure, Shaker women were considered on equal terms with men. Shakers could thus arrange for women to perform the tasks for which they had been trained or were best equipped physically to do. For the Shakers, equality for women did not mean “doing what men do”.¹⁶

Shakerism, then, possessed many features which proved attractive to women. Along with early feminism, it addressed the deep-rooted social incongruities and difficulties which they faced in the antebellum era and beyond. Both Shakeresses and feminists complained about the sexual exploitation of women in marriage, about the legal and political disadvantages from which they suffered, and about the discrimination to which they were subjected at all levels in the religious sphere. Despite these similarities, however, there was an insurmountable gulf between
the two. Although Shaker women observed the tribulations of their sisters in the World with obvious sympathy, they did not feel the need to espouse the feminist cause. Perhaps their approaches to economic issues hold the clue to this fundamental difference. Unlike feminists, Shakeresses did not need to establish the fact of their equality with men. Their concern was not confrontation between the sexes, nor did they need to assert what they saw as an abstract equality. They believed they were living in the New Jerusalem. Their solution to the problems of humanity was the revitalisation of the human soul in a millennial community where all were equal before God and all were merciful to each other for His sake. In encouraging and directing the spiritual progress of each individual, they sought to bring men and women together in a new synthesis which satisfied the deeply-felt needs of both sexes. Not least of the many achievements of the Shaker communities was that they so successfully provided thousands of women with a satisfying alternative to the society which they believed had failed them. Shakerism in this respect certainly was a vanguard in the nineteenth-century search for female autonomy and independence.

NOTES

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2. Quoted in Foster, p.245.

3. See D'Ann Campbell, ‘Women’s Life in Utopia: The Shaker Experiment in Sexual Equality Reappraised—1810 to 1860’, *New England Quarterly*, 51 (1978), pp.29-30, and, particularly, Priscilla J. Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives*, Hanover, 1986, pp.215-6. Membership lists do not give the most accurate idea of the extent of Shakerism's influence. First, since many thousands of women, especially later in the nineteenth century, chose to spend a period of time within Shaker communities, membership fluctuated; lists for a given year do not reveal this fluctuation and thus underestimate the number of individuals involved. Second, there were always women who were unable to join a community due to familial opposition; nevertheless, these women followed the Shaker way of life outside the Society. The extent
of this type of ‘membership’ is unfortunately unknown, but was probably considerable.

4. It is well known that by the nineteenth century, women predominated in church congregations and were the majority of converts in the Second Great Awakening. The writings of women show that they began to view Jesus as embodying characteristics which women themselves were expected to cultivate. A glance at the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Catharine Beecher, the Grimké sisters, and the many women writers of fiction aimed at the female market will indicate the pervasiveness of this view.


6. The colonial legal system had been a mixture of Puritan religious law and English common law. In Barbara L. Epstein’s view, the Puritan injunctions could in some ways work in favour of women in the areas of property, inheritance and the defence of the female within marriage, when compared with contemporary European and later American practice. However, during the eighteenth century, English common law began to supersede the religious customs, and a much less favourable set of laws then pertained to women. See Epstein’s *The Politics of Domesticity. Evangelicalism and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America*, Middletown, 1981, pp.31-3.

7. Epstein notes that the church authorities frequently went to investigate domestic problems and might often rule in the woman’s favour. Ibid., p.31-3. Mary P. Ryan has noted that as late as the 1830s, representatives from the church still attempted to exert influence on secular behaviour. See Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class. The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865*, Cambridge, 1981, pp.115-6.

8. ‘Mother Ann’s Work’, also described in Louis Billington’s contribution to this book, was the term used to describe the spiritualist revival which swept the communities for some ten years after 1837. Louis J. Kern has asserted that all those people who received both visions and spiritual gifts in this period were women, and that a clear majority of those receiving visions only, (i.e. 67.5%), were also women. See *An Ordered Love*, p.106.

9. Ann Lee had evidently disliked the idea of marriage from the first, but had been persuaded to marry her husband. She suffered four difficult pregnancies, and all four babies died. The last delivery took many hours and necessitated the use of forceps. Lee did not like the subordination which was expected of women, this being clear in her defiance of her husband when she continued to advocate her doctrine of strict celibacy. It is said that although her husband did go to America, he eventually deserted her in favour of a prostitute. For treatments of Ann Lee’s life, see Edward D. Andrews, *The People Called the Shakers. A Search for the Perfect Society*, New York, 1953; Brewer; and Anna White and Leila S. Taylor, *Shakerism. Its Meaning and Message*, 1904, reprinted New York, 1971. The best primary source is *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations, and Doctrines of Our*
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_Blessed Mother Ann Lee..._ Hancock, MA, J. Talcott and J. Deming, Jnr., 1816.

10. Brewer presents persuasive statistics, pp. 29-30. See also Campbell, 'Women’s Life in Utopia'. In some communities, the ratio in the age group 20 to 45 years was as high as five women to every one man. See also Lee V. Chambers-Schiller, _Liberty a Better Husband. Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840_, New Haven, 1984, p. 3.

11. By mid-century, this type of prescriptive literature was a huge business. Such literature often replaced the immediate parental or family influence of which many couples were now deprived. Female writers contributed much of this prescriptive literature, in both tracts and romantic fiction, and in this way some—such as Beecher, Stowe, Lydia Sigourney and E.D.EN Southworth—achieved a measure of financial independence. See Ann D. Wood, 'The “Scribbling Women” and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote', _American Quarterly_, 23 (1971), pp. 3-24; Mary P. Ryan, ‘American Society and the Cult of Domesticity, 1830-60’, University of California, Santa Barbara, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1971; and Kathryn K. Sklar, _Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity_, New Haven, 1973.

12. For studies of disparities between the real and the ideal, see Nancy F. Cott, _The Bonds of Womanhood—“Woman’s Sphere” in New England 1780-1835_, New Haven, 1977; Epstein; Chambers-Schiller; and the two Ryan works cited. The cautionary texts were generally written by ministers and doctors. They put forward both religious and 'scientific' reasons for their views. Two very influential figures were Sylvester Graham and William A. Alcott. For an illuminating study of the former which sheds light on the whole genre, see Stephen W. Nissenbaum, 'Careful Love: Sylvester Graham and the Emergence of Victorian Sexual Theory, 1830-1840', University of Wisconsin, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1968. See also John S. Haller and Robin M. Haller, _The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America_, Urbana, 1974.

13. In this sense, the Shakers were echoing sentiments in the World. Increasingly the concept of 'The Home' became an idyllic refuge set in an idealised rural suburbia away from the perceived dangers and immorality of the cities. Kirk Jeffrey has suggested a link between this concept and that which informed the utopian ventures. See Jeffrey, 'The Family as Utopian Retreat from the City: The Nineteenth-Century Contribution', in Sallie TeSelle, ed., _The Family, Communes and Utopian Societies_, New York, 1971, pp. 21-41.

14. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America', _Signs_, 1 (1975), pp. 1-29. See also Cott; Epstein; Ryan; and Sklar. When Frances Wright travelled the United States in the 1820s and 1830s, she noted, particularly in Cincinnati, that men and women had very little in common and spent most of their time apart; she clashed openly with Catharine Beecher, who was making this domestication and ‘segregation’ of women a feature of their ‘moral superiority’. See Celia M. Eckhardt, _Fanny Wright: Rebel in America_, Cambridge, MA, 1984, particularly pp. 176-180.
15. A comprehensive account of women’s tasks and contributions can be found in Andrews, *The People Called the Shakers*, 123ff; see also White and Taylor, *Shakerism*, pp.312-14, and Paul Oliver in this collection.