

The Politics of Sexual Restraint: Debates Over Chastity in America, 1780-1860

by

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## Abstract

Entitled *The Politics of Sexual Restraint: Debates Over Chastity in America, 1780-1860*, my dissertation highlights three prominent groups who were advocates of sexual restraint in early-nineteenth century America: Shakers, Catholic priests and nuns, and followers of sexual reformer Sylvester Graham. In the decades between the American Revolution and the Civil War, mobs attacked Shaker villages, burned Catholic convents, and rioted against Graham's lectures. Discussions of celibacy and sexual self-control seemingly provoked "sex panics" about people who were *not* having sex. Advocates for celibacy and chastity faced hostility in the form of armed violence, prejudicial lawsuits and legislation, as well as print attacks from editors and pamphleteers. For these Americans, sexual restraint was nearly, if not as, disturbing as sexual excess. The question is why. By promoting sexual restraint, the Shakers, Catholic priests and nuns, and reformers I examine de-naturalized the assumed naturalness of sex within marriage. In doing so, they undermined the sexual foundation of middle-class identity.

Controversy around the sexual practices of Shakers, Catholic priests and nuns, and Grahamite reformers arose out of the particular social, cultural, and economic conditions of the first half of the nineteenth century. Revolutions in print and publishing, in consumer goods and services, and in travel and transportation created a context that allowed these groups to emerge as sexual minorities. These innovations also provided advocates of sexual restraint mediums to engage with their critics and promote their sexual philosophies to a curious and often hostile public. The predisposition to categorize those who practiced sexual restraint as somehow "other"



further contributed to the development of celibacy as a distinct sexual identity in the antebellum era. Investigating sexual restraint gives a more comprehensive picture of the sexual landscape of early America. It allows us to better envision how Americans in the nineteenth century understood sexuality and its relationship to concepts of “natural,” “normal,” and even humanness itself.

## Introduction

In May of 1774, a woman named Ann Lee set sail from Liverpool on the ship *Mariah* with a small band of followers to found a new church in the British American colonies. Lee, a blacksmith's wife from Manchester, England, was the anointed leader, or "Mother," of the "Shaking Quakers," a sect known for their prophecy, ecstatic worship, and embrace of celibacy. Though Lee herself had once been married and had borne four children that died in infancy, over the course of her life she became convinced that sexual intercourse was "the root and foundation cause of all human depravity."<sup>1</sup> The local Manchester authorities had found both the medium of the Shakers' preaching as well as their message disruptive. To maintain public order they imprisoned Ann Lee in a madhouse. A year after her release, Lee received a "revelation" that the Shakers' doctrine would flourish across the sea when planted in American soil.

Ann Lee and the founding Shakers arrived in New York City to find the colonies on the brink of revolution. For two years, the band toiled in the city as servants and laborers. The "Mother" of the Shaker church was herself forced to work as a domestic at a house on present-day Pearl Street. After two years of living in near poverty, Lee and her followers journeyed upriver to found a settlement of their own at Watervliet, seven miles outside of Albany, "an obscure place in the wilderness, remote from the public eye."<sup>2</sup> For four more years, Lee and her band practiced their controversial religious doctrines in peace and relative obscurity. In late

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin S. Youngs, *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing Containing a General Statement of All Things Pertaining to the Faith and Practice of the Church of God in this Latter-day* (Lebanon, OH: 1808), 22-23. Life of Mother Ann Lee also described in Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953); Richard Francis, *Ann the Word: The Story of Ann Lee, Female Messiah, Mother of the Shakers* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Youngs, *Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing*, 26.

1779, a spiritual revival occurred in the nearby town of New Lebanon. Finding in the revival a type of ecstatic spirituality kindred to their own, Lee and her followers took the opportunity to preach their doctrines of pacifism, communal ownership of property, and celibacy to the revivalists. The Shakers won many converts at this revival, but Mother Ann's preaching carried risks as well as rewards. Shaker remembrances of these early days state that "To such as loved the things of this present world, the testimony and the work accompanying it appeared like the greatest possible inconsistency and delusion."<sup>3</sup> Once again, Ann Lee found herself at odds with the local authorities, suspected of witchcraft, devil-worship, and worst of all, treason. In July of 1780, after only a year of public preaching, Lee and nine of her followers, representing the entirety of the Shakers' joint Anglo-American leadership, were arrested and tried before the revolutionary government at Albany. They were found guilty and imprisoned as "enemies of the country."<sup>4</sup> Lee herself was singled out for special treatment and separated from the other prisoners. Convinced she was a British spy, the American Revolutionaries transported her south to Poughkeepsie, where they intended to hand her over to the British army.

The charge of treason was, according to the Shakers, the product of "designing men." The Shakers themselves believed that "the real ground of enmity was in the cross," or celibacy, "which had been a stumbling stone and rock of offense to a licentious world."<sup>5</sup> Yet, even the imprisonment of Ann Lee and the rest of the Shaker leadership was not enough to extinguish the zeal of the Shakers' newly-won converts. Lee's New York followers successfully petitioned

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee* (Hancock, MA, 1816), 71-73.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 70. The 1816 *Testimonies* were a kind of collective biography of Ann Lee, comprised from the reminiscences of her surviving followers in 1816. Lee died in 1784 and there are no spiritual writings or records from her lifetime. Lee and her first followers mistrusted the written word and were reluctant to put their beliefs down in writing, because they favored the immediacy of prophecy and spiritual revelation to doctrine. Though it must be acknowledged that using the *Testimonies* as a source comes with a caveat, they are perhaps the best record of the lives of the earliest Shakers.

Governor George Clinton for her release in December of 1780, after having spent half a year in prison.<sup>6</sup> Much to the dismay of her enemies, Lee's imprisonment won her more followers, not fewer. "Great numbers" of people, not just from New York, but Massachusetts and Connecticut, too, flocked to hear Lee's new gospel, eager to hear the preaching of a woman who had been willing to risk imprisonment rather than recant her beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

Ann Lee had left Britain, believing her days of persecution were behind her on the other side of the Atlantic. She had hoped to find in the colonies a people who would recognize her doctrines as divine revelation, instead of the delusions of a madwoman. Perhaps she and her followers should not have been surprised at the fear their preaching against the lusts of the flesh inspired. The imprisonment of Ann Lee at the height of the Revolution was not the first time American patriots had taken a stand against religions practicing celibacy. In the spring of 1775, the New York Sons of Liberty marched to the city commons (present-day city hall) and with music and great fanfare, raised a red and blue "Union Flag" atop their Liberty Pole. On one side their flag proclaimed "George III Rex" and the words "No Popery." The reverse side advocated "The Union of the Colonies" and "The Measures of Congress."<sup>8</sup> The "No Popery" flag sent several messages. In March of 1775, the shots of Lexington and Concord had not yet been fired. The political situation between the American colonies and Britain was strained, but it had not yet erupted into outright war. The Sons of Liberty's flag proclaimed Americans to be citizens of the British Empire, first and foremost, who would not tolerate tyranny, represented as "Popery."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Youngs, *Testimonies of Christ's Second Appearing*, 26-28.

<sup>7</sup> *Testimonies of the Life*, 81.

<sup>8</sup> "New-York, March 9," *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, March 11, 1775.

<sup>9</sup> Linda Colley has argued that during the eighteenth century, Britains developed a national identity based on Protestantism and empire, specifically in opposition to French Catholics. See Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 11-53. On eighteenth-century Americans associations between tyranny and "popery" see Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1985) 43. Brendan McConville has also traced how "Popish plots" frequently emerged as kind of colonial paranoia in the decades before the American Revolution. See McConville,

“No Popery” was also specifically an attack against Catholicism and the Catholic clergy as much as it was a plea for expanded rights for American colonists. The flag was the Protestant Sons of Liberty’s protest against the Quebec Act which Parliament had passed the year before. The Quebec Act allowed for Catholic clergy to be exempt from paying tithes as they had been under the French government. In the eyes of Protestant colonists, the Quebec Act was equivalent to the British government legitimizing Catholicism in Canada. Protestant colonists felt threatened by “popery” on their borders. Their paranoia led them to suspect that Parliament would seek to encourage the growth of Catholicism, not only in French Quebec, but in the thirteen American colonies as well. The “No Popery” flag flying atop the Liberty Pole on the New York Commons protested tyranny and expressed a general anti-Catholic feeling. But it was also a knee-jerk reaction by the Sons of Liberty against Parliament legitimizing the celibate priests of the Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup>

It is altogether possible that during her tenure as a domestic in New York City Ann Lee would have passed the Commons and viewed the “No Popery” flag draped from the Liberty Pole. She may have even gathered there herself and cheered the Sons of Liberty on in their act of political theater—Shakers might have embraced celibacy, but they were virulently anti-Catholic and considered themselves good Protestants. Read together, Ann Lee’s imprisonment during the American Revolution and the “No Popery” flag point to the ways Americans were defining who was and was not included in their new nation. Though religious liberty would be protected in the Bill of Rights, it was not clear in 1775 or 1780 whether or not religious liberties

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*The King’s Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Rural America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 20, 34, 261-66.

<sup>10</sup> As an historical anecdote, the “No Popery” flag is well-known to scholars of early American religious history and American Catholicism. For other descriptions of the event, see *The American Catholic Historical Researches* 3 (1907), 151; Jason K. Duncan, *Citizens Or Papists?: The Politics of Anti-catholicism in New York, 1685-1821* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 37; Susanna Linsley, “The American Reformation: The Politics of Religious Liberty, Charleston and New York 1770-1830” (Ph.D. Diss, University of Michigan, 2012), 27-31.

would protect the sexual practices of Catholicism and Shakerism. The patriots of the American Revolution positioned celibacy as antithetical to liberty. Celibacy may not have been the sole motivation behind Ann Lee's imprisonment or the "No Popery" flag, but as a sexual practice it would remain tainted by its association with treason and tyranny for decades to come. As historian Philip Deloria has written, nationalism "links land, subsistence, political identity, and group destiny together, creating a clear-cut boundary between insiders and outsiders."<sup>11</sup> At this key moment of nation-making, Americans were defining themselves sexually, as well as religiously, racially, and ethnically.

This dissertation investigates sexual abstinence to better understand the sexual dimensions of American identity between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Entitled *The Politics of Sexual Restraint: Debates Over Chastity in America 1780-1860*, my project highlights three prominent groups who were advocates of sexual restraint in early nineteenth-century America: Shakers, Catholic priests and nuns, and followers of sexual reformer Sylvester Graham. In the decades between the American Revolution and the Civil War, mobs attacked Shaker villages, burned Catholic convents, and rioted against Graham's lectures. Discussions of celibacy and sexual self-control seemingly provoked "sex panics" about people who were *not* having sex. Advocates for celibacy and chastity faced hostility in the form of armed violence, prejudicial lawsuits and legislation, as well as print attacks from editors and pamphleteers. For these Americans, sexual restraint was nearly, if not as, disturbing as sexual excess. The question is why. By promoting sexual restraint, the Shakers, priests and nuns, and reformers I examine de-naturalized the assumed naturalness of sex within marriage. They also challenged marriage's exalted and central place in the social and cultural imagination of Americans. Moreover, by refusing to adhere to normative definitions of marriage, advocates for sexual restraint openly

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<sup>11</sup> Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 21.

challenged the white male privilege enshrined within the legal principle of coverture. Coverture not only gave a husband dominion over his wife's property and labor, but also control over her sexual being.

Who were these sexual dissidents? To students of nineteenth-century America, Shaker brothers and sisters and Roman Catholic priests and nuns are perhaps the most obvious to come to mind. It should be acknowledged that Roman Catholic and Shaker practices regarding celibacy have entirely different histories. The celibacy of Catholic priests and nuns became codified during the early Middle Ages and survived the Reformation. Shaker sexual regulations developed out of eighteenth-century radical Quakerism and the influence of the Camisard branch of prophets as well as Mother Ann Lee's personal revelation that sexual intercourse was the root of all human suffering. I would argue that both groups simultaneously rose to prominence in America in the early nineteenth-century in an unprecedented way. And despite their disparate origin stories, as religious communities that abstained from sex, Shakers and Catholics were frequently conflated by American Protestant writers and readers.<sup>12</sup>

Secular health reformer Sylvester Graham and his followers have a place in this study as well. While Graham and other health reformers never advocated total celibacy, they did argue for the limitation of sexual intercourse within marriage as well as sexual abstinence for the unmarried. Moreover, Graham rose to fame in the 1830s by crusading against "the solitary vice" of masturbation. Though on the surface the Grahamites might seem miles apart from religious enthusiasts such as the Shakers, these two groups inhabited a similar cultural and intellectual milieu. Graham's promotion of vegetarianism and abstention from alcohol and caffeine were in service of curtailing the sex drive. In the 1830s, Shaker communities began implementing these

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<sup>12</sup> On the origins of Catholic celibacy see Elizabeth Abbott, *A History of Celibacy* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2000), 63-88. On the development of Shakerism in England see Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Camisards to the Shakers*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 46, 56.

health reforms, with the hope they would affect the body as Graham had promised.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, opponents of Graham attacked him as a weak celibate monster and derided male Grahamites' masculinity, similar to the language used to attack Shaker brothers and Catholic priests.<sup>14</sup> Though most Grahamites were middle-class Protestants themselves, they faced virulent persecution for daring to challenge male sexual prerogatives within marriage. The fact that Graham's call for chastity and sexual control was rooted in medical science rather than religion complicates traditional understandings of sexual abstinence as mainly a spiritual practice.<sup>15</sup>

Looking at these different groups together—secular and religious, mainline denominations and outsider sects—based on their sexual beliefs and behavior is an innovative and unprecedented approach. Religious historiography on the Shakers has tended to study them in tandem with other emerging religious movements of the nineteenth century, notably Mormons and Oneida Perfectionists.<sup>16</sup> While such comparative work is valuable for understanding how these groups offered up both sexual and doctrinal challenges to mainstream Christian theology and worship, it must also be acknowledged that celibacy, polygamy and complex marriage are hardly alike in practice. Shakers, Catholics, and Grahamites, on the contrary, shared a belief that the disciplining of the body through sexual restraint could have crucial spiritual, physical, and moral consequences.

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<sup>13</sup> On Shaker adaptations of the Grahamian diet see Stephen Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 156-57.

<sup>14</sup> April Haynes, "Riotous Flesh," PhD Dissertation, University of California Santa Barbara, 2009. Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, Debility*; Godfrey Greylock, *Taghconic; Or Letters and Legends about our Summer Home* (Boston: Redding & Company State Street, 1852), 129-30.

<sup>15</sup> Graham's medical advice about the dangers of masturbation and linking a high libido to a rich diet might hardly seem like science in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but the fact was his regimen was seen as scientific by medical practitioners of the day as well as ordinary men and women.

<sup>16</sup> On comparative studies of the Shakers, Mormons and Oneida Perfectionists, see Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, Utopia* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1992); Foster, *Religion and Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Louis Kern's *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias--The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1981).



I call these behaviors “sexual restraint,” which ranged from complete sexual abstinence (for Shakers) to celibacy for select groups (Catholic priests and nuns) to groups that wanted to limit the frequency of sex within marriage (Grahamites and other sexual reformers). I believe the term “sexual restraint” best encompasses this spectrum of thinking on sexual abstinence, acknowledging the similarity of these practices, while also recognizing the differences. The title of this dissertation, *The Politics of Sexual Restraint*, therefore acknowledges that sexual abstinence is not monolithic, but can vary from person to person and group to group, much like other sexual activities. The title also recognizes the degree to which abstaining from sex was a political act that carried very real social, economic, and legal repercussions for individuals and communities. Practicing sexual restraint in the 1800s sometimes came with harsh consequences, from horrific mob violence to legislation that sought to confiscate Shaker property or ban the formation of convents on American soil. During the 1840s and 50s, lurid “escaped nun” stories served as cultural propaganda for the Know-Nothing movement that had risen up in response to increased immigration from Catholic Ireland. Sexual restraint inspired political action at the local and translocal levels in the nineteenth century, from practitioners and opponents alike. This study shows yet again how the most personal and intimate of decisions (whether or not to have sex, with whom, and how often) come with a political cost.

It is no coincidence that Shakers, Catholic priests and nuns, and Grahamite reformers became targets of violence and prejudice at the same historical moment that the American middle-class came into being. Much has been written of the religious, economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions of the “new” middle-class identity that arose in America between 1820 and 1850. As Karen Halttunen and Paul Johnson have shown, the market revolution dramatically transformed American society during this time period, resulting in the creation of a social order

culturally and economically distinct from that which had preceded it.<sup>17</sup> Halttunen argues that unlike the “middling classes” of the eighteenth century, the nineteenth-century middle class no longer represented “a point of equilibrium between two other fixed classes; to be middle class was to be, in theory, without fixed social status.”<sup>18</sup> Because the social status of the middle class was so amorphous and undefined, it became all the more important to try to project one’s class identity through outward displays of dress, sentimentality, and ritual.

It is important to remember that middle-class identity also had a sexual dimension, in which sex within marriage was the ideal. Historians have illuminated how adultery, seduction, prostitution, polygamy, and free love challenged middle-class norms and how members of the middle class organized against these threats to the sexual status quo by forming Female Moral reform organizations or anti-Mormon mobs.<sup>19</sup> However, lifelong sexual abstinence as a Shaker or a nun was also completely in opposition to the middle-class sex within marriage as much as any of these other acknowledged types of deviant sexuality. The presence of celibate sexual outsiders such as Shakers and Catholics disrupted middle-class sexual identity, family structure, and the gender hierarchy. And though he did not advocate complete celibacy, the outrage against Sylvester Graham is very telling. As a middle-class Protestant reformer, Graham was himself an “insider.” Graham’s sexual ideology could not be dismissed as either Catholic superstition or merely the practices of a strange sect like the Shakers, which made him all the more threatening to those who wanted to maintain the sexual privileges that came with middle-class marriage. As Paul Johnson has rightly noted in his study of middle-class religiosity in nineteenth-century

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<sup>17</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Halttunen, *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> The most notable study of Female Moral Reform and how it helped solidify middle-class female identity is Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Rochester, “marriage” is both a relationship between two individual people as well as an enduring social phenomenon in Western Christianity, invested with a certain moral authority; “if a man stops fighting his wife and starts fighting his marriage, and if that event is repeated in society until “marriage” itself is called into question, that is a religious problem.”<sup>20</sup> Though Johnson is primarily concerned with how nineteenth century men “fought” their marriages through adultery and prostitution and how middle-class reformers fought back, I would argue that practicing sexual restraint represented yet another way to “fight” marriage and undermine cherished middle-class sexual ideals.

A study of sexual restraint in early America has the potential to address a large gap in the history of sexuality. While normative heterosexual relationships and even sexual deviance (histories of homosexuality, adultery, and prostitution) have received a good deal of attention in this expanding field, abstinence as a sexual behavior has been almost entirely ignored by scholars.<sup>21</sup> When the celibate identities of these individuals are discussed at all, it is often only to project our own post-Freudian and Foucauldian attitudes toward sexuality than to place such practices in their historical context. In the years between 1780 and 1860, I argue that sexual attitudes shifted away from a toleration of various sexual behaviors toward a worldview in which only married sexuality was posited as natural and normal and everything else, including celibacy, was considered deviant.

Ultimately, celibacy has also been poorly understood within sexuality studies simply because such scholarship has typically focused on people engaging in sexual activities, not

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<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> George Chauncey deserves a great deal of credit for making lesbian and gay history as well as sexuality studies in general mainstream topics of history. See Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), Clare Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), Christine Stansell, *City of Women*, (New York: Knopf, 1986), Timothy Guilfoyle, *City of Eros*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994), Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*, (New York: Vintage, 1999).

individuals practicing abstinence. While they may not have been prostitutes, adulterers or sodomites, celibate Shakers and Catholics were completely non-normative by the sexual standards of early America. Moreover, sexual reformers like Graham crossed a line when they advocated sexual restraint for married couples. Graham drew the ire of libertine republican newspaper editors and sporting men when he attacked a pillar of white masculine privilege under coverture: a husband's unrestricted access to his wife's body.<sup>22</sup> Historians Clare Lyons and Richard Godbeer have documented a transition in sexual values from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Lyons' *Sex Among the Rabble* argues that during the 1780s and 90s, a transatlantic "pleasure culture" that tolerated adultery, prostitution, and children born out of wedlock flourished in Philadelphia.<sup>23</sup> Men and women were both understood to be naturally lusty creatures. But sexual mores shifted with the rise of the smaller, middle-class family. White middle-class women were now the holders of sexual virtue, presumed to be naturally chaste. Their male counterparts were also expected to reign in their sexual appetites and help their wives practice family limitation.<sup>24</sup> Though some men continued to be seducers, rakes, and adulterers, one could no longer freely participate in "pleasure culture" without facing social consequences. Middle-class men had in the course of roughly two generations yielded the sexual liberties their grandfathers had once enjoyed. Graham's attacks hit especially close to home for men of this class, because he asked them to forsake the limited sexual pleasures that still remained.

By refusing to engage in sexual activities, celibates became sexual minorities and sexual deviants in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America. But why have scholars been so reluctant

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<sup>22</sup> On libertine republican newspaper editor's antagonism toward Graham see Haynes, *Riotous Flesh*, 81-130.

<sup>23</sup> Lyons' book is limited to Philadelphia, but Godbeer's more national study demonstrates a greater toleration for premarital sex existed in more provincial locales as well. See Richard Godbeer, *The Sexual Revolution in Early America*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) 127-30, 228-33.

<sup>24</sup> Susan See Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 244, 207-8.

to celibate people in the ranks of the sexually non-normative? Partly, it is due to the endurance of one of the greatest myths about human sexual behavior, what Gayle Rubin described as “sexual essentialism—the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life.” In her revolutionary essay, “Thinking Sex,” Rubin explained that academic and popular thought on sex retains a tendency to “fall back on the notion of a natural libido subjected to inhumane repression.” When it comes to sexual abstinence, Rubin herself appears to have fallen victim to her own critique. Though she catalogues society’s acceptance and distaste of all manner of sexual behavior from married heterosexuality to sadomasochism and pedophilia, celibacy is entirely absent from her anthropological understanding of sexual behavior.<sup>25</sup> Rubin’s work only examines the social prejudices and consequences associated with various sexual activities. My work argues that sexual *inactivity* also has historically carried cultural, political, and legal repercussions.

Examining abstinence as a sexual behavior also challenges dominant paradigms in sexuality studies’ scholarship surrounding the emergence of sexual identities. Prevailing thought in the discipline has held that “sexuality” and “sexual orientation” are “a modern invention” and should not be mapped onto the homosexual (or heterosexual) behaviors of early Americans. Richard Godbeer and others believe that prior to the sexological research of the 1880s, individuals did not see themselves as possessing sexual identities, only engaging in sexual acts or behaviors. This argument advocates that prior to the twentieth century, Americans did not understand erotic desires as falling into a discrete rubric that we would call “sexuality,” but rather “as expressions of social and moral standing,” integrated into other aspects of their lives. And indeed in colonial America there is strong evidence indicating that “women or men who were punished for unnatural sexual acts did not acquire a lifetime identity as ‘homosexuals,’ and

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<sup>25</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex” reprinted in *Culture, Society and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 143-168.

they could be reintegrated into the fold.” Such acts may have been labeled either acceptable and normal (sex within marriage for procreation) or deviant and sinful (masturbation, sodomy). But as long as sexual sinners committed penance for their crimes, they did not seem to acquire a lifetime stigma regarding their sexual natures.<sup>26</sup>

Recently, some scholars have attempted to complicate what might be too easy a dichotomy between early modern sexual acts and modern sexual identities. Thomas Foster in his introduction to the recent anthology *Long Before Stonewall* writes that although “the terms homosexual and heterosexual are indeed modern...the *acts-versus-identities* pronouncement is an oversimplification made from the vantage point of modernity.”<sup>27</sup> This duality favors psychological and legal understandings of sexuality over cultural representations and lived experience. Ann Myles’ “Border Crossing, The Queer Erotics of Quakerism” rejects the Foucauldian understanding of sexuality. In analyzing same-sex Quaker evangelical pairs, some of whom experimented with celibacy, Myles finds that people who were “the other,” sexually and religiously, knew it and accepted it as a part of themselves, even if it bore no resemblance to the modern hetero-homo binary. Some of these seventeenth century New England Quakers were married couples who chose to mark their conversion to Quakerism by being openly celibate while still remaining married as a conscious display of their new faith.<sup>28</sup> Examining the celibacy of American Shakers and Catholic priests and nuns has the potential to provide a more complex understanding of sexual acts and sexual identities in early America. By focusing on the division

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<sup>26</sup>Godbeer, *The Sexual Revolution*, 11-12; D’Emilio, *Intimate Matters*, 31; Rubin, “Thinking Sex;” Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Foster, “Introduction,” in Foster ed., *Long Before Stonewall*, (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ann Myles, “Border Crossing, The Queer Erotics of Quakerism” in Foster, ed., *Long Before Stonewall*, 114-43. Scholars of sexuality that work in the Early Modern period like Carla Freccero have likewise questioned the Foucauldian “acts versus identities” pronouncement. Freccero points out that this might be biased as it is based almost entirely on legal and juridical sources and that using cultural and literary sources to discuss sexuality yields more complexity. See Freccero, *Queer Early Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 42.

between sexual and non-sexual people, this project is also not overdetermined by the coming emergence of heterosexual and homosexual classifications later in the nineteenth century.

My dissertation examines Shakers, Catholic priests and nuns, and Grahamite reformers based on their shared belief in sexual abstinence amidst an American society undergoing the rapid social, demographic, and economic changes historians call “the market revolution.” The revolutions in print technologies, in consumer culture, and in transportation and travel allowed advocates of sexual restraint to see and be seen in American society as never before. In chapter 1, “Sex Panics in Print,” I investigate the relationship between mob violence experienced by Shakers, Catholics, and Grahamites and innovations in early nineteenth-century print culture. I demonstrate how print could inspire violence by inciting a mob of hundreds to attack celibate Shakers. In the case of the Charlestown Convent burning, violence inspired print, creating a publishing boom in convent tales and turning escaped nuns like Maria Monk and Rebecca Reed into antebellum celebrities. Finally, I explore how Grahamite victims of violence responded to their attackers by founding *The Graham Journal*, a publication which connected Grahamites on a local and national level.

Chapter 2, “Vinegar-faced Sisters and Male Monsters” examines how sexual restraint challenged and transformed traditional gender roles. Investigating sexual restraint during the heyday of separate spheres, in the words of Jeanne Boydston, allows for “multiple understandings of gender.”<sup>29</sup> Dominant notions of masculinity and femininity took on new meanings when they were no longer tied to marriage. My research suggests that celibate masculinity was in some ways more threatening to the status quo than celibate femininity, if for no other reason that sexual restraint dovetailed neatly with normative ideas about women’s “passionless” nature. Such debates demonstrate there was no one coherent definition of

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<sup>29</sup> Jeanne Boydston, “Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis” in *Gender and History* 20 (2008), 558–583.

“masculinity;” libertines, working-class men, middle-class reformers, and utopian dreamers were all trying to articulate who was the “right” kind of man.

The predisposition to categorize those who practiced sexual restraint as somehow “other” further contributed to the development of celibacy as a distinct sexual identity in the antebellum era. The third chapter, “Identities of Sexual Restraint,” examines what it meant to practice sexual restraint as part of one’s daily lived experience. The spiritual testimonies and memoirs of these historical subjects challenge the popularly held notion that there were no sexual “identities” prior to the late nineteenth century. I demonstrate that individuals practicing sexual abstinence or limitation saw themselves as distinctly different from those who did not. The Grahamites especially held an awareness that sexuality was not something “natural” but what we today would call “socially-constructed.” Moreover, the emergence of these celibate and chaste identities took place alongside a demographic revolution in which more and more men and women chose not to marry. And, as Susan Klepp’s research has shown, those that did marry increasingly practiced family limitation. Companionate marriage and the emphasis on the new, smaller middle-class family offered married women greater control over reproduction than their grandmothers’ generation had. Grahamite reformers wished to give women further sexual autonomy within marriage, arguing that a wife’s desire should regulate a couple’s sex life.<sup>30</sup>

Chapter 4, “The Purity of the Mixture,” demonstrates how a celibate sexual identity allowed the products of Shakers, Catholics and sexual reformers to achieve a “brand-name”

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<sup>30</sup> Over the course of the century, the percentage of native born never-married women would increase from 7.3 percent in 1830 to 10.9 percent in 1870. In New England, home of the Catholic convents, Shaker villages, and Grahamite societies that feature in this study, these trends were dramatically more pronounced. 14.6 percent of Massachusetts women never married in 1830, by 1870, the number had climbed to 22.6 percent, nearly double the national average. Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, a Better Husband* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 3-5.; Susan Klepp has charted a dramatic decrease in the birth-rate among middle-class Americans between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, which she attributes to couples practicing some form of family planning (spacing births or engaging in forms of intercourse which would not result in pregnancy) or abstaining from sex altogether. See Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, 244, 207-8.



recognition in the emerging marketplace. The sexual distinctiveness of these products and their producers made them seem exotic to consumers. Similar to the way that racialization and Orientalism also were employed by marketers and advertisers, Shaker patent medicines and herbs, Catholic education, and the Grahamite health establishments were enhanced by claims to a mystical purity. The final chapter entitled, “Performing Sexual Restraint,” ties together print culture, gender disorder, sexual distinctiveness, and consumption through performance. Intrigued by what they had read in pamphlets, books, and newspapers, non-celibate Americans went to see these identities embodied. Shaker Villages and Catholic convents became some of North America’s earliest popular tourist attractions. Criticism mingled with curiosity when spectators watched Shaker dances or saw nuns take the veil. David Roediger, Eric Lott, and Robert Toll have done extensive and insightful work on how nineteenth-century white Americans interpreted and consumed racial difference in the form of blackface minstrelsy. I would argue we know a great deal less about how gender identity and sexuality were performed and understood in this era.

Investigating sexual restraint gives a more comprehensive picture of the sexual landscape of early America. It allows us to better envision how Americans in the nineteenth century understood sexuality and its relationship to concepts of “natural,” “normal,” and even humanness itself. Sexuality was the glue that held gender identity, family structures, and even popular culture together. When Shakers, Catholics, and Grahamites refused to adhere to the sexual status quo of their time, they challenged the very foundations of American society.

## Chapter 1

### Sex Panics in Print

On a Monday morning in late August 1810, a group of over five hundred armed men surrounded the fledgling Shaker settlement on the banks of Turtle Creek in southwestern Ohio. The Ohioans called themselves “an expedition,” a self-anointed mission charged with determining whether reports of the sect enslaving women and abusing children were true. To the Shakers, ardent pacifists, these men “equipped in uniform, and in military order,” armed with guns, staves, hatchets, poles and sticks, were no less than an unruly mob. “Old grey headed-men, boys, and others, who exhibited a very mean & mob-like appearance” and “women, of the baser sort, who were in fellowship with the riot” had turned out that day in hopes of witnessing “the destruction of the Shakers.”<sup>31</sup>

Two months prior to the Turtle Creek riot, Colonel James Smith, a Continental Army veteran and leading citizen, published an incendiary pamphlet, attacking and discrediting the Shakers’ commitment to celibacy. Colonel Smith was also a grandfather seeking custody of his grandchildren from their Shaker father, Smith’s son, James Smith, Jr. Testifying from his own short-lived experience as a Shaker convert, Smith Sr. related that Shaker men were promised “if they if they bore the cross and abstained from women for some time, they would become so holy that it would be no sin for them to have carnal knowledge with their own holy women.”

Responding to the unasked question of where all the offspring of the Shaker Elders and their

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<sup>31</sup> Benjamin S. Youngs, “Transactions of the Ohio Mob,” Cathcart Collection, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, hereafter abbreviated as WRHS; “Expedition Against the Shakers,” *The Review*, Nashville, TN October 26, 1810 .

women might be, Smith concluded that the sect must be committing infanticide: “since a Shaker woman has rarely been seen to suckle a child, if they beget children they put them out of the way, or by some means prevent propagation: because this would be an injury to their money making plan.” The colonel assured his readers that despite their humble appearances “the leading Shakers live in luxury in wine and women as far as their plan of secrecy will admit of.”<sup>32</sup>

Nearly a quarter of a century later during the sweltering summer of 1834, a gang of working-class men—brickmakers, sailors, apprentices, and firemen—surrounded the Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts. The crowd, acting on rumor that Mary St. John Harrison, a prospective nun, was “being secreted or abducted” to Canada against her will, threatened to burn the convent to the ground unless she was released. When Harrison did not come forward, they set fire to the convent and school with “twelve nuns and *fifty-seven female* scholars inside.”<sup>33</sup> Newspapers from Maine to Maryland reported how the rioters stole the Mount Benedict ciborium, smashed the sisters’ expensive musical instruments, and converted the personal library of Boston’s Bishop Fenwick into fuel for a bonfire. As a final act of desecration, the mob “burst open the tomb, and ransacked the coffins” of dead nuns, searching for the bodies of Sister Harrison and the Ursulines’ young Protestant pupils, rumored to have been murdered behind the convent walls.<sup>34</sup>

Akin to Colonel James Smith’s pamphleteering that provoked a mob attack against the Ohio Shakers, tales of illicit sex and abused women rose from the ashes of the Charlestown riot. Just as the Charlestown rioters were being brought to trial in 1835, ex-novice Rebecca Reed’s

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<sup>32</sup> James Smith, *Remarkable Occurrences Lately Discovered Among the People Called Shakers of a Treasonous and Barbarous Nature*, (Carthage, TN: Moore, 1810).

<sup>33</sup> “Dreadful Conflagration,” *Eastern Argus*, August 13, 1834.

<sup>34</sup> On newspaper accounts of the Charlestown riot, see “Disgraceful and Unprecedented Outrage,” *Baltimore Patriot*, August 15, 1834; *New Bedford Mercury*, August 15, 1834. A descriptive account of the Charlestown riot can also be found in Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Fire and Roses* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 1-7.

autobiography, *Six Months in a Convent*, detailed a life of horrors. According to Reed, the sisters of Mount Benedict heaped slavish devotion on their Mother Superior and were subjected to bizarre and cruel penances. The convent was a place of unmentionable sexual deviance, where confession with the Bishop led to “various improper questions” regarding the novices’ sexuality and where Superior Mary St. George Moffat was inclined to “bestow presents and caress” the sisters who were her “great favorites.”<sup>35</sup>

Three years later, the city of Boston would witness another riot when Dr. Sylvester Graham attempted to deliver his “Lecture to Mothers” on sexual restraint. A crowd of two to three hundred gathered at Boston’s Amory Hall and plastered the area with “inflammatory placards” to prevent Graham discussing “the Science of Human Life” with an all-female audience—“no spinsters or male monsters (except Mr. Graham) were admitted.” When the ladies in attendance attempted to speak in Graham’s defense, they were shouted down by male rioters imitating the noises of animals: “barking, mewings, howlings, yellings, hissings and groaning.” As the situation escalated out of control, the City Marshal forced Graham to cancel his lecture for the day, acting on orders from the mayor himself.<sup>36</sup>

The “anti-Graham riot” in 1837 was actually the second occasion Dr. Graham’s “Lecture to Mothers” was shut down by an angry mob—the first was in Portland, Maine in 1834. Newspapers reported that Graham’s “lecture, his language, and his conduct in delivery was of a nature too immodestly indelicate for the ear or eye of modest woman.” The “Lecture to Mothers” was so controversial that not a single extant copy of it survives. Historians believe it encouraged women to control and prevent “the solitary vice” not only in their sons, but also in themselves, and to practice greater sexual restraint within marriage. In preaching chastity and

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<sup>35</sup> Rebecca Reed, *Six Months in a Convent*, ([Boston : Russell, Odiorne & Metcalf](#), 1835)

<sup>36</sup> *New Hampshire Sentinel* July 31, 1834; “Anti-Graham Riot,” *Barre Gazette* March 10, 1837; “Mob Law,” *The Liberator*, March 24, 1837.

crusading against masturbation, Graham ironically acknowledged female desire. Furthermore, his lecture gave greater weight to a wife's desire to determine sexual relations within marriage and created a space for middle-class women to have sexual agency in their families and in society at large.<sup>37</sup>

In the 1810s and 1830s, discussions of celibacy and sexual self-control seemingly provoked “sex panics” about people who were *not* having sex. These riots represent neither the beginning nor the end of debates on sexual restraint. They are best understood as flash points or markers in a larger story. Each of these groups suffered violence because of their belief in sexual restraint. However, the relationship between print and violence in each event was never identical. In both Turtle Creek, Ohio and Enfield, New Hampshire, anti-Shaker pamphleteering whipped the surrounding community into a mob mentality, inspiring them to attack their Shaker neighbors. The burning of the Ursuline convent sparked an appetite for salacious convent tales, lining the pockets of publishers for decades to come. Through the use of a print journal, followers of sexual reformer Sylvester Graham built institutions—including boarding houses, a library, and even a health food store—that provided a sense of permanence and community long after Mr. Graham had moved on to the next city on his lecture tour.

Shakers, Catholics, Grahamites and their critics navigated print culture at a time of rapid commercial expansion and market integration that dramatically transformed the relationship between labor and capital in multiple industries, including publishing. Examining the uses of print in each individual case and following them over the course of the decades between 1810 and 1860, reveals the transition from localized print spheres to a more centralized, national print culture as described by Trish Loughran in *The Republic in Print*. The pamphlets printed by Colonel James Smith in 1810 were highly dependent on the interest of local printers and

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<sup>37</sup> “Anti Graham Riot.”

newspaper editors in Ohio. By the eve of the Civil War, mass stereotype printing allowed the memoirs of an escaped Virginia nun to be printed in New York City and become news in Chicago. Conversely, *The Graham Journal's* ability to connect reformers on a “translocal” level complicates the easy dichotomy between local and national print Loughran has drawn.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Shakers and the Ohio Mob: Print & Prejudice**

Though pacifists themselves, the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, more commonly known as Shakers, were no strangers to violence. The Shakers had been targets of religious persecution and pamphleteering in New England in the 1780s and 1790s. During her missionary tour of Massachusetts, Mother Ann herself was physically attacked by a mob. There was a strong outbreak of anti-Shaker sentiment during this time period, partly in response to the very newness of the religious movement as well as the advocacy of a few key apostates. After the initial controversy died down, the Shakers and their neighbors in New England settled into a grudging tolerance as their communities’ grew and prospered for the next two decades.<sup>39</sup>

Despite these early setbacks, the Shakers increased in numbers throughout the Northeast and became prosperous enough to send a mission to Ohio in 1805 following the Cane Ridge Revival. The ecstatic Christianity expressed at the revival, especially the outpouring of “gifts of the spirit”—speaking in tongues, shaking, and intense emotion—made the region seem an

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<sup>38</sup> Nancy Beadie has described these processes as “the capitalist transition” around 1840, preceded by the “market revolution,” beginning around 1815. See Beadie, *Education and the Creation of Capital in the Early American Republic*, (New York: Cambridge UP 2010), 4-5. Loughran argues that prior to the Civil War, America lacked a “national” print culture. See Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), xvii-xx.

<sup>39</sup> On the early experiences of Ann Lee in America, see Priscilla Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986), 1-5, Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 61. The most outspoken Shaker apostates in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century were Daniel and Reuben Rathbun/Rathbone. Several members of the Rathbun family joined the Shakers later to quit them. See Reuben Rathbone, *Reasons Offered for Leaving the Shakers*, (Pittsfield, MA: Chester Smith, 1800). 3,7, 24-28.

attractive site for a Shaker mission. Shaker missionaries Bates, Meacham and Young, who continued to be successful in winning converts in the heightened spiritual aftermath of the frontier revival, founded the Lebanon settlement at Turtle Creek in 1806. Perhaps because of the Shaker's increasing prosperity in Ohio, they were victims of numerous property crimes in 1805 and 1807. Resentful Ohioans burned barns, broke windows and cropped the ears of Shaker horses, trying to tear down the community the Shakers had built one piece at a time.<sup>40</sup>

The simmering tension between the Shakers and their Ohio neighbors reached its boiling point when Colonel James Smith, a respected Revolutionary War veteran, published a pamphlet in June of 1810. Colonel Smith demanded the Shakers deliver up his grandchildren, now living with Smith's son, James Smith, Jr., at the Turtle Creek settlement. The controversy began when James Jr. left his wife Polly and their children to embrace celibacy and the Shaker religion. James later persuaded his wife to bring the children to Turtle Creek, promising that she need not convert herself, but that he would build a house for her and the children near the settlement. According to her father-in-law's account, Polly arrived to find no house had been built and that she must either live as a Shaker, or give up her rights to her children. When Polly left the Shaker village for a short visit with friends without her husband's permission, James advertised her supposed desertion in the newspaper, claiming she had abandoned her family. Seeing the grieving mother forcibly parted from her sons and daughter, "was too much for human nature to bear." Smith further lamented, "O! mournful scene! I thereby beheld the tender child forcibly

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<sup>40</sup>. The Cane Ridge Revival began in Bourbon County Kentucky in 1801 and is widely considered to be one of the landmark events of the Second Great Awakening in the United States. On the Cane Ridge Revival, see Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 13, 70 and Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival*, (Ohio: Browne, 1807)..

wrested by the iron hands of a despotic Shaker, from the affections of a weeping mother. The feelings of my heart I cannot describe.”<sup>41</sup>

Eunice Chapman’s and Mary Marshall Dyer’s stories bear a striking resemblance to that of Polly Smith. Chapman and Dyer, like Smith, had husbands who had converted to Shakerism and taken their children with them. The two abandoned wives were allies, seeking to persuade legislators and popular opinion to amend the current divorce laws so that in the case of a husband who abandoned his wife to join the Shakers, custody of the children would automatically go to the non-Shaker wife.<sup>42</sup> Unlike Polly Smith, these two Northeastern women did not speak through a male relative as a mouthpiece, and instead took to print themselves to argue for their rights. Their respective pamphlets, Chapman’s 1817 *Being an Additional Account on the Conduct of the Shakers* and Mary Marshall Dyer’s 1818 *A Brief Statement of the Sufferings of Mary Dyer* aroused public sympathy. Through their pamphlets, Chapman and Dyer gathered the numbers necessary to launch an attack on the Enfield, New Hampshire Shaker community where their children were being held. The sales of both pamphlets were highly localized, circulating heavily in Boston, New Hampshire, and Albany close to the Shaker villages that drew their ire.<sup>43</sup>

It is evident from his multiple pamphlets and newspaper articles that James Smith, Sr. was especially aggrieved by his son’s conversion to Shakerism and the harsh treatment he bestowed upon his wife. Colonel Smith protested (perhaps too much) that “My son, before he received the Shakers’ testimony was kind to me, and affectionate to his wife” and that James was

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<sup>41</sup> James Smith, “An Attempt to Develop Shakerism,” *Spirit of Seventy-Six* (Washington, D.C.), July 20, 1810.

<sup>42</sup> Eunice Chapman, *Being an Additional Account on the Conduct of the Shakers* (Albany, 1817)

<sup>43</sup> Chapman, Mary Marshall Dyer, *A Brief Statement of the Sufferings of Mary Dyer Occasioned by the Society Called Shakers Written by Herself to Which is Added, Affidavits and Certificates Also, a Declaration from their own Publication* (Concord: Joseph C. Spear, 1818. Dyer’s pamphlet was sold in Boston and New Hampshire according to newspaper advertisements. While “news” of Chapman and Dyer’s crusade against the appeared as far away as Washington, DC, I have been unable to find advertisements of their pamphlets outside of New England. *Concord Gazette*, June 23, 1818; *Concord Gazette*, July 7, 1818; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 6, 1818; “Eunice Chapman,” *National Messenger* (Washington, DC) March 11, 1818.



“naturally friendly: a dutiful son, a kind husband, and a tender father.” The conversion to celibacy and the end of the marriage contract between husband and wife was something that incensed James Smith Sr. and virtually every other anti-Shaker throughout the period from 1790-1830. The thought of Shaker celibacy aroused violence and hostility at worst, and, at best, derision and jest. What is consistent among all these writings, even those not as alarmist as Colonel Smith’s, is that celibacy was itself an impossible sexual identity in the early republic, especially for men, at a time when the gendering of sexual virtue was shifting.<sup>44</sup> Because Shaker men were not able exercise their sexuality wholesomely in marriage, it followed that they must be seducers in disguise: true celibacy was never considered.<sup>45</sup> Similar ideas about the hypocrisy of the Shaker celibacy also surfaced in pamphlets written by Eunice Chapman. Chapman reported acts of vanity in the Shaker sisters more suited to simpering coquettes: “they went before the glass and changed their caps at least four or five times in the course of a day.” Moreover, she “saw the *spiritual husbands* each with *his spiritual wife* withdraw to different apartments” following the Shakers’ evening prayer meeting. Chapman maintained that her own husband had abandoned her to find his own “spiritual wife” among the Shakers.<sup>46</sup>

If Eunice Chapman’s accusations and arguments seem so similar to Col. James Smith’s, it is because the two anti-Shaker writers were actually in contact with each other. Chapman published portions of a letter from John Irvin, stepson of Colonel Smith and brother-in-law of Polly and provided a clear summary of Smith’s anti-Shaker tract. Similarly, Chapman also included an excerpt written by Mary Marshall Dyer. Chapman selected a portion from Dyer’s

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<sup>44</sup> Smith, “An Attempt to Develop Shakerism”

<sup>45</sup> Richard Goodbeer, *The Sexual Revolution in Early America*, (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2002), 266. See also Ruth Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 148.

<sup>46</sup> Eunice Chapman, *Being an Additonal Account on the Conduct of the Shakers*.

letter that seemed to validate her own testimony regarding the Shakers' fake celibacy. Dyer wrote to her sister in suffering:

They selected out a man for me, who appeared to be filled with *the spirit of the earth!!* I told them I believed they indulged in those practices which they so much condemned in the people of the world. They said, 'you do not *understand* the gospel; Mary, you must not be afraid of *loving* the brethren, *we* consider it a *privilege* for the *brethren* to *love* the *sisters*, and the *sisters* to *love* the *brethren*.<sup>47</sup>

Such accounts from Chapman, Smith and Dyer implied that celibacy was a guise for adultery and sexual abuse. Furthermore, they were clearly meant to arouse anger in a public who had been unwittingly duped into believing that the Shakers were wholeheartedly nonsexual beings. These pamphlets portrayed Shaker women as victims to the lusts of Shaker men, forced to participate in arranged spiritual marriages against their will. No wonder the "expedition" at Turtle Creek was so eager to locate the women supposedly enslaved by the Shakers.

That so many of these anti-Shaker writers borrowed from and corresponded with each other points to how these pamphlets function as sources. Anti-Shaker pamphlets exemplify the localized print culture described by Trish Loughran's *The Republic in Print*. From the first printed whiff of anti-Shaker sentiment published in 1781 by Valentine Rathbun to the later print wars surrounding the Enfield mob in 1818, anti-Shaker authors worked in tandem with newspaper editors and booksellers to make their views known while also making a profit. Valentine Rathbun's inaugural anti-Shaker testimony, *Some Brief Hints of a Religious Scheme, Taught & Propagated by a Number of Europeans*, received no less than seven separate local printings from 1781-83: Providence, Boston, Norwich, Hartford, Salem, Worcester, and New York.<sup>48</sup> Also notable is the fact anti-Shaker articles in regional newspapers, authored

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 71.75-77. Italics are hers.

<sup>48</sup>. Valentine Rathbun, *Some Brief Hints of a Religious Scheme*. The Evans series of Early American Imprints/Archive of Americana has all the separate printings in possession of the American Antiquarian Society, <http://iw.newsbank.com> 1/21/09

anonymously, did not appear until 1781, the year Rathbun sold his first pamphlet.<sup>49</sup> It is quite possible that Rathbun or local printers may have submitted these articles in order to drum up interest and sales. What is known for certain is that anti-Shaker writers continued to use local newspapers to sell pamphlets into the 1810s and these editions were organized around regional markets. Col. James Smith reprinted portions of his pamphlets as “An Attempt to Develop Shakerism” in a Washington, DC newspaper a month before the mob attack. Reports of the militia’s “Expedition Against the Shakers” appeared first in local papers in Cincinnati and Carthage, Tennessee. By the end of the year, the story had reached readers in Newark, New Haven, Portland, Wilmington, New York, and Boston.<sup>50</sup>

The showdowns in Lebanon, Ohio and later Enfield, New Hampshire during the 1810s are significant because of the key role print played in motivating both attacks. While earlier anti-Shaker riots focused more on the sect’s controversial theology or their suspiciously British origins during a time of war, the riots of 1810 and 1818 share one nearly identical motivation: mothers attempting to reclaim children from Shaker fathers. The abduction of Polly Smith’s children by their Shaker father was the pretext by which Col. Smith gathered hundreds to march upon the Shakers. Through print, he successfully recruited 500 men to march on the Turtle Creek settlement, and even managed to get access to the women and children who lived in seclusion there. But ultimately, his myriad allegations failed to convince Ohioans that the Shakers warranted expulsion. The very expedition his pamphlets inspired determined that his charges of abuse and enslavement against the Shakers were untrue. As of 1818, his daughter-in-law Polly

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<sup>49</sup> “Worcester, May 4,” *New-England Chronicle*, May 7, 1781.

<sup>50</sup> “An Attempt to Develop Shakerism,” “Expedition Against the Shakers,” *Sentinel of Freedom*, September 25, 1810. “Cincinnati, Sept. 1,” *Connecticut Journal*, September 27, 1810.; “Cincinnati, Ohio, Sept. 1,” *Eastern Argus*, September 27, 1810; “Cincinnati, (Ohio) Sept. 1 The Shakers,” *American Watchman*, September 29, 1810. “Cincinnati, (Ohio) Sept. The Shakers,” *Public Advertiser*, October 3, 1810; “Shakers Shaking,” *Repertory*, September 25, 1810.

had only recovered her youngest child from the Shakers. His son and namesake, James Smith, Jr., remained in the community with his two oldest children, who grew up estranged from both their mother and grandfather. If the fact that Colonel Smith was still participating in anti-Shaker activity eight years later is any indication, it would seem that the anger and bitterness he felt over the breakup of his family had not dissipated.<sup>51</sup>

### **The Burning of the Ursuline Convent: Prejudice for Profit**

With the riot at the Ursuline convent in 1834, the relationship between print and protest worked in reverse. Rather than print provoking an outbreak of violence, the burning of the convent was an occasion of violence that generated an outbreak of print. The two anti-Catholic “escaped nun” narratives that would become bestsellers in antebellum era, Rebecca Reed’s *Six Months in a Convent* and Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu*, would not be published until more than a year *after* the convent lay in ashes. Reed’s and Monk’s narratives were the best-selling and most well-known “escaped nun” tales, but the burning of the convent created a flourishing genre of anti-Catholic print that promised to expose the secret lives of nuns and priests. While the political, class, and religious motivations of the Charlestown riot have been explored, the way anti-Catholicism was exploited by publishers for financial gain in this era has gone unexamined.<sup>52</sup>

While it made many Catholics see red, the burning of the Ursuline Convent made printers and publishers see green. The tragic events of August most certainly hastened the printing of *Female Convents, Secrets of Nunneries Disclosed* a translation of an Italian work by “Scipio de

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<sup>51</sup> “Expedition Against the Shakers,” Chapman, 71.

<sup>52</sup> The best analysis of the myriad motivations behind the Charlestown Riot is arguably Nancy Lusignan Schultz’s *Fire and Roses*. See also Paul Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Jack Tager, *Boston Riots: Three Centuries of Social Violence* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2001).

Ricci, bishop of Pistoia and Prato” in October of 1834, mere months after the fire. Indeed “the conflagration at the Ursuline Convent” is cited as a primary reason for printing this book.

Unfortunately, the title served as a bit of false advertising for readers hoping to read about the scandalous goings on behind convent walls; the majority of the text is nothing but Italian history. The American authored introduction mentions “female convents” and Ursuline schools as places where Protestant girls enter and leave “with every refined feminine sensibility destroyed.”<sup>53</sup>

With anti-Catholic publications of the 1830s and beyond, the link between prejudice and profit is easy to discern. Authors, publishers, and writers fought in the courts over who controlled the rights to “escaped nun” tales and, therefore, where the bulk of the profits should go. Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures*, outsold only by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* prior to the Civil War, was first offered to prominent New York publishing firm Harper & Brothers. Monk herself was recruited by Protestant anti-Catholic activists in Canada, then brought to the United States specifically to embody her tale of a young woman abused in the convent and seduced by the priests within. Harper & Brothers initially turned down the manuscript—they did not want such a scandalous, near-pornographic tale associated with their firm, for fear it would taint their wholesome image. But the publishers, reading the temperature in the air, must have known they had a hit on their hands, and therefore set up a dummy company formed by two Harpers’ employees to publish *Awful Disclosures*. Such machinations on the part of Monk and her publishers were hardly shrouded in secrecy—they were made public in a lawsuit.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Female Convents, Secrets of Nunneries Disclosed...Scipio de Ricci, bishop of Pistoia and Prato* By Mr. De Potter, edited by Thomas Roscoe (New York: D. Appleton & Co, 1834), x, xxi. *Female Convents* is a reprint of a 1829 London pamphlet, which in turn claims to have been written by an ex-priest about Catholic monasticism in Italy prior to the French revolution.

<sup>54</sup> During the 1830s, Harper & Brothers rose to success selling series of books based on the “library” model to families and institutions. See Scott E. Casper, “Case Study: Harper & Brothers” in Robert Gross and Mary Kelley, ed. *A History of the Book in America Vol. 2* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2010), 128-137. On the Maria Monk lawsuit, see Ray Allen Billington, “Maria Monk and Her Influence.” *Catholic Historical Review* 22 (1936), 287.

Rebecca Reed, a former inhabitant of the Ursuline Convent whose somewhat more legitimate autobiographical tale, *Six Months in a Convent*, made substantial sums of money from the proceeds of its sales. Nearly as much of a bestseller as *Awful Disclosures*, *Six Months in a Convent* sold 50,000 copies during its first nine months of publication. Such sales figures were on par with other popular works of the antebellum era, such as George Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1846) and Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1855) which similarly averaged 55,000-60,000 copies in their first year of publication.<sup>55</sup> As Reed was guaranteed 6¼ cents royalty per copy sold, it is estimated she would have made more than \$3000 within a year of her narrative's publication.<sup>56</sup> Newspapers announced that the first 5,000 copies of *Six Months in a Convent* had sold out within two days of publication; within a month that number had expanded to 25,000. The *New Bedford Mercury* reported in April 1835 that Reed's publishers kept two stereotype presses manned by forty workers running round the clock to meet the demand, turning out as many as 1300 copies a day. The paper predicted demand for the tale could only increase, as it had not yet been distributed south of Philadelphia or in the Mississippi Valley region.<sup>57</sup> The *Alexandria Gazette* remarked with undisguised amusement that "Boston seems to be the focus of excitement and agitation" and the present excitement being "Miss Reed's book.... the feeling it has created is scarcely less warm than that which was produced by the burning of the Convent."<sup>58</sup>

Reed's publishers thoughtfully primed the pump, releasing exciting extracts and snippets in several of New England's regional newspapers in advance of the book's release. This process

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<sup>55</sup> Emory Elliott et al. ,*The Columbia History of the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 54.

<sup>56</sup> Daniel A. Cohen , "The Respectability of Rebecca Reed: Genteel Womanhood and Sectarian Conflict in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (1996), 456.

<sup>57</sup> "Six Months in a Convent," *Norfolk Advertiser*, March 21, 1835; "Six Months in a Convent," *Newburyport Herald* April 17, 1835.

<sup>58</sup> *Alexandria Gazette*, March 27-1835.

was known as “puffing,” and was used to great success by antebellum publishers.<sup>59</sup> One “puff” piece first published in the *Boston Traveler* testified to her virtuous character as “a young and delicate female of timid and retiring habits, of extreme sensibility.” At the same time, the preview stoked old denominational prejudices and lamented that “so much of the wealth and talent of that great city has been enlisted in defending and eulogizing that establishment and in denouncing as participators in or approvers of the riot, all who called in question the sanctity of its inmates and the propriety of Protestants sending their daughters there.” The “puff” piece printed some of the most salacious bits of Reed’s story which included reports of Reed having to kneel on the floor and obey the Superior in all things without question.<sup>60</sup>

Not all editors saw Reed’s narrative as illuminating, instructive, or in any way authentic. Some quite vocally declared it “catch-penny,” deliberately preying on the worst of human nature in service of turning an easy profit. The editor of *The New Hampshire Patriot* in particular criticized Reed’s book as nothing more than a shoddily produced mess of old prejudices and recycled ideas: Reed’s “*remarkable* story contains about as much matter as would occupy one page of a common newspaper—well expanded however by the aid of coarse type and wide margins.” Instead of revealing exciting secrets, it was “just what everybody knew before—that much of the time of the tenants of a Convent is occupied in repeating prayers and performing ceremonies and observances which to a Protestant seem ridiculous.” According to the *Patriot*, the motivations of such a publication were emblematic of the kind of incendiary fanaticism responsible for destroying the Ursuline Convent in the first place. And while the editors clarified that they were neither pro-Catholic nor anti-Reed, they felt motivated to write such a negative review because “we hate to see the community gulled and cheated by such a frivolous, one-

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<sup>59</sup> Eugene Exman, *The House of Harper* (New York: Harper & Row, 1867). Harper & Brothers as well as other publishing houses used “puff” pieces in newspapers to stimulate demand and increase sales.

<sup>60</sup> “From the Boston Traveller” in *Essex Gazette*, March 28, 1835.

sided, useless publication.” In short, the editor advised his readers they would be better served by spending the half-dollar *Six Months in a Convent* retailed for on something else. It is also possible that the warnings of *The Patriot* may have backfired, the free publicity only further piquing the curiosity of potential readers searching for the “pornography of pain” such a gothic tale of seduction and intrigue could provide.<sup>61</sup>

Nearly twenty years after the immense success of *Awful Disclosures* and *Six Months in a Convent*, Harper & Brothers had no such qualms about publishing the autobiographical “escaped nun” narrative of Josephine Bunkley. The publishing house actively campaigned to maintain exclusive rights to her story. Bunkley was a former postulant of the Sisters of Charity who “escaped” from the order’s motherhouse in Emmitsburg, Maryland after a brief ten months as a postulant. After her supposed escape, the eighteen-year-old Bunkley returned to her family in Norfolk, Virginia and began to write her tale, supposedly to defend herself from accusations against her character from Mother Etienne, the superior of the Emmitsburg Convent. But someone smelled money in Bunkley’s convent narrative and she was forced to obtain a court ordered injunction after Charles Beale, a family friend and editor of the local *Daily News*, attempted to publish her manuscript without her permission. The lawsuit alleged that Beale, representing himself as Bunkley’s agent, contracted with the New York firm De Witt and Davenport in January of 1855 (only a few months after Bunkley left the convent) to publish *My Book, or the Veil Uplifted*, with a royalty of fifteen cents on the dollar, terms “more favorable than was customary, equivalent to more than half the profits.” The defendants in the suit (which included Beale as well as publishers De Witt and Davenport) lamented to the court that they had

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<sup>61</sup> “Six Months in a Convent,” in *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, March 30, 1835. Karen Haltunnen coined the phrase “pornography of pain” to describe the antebellum fascination with “true crime” murder stories as well as escaped slave narratives. I argue that these “escaped nun” narratives fit into the genre of gothic horror she describes in “The Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture” *The American Historical Review* 100 (1995), 303-334.



already spent \$1300 on the creation of stereotype plates necessary for mass printing. The terms and the creation of the stereotype plates in advance of release indicate that they expected this latest convent narrative, “a tale of Roman Catholic intrigue and superstition” to be a best-seller. Escaped nuns, in fact, were so *en vogue* that a news item on Bunkley’s lawsuit story appeared in a Chicago paper, a place far removed from Bunkley’s life or any of the events in her story.<sup>62</sup>

Josephine Bunkley went to court to protect not only her story, but also her “likeness and autograph,” showing that post-Maria Monk, convent tales were big business and runaway postulants, on the verge of celebrity. She also testified that her narrative was the genuine article, and that a recent work of fiction, *The Escaped Nun*, was not her story.<sup>63</sup> *Miss Bunkley’s Book* sold for \$1, pricing it well out of the range of a working-class readership—this was no dime novel. By the time Bunkley’s book was published, gift book publishing and a segmented marketplace had already been established. Her memoir had a tooled leather cover, and maps and prints detailing the inside of St. Joseph’s. With its ornamental cover and many illustrations, the “escaped nun” tale may well have been intended to have been given as a gift or displayed in the home, a marker of gentility as well as an anti-Catholic tract.<sup>64</sup>

The “escaped nun” tales of Monk, Reed, and Bunkley sold, presumably, because they promised to give credible first-hand accounts of life within a secret, closed community. However, the burning of the convent encouraged such curiosity among readers and speculation among publishers, that it also inspired convent tales that were explicitly fiction. One of these,

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<sup>62</sup> De Witt and Davenport specialized in cheap sensational fiction and romances. Robert M. DeWitt, the publisher, was a known anti-Catholic and member of the Know-Nothing Party, which may also account for his interest in Bunkley’s narrative. Madeleine B. Stern, ed., *Publishers for Mass Entertainment in Nineteenth Century America* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1980), 93-96. “Emmettsburg Nunnery Case U. S. Circuit Court-Monday, May 7 before Nelson, J.,” *Chicago Times*; May 17, 1855; “The Book of Miss Bunkley,” *The Sun*; May 9, 1855.

<sup>63</sup> Josephine Bunkley, *Miss Bunkley’s Book The Testimony of an Escaped Novice from the Sisterhood of St. Joseph Emmitsburg Maryland (The Mother-house of the Sisters of Charity in the United States)* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers 1855), ix-xi.

<sup>64</sup> On the status and emotional meanings associated with gift books, see Louise Stevenson “Homes, Books, and Reading” in *History of the Book in America Vol. 3* Scott Casper, ed. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007), 319.

*The Nun of St. Ursula, A Romance of Mt. Benedict* traded on this episode of violence, as well as the legacy of Reed and Monk to sell what made no pretensions of being anything other than a cheap, thrilling adventure story. Booksellers literally advertised *The Nun of St. Ursula* under “weekly list of cheap publications,” and Hazel’s picaresque tale retailed for ten to twelve and half cents, making it a true dime novel and accessible to a working-class audience.<sup>65</sup> Hazel’s book capitalized on the continued mystery surrounding the burning of the Ursuline convent to sell his tale. The back design (one of only two illustrations) featured a crudely rendered pen and ink drawing of the Charlestown convent smoldering in ashes. Hazel wrote to readers in his introduction

The history of the Convent, from its institution to its destruction is still as mysterious and impenetrable to the great mass of the people as ever, it is a good theme for a writer of fiction. As our title indicates, we propose to write a “*Romance of Mount Benedict*,” but if, in the exercise of our imaginative faculties, we should accidentally stumble upon some stubborn truths.<sup>66</sup>

None of the personages in Hazel’s tale had any connection with any of the true residents of the Ursuline convent—indeed *The Nun of St. Ursula* stars a young novice named Cecile who had rejected her Harvard suitor in favor of the convent, that “monument of intolerance, of desecration and disgrace upon the otherwise fair escutcheon of the good old Commonwealth of Massachusetts!” “Beguiled” and naive, the virtuous Cecile is rescued at the last minute from both taking her vows and being burned alive by her daring brother Jack, believed to have been lost at sea, who has since become a Turkish pirate. Cecile, her scholarly beau, her dashing brother and his Muslim bride, Zillah, sail away on a corsair and live out lives of luxury at the

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<sup>65</sup>*The Sun* July 10, 1844; *National Aegis*, February 12, 1845; *Plain Dealer*; September 28, 1846.

Writing under the names Justin Jones and Harry Hazel, the author produced a number of “blood and thunder” tales for mid-century story papers like *The Flag Of Our Union* and *The New York Weekly*. Hazel’s other works were equally provocative and sensational, with titles that hinted at gender or racial transgression: *Blanche de Ranzi or the Beautiful Turkish Slave*, *Horse Thief or the Maiden and the Negro*, *Larcoka the Belle of the Penobscots* and *Clarilor the Female Pick Pocket*.

<sup>66</sup> Hazel, *The Nun of St. Ursula*, 1-2.

Sultan's palace in Constantinople.<sup>67</sup> In the logic of the “escaped nun” story, becoming a pirate and marrying a Muslim was more acceptable to readers of the era than becoming a nun and not marrying at all.

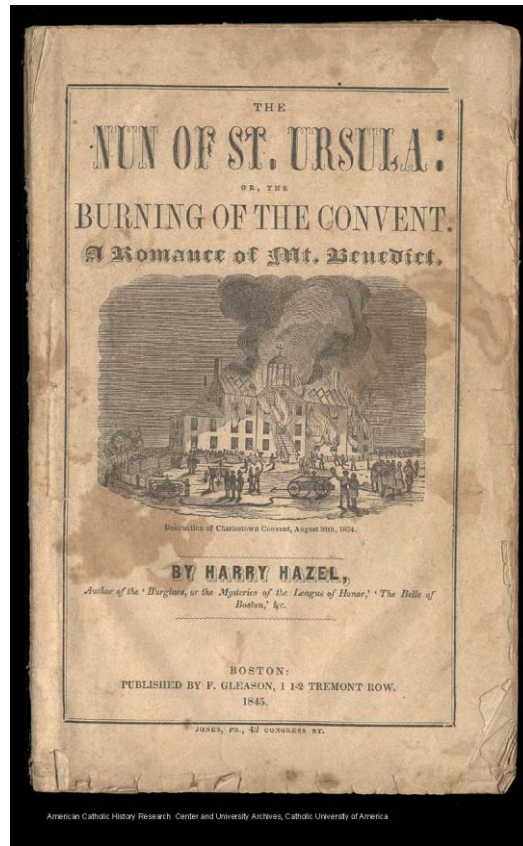


Figure 1. Cover illustration from *The Nun of St. Ursula* (1845). University Archives, Catholic University of America.

Despite its penchant for the picaresque, *The Nun of St. Ursula* is not without moments of political commentary. Hazel believed the Ursulines deserved reparations from the city on account of the destruction of their property. In Hazel's opinion, it would be better to just pay the Ursulines to go away “and end a controversy which has aided the spread of popery in our land, for the last ten years, more than the combined spiritual efforts of all its bishops and priests during

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<sup>67</sup> *The Nun of St. Ursula or the Burning of the Convent, a Romance of Mt. Benedict* by Harry Hazel (author of the 'Burglars, mysteries of the league of honor,' 'The Belle of Boston,' &c) (Boston: F. Gleason 1 1-2 Tremont Row 1845)

the century previous.”<sup>68</sup> In the conclusion his swashbuckling adventure, Hazel cautioned against the rise of the Sisters of Charity throughout the United States and warned the more “zealous Catholics” of New England against attempting to re-establish the Ursulines in Boston: “Go and multiply your churches—but have no secret auxiliaries—and both Protestants and Catholics may worship the same God in the same community without jealous rivalry—without wrangling—without rioting!” Even in an unquestionably “catch-penny” story, religious tolerance could only be had if Catholics acclimated themselves to Protestant convention. “Secret auxiliaries” of men and women behind convent doors were asking for a riot.<sup>69</sup>

### ***The Graham Journal: Physiological Print***

If print provoked anti-Shaker violence and anti-Catholic violence provoked publishers in search of large profits, the wake of print following the Graham riots can be read as a further variation on this theme. Though Sylvester Graham’s lectures on sexual restraint received their fair share of bad press in Portland, Boston, Providence, and New York, the Grahamites were unique in the ways in which they utilized print to organize themselves against their opponents. Through harnessing the press to publish two separate pro-Graham Journals, the proceedings of their meetings, and a variety of books on the Graham philosophy, Grahamites created an apparatus to implement and sustain the physiological reforms preached by Mr. Graham.

Less than a month after the infamous riots at Amory Hall that prevented Graham’s *Lecture to Mothers* from being heard by the ladies of Boston, devoted Grahamite David Cambell turned out the first issue of the *The Graham Journal of Health and Longevity* on April 4, 1837. The *The Graham Journal* served the Grahamite community of reformers along with fellow

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 63.

publication *The Library of Health*, edited by Dr. William Andrus Alcott. The two periodicals enjoyed a friendly rivalry and both promoted Graham's philosophies on diet and sexual restraint. Cambell and Alcott were charter members of the American Physiological Society (APS), founded in Boston in February of 1837. Graham's lectures so inspired these Bostonians, they banded together to form an association to promote "Physiology, or the science of life, in its most extended sense." Rather than confined to a handful of educated medical professionals, the APS believed knowledge of the human body should "be accessible, in a community like our own, to every citizen." Dr. Alcott, already a celebrated education reformer and cousin to the Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, was elected president of the fledgling society and Cambell served as Recording Secretary. One hundred and sixty-three members joined the initial APS, and men outnumbered women 3 to 1.<sup>70</sup>

The APS and its associated publications upheld Grahamite stances on sexuality and warred against "the solitary vice;" Dr. Alcott warned in his first address as President:

Now there is one form of physiological vice which is spreading far and wide in our community; and which threatens to become a foe to human happiness still more deadly as society becomes more refined, and people more and more effeminate....I have proof positive that this species of depravity has reached our common schools, and unless something is speedily done, it will undermine everything dear and valuable in human character among us.<sup>71</sup>

To that end, Grahamites promoted the Graham diet as a means to subdue the lusts of the flesh and promote all-around good health. Graham argued that rich foods—meats, coffee, tea, alcohol, spices, and confections—inflamed the passions and diverted the body's vital energies away from

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<sup>70</sup> *The Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*, April 4, 1837. William A. Alcott, *An Address Delivered Before the American Physiological Society March 7 1837*. (Boston: Light, 1837), 4; *Constitution of the American Physiological Society with a Catalogue of its Members and Officers* (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1837), 4,5, 17-19. (124 to 41). The majority of women who joined were married women who joined along with their husbands, only seventeen of the initial forty-one charter members were unmarried. Male members paid \$1 a year to join or \$15 for a lifetime membership; ladies could become members at half price.

<sup>71</sup> William A. Alcott, *An Address Delivered Before the American Physiological Society at their first annual meeting*, (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1837).

staying healthy. By adapting what was essentially a strict vegetarian and low-carbohydrate diet (vegan but for the allowance of milk) sexual restraint would become effortless and natural, and various diseases from indigestion to tuberculosis could be kept at bay. Grahamite reformers faced harsh criticism for their sexual and dietetic ideologies in an era where sexual rights within marriage as well as meat and bread were considered to be a married man's prerogative, regardless of social class. Because of constraints around censorship Grahamites and their opponents were often prohibited from discussing Graham's more explicit pronouncements regarding sex and solitary vice. Instead, criticisms of the Graham diet often stood in proxy for criticism of the Grahamites' sexual restraint. APS publications discussed openly how difficult it was for them to follow their new regimen among more traditional neighbors: "Let a pure liver sit down to a breakfast of dry bread and cold potato, and the *bon vivants* will regard him as an ascetic, doing penance. They cannot conceive how he can muster the self-denial to take up with such fare"<sup>72</sup>

The minutes of the APS and the pages of its sister journals reveal that these organizations and publications existed to help "Pure Livers" find community. If the words of President Alcott are to be believed, the majority of APS members were new to one another and to reform causes in general: "Many of us are utter strangers to each other, and strangers to the best modes of conducting the affairs of an association of any kind whatever, especially for one whose conduct we have no model." While there were indeed antislavery, temperance, Sunday school, and Bible societies aplenty, theirs was the first society devoted to educating the public on the workings of the body and the practice of sexual restraint. Members were required to share at monthly meetings "such facts in relation to our own obedience and disobedience of the laws of life, and the consequences, immediate or remote, as may be within our recollection." To that end, the APS

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

was a bit like Alcoholics Anonymous; not only did the APS provide a haven from public scrutiny, members were required to submit to the surveillance of other members, so as to keep one another faithful to the Graham system of living.<sup>73</sup>

William Andrus Alcott and his fellow members of the APS understood that print was key to winning converts to the Graham system and to helping Grahamites stay the course. Foremost among the goals laid out in his first Presidential Address was the creation of a library of physiological texts where members of the APS could read the works of Graham, Coombe, and Alcott himself. The dissemination of knowledge was so important because these reformers sincerely believed “practical knowledge of the science of human life...will make us better parents, better teachers, better merchants, better mechanics, better manufacturers, better farmers, and, in every respect, better citizens.”<sup>74</sup> In the span of a few short months, *The Graham Journal* announced that the Physiological Library was open for business and APS members were entitled to check out one book a week for free.<sup>75</sup>

The Physiological Library became a nexus of Grahamite sexual reform. Not only was it financially supported by the dues and donations of the APS, and their separate all-female auxiliary, the Ladies’ Physiological Society, it was also headquartered at the offices of the printers’ Marsh, Capen & Bowen. Bela Marsh, in addition to being a major publisher of the evangelical Protestant newspaper *Zion’s Herald*, was also the Treasurer of the APS. Marsh’s firm published *The Graham Journal*, the annual reports of the APS, and major works by both Sylvester Graham and William Andrus Alcott. At Marsh’s office at 1 Cornhill, centrally located in downtown Boston, one could purchase tickets to upcoming APS lectures. Out of town

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<sup>73</sup>The best analysis of the spirit of the age and the various reform movements of the antebellum era is Robert Abzug’s *Cosmos Crumbling*, (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1994); Alcott, *An Address*, 3; *Constitution of the American Physiological Society*, 11.

<sup>74</sup> Alcott, *An Address*, 19; *Constitution of the American Physiological Society*, 12-13, 17.

<sup>75</sup>*The Graham Journal* August 22, 1837, 160.

Grahamites were encouraged to stop there upon first arriving in the city, where they could be directed to boardinghouses friendly to the Graham system. Mrs. Marsh also attended the APS with her husband and hosted private meetings with Mr. Graham and the Ladies' Physiological Society in their home. As strong evangelical Protestants involved in a variety of reform causes, the Marshes were most likely sincere in their participation in sexual reform. However, their position within the APS also seems strategic, or at least mutually beneficial for both parties. Grahamites could not hope to achieve their goal of spreading physiological knowledge throughout the nation without the support of sympathetic printers willing to publish their works, especially because they had been turned down before due to the sexual nature of some of their writings. The Marshes, in return for their voluntarism in the APS, received a steady income from sexual reformers like Alcott and Graham looking to publish. By hosting the library, they endeared themselves to APS members, who may have been more inclined to purchase or subscribe to other texts. In this way, the affiliated Grahamite organizations functioned as a circuit, mutually reinforcing one another.<sup>76</sup>

The pages of *The Graham Journal* and *The Library of Health* chart the progress and expansion of this network of sexual reformers. *The Graham Journal*'s back page of advertisements let subscribers know about upcoming meetings of the APS and LPS, lectures by Graham and Alcott, and events in the larger Grahamite community. They advertised Grahamite boarding houses in New York and Boston (including the one owned by Cambell, the publisher) as well as Boston's Graham-friendly Temperance hotel, the Marlboro, where guests were assured

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<sup>76</sup> Bela Marsh published the *Constitution of the American Physiological Society*, *The Graham Journal*, the first annual report of the APS, an 1839 edition of Sylvester Graham's *The Science of Human Life*, and would publish many of William A. Alcott's works, including *Tea & Coffee* (1836); *Vegetable Diet as Sanctioned by Medical Men and by Experience in all Ages* in 1838, *The Use of Tobacco* (1848); *The Graham Journal* October 3, 1837; "Proceedings of the Ladies Physiological Society," Rebecca Codman Butterfield Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, MHS.



no wine or tobacco was tolerated. By November of 1837, Boston could boast a “Physiological Society’s Provision Store,” run by APS treasurer, Nathaniel Perry. Perry’s store at Fayette Court, near Boylston Market, sold “Graham bread” (whole wheat bread) as well as grains, vegetables, and other staples of the Graham diet; it may very well have the distinction of being the first “health food” store in America. *The Graham Journal* also advertised the Grahamite Boarding School in Lynn, Massachusetts opened by sexual reformer and fervent Graham disciple, Mary Sargent Gove in 1838. By the end of 1837, there were twenty agents selling *The Graham Journal* in Massachusetts alone as well as in states far beyond Graham’s northeastern lecture circuit—Michigan, Ohio, and Georgia. By 1839, the *Journal* could be bought as far away as South Carolina, Louisiana and Mississippi.

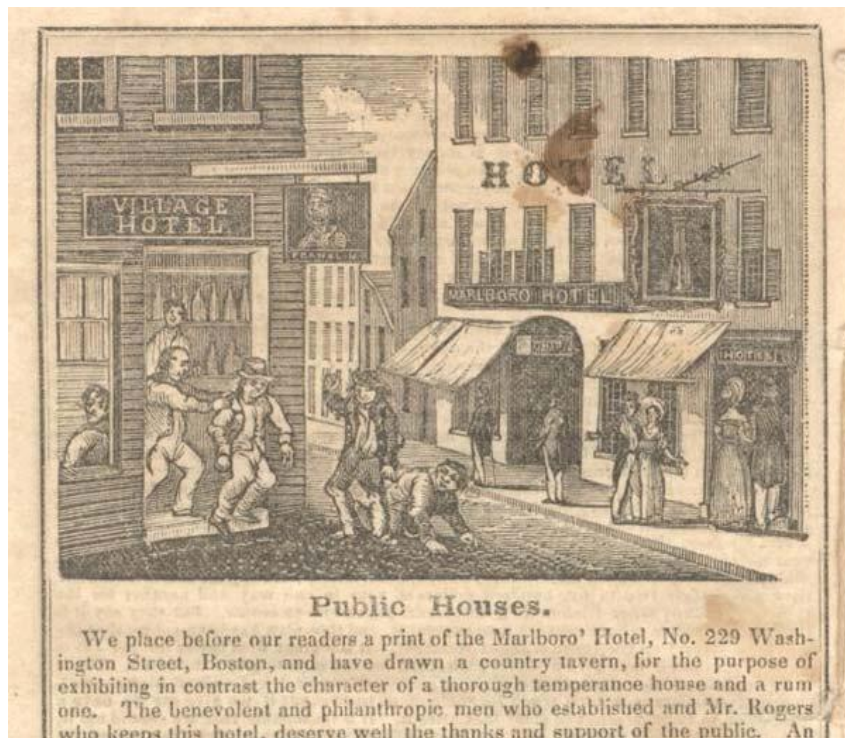


Figure 2. The Marlboro Temperance Hotel hosted several Grahamite events during the 1830s. *Temperance Almanack* (1841), Old Sturbridge Village.

Grahamite publications not only let reformers know where to purchase Grahamite products and the locations of upcoming lectures and events, they also provided valuable emotional and moral support. While one could find a like-minded community of openly avowed Grahamites in Boston or New York, subscribers in small towns did not have the opportunity to attend an APS meeting or visit Perry's store. Nevertheless, as David Nord has argued, the circulation of ideas through print, combined with revolutions in transportation and postal delivery allowed these reformers to connect on a "translocal" level. The items contained within *The Graham Journal* broadcasted the topics of debate within the Boston parlors of the Ladies Physiological Society and the lecture rooms at Amory hall to a wider public.<sup>77</sup> *The Graham Journal* helped Grahamites far and wide navigate potential social minefields, such as whether or not tea and coffee should be served to non-Grahamite guests in the home. Editor David Cambell fielded questions in a quasi-advice column. In one example, a Philadelphia Grahamite tired of fending off his "coffee-loving friends" asked "Now, Mr. Editor, will you put in our mouths a quietus for these would be friends of ours?" Cambell wrote sympathetically in response, "Whoever departs from any of the customs of society must expect to encounter its sneers or its scorn or, still worse, its pity. Especially is this the case with any attempt to reform the evils which result from the unnatural indulgence of the animal propensities and appetites." He advised the man to persevere and lead by example, and gently reminded his fellow Grahamites that until recently, they too had the same lusts for "flesh meats and poisons."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Nord has described how the spread of print from centralized distributors helped create regional voluntary societies. A "translocal" movement allowed reformers to both participate in reform circles in their own localized community yet read about and corresponded with a wider regional network of reformers, whose events were discussed in the pages of a periodical like *The Graham Journal*. see David Paul Nord, "Benevolent Books: Printing, Religion, and Reform 1790-1840" in *History of the Book in America Vol. 2*, 229, 234.

<sup>78</sup> Answer to the above inquiry: When husband and wife are both Grahamites they should avoid setting out "narcotic poisons" when entertaining company. Guests should prize the host's company more than tea and coffee. *The Graham Journal*, "How Shall We Treat Our Friends?" June 22, 1839, September 19, 1837.

David Nord has argued that evangelical voluntary societies should not be understood as proto-corporations, but as proto-non-profits; the APS and the Grahamites fit this model. Nord writes, “the Bible and tract societies pursued a goal that was the opposite of private enterprise. They proposed to turn the market on its head, to deliver a product to everyone, regardless of ability to buy.”<sup>79</sup> This was a galvanizing idea, and proved extremely successful for the Bible and tract societies Nord and Candy Gunther Brown have investigated in their work on evangelical print culture. But it was not so successful for men like David Cambell trying to spread the gospel of Grahamism with his *Graham Journal*. What Bible societies and anti-slavery societies had that Grahamites did not was a broad range of support and key benefactors (like the Tappan brothers) with deep pockets. And though a few “star” members of the sexual reform movement—William A. Alcott, Mary Sargent Gove, and Sylvester Graham himself—made a living as professional sexual reformers, giving lectures and publishing books, the commercial side of sexual reform bore more of a resemblance to a voluntary society than a business venture.

In the final issue of *The Graham Journal* in December of 1839, editor David Cambell sorrowfully announced that due to “pecuniary affairs,” there would be no fourth volume of the journal in January. He revealed that he had been operating the journal at a loss and “had sacrificed his time, and five hundred dollars annually, for the past three years, in sustaining the *Journal* and giving it an extensive gratuitous circulation.” He sheepishly encouraged “delinquent subscribers” to pay their debts and that those readers of means buy the remaining back issues to distribute to their friends and families as gifts.<sup>80</sup> But though *The Graham Journal* itself shuttered

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<sup>79</sup> Nord, “Benevolent Books,” 229.

<sup>80</sup> The pecuniary failings of the *Journal* may have been more due to the financial difficulties of the editor himself than a lack of enthusiasm on the part of Grahamites. In 1839, Cambell found himself jailed for refusing to perform military service for the third time in three years. The noted “ultraist” and his wife decided to quit Boston and move to Oberlin, where they gained steady employment managing the college’s dietics. Quoted from *The Liberator* in the *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison* v. 2, p. 452.

in 1839, the sexual reform cause was not through. William Andrus Alcott, editor of rival publication *The Library of Health*, would continue to champion Graham in its pages and keep the cause alive into the 1850s.<sup>81</sup>

Grahamites used print culture so successfully and adapted it to their own needs so quickly because, as New England Protestants, they were raised in a culture that valued print and print networks. Evangelicals at this time promoted an “evangelical canon” that allowed believers to “participate in a textually defined community.” One can draw parallels between religious “conversion” and conversion to the Graham system of diet and sexuality. If printed texts allowed evangelicals to maintain their religious beliefs and practices following conversion, which “marked the beginning rather than the culmination” of Americans’ spiritual lives, so did reading texts like *The Graham Journal* and *The Library of Health* act as safeguard against the ever-present threat of fleshy temptation.<sup>82</sup>

Those aligned with Catholic and Shaker spirituality had a built-in reticence to using the written word as an evangelical tool. Both groups emphasized the experiential dimensions of religion over the study of the Bible. The early Shakers, including their founder Mother Ann Lee, were mistrustful of documenting and canonizing their ecstatic religious experiences, favoring the “sacred theater” of spirit possession, prophesy, and divine inspiration over the study of scripture.<sup>83</sup> In fact, no writing of any kind from the founding generation of Shakers was produced

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<sup>81</sup> *The Graham Journal*, December 14, 1839. Fellow Grahamites Hannah and Edward Emerson took over the Cambell’s Brattle Street boardinghouse in 1839.

<sup>82</sup> Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 9, 13, 18.

<sup>83</sup> Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Camisards to the Shakers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 5, 234. Spirit possession in the Atlantic world was “sacred” according to Garrett, because “the descent of divinity into humans” fulfilled biblical promises of “personal salvation and universal regeneration.” It was “theater” because such acts “entailed a cultural interaction between ‘performers’ and ‘audience.’” Garrett has illustrated that the Camisards, Methodists, Moravians, American “New Lights,” and ultimately the Shakers not only included, but highly esteemed such sacred theater in their worship. In America,

in Ann Lee's lifetime—the first Shaker document was her successor Joseph Meacham's 1790 pamphlet, *A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church*.<sup>84</sup> The Shakers' refusal to engage in print culture further distanced them from evangelical Protestants; Susan Juster argues that the Shakers' rejection not only of family and gender roles but history, reason and even the Bible itself further characterized them as religious outsiders.<sup>85</sup> Catholicism, in its emphasis on a ritual calendar and worship that engaged the five senses also was less textually-based than Protestantism. Catholics had faced accusations of anti-intellectualism since the Reformation and such charges continued to be leveled against them when their numbers began to grow in nineteenth-century America. Catholic publications in the antebellum era continued to reflect ambivalence toward engaging with print. In its inaugural publication, the newly formed Catholic Tract Society of Baltimore seemingly longed for a quieter, less print-obsessed time; “our country is overrun with publications on every subject...How delightful, how peaceful an abode was the terrestrial Eden before the fatal knowledge of good and evil was imparted to its happy occupants.”<sup>86</sup>

The outbreaks of mob violence Shakers and Catholics experienced in the early nineteenth century provided the catalyst for their engagement with print culture. Both religions began to utilize Protestant methods of print to advance their own ends. In many ways, incidents of violence and negative pamphleteering galvanized Shakers and Catholics into responding to their critics. The mob attack at Turtle Creek caused newly converted Richard McNemar to break

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Shakers' valuation of religious immediacy and emotionalism won them converts away from Anglicanism and Congregationalism in the New England back country throughout the 1780s.

<sup>84</sup> Joseph Meacham, see *A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church, according to the Gospel, of the Present Appearance of Christ. As Held to and Practiced by the True Followers of the Living Savior at New-Lebanon* (Bennington, Vt.: Haswell and Russell, 1790).

<sup>85</sup> Susan Juster, *Doomsayers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 165-66.

<sup>86</sup> Catholic Tract Society of Baltimore, *Address of the Editorial Committee of the Catholic Tract Society of Baltimore to the Public No. 1* (Baltimore, 1839), 10.

precedent and defend the Shaker faith using the printed word.<sup>87</sup> He published *Shakerism Detected, & Examined and Refuted in Five Propositions* in 1811; it was the first time a Shaker had responded in print to the allegations of anti-Shaker apostates since Mother Ann had first set foot on American shores nearly forty years before. The years following the mob attacks at Turtle Creek and Enfield would see an outpouring of pro-Shaker pamphlets that attempted to explain Shaker beliefs and evangelize through print. Most notable among them (and originally not for public consumption) was *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing*, sometimes referred to as the "Shaker Bible." This sacred text both codified Shaker theology and passed down the wisdom of Ann Lee to a new generation of Shakers.

Catholics also began co-opting Protestant methods of print culture as defensive measures against misinformation. As early as the 1820s, Catholic newspapers *The U.S. Catholic Miscellany* and the *The Truth-Teller* engaged in "paper wars" with their Protestant counterparts in New York City.<sup>88</sup> Despite the fact that many Catholics found Protestant tract societies self-important and self-promoting, on September 1, 1839, a group of Baltimore's leading Catholics met to found The Catholic Tract Society of Baltimore (CTS). The Catholic Tract Society was meant to be the American Catholic's answer to Protestant organizations like the American Bible Society and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. This collection of priests and Catholic gentlemen founded their tract society "to encourage virtue, to expose misrepresentation, and to give a more extensive circulation to the doctrines of the Roman Catholic religion."<sup>89</sup> The

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<sup>87</sup> Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 136. On anti-Shaker pamphleteering see Elizabeth DeWolfe, *Shaking the Faith* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 12. De Wolfe argues that anti-Shaker activism actually helped consolidate the Shaker faith because of the way it required them to formulate and articulate their beliefs not only to the public, but also to themselves.

<sup>88</sup> Susanna Linsley, "The American Reformation: The Politics of Religious Liberty, Charleston and New York 1770-1830" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Michigan, 2012), 286-290.

<sup>89</sup> Catholic Tract Society of Baltimore, *No. 1*, 3. Women were not prohibited from joining the CTS, but all of the officers were either priests or members of Baltimore's Catholic elite. I have found no evidence of a ladies auxiliary similar to one that existed among the Boston Grahamites.

decision to print and distribute tracts (which the CTS considered “a cheap and easy method of instruction” for both wayward Catholics and hostile Protestants) came after years of finding themselves on the receiving end of Protestant smear campaigns and salacious convent tales. They lamented, “Why should we allow this wonderful engine, omnipotent for evil and for good, to be wielded against our tenets, our institutions, our liberties?...Why may not the Catholic unfold to the view of his fellow citizens, the beauty, the solidity, the admirable fruits of the religious doctrines which he professes?”<sup>90</sup>

The Catholic Tract Society and its successor, The Metropolitan Tract Society, filled a void in American Catholic society, which numbered as many as 800 individual congregations in 1839. They made membership cheap and affordable—it only cost \$1 for a year’s subscription and anyone male or female who paid their dollar could join.<sup>91</sup> A subscription bought a member three copies of every tract, one for them and two to distribute to their friends and neighbors. Like their Protestant counterparts, Catholic tract societies functioned as proto-non-profits, supplying the public with cheaply produced tracts independent of consumer demand.<sup>92</sup> During the antebellum era, Catholics used tract societies to call for greater religious toleration and claim a role for Catholics in the founding of the American nation. They also distributed tracts like *Nuns and Monastic Institutes*, a three-part series that attempted to respond to the allegations of Maria

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 12-13, 15.

<sup>91</sup> Catholic Tract Society of Baltimore, *No. 2 The Excellence and Dignity of Religion*, (Baltimore, 1840), 2. In its first year, the CTS took in \$1353 and 1200 subscriptions, not quite enough to cover their \$1,472.62 of operating expenses. They issued a tract every month and printed 140,000 tracts. They estimated nearly 70,000 tracts were circulating in the community while some had been mailed to Catholic parishes “in a distant section of the country.” Catholic Tract Society, *Address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Catholic Tract Society of Baltimore* (Baltimore, 1841), 5-7.

<sup>92</sup> David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 7.

Monk and Rebecca Reed by presenting detailed information about the spiritual formation of nuns and priests.<sup>93</sup>

Nowhere did Catholic print offer such a clear riposte to sensationalized “escaped nun” stories than in the life and death of Sister Mary Ignatia Greene. Born Mary Greene in 1821, the daughter of Boston postmaster and *Boston Statesman* editor, Nathaniel Greene, Mary Ignatia rejected a life of privilege in order to fulfill her spiritual calling.<sup>94</sup> Breaking with the religious traditions of her New England Protestant upbringing, she joined the Sisters of Charity founded by Elizabeth Seton and began teaching at St. Joseph’s School in Emmitsburg, Maryland.<sup>95</sup> In many ways, Mary Ignatia Greene’s life was a Know-Nothing’s worst nightmare. The daughter of a prominent New England journalist and politician, she was “seduced” away into a convent where she abandoned her faith and her family to become a nun. But unlike so many of these convent story heroines, Mary Greene’s family accepted and supported her decision to become a Sister of Charity, even while remaining Protestant themselves. The Greene family, however, may have been a special case. At the same time Mary Ignatia was taking her vows as a nun, her elder brother, William Batchelder Greene, was at Harvard studying to become a Unitarian minister and submitting articles to the well-known Transcendentalist publication, *The Dial*.<sup>96</sup> Susan Batchelder Greene seems to have tolerated the spiritual searchings of both her children. Before

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<sup>93</sup> Baltimore Tract Society, *Nuns and Monastic Institutes*, Nos. 14-16. (Baltimore, 1841). At some point around 1844, the Catholic Tract Society of Baltimore and the Baltimore Tract Society merged to form the Metropolitan Tract Society. It was an appropriate name; Baltimore and the state of Maryland would remain an American Catholic metropole for much of the nineteenth century, even as Catholics emigrated to the U.S. and moved to Midwestern cities. Maryland because of its history as a Catholic colony had a greater concentration of both Catholic wealth and infrastructure—convents, schools, and seminaries—than other parts of the country.

<sup>94</sup> “Death Notice,” *The New Hampshire Patriot*, September 1, 1852

<sup>95</sup> The Sisters of Charity in America joined with the Daughters of Charity and the larger Congregation of the Mission headquartered in Paris, France on November 1, 1850 and were hereafter known as the Daughters of Charity. But as they were the Sisters of Charity when Mary Ignatia Greene joined in the 1840s, I will refer to them by their earlier designation for the purposes of this chapter.

<sup>96</sup> On the life of Mary’s brother, William Greene, see Phillip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 181-189. Greene and his wife Anna Shaw were prominent abolitionists and radicals. Greene’s friendship with Orestes Brownson (himself a Catholic convert) may have encouraged his acceptance of his sister’s decision to become a nun.



becoming a nun Mary Ignatia had been caught up in a Baptist revival while away at school in Troy, New York, and had been baptized in the Hudson River at age fourteen.<sup>97</sup>

Mary Ignatia's letters detailing her life as nun are not filled with lascivious priests or cruel superiors, but days spent teaching how to paint watercolors, correcting student compositions, and crafting costumes for the Epiphany play. "You need not think me dying of ennui or monotony," she wrote of her days at St. Joseph's.<sup>98</sup> Her letters also recounted the many heroic sacrifices of her fellow Sisters of Charity as they cared for the sick and orphaned in cholera epidemics in St. Louis, Baltimore, and Boston throughout the 1840s. Though by all appearances Sister Mary Ignatia was a skilled and knowledgeable teacher (and had herself received a fine education at Emma Willard's prestigious Female Seminary) she longed for the day when she, too, might be called to serve in one of the Sisters of Charity's growing number of missions. On June 12, 1852, the young sister got her longed-for wish; she was selected to be among the seven sisters to found a new ministry in San Francisco, despite counting herself "the youngest in years, and the least advanced in goodness in the band."<sup>99</sup>

Sister Mary Ignatia's joy was unfortunately short-lived. She and Sister Honorine Goodman contracted cholera and died while trying to cross the Isthmus of Panama on July 22, 1852. To commemorate her daughter's faith and bravery, Mary Ignatia's mother, Susan Batchelder Greene, published her daughter's letters, detailing her life as a Sister of Charity from 1845-1852, so that her friends and relations would better understand her calling as a sister and a missionary. Susan Greene used the publication of her daughter's letters to plead for greater

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<sup>97</sup> Susan Batchelder Greene, ed. *Letters from Sister Mary Ignatia to her Own Mother* (Boston: Damrell & Moore, 1853), 20-21.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 9, 15, 17.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

religious tolerance between Protestants and Catholics; “it is hoped that the Good and the *True* will feel that they are united with Sister Mary Ignatia in worshipping the same Saviour.”<sup>100</sup>

In printing this volume, *Letters from Sister Mary Ignatia to her Own Mother*, Susan Greene took what had become a popular form of Protestant devotional literature—the missionary narrative—and repurposed it to memorialize the life of her Catholic daughter. During the antebellum era, the lives of Protestant female missionaries Harriet Newell and Ann Judson had become best-sellers, their letters and biographies staples of devotional reading for Protestant men and women alike.<sup>101</sup> The parallels between the lives of Mary Ignatia Greene and Harriet Newell are striking; both women were born in Haverhill, Massachusetts, both felt a profound spiritual calling and longed to express it as missionaries, and both died young, tragic deaths before even beginning their missionary labors. Susan Batchelder, a New England Protestant and resident of Haverhill, would have been well aware of how her daughter’s life mirrored that of Protestant heroine, Harriet Newell. *Letters from Sister Mary Ignatia* would be considered a “vanity publication” by our present-day standards. The book never had the explosive readership of either the Protestant missionary narratives which it sought to emulate or the lurid “escaped nun” novels it aimed to rebuke. It was not advertised for sale in the newspaper and most likely its tooled leather binding and glossy pages were meant as a memorial to be circulated among the friends and relations who knew Mary Ignatia (and her mother) best. *Letters from Sister Mary Ignatia* boldly claimed that Catholic missionary sisters were worthy of the same admiration as their married Protestant counterparts.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, i.

<sup>101</sup> On Protestant devotional reading in the nineteenth century and Harriet Newell’s place within that canon, see Mary Kelley, “Pen and Ink Communion: Evangelical Reading and Writing in Antebellum America” *New England Quarterly* 84 (2011), 555-587.; Mary Cayton, “Canonizing Harriet Newell: Women, the Evangelical Press, and the Foreign Mission Movement in New England, 1800–1840,” in *Competing Kingdoms: Women, Mission, Nation, and the American Protestant Empire, 1812–1960*, ed. Barbara Reeves-Ellington, Kathryn Kish Sklar, and Connie A. Shemo (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 86–87

The relationship between the written word and outbursts of violence against Shakers, Catholics, and Grahamites points to the changing nature of print in this era. Through the anti-Shaker pamphleteering of Colonel Smith, Eunice Chapman and Mary Marshall Dyer, allegations of sexual and gender disorder among celibate Shakers could be deployed through print to generate a mob mentality and a localized desire for vigilante justice. Writers, editors, and publishers fanned the embers of the burning of the Ursuline convent at Charlestown to reap profits and market convent tales to a diverse reading public across class lines. The efforts of the Grahamites to connect through *The Graham Journal* serve as an important reminder that print could be a tool for institution-building as much as for profit or violence. Eventually, recognizing print culture's power and influence, Catholics and Shakers put aside their mistrust of the written word; the technology of print was just too advantageous to be disregarded. Pamphlets about celibate Shakers inspired frenzy, tales of escaped nuns turned outrageous profits, and a journal for sexual reformers created a regional culture of reform. The following chapter will explore the similarity and content of the tropes surrounding sexual restraint used against Shakers, Catholics, and Grahamites in newspapers, pamphlets, melodramas, and fiction in greater detail.

## Chapter 2

### Vinegar-faced Sisters and Male Monsters: The Gender of Sexual Restraint

There was gender trouble afoot in the physiological lectures of Mary Gove in the spring of 1839. A devotee of the infamous reformer Sylvester Graham, Gove had made a career for herself as a traveling lecturer, preaching the benefits of sexual restraint and the Graham system to exclusively female audiences. However, James Gordon Bennett's *Morning Herald* painted a picture of Mary Gove's lectures as a carnivalesque spectacle of gender and sexual inversion, where the most fashionable and respectable ladies of New York society eagerly listened to a strange woman tell them "of things that they heretofore have been taught to think of with dread, if not with fear and trembling; and show them parts and parcels of anatomy, many of which they have been forbidden to look upon." Mary Gove, "reputedly pious, modest and delicate," held the ladies in the audience spellbound with her knowledge of Galen and Aristotle. The newspaper reported that the unassuming Quaker matron "prepares a piquant and spicy dish of this forbidden fruit and serves it up for a dessert at 4 o'clock P.M. three times a week at 25 cents a plate full for each guest."<sup>102</sup>

To this already transgressive scene, the *Morning Herald* added its own dollop of farce in the form of a correspondent, "Ariel, our tricky spirit," a male reporter who managed to infiltrate the female sanctum of Gove's lecture hall in drag. "Dressed in a very beautiful white silk petticoat, muslin frock, silk stockings, sandal shoes, thick white veil. And a set of false ringlets that hid his features" the *Herald's* Ariel went to Mrs. Gove's lectures "to pass for a pretty young

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<sup>102</sup> "Mrs. Gove's Extraordinary Anatomical Lectures," *Morning Herald*, April 20, 1839.

married lady, and to learn the mysteries of life, and death, resurrection of dry bones and so on.” His costume fooled the women in attendance and so he was able to report for the *Herald*’s readers of how the modest Mrs. Gove “as the she serpent of old” dispensed forbidden fruit to the Eves in the audience.<sup>103</sup> “Ariel” alleged that most of the women in the audience “aged 15 to 50” were “young and unmarried,” and therefore should not be seeing the colored plates representing the male and female form or learning the details of how a Caesarian section was performed.

Most titillating and disturbing of all were Gove’s frank proscriptions against masturbation; “Ariel” reported “She then said something about vice in solitude which I could not understand, as I have always thought that ladies could do no wrong, unless a gentleman was with them either to tempt or be tempted.” When Mrs. Gove spoke of these things and used the correct anatomical language for the male and female reproductive organs “there was a general rustling of silks and moving of hands.” Gove further elaborated on a practice she called “dodging,” which implied a wife’s refusal of her husband’s sexual advances. The lecturer advised married women to make every tenant of her their households, including their husbands, “keep within strict limits; indulge not in any thing.” Some of Mary Gove’s advice to wives was deemed too indecent to be printed in the *Morning Herald*—it must have been quite scandalous indeed, for the paper had no such qualms about covering the sensational murder of prostitute Helen Jewett in 1836.<sup>104</sup> Gove gave her own testimony as a woman reformed from these vices and urged women to exercise restraint, so as to ensure long healthy lives for themselves and their children. “I abused myself in my young days,” she admitted, and further confessed to crimes of tight lacing, high living, as well as other evils she declined to name. Gove assured her audience that by following the

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<sup>103</sup> “Mrs. Gove’s Extraordinary Lectures on Obstetrics and Female Anatomy,” *Morning Herald*, April 10, 1839.

<sup>104</sup> Helen Jewett (October 18, 1813 – April 10, 1836) was an upscale New York City prostitute whose murder, along with the subsequent trial and acquittal of her alleged killer, Richard P. Robinson, became a media sensation in the 1830s. Andie Tucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America’s First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1994), 37-45.

Graham system of diet and sexual restraint, her health was restored and she enjoyed more vitality than ever before.<sup>105</sup>

What to make of “Ariel” in the *Morning Herald’s* 1839 rendering of *Some Like It Hot*? Did James Gordon Bennett really send a male reporter in drag to get the scoop on what went on behind closed doors at Mary Gove’s lectures? Or was “Ariel” in fact pulling more of a *Victor/Victoria*—a woman posing as a man posing as a woman? Both possibilities are fascinating to contemplate, but unfortunately “Ariel” is one of those historical mysteries that can’t be known. But perhaps like the parable of the “She-romps,” a supposed all-female 18<sup>th</sup> century gathering alluded to by Michael Warner in *Publics and Counterpublics*, “Ariel’s” real gender identity is beside the point.<sup>106</sup> The comedic image of a man decked out in false ringlets and silk petticoats to eavesdrop on the ladies highlights the gender disorder of the Grahamites and the threat their advocacy of sexual restraint posed to society. Moreover, it reveals the antebellum penchant for voyeurism. Bennett’s *Morning Herald* was a penny paper, but it was no “flash” or sporting rag. To view and witness the grotesque and obscene was not something relegated exclusively to an urban underworld, but a pastime middle-class readers could indulge in safely within their own parlor walls.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> “Mrs. Gove’s Extraordinary Anatomical Lectures,” *Morning Herald*, April 20, 1839.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 109-112. The “She-romps” were a group of “ladies” who wrote in to the 18<sup>th</sup> century London *Spectator* to tell of their secret doings as the female equivalent of a mock-men’s club popular among male *Spectator* readers. One “Kitty Termagant” wrote in to describe how the She-Romps meet once aweek in hired rooms to “throw off all that Modesty and Reservedness with which our sex are obliged to disguise themselves in Publick Places.” Because of the secret nature of the She-Romps meetings, Warner argues that they cannot be a proper public; their politics is opposed to the politics of a public.

<sup>107</sup> Karen Halttunen has described the proliferation of obscene material as being intrinsic to humanitarian reform literature. Halttunen, “The Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *The American Historical Review*, 100: (Apr., 1995), pp. 303-334. The “flash press” refers to a genre of newspapers geared toward an urban male public that proliferated in antebellum cities in the 1840s and 50s. They often covered topics of a sexual nature, such as prostitution. See Patricia Cline Cohen et al *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

This chapter explores how ideas about practices of sexual restraint challenged and transformed conventional gender roles in early nineteenth-century America.<sup>108</sup> The era between the American Revolution and the Civil War, was, as termed by historian Mary Ryan, a society caught “between patriarchy and domesticity,” two gender regimes that both posited very specific norms for men and women.<sup>109</sup> I argue that masculinity and femininity took on new meaning when they were outside the heterosexual matrix of marriage and childbearing. Celibate masculinity was in some ways more threatening to the status quo than celibate femininity, because for women to practice sexual restraint dovetailed neatly with rising assumptions around women’s naturally “passionless” nature. For a man to practice sexual restraint, however, bordered on the impossible. By the 1830s, the male libido had become “both naturalized and ungovernable.” If a man could not express his sexuality through the approved channel of marriage, he would be forced to turn to illicit outlets such as prostitution, seduction, or solitary vice. A man, therefore, could not choose to be celibate without his neighbors suspecting him of being a potential seducer.<sup>110</sup> These attitudes are revealed in the cottage industries of anti-Shaker and anti-Catholic pamphlets and derogatory newspaper articles published in both the “flash” weeklies as well as the mainstream press. Such writings either feminized these men as emaciated “sawdust bread eaters”—or the reverse—portrayed Catholic priests and Shaker elders as hypersexualized, demonic creatures. These debates further demonstrate there was no one

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<sup>108</sup> I understand “gender” to be, in the words of Joan Scott, “a way of referring to the social organization of the relationship between the sexes.” Furthermore, I believe that masculinity and femininity are not just whatever men and women do, but historically contingent and culturally constructed processes, subject to change over time. See Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988), 28; Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Summer, 1991), 777 ; Jeanne Boydston, “Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis” in *Gender and History* Vol.20 No.3 November 2008, pp. 558–583.

<sup>109</sup> Mary Ryan, *Mysteries of Sex: Tracing Women and Men through American History* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2006), 80.

<sup>110</sup> Susan Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 244, 207-8. Klepp argues that though many men in the nineteenth century supported family planning and desired smaller families in the industrializing era, overall, family limitation—of which abstinence was the only foolproof method—made most men resentful.

coherent definition of “masculinity;” rake culture, working-class men, middle-class reformers, and utopian dreamers were all trying to articulate who was the “right” kind of man.

In popular fiction, newspaper, and magazine articles, and first-hand accounts, sexual restraint was viewed as causing gender deviance. Refusing to engage in or deeply limiting sexual intercourse profoundly disrupted antebellum gender identities. The vast majority of Protestant middle-class consumers of these narratives, themselves outsiders to Shaker, Catholic, and Grahamite worlds, panicked at the gender trouble caused when their contemporaries took on identities that challenged the sexual status quo. These sources reveal that there was something about the act of sexual intercourse was intrinsic to nineteenth-century Americans understanding of womanhood and manhood. Attempts to redefine celibate priests and Shaker elders as rakes and seducers can be understood as a way of bringing these people back under the rubric of heterosexuality through the familiar trope of the seduction narrative. In these narratives, the only alternative to being a seducer was being a monster, irredeemably outside the realm of humanity.

For the Grahamites, Shakers, and priests and nuns who practiced sexual restraint themselves, chastity did not render the female members unfeminine or the male practitioners monstrous. In some cases, sexual restraint did indeed allow for new conceptions of what was appropriate behavior for men and women, and opened up alternative ways for men and women to relate to one another in these contexts. However, gender roles within Catholic institutions, Shaker villages, and Grahamite circles also reinforced many of the traditional ideologies of gender existing in greater American society. Though outside the definition of what society considered “normal” sexuality, fringe status did not allow these groups to completely transcend the gendered assumptions around power that pervaded antebellum America.



Investigating sexual restraint in this time period, the heyday of domesticity and separate spheres, in the words of Jeanne Boydston, allows for “multiple understandings of gender.” Allowing for gender identities beyond and within the categories of “male” and “female” can flip the script historians have all too often taken for granted, and prevent us from imposing binaries where there is indeed variation.<sup>111</sup> In terms of my study, I ask what did conventional gender look like when some of its major props—motherhood, fatherhood, and heterosexual romance—were taken away. How did men and women relate to each other in a religion that proclaimed their spiritual equality or in reform groups that gave each gender equal responsibility for sexual health? The presence of celibate persons within the historical record evoke the words of feminist theorist Monique Wittig; “the refusal to become (or to remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or a woman.”<sup>112</sup> Though Wittig’s words were written in reference to the rise of lesbian feminism of the 1970s and 1980s, I would argue they are applicable to the Shakers, priests, nuns, and reformers that figure in this study. In refusing to practice not only “normal” sexuality, but to engage in sexual intercourse, their opponents perceived them as threatening the very core of womanliness and manliness, something worth rioting about. Feminist theorists have long debated the relationship between sexuality and gender identity. While Judith Butler and others agree that non-normative sexuality does not always equal gender deviance and vice versa, there is a strong case for understanding sexuality and gender as mutually constitutive. If “normative sexuality fortifies normative gender” according to Butler, it is understandable that the abnormal sexual restraint of these historical subjects may also have

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<sup>111</sup> Boydston, “Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis,” 568-69. Two examples of historians that have investigated “multiple understandings of gender” are Nan Enstad’s *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* and George Chauncey’s *Gay New York*. Nan Enstad argues that to be a “lady” was its own gender identity in late 19<sup>th</sup> century America, inflected by class and aspirations of social status. Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>112</sup> Monique Wittig, “One is Not Born a Woman” in *The Straight Mind* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 11-12.

disrupted their performance of gender.<sup>113</sup> By engaging in sexual abstinence, Catholic nuns and Shaker sisters, vegetarian reformers and celibate Jesuits added to the patchwork definition of gender in antebellum America as surely as did more familiar images of the noble working man or the “angel in the house.”

### **Vinegar-faced Sisters and Feminine Seducers**

The pseudonymous Godfrey Greylock summed up neatly celibacy’s affect on the Shaker sisters and brothers he met on his travels through the Shaker settlement at Mount Lebanon, New York for the curious readers of his travel narrative. Nestled within the meeting house at Mount Lebanon, “the capital of the Shaker world,” he rendered the following scene. As the Shakers prepared to commence their meeting before a “fashionable mob” of Manhattanites over from the nearby Lebanon Springs resort, “a female specimen of elongated acidity went up to certain ladies who had introduced the world’s custom of carrying babies into public assemblies” and removed them. Greylock commented with a wink, “Oh, vinegar faced sister, how often in church and concert-room have we longed for a preventative police force like thine!” He further lamented the sad sight of “young girls cut off from all that sheds a charm and halo upon the years of maidenhood” and could only pray that they would one day exchange “the Shaker garb for a bridal dress.” But Greylock assured readers that pretty sisters were the exception rather than the rule. He wrote that most Shaker women did not possess the physical charms capable of attracting

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<sup>113</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Routledge, 1999), xi-xii. Butler gives a specific example in this passage of how homosexual identity (“becoming gay”) can trigger feelings of anxiety and alienation from one’s gender identity. I believe her thinking about the interconnectedness of sexuality and gender can still be applicable in a historical context, before the emergence of “modern” sexual identity. On the notion of a heterosexual matrix producing normalized gender identity see Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, Rayna Reiter, ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210; Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” in *Powers of Desire*, ed. Ann Snitnow et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 177-203. Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women” has also posited that gender identity exists within a heterosexual matrix, and that to step outside that matrix is to lose one’s gender identity.

a man; “The sallow cheeks and lackluster eyes bear sad record of the violation of Nature’s laws.” Nevertheless, Greylock wrote, “I earnestly recommend any young gentleman romantically inclined, to make the attempt, and so rescue at least one enchanted damsel from the den of these celibate dragons.”<sup>114</sup>

Lucius Sargent, a Boston-area physician, echoed very much the same sentiments when he visited Hancock and Mount Lebanon while traveling with his wife and children. “They would persuade the world’s people that all the women there are virgins...virgins in thought word & deed.” He remarked sarcastically that if she sisters were not truly virgins, “they ought to be, that is if man in the natural, not the Shaker state, has anything to say.” He further offered his official medical opinion on the matter; “they ought not to be probably if their health spirit or personal appearance are worth improving.”<sup>115</sup> For both Sargent and Greylock, unnatural celibacy plucked the roses from a healthy girl’s cheeks. Or conversely, celibate Shakerism could only be something the most sour and vinegar-faced of women could ever be attracted to, since they had no hope of gaining a husband to begin with. Finally, if pretty “damsels” resided in Shaker villages, they could not possibly be there of their own free will and were in need of red-blooded American men to rescue them away from monstrous celibate men, the “dragons” who held them in thrall.

“Escaped nun” stories popular throughout the nineteenth century provided congruent representations of celibate women. This particular genre, a cross between adventure tale and didactic anti-Catholicism, similarly portrayed the nuns as pale, sick and unhappy creatures, who because they had chose convent life and celibacy over traditional motherhood, were withering and fading. In nuns, the Protestant observer could readily observe “that profound discontent, that

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<sup>114</sup> Godfrey Greylock, *Taghconic; Or Letters and Legends About Our Summer Home* (Boston: Redding and Company, 1852), 121, 123, 129-30.

<sup>115</sup> Lucius Sargent Diary, August 11, 1860, Maine Historical Society, Portland, Maine.

pallid look, that meager countenance, those symptoms of wasting, declining nature.” Again, the celibacy of priests and nuns was regarded as not a mark of holiness, but as dangerously contrary to “nature,” marking them as abnormal and perhaps not even human. The narrator of an escaped nun story unimaginatively titled, *The Escaped Nun*, asked, “Can those vows which outrage the general propensity of nature be ever well observed, except by a few ill-constructed beings, in whom the germs of passion are injured, and who properly should be referred to the class of monsters?” Rather than eradicating the “animal functions” altogether, the convent, on the contrary, reanimated them a hundredfold in its inhabitants.<sup>116</sup>

But contrary to these portrayals of celibate women as either sickly or sour, just as often nuns (especially the authority figure of the mother superior) took on the role of masculinized seducer. Like the convicts and runaway slaves featured in Ann Fabian’s *The Unvarnished Truth*, the female protagonist of such tales needed to explain why she was taken in and deceived in order to gain credibility and the reader’s sympathy.<sup>117</sup> Frequently, the excuse given was that she was “seduced” into a convent by a two-faced charismatic female leader. In 1855’s *Stanhope Burleigh: The Jesuits in Our Homes*, the Lady Abbess “seduced” Agnes, a young sea captain’s daughter, away from “the endearments of her home, to bury herself in a convent.” The abbess is compared to a cruel general for whom “no enemy must escape the field.” The Lady Superior of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart (which had a growing presence outside Manhattan at this time) was similarly described as a woman of calculating beauty with “a graceful and winning manner.” She declares to the hero “do you think it absolutely necessary that a Lady Superior should become a hag before she is qualified to win and guide the fairest and best maidens of this heretic

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<sup>116</sup> *The Escaped Nun, Or, Disclosures of Convent Life* (New York: De Witt & Davenport, 1855), 152-54.

<sup>117</sup> Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 4-7.

Republic?”<sup>118</sup> If the nuns were not “vinegar-faced” like the Shaker sisters, it was all the better to deceive, to hide their treachery behind a lovely face. The narrator of *The Escaped Nun*, a book loosely inspired by the life of “escaped” Sister of Charity novice Josephine Bunkley, explained the secret behind the sisters’ success; “A mother of novices is the most indulgent sister that they can find...it is the most artful and refined seduction. She thickens the surrounding darkness, she lulls you into tranquility, she decoys you into her snares, she fascinates you. Ours was particularly attached to me.”<sup>119</sup> The Lady Superior was rendered mannish by her authority as well as her celibacy; rather than simply being an unattractive woman, she was endowed with a certain kind of masculine charm. The Superior was simultaneously depicted as a rake on par with the villain of the most prurient seduction novel and a wicked enchantress out of a fairy story. In this way, the innocent heroine and scheming lady superior reconfigure the archetypes of the “Poor Unfortunate” and the “Siren” present in seduction novels like *Charlotte Temple* and penny press scandals, such as the one surrounding the 1836 murder of prostitute Helen Jewett. While the heroine “seduced” in to a convent fits the figure of “Poor Unfortunate” as identified by Andie Tucher, a “sinner” but one who was all too human, her counterpart, the “Siren” was a scheming Medea-like villainess, a “predator, the gleeful incarnation of Original Sin who perversely sought the destruction of the social order.”<sup>120</sup> Such statements echo James Gordon Bennett’s description of matron Mary Gove as a “she-serpent.” And yet, ironically, in her role as “Siren” the lady superior’s crime was not acting as procuress for a house of ill repute, but “seducing” promising

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<sup>118</sup> The Sisters of the Sacred Heart were the female order of nuns affiliated with the Jesuits. As there was specifically a strain of anti-Jesuit sentiment within a more general anti-clerical and anti-Catholic sentiment, they were singled out for their affiliations with the Jesuit order. Helen Dhu, *Stanhope Burleigh or the Jesuits in Our Homes* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1855), 345.

<sup>119</sup> *The Escaped Nun*, 28.

<sup>120</sup> Andie Tucher has traced these archetypes through the seduction novels of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century through the penny press and female moral reform literature of the 1820s and 1830s. She also argues that James Gordon Bennett also cast Helen Jewett as a “Siren,” contrary to his rivals in the penny press, who preferred to depict her as an innocent seduced into a tragic life of dissipation, ending in her untimely death. Tucher, 67, 63. For more on the life and death of Helen Jewett see Patricia Cline Cohen *The Murder of Helen Jewett*, (New York: Random House, 1999).

young women away from traditional marriage (and often Protestantism) and into the celibate sisterhood. The sexualized language employed to describe these female seducers also gave readers more than a hint of lesbian innuendo. Though homosocial relationships were common for both men and women during this period, flash newspapers point to the fact that many sporting men found the idea of two women in sexual relationship more than a little titillating.<sup>121</sup>

Nuns were masculinized to the point where some suspected them as posing as male impersonators. Though many “escaped nun” and anti-Catholic stories warned against Irish servants being clandestine nuns, secretly teaching children Catholic religion and spying on Protestant families, two novels, *The Female Jesuit* and *Danger in the Dark*, both suggested that nuns went about society passing as men. Even the title of *The Female Jesuit* (so successful it spawned a sequel, *The Female Jesuit Abroad*) suggested that nuns were but the equivalent of female priests—and in anti-Catholic circles, there was no priest more cunning or deceitful than a Jesuit.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, *The Female Jesuit* deviated from the standard escaped nun narrative in that the “escaped nun” protagonist, Marie, is not a sympathetic character at all, but an unrepentant manipulator, whose “escape” from convent life turns out to be yet another ruse for her to defraud the kindly Protestants who have taken her in. The book claimed that Marie was not the only one of her kind and that there were many such “female Jesuits” at large in American cities. One such person was a Philadelphian named “Theodore” who disguised him/herself and worked as a waiter. Originally educated in England, she was affiliated with the Sisters of Charity in New Orleans and Baltimore. On her superior’s command:

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<sup>121</sup> One such short story appeared in the *Boston Satirist and Blade* involved a woman impersonating a man, named “Billy,” who attends an “underworld” ball and gets propositioned by one of the city’s most prominent courtesans. “Dissipation: A Tale of Charlestown,” *Boston Satirist and Blade*, February 19, 1848.

<sup>122</sup> The Know-Nothing movement, while anti-Catholic in general, targeted Jesuits specifically. Jesuits had been singled out for persecution from within and without since their inception and were sometimes regarded as being a secret society within the Catholic Church. See Raymond Schroth, *The American Jesuits: A History* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 73.

she cut short her hair, dressed herself in a smart-looking waiter's jacket and trousers, and, with the best recommendations for intelligence and capacity, she, in her new dress, applied for a situation as a waiter at Gadsby's Hotel in Washington city... Now the Jesuit was in her glory. Now the lay sister had an opportunity of knowing many of our national secrets, as well as the private character of some of our eminent statesmen. Now it was known whether Henry Clay was a gambler; whether Daniel Webster was a libertine; whether John C Calhoun was an honorable but credulous man.<sup>123</sup>

*The Escaped Nun* claimed that the infamous Hotel Dieu of Montreal contained a room of disguises, so that nuns could costume themselves as schoolteachers, maids, and even priests. "They are often mistaken for men, especially for priests" the book alleged because "in the evening it is not very difficult for a woman to pass for a man in a crowd, when dressed with care, and somewhat practiced beforehand, especially with one or two real men to accompany her."<sup>124</sup> These spurious accusations served to further render nuns as monstrous and deceptive women, beyond the pale of "normal" middle-class white femininity.

Gender deviance among nuns held anti-Catholics and readers of escaped nun tales transfixed with equal parts fascination and horror. The climax of many an escaped nun tale from the antebellum era was the veiling ceremony in which a prospective nun cut her hair short as a renunciation of vanity and the pleasures of the world. Protestant curiosity about this practice was not just limited to fiction. When Mary Barber made her vows at the Ursuline Convent at Charlestown in 1828, Bishop Fenwick and Superior Mary Edmond St. George Moffat invited "a number of respectable Protestant ladies" as a political move to cultivate interest in the school and the goodwill of the community. However, the Protestants in attendance were disappointed that

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<sup>123</sup> Jemima Thompson Luke, *The Female Jesuit: Or, The Spy in the Family* (New York: M.W. Dodd, 1851), vii-ix.

<sup>124</sup> *The Escaped Nun*, 244.

though they were allowed to witness the prayers, blessings and incense of the ritual, its most sensational aspect was not open to the public.<sup>125</sup>

This aspect of Catholic ritual was treated with the most prurient curiosity and was often described in highly sexualized terms. The moment of “sacrifice” was depicted in art from the shoddiest engravings found in dime novel, *The Nun of St. Ursula* (1845), to more middling gift book illustrations, to Robert Weir’s high art masterpiece *Taking the Veil* (1863). The frontispiece of *The Nun of St. Ursula* [Figure 3] illustrated the novel’s point of climax and terror, as Cecile, the damsel in distress kneels before the altar, the Superior with flashing shears in hand. Fortunately, she is rescued at that moment by her pirate brother; “The fatal scissors were in the hands of the Abbess—a cluster of beautiful curls was read! When suddenly; as if by enchantment, a broad glare of light gleamed through the windows and fell upon the dark figures there assembled...The Abbess dropped her scissors and began repeating her Aves.”<sup>126</sup> Notably, this scene was one of only two illustrations in the entire cheaply printed volume; the other depicted the convent engulfed in flames.

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<sup>125</sup> Lusignan Shultz, *Fire and Roses*, 57-60; Diary of Bishop Benedict Fenwick, August 15, 1828, Archdiocese of Boston archives.

<sup>126</sup> Hazel, *The Nun of St. Ursula*, 1, 49.





CHAPEL OF THE URSULINES—CECILE TAKING THE VEIL.

*See Chapter IX.*

Figure 3. “Cecile Taking the Veil,” *The Nun of St. Ursula* (1845). University Archives, Catholic University of America.



Figure 4. "The Sacrifice," *Cabinet of Modern Art* (1852) Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

As engravings were expensive to produce, they were often reused, especially in gift book production. In one engraving entitled, "The Sacrifice," [Figure 4] a young blonde woman, teary-

eyed, kneels to make her vows. One sister cuts her long hair, as the abbess stands behind her with the white veil, the bridal crown discarded. This image was reproduced no less than four times between 1849 and 1855, and was used to illustrate both poems and short stories. Compared to other gift book engravings, an image of a nun taking the veil appeared alongside depictions both domestic and exotic; from Venus on her half-shell and dusky women wearing Spanish *mantillas* to innocent and sentimental scenes of a young girl with her dog, or of a mother bathing a child. The inclusion of images like “The Sacrifice” as well as other depictions of nuns inside gift books, shows that this imagery was exotic enough to be interesting, yet wholesome enough to be marketed to young women or a family audience.<sup>127</sup>

Hudson River school artist Robert Weir’s *Taking the Veil* [Figure 5], inspired by the painter’s trip to Italy in the 1820s, portrayed the veiling ceremony in lavish and transcendent detail. It is a large painting, measuring approximately four feet tall by three feet wide. Weir depicted a young nun clad in bridal finery (as it was customary for nuns as “brides of Christ” to wear wedding gowns before taking the habit) kneeling in submission before a priest. The flowers that adorned her bridal crown have been cast aside, as if to suggest the ephemeral and transient nature of her virginal beauty. Weir rendered the moment exquisitely, even managing to capture the exact nature of the light as it filtered through stained glass windows. The painting became the biggest commercial success of Weir’s career and was exhibited to more than a thousand paying viewers at Goupil’s Gallery in New York when it debuted.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> This image appeared twice as “The Sacrifice” first in the *Cabinet of Modern Art* (Philadelphia: EH Butler & Co., 1852), 63 and in *Missionary Manual* (Philadelphia: Cuthbert Montgomery, 1855), 366. It also appeared as “Taking the Veil,” *Friendship’s Offering* (Boston: Phillips & Sampson, 1849), “The Bride of Heaven” in *Affection’s Gift*, (Philadelphia, E.H. Butler & Co, 1855). It was crafted by the noted engraver Sartain. Based on marginalia present in the American Antiquarian Society’s editions of these books, one (*Cabinet of Modern Art*) was presented as a Christmas gift from a mother to her daughter; another (*Friendship’s Offering*) from a family to their music teacher, Mr. Kimball, who in turn re-gifted it to his second wife.





Figure 5. Robert Weir, *Taking the Veil*, (1863). Yale University Art Gallery.

It is understandable why this ritual may have been so sexualized by the Protestant public. The veil ceremony was effectually a marriage ceremony, where a nun married herself to Christ

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<sup>128</sup> David Morgan and Sally Promey, eds. *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 125-127.

the bridegroom, and renounced traditional marriage and wifhood in favor of her order and the company of her sisters. If the ceremony itself was a kind of wedding, inevitably some kind of consummation must follow. Long, flowing hair was viewed in nineteenth-century Western culture as an extension of a woman's sexuality as well as an essential marker of her femininity. Indeed, in the mid-nineteenth century, women's hair played a key role in performing middle-class sentimentality, used as it was as tokens of remembrance, such as the practice of keeping a lock of a close friend or family member's hair or in the hairwork jewelry crafted for mourning.<sup>129</sup> Anthropologist Wendy Cooper has likened the shearing of a novice's hair in the veiling ceremony to a kind of ritualized castration, while others have interpreted it as a loss of her individual identity and embrace of a collective one, symbolized by the identical habit worn by all the sisters of a given order.<sup>130</sup> Antebellum Protestants seized on the cutting of a woman's hair and gave that process a profound sexual charge, to the point where the priest performing the deed seems more like a rapist than a clergyman. In *Danger in the Dark*, an anti-Catholic novel set in Cincinnati, Anna Maria and Arabella are duped in to becoming nuns by their scheming confessor, Father Dupin. As they make their vows, Dupin says:

Heaven requires sacrifice! Long hair is an ornament and only fosters pride, and as pride becomes not saints, you must now be shorn." Saying which, he inserted into Anna Maria's ebon locks, the sacred scissors, like his own heart relentless and remorseless! The monster ceased not to despoil until the head was made bare, and the last ringlet dropped from the temples of beauty!<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 139. Hair was made not only into jewelry, but embroidered into artwork, made into wreaths, rings and watch chains. Wearing an object made from a deceased loved one's hair showed the wearer to be a person of sincerity and feeling. See also Helen Sheumaker, *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

<sup>130</sup> Cooper, *Hair, Sex, Society, Symbolism* (New York: Stein, 1971) The connection between a woman's hair and sexual power can be seen in Victorian literature as well as paintings, exemplified by the art of Dante Rossetti. See Elisabeth G. Gitter "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination," *PMLA* 99 (1984), 936-954.

<sup>131</sup> Isaac Kelso, *Danger in the Dark: a Tale of Intrigue and Priestcraft* (Cincinnati: Queen City Publishing House, 1855), 80-81.

At the last, they are no longer women, but Dupin's "mutilated victims." In another novel, *Stanhope Burleigh*, the fair Genevra actually dies of grief at the moment when they are about to cut her hair. Her death transforms the hero, Stanhope, into a fierce opponent of the Jesuits.<sup>132</sup>

These sensational novels tell us that for a woman to lose her femininity, was both a spectacle to be witnessed and also a fate worse than death. In cutting her hair, a nun lost one of the primary markers of femaleness at a time when, as Ruth Bloch argues, gender roles were predicated on men and women's inherent distinctiveness.<sup>133</sup> Fears of "female Jesuits" masquerading about were but another iteration of the growing anxiety that pervaded the newfound "world of strangers." In an urbanizing society where anonymity had replaced the face-to-face relationships of an earlier era, the markers of respectability coded in manners, dress, and yes, hairstyles, carried a great deal of weight. A woman's beauty in the antebellum era was not simply a matter of aesthetics, but part and parcel of the social order because of the "regulating" and "refining" influence it had over men. For a woman to deliberately sabotage her femininity, by swathing her figure in a shapeless Shaker gown or nun's habit, went against "a social responsibility to cultivate her own beauty."<sup>134</sup>

Moreover, the inherent sadism depicted in an anti-Catholic novel like *Danger in the Dark* was not singular to the "escaped nun" genre and well within the antebellum era's fascination with the "pornography of pain." "Escaped nun" stories traded in sensationalism and spectacles of suffering not only to titillate readers with depictions of eroticized violence, but to illustrate

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<sup>132</sup> Dhu, *Stanhope Burleigh*, 399.

<sup>133</sup> Bloch, "Untangling the Roots of Modern Sex Roles," in *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture*, 43-45. This is in contrast to the early modern era where women were often viewed as inferior men. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century witnessed a transition to a more "horizontal" understanding of gender difference. Under the separate spheres model, each gender had its realm of expertise.

<sup>134</sup> Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 71. Halttunen bases these interpretations on prescriptive literature such as that found in the pages of *Godey's Lady's Book*. It should be noted that *Godey's* emphasized women's moral beauty as well as their physical beauty, and actually argued that improving one's morality could beautify one's outward appearance. As members of what many Protestants would consider a corrupt and decadent religion, it seems nuns had neither physical nor moral beauty.

that Catholicism was horrific and in desperate need of reform. Classics of temperance and antislavery literature such as *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* similarly deployed beatings, whippings, and other forms of violence to impress upon readers the urgency of their cause.<sup>135</sup> Anti-Catholic writers drew parallels with the “slavery of the mind” fostered by Catholicism and the “slavery of the body” practiced in the South, declaring the latter to actually be “less degrading” to a human being than the former.<sup>136</sup> Henry Hazel and other writers of “escaped nun” fiction used their tales to advocate for laws outlawing convents on American soil, and encouraged readers sympathetic to abolitionism to consider nunneries a kind of female slavery.<sup>137</sup> One pamphlet, entitled *Priest's Prisons for Women* (1856), published during the height of the sectional crisis, explained that a convent was “an institution whose object it is to kidnap their daughters, and imprison them as *free white slaves*, the property of the priests.”<sup>138</sup> Such texts implied that while individual Catholic persons may be tolerated, Catholic institutions that trained Catholic clergy had no place in America.

Publishers and reviewers alike viewed escaped nun stories not as trashy adventure stories, but as reform literature. For example, reviewers of *Stanhope Burleigh* compared the book to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and hoped the anti-Jesuit novel would do for Know-Nothingism what Mrs. Stowe's book had done for antislavery. Frederick Douglass agreed and championed *Stanhope Burleigh's* potential twice in his paper, *The Northern Star*. Douglass encouraged the pseudonymous author to reveal himself, calling him “a man of no ordinary powers of mind, and

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<sup>135</sup> Halttunen, “Pornography of Pain,” 320-324. I agree with Karen Halttunen, that pornography in the nineteenth century goes beyond mere depictions of genital contact and bleeds over into areas which included the “eroticization of pain.” Bruce Dorsey has argued that anti-Catholicism was indeed an antebellum reform movement, and includes it along with antislavery, women's rights, and temperance in his study. See Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>136</sup> Mrs. L Larned, *The American Nun or the Affects of Romance*, (Boston: Otis, Broaders & Co, 1836), 126.

<sup>137</sup> Hazel, *The Nun of St. Ursula*, 63.

<sup>138</sup> Andrew B. Cross, *Priests Prisons for Women* (Baltimore: Sherwood & Co, 1854), 5.

no uncommon daring.”<sup>139</sup> Douglass’s enthusiasm for *Stanhope Burleigh* demonstrates that “escaped nun” stories had wide appeal in reform circles, even across racial lines. After the Civil War, evangelical publishing houses such as the Presbyterian Publication Committee regularly released “escaped nun” stories along with temperance and more general religious fiction into their output. One Presbyterian author, Julia McNair Wright, produced a wildly successful series of heavily illustrated “escaped nun” stories for them; *Almost a Nun* (1868), *Priest and Nun* (1869), and *Almost a Priest* (1870).<sup>140</sup> McNair Wright also wrote several temperance novels and general domestic advice manuals, showing how anti-Catholicism was part and parcel of reform culture for many nineteenth-century Protestants.

Changes in print technology as well as changes in the ethnic makeup of American society meant that these later escaped nun stories had a broader impact than earlier anti-Catholic writings. In the 1840s and 50s, Catholicism was not merely a symbol of foreign decadence as it has been in the 1770s when the Sons of Liberty raised their “No Popery” flag. Nor were Catholics confined to a few select, prominent institutions like Charlestown’s Ursuline convent like they were in 1834. A sharp increase in immigration from Ireland and Catholic regions of Germany had dramatically transformed the landscape of the urban Northeast at mid-century. In 1860, it is estimated that one quarter of all residents of New York City were Irish.<sup>141</sup> As a reaction to the perceived Catholic threat to American democracy, Nativist Protestants founded the Know-Nothing Party in the 1850s. The Know-Nothings experienced a near-meteoric rise to power: in 1854, the party boasted over 10,000 local lodges and more than a million members, as

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<sup>139</sup> “Stanhope Burleigh,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, February 23, 1855; February 2, 1855.

<sup>140</sup> Julia McNair Wright, *Almost a Nun* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Publication Committee, 1868); *Priest and Nun* (Philadelphia: Crittenden & McKinney, 1869); *Almost a Priest* (Philadelphia: McKinney and Martin, 1870). McNair Wright’s series was very successful according to her publishers. The first edition of *Priest and Nun* sold out within two months. For more information on the career of Julia McNair Wright, see Susan Mitchell Yohn, *A Contest of Faiths: Missionary Women and Pluralism in the American Southwest* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 32.

<sup>141</sup> Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 82.



well as eight governors, 100 congressman, and the mayors of Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Chicago.<sup>142</sup>

The increased enthusiasm for “escaped nun” stories in the 1850s was directly tied to the rise of Know-Nothingism. “Escaped nun” stories were not produced in isolation, but were marketed alongside and also helped to market a wider range of anti-Catholic print. For example, the back title page of the memoirs of escaped postulant Josephine Bunkley advertised an entire anti-Catholic line for sale, with such works as *Mexico and Its Religion*, *Seymour’s Jesuits*, *Inez a tale of the Alamo*, *Le Curé Manqué* all available for interested readers and marketed to a middle-class audience. James Harper, Bunkley’s publisher, was elected Mayor of New York in 1844 and ran on a Nativist Republican party ticket. Anti-Catholic tales like Josephine Bunkley’s provided Harper with political as well as financial gain. They were more than just titillating stories, they served as the cultural wing of the Know-Nothing Movement.<sup>143</sup> Acquisition of predominantly Catholic territory after the Mexican-American war in 1848 saw an uptick in publishers adding Southwestern themed anti-Catholic stories to their lines.

“Escaped nun” tales and the gendered fears they expressed did not exist in isolation, they were rushed these into print deliberately to take advantage of the anti-Catholic spirit that was sweeping the country. Some newspapers like the *National Aegis* were not afraid to call publishers out on their boldfaced opportunism. The Worcester paper quite rightly saw that DeWitt & Davenport’s *The Escaped Nun* was an attempt by that publisher to recreate some of the financial success “of that notorious work, *Maria Monk*” and expected it to become a best-seller among the Know-Nothing crowd. The editors of the *Aegis* knew that such books would

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 97. The Know-Nothings would fall from power just as quickly as a result of the coming sectional crisis. The party was split over the expansion of slavery and their political clout evaporated in the wake of the Civil War. However, anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiment endured in American society long after the Know-Nothings were gone.

<sup>143</sup> Exman, *The House of Harper*, 30.

sell precisely because they confirmed the Know-Nothing worldview; “here they can read of horrible, Jesuitical schemes and conspiracies, of loathsome dungenons, secret passages, trap-doors, dead-falls, drunken priests, immoral lady superiors and tortured nuns.”<sup>144</sup> Though these works claimed they wished to open the public’s eyes to the horrors of convent life, they were undoubtedly just as interested in opening the Know-Nothing’s pocketbooks.

Perhaps because they never advocated lifelong celibacy or withdrew from conventional society like their Shaker and Catholic counterparts, far less opprobrium was heaped upon the female followers of Sylvester Graham. However, the movement’s frank discussion of female and male sexuality both frightened and titillated detractors. Transcendentalist Orestes Bronson lamented the preponderance of “disinterested lecturers, ready in public discourses to explain to his wife all the mysteries of the conception and birth of a human being.” By granting women an equal say in the sexual politics of their households, men such as Bronson saw it as an assault on male bastions of privilege. Middle-class men were now “bound hand and foot, and delivered up to” the likes of Graham, William Andrus Alcott, and Mary Gove, “sage Doctors and sager Doctresses, who have volunteered their services in the management of his affairs. He has nothing he can call his own, not even his will. There is left him no spot, no sanctum, into which some association committee cannot penetrate....What is most intimate and sacred in his private relations, is laid before the public.”<sup>145</sup> In this logic, power could not be granted to female reformers without depriving white men of their privilege. No wonder the men attacking Graham’s “Lecture to Mothers” at Boston’s Amory Hall hooted and hollered and made the noises of barnyard animals when female Grahamites attempted to speak, effectively reducing

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<sup>144</sup> “The Escaped Nun,” *National Aegis*, August 15, 1855.

<sup>145</sup> Though Brownson later converted to Catholicism and repented reform beliefs in the 1840s, during the years he was editor of the *Quarterly Review*, he was still largely allied with reform and antislavery causes. “Review of *The Mother in Her Family*,” *The Boston Quarterly Review* (1838).

them to a level less than human. In the many Graham riots, it seemed that if women were going to attempt to seize sexual knowledge, they must also be willing to face male violence. The members of Boston's Ladies' Physiological Institute (LPI), founded under the auspices of Dr. Harriot K. Hunt in 1848, recalled that "the members of the Institute were stoned on their way to meetings, and had to cover their faces with thick veils so they would not be recognized." Even though the LPI was much less radical than the Grahamite women's groups of the 1830s, the society still received a frosty reception from Boston society for the supposed crime of teaching women about their own anatomy. Only one minister, a Reverend Jenks, would agree to officiate at their first anniversary.<sup>146</sup>

If anything, female Grahamites were suspected of being helplessly feminine. Like the heroines of the escaped nun tales, they were a chorus of "poor unfortunates," hopelessly enthralled by the siren songs of Mary Gove and Sylvester Graham. While reform publications such as the *Liberator* and *Zion's Herald* championed Gove's lectures to women, James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Morning Herald* had a distinct ax to grind, and ran a series of derisive articles against Gove during her New York lecture tour in the spring of 1839. Bennett was characterized by his opponents as utterly unscrupulous in pursuit of a story and fond of launching print attacks "without discrimination, without fear, and often without discernible reason." And though he was as likely to lambast free love as often as prudery, he had no affection for the Grahamites. In a twist of unique irony, his future professional archrival Horace Greeley, founder of the *New York Tribune*, was a fervent Grahamite and had met his wife in a

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<sup>146</sup>"Eunice Cobb, Universalist Pioneer," *The Bulletin*, 24, (1950).; Ladies Physiological Institute Handbook (1948), Records of the Ladies' Physiological Institute of Boston and Vicinity, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College. The LPI would have the last laugh in all of this; they survived for over a hundred years and when they finally disbanded in the 1970, they were the oldest continually operating women's club in New England.

Graham boarding house.<sup>147</sup> Bennett repeatedly lumped Mary Gove in with the most scandalous women of her day, fellow “petticoat lecturers” Abby Kelley, the famous abolitionist, and free-love advocate Fanny Wright.<sup>148</sup> He even ran articles linking Gove to the notorious Madam Restell, despite the fact that as an advocate of sexual restraint, Mary Gove was promoting the far opposite of abortion. A young lady, “Lizzie,” wrote in to defend Mary Gove’s lectures to ladies as beneficial, and not at all of an “evil” or “deleterious tendency.” She supposed some “quack physicians” might object that “a female should stand boldly forth and enlighten her sex with a knowledge of which many of them profess to understand, but are woefully deficient.” Of Bennett himself, Lizzie chastised him personally; “I am perfectly astonished that you, James Gordon Bennett, who has heretofore been the champion of our sex, should be guilty of writing in the strain in which you have indulged in this morning’s paper.” She blamed it upon his seven rejected marriage proposals and said, given his attitudes toward Mrs. Gove, no lady would marry him now and few ladies would continue to read his paper. For his part, Bennett replied condescendingly that Mary Gove was no less than the serpent in the Garden of Eden, tempting the pure and virginal Eves of the city with forbidden knowledge of “anatomy and obstetrics,” which would inevitably prove their downfall. Bennett insisted, “Since the fall of man, she is the first woman who has attempted to lecture on anatomy.”<sup>149</sup> Like Sylvester Graham, Mary Gove was characterized as a monster—(no less than Satan) for daring to talk frankly about female bodies in the name of sexual restraint. And like those other symbols of female authority—the

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<sup>147</sup> At the time when Bennett was attacking Mary Gove’s lectures in 1839, Greeley was not yet a serious professional rival for Bennett, so Bennett’s hatred of Grahamites cannot be connected to his dislike of Greeley. See Tucher, *Froth and Scum*, 19, 108.

<sup>148</sup> “Abby Kelly, the new Prophetess,” *Morning Herald*, May 29, 1840; “The Case of Mrs. Restell,” *Morning Herald*, August 21, 1839; “Mysterious,” *Morning Herald*, Tuesday, May 7, 1839. Bennett noted that Kelley and Gove were both natives of Lynn, Massachusetts and therefore “possess all the peculiar and distinctive parts of character that are common to the females of certain parts of New England.”

<sup>149</sup> “Mrs Gove’s Lectures on Female Anatomy,” *Morning Herald*, April 3, 1839.

Lady Superiors of the escaped nun tales—her seemingly pleasant and respectable demeanor was naught but a façade.

### **“The Fanatic, the Jesuit, and the Voluptuary”—the Male Monsters of Sexual Restraint**

If women who practiced sexual restraint were characterized as full of vinegar or as beguiling as the serpent in the garden of Eden, men were considered even more monstrous and predatory. To be a celibate Catholic priest or Shaker brother, disinterested in biological fatherhood and the accumulation of wealth, was contrary to every expectation for white male citizens. And for the middle-class white men who made up the majority of Grahamites, to live on “sawdust bread and water,” to choose to limit sexual intercourse with their wives to once a month at maximum, and to voluntarily relinquish both privilege and pleasure was unthinkable to the point of insanity to most of their contemporaries. Complete sexual abstinence as practiced by priests and Shaker brothers became an impossible sexual identity for antebellum men due to the reconfigurations of sexual virtue in this period.

It had not always been evident that men were the more passionate and libidinous sex. Prior to the nineteenth century, women were considered to be “naturally” more passionate while men were considered in possession of greater reason and self-control. Contestations over celibacy reveal much about the early republic as a time when sexual values and behaviors were very much in flux. Richard Godbeer and Ruth Bloch have both written about the shift in the gendering of sexual virtue from men to women in the Anglo-American world during the Revolutionary era. Godbeer writes of how “characteristics previously associated with women, especially lust and deceit, were transposed onto men” in the new moralistic and didactic

literature that portrayed men as seducers and women as victims.<sup>150</sup> Others have written about the early republic and Jacksonian eras as a time of conflict between new ideas of male self-discipline or “manliness” versus a much more hedonistic and rakish masculinity embraced by middle-class “libertine republicans” and working-class “jolly fellows.”<sup>151</sup> Beginning in the 1820s, a new kind of “cult of true manhood,” based on discipline and self-restraint, encouraged middle-class white men to work hard and eschew frivolity in order to get ahead in the emerging marketplace.<sup>152</sup> Richard Stott has described how this reforming culture nearly eliminated the male “jolly culture” of drinking, fighting and wenching from New England’s small towns by the 1830s, displacing it into the frontier west and the “moral regions” of urban cities.<sup>153</sup> The gentleman of property and standing behind anti-Graham riots in Portland, Providence and Boston, equated freedom with the right to sexual pleasure. Libertine republicans who founded the flash press and patronized the “moral districts,” held that “sexual passion was natural, its elimination impossible, and its repression injurious.”<sup>154</sup> It is certainly true that Grahamite men especially fit the ideal of the reforming “manliness” that libertines and jolly fellows found anathema. These debates illustrate there was not a singular and stable construct of masculinity in the antebellum era; Shaker brothers and Grahamite reformers attempted to define and redefine what it meant to be a “man” as much as cultural tastemakers and sporting men.

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<sup>150</sup> Ruth Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture*, 136-154; Godbeer, *The Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 263-67.

<sup>151</sup> Richard Stott, *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 77, 98. Clair Lyons’ *Sex Among the Rabble* also argues that prior to the nineteenth century, a transatlantic “pleasure culture” flourished in port cities in Philadelphia, and that there was a greater toleration of sexual promiscuity even within genteel circles. See Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 1, 60-61, 114.

<sup>152</sup> Antebellum “manliness” based on restraint contrasted with turn of the century masculinity, based on physical prowess and power has been thoroughly examined in Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 11, 13.

<sup>153</sup> Stott, 98-100. Though Stott’s work emphasizes the drinking and fighting aspects of “jolly culture,” illicit sex had always been associated with these environments.

<sup>154</sup> Haynes, *Riotous Flesh*, 89-90. On “libertine republicanism” see Cline Cohen et al, *The Flash Press*, 56-58.

In the eyes of their critics, sexual restraint weakened men. As celibacy masculinized women, some contended that it in turn effeminized men. This was especially evident in the critiques of men who adopted the Graham system, which limited sex, proscribed masturbation, and required followers to abstain from all forms of “stimulating” food. Because of censorship around sexuality in the papers of the day, critiques of Graham’s diet often stood in for his prescriptions for limiting the libido. And indeed Graham, William Andrus Alcott, and Mary Gove themselves believed that overstimulating one appetite led to sexual degeneracy; it was a perverse critique of the Grahamites’ own logic. The *New York Review* painted a portrait of “Dietetic Charlatanry” asking readers to imagine the oxymoronic nature of a Graham house feast; ‘We must think one of the rarest spectacles in the world must be (what is called) a Graham board-ing house at about the dinner hour.’ Around the table “some thirty lean-visaged, cadaverous disciples, eyeing each other askance—their looks lit up with a certain cannibal spirit; which, if there was any chance of making a full meal off each other’s bones, might perhaps break into dangerous practice. The gentlemen resemble busts cut in chalk or white flint, the lady-boarders...mummies preserved in saffron.” Another installment imagined an actor’s visit to David Cambell’s Brattle Street boardinghouse in Boston, where the proprietor answered the door, tall and gaunt, with a high-pitched “branny” voice.<sup>155</sup> “WW” a subscriber to the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, one of the preeminent medical publications of its day, declared the Graham system poisonous to masculinity, writing “Emasculation is the fruit of Grahamite fanaticism.” Sylvester Graham himself was portrayed in terms more suited to a female hysteric;

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<sup>155</sup> Reprinted from the *New York Review* in *The Graham Journal*, November 21, 1837, 257. Reprinted from the *New York Review* in *The Graham Journal*, November 28, 1837, 268-69.

“Mr. Graham’s nervous system is kept in a state of high excitation, not to say irritation, by external and internal friction, and muscular and moral exercises.”<sup>156</sup>

Grahamites did not feature as often in popular fiction as priests or Shaker brothers. A serialized short story that appeared in *Brown’s Literary Omnibus* entitled “The Grahamite and the Irish Pilot” is unique in this regard, yet perfectly captures the oddity of the male Grahamite in the public imagination. The Grahamite, is described as “thin as a whippin post. His skin looked like a blown bladder arter some of the air liked leaked out, kinder wrinkled and rumped like.” Altogether, “he put me in mind of a pair of kitchen tongs, all legs, shaft, and head, and no belly; a real gander lookin critter, as holler as a bamboo walkin cane, and twice as yaller.” Like many a Grahamite, he was a professional man, a lawyer from Maine. “Thinks I, the Lord a massy on your clients, you hungry, half-starved lookin critter, you, you’ll eat ‘em up alive, as sure as the Lord made Moses.” Like the description of the Grahamite dinner party that appeared in the *New York Review*, the Grahamite is described as being both comically thin and deprived to the point of cannibalism. In short, a “male monster.”<sup>157</sup>

As one might imagine, the “flash” and sporting papers of the day had nothing but ridicule for the ideals of sexual restraint. By the 1850s, Graham was dead, but his legacy lived on in reformers like Harry C. Wright. Wright, like Graham before him, was a true “ultraist” in every sense of the word—pacifist, feminist, abolitionist, and a staunch advocate for sexual restraint.<sup>158</sup> Though Wright was admired by the likes of Susan B. Anthony and William Lloyd Garrison, he was nothing but an object of derision to the readers of the New York flash rag, *The Broadway Belle*. *The Broadway Belle* was edited by George Thompson, author of the infamous *Venus in*

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<sup>156</sup> *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, April 20, 1836; *Ibid*, February 10, 1836.

<sup>157</sup> “The Clockmaker: Chapter XVIII: The Grahamite and the Irish Pilot.” *Brown’s Literary Omnibus*, January 12, 1838, 3-32.

<sup>158</sup> For more information on Henry C. Wright’s participation in antebellum reform movements, see Lewis Perry, *Childhood, Marriage, and Reform: Henry Clarke Wright, 1797-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).



*Boston* and other mystery of the city novels popular in the 1840s and 50s. Under the heading “Late Supper and Licentiousness” Thompson poked fun at “a pale moralist who advocates in exclusively vegetable diet. His remarks are all very fine; but we go in for the good things in life nevertheless. The luxuries he mentions are not ‘bad to take.’ ” He included a snippet of Wright’s railings in his book *Marriage and Parentage* against “oyster stews” and “terrapin soups,” those high-priced delicacies “eaten, in many instances, in high (low) life, expressly to beget unhallowed desires! Oh, shame, where is thy blush!”<sup>159</sup> The following week, Thompson went after Wright again for his warnings against overindulgence in marital sex. He proclaimed (tongue planted firmly in cheek) Wright’s work “True as gospel, every word of it....Rum is a hard master, but the other thing is a tyrannical and cruel mistress.”<sup>160</sup>

A visual representation of a Grahamite, a true “saw-dust bread eater” appeared in the political cartoon “The Great Republican Reform Party” [Figure 6] by lithographer Louis Maurer. Maurer’s image portrayed the growing Republican Coalition in the broadest and most burlesque terms; lumping together “Fourierists” with women’s rights advocates, free lovers, African-Americans, and a Catholic priest. All of these figures are meant to inspire fear as they petition John C. Frémont; a Bloomer, wearing spurs with a whip in her hand, a free man of color dressed in ruffles and finery, an elderly woman spouting the principles of free love, and lastly, the emaciated Fourierist, a sponsor of the new Maine Law, the first state law to outlaw liquor sales and a major victory for the temperance movement. Emboldened by temperance’s recent triumph, the extremely slender gentleman now declares “the first thing we want is a law making the use of Tobacco, Animal Food and Lager-beer a Capital crime.” At first glance, it would seem that only the Catholic priest is not a caricature—he is young and handsome, neatly dressed in his long

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<sup>159</sup> Henry C. Wright, *Marriage and Parentage or the Reproductive Element of Man as a Means to His Elevation and Happiness* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1855); “Late Suppers and Licentiousness,” *The Broadway Belle*, January 22, 1855.

<sup>160</sup> “Important to Husbands and Wives,” *The Broadway Belle*, January 29, 1855.

black cassock. Given antebellum Protestant's tendency to believe all priests seducers in disguise, he would have inspired fear precisely because he is portrayed as young and handsome.



Figure 6. “The Great Republican Reform Party,” Louis Mauer (1856). The Grahamite is the thin man on the far left. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

Portraying the controversy surrounding Graham in the antebellum era as a crisis of masculinity that pitted a new breed of self-disciplined reform men against an older order struggling to hold onto sexual and gustatory pleasure as male prerogatives has perhaps oversimplified the complexity of masculine identity in the 1830s. For some men, it was not a case of “either/or” but one of “both/and.” One could be a “sporting man” during one’s time doing business in the city, and accept a copy of Graham’s *Lecture to Young Men* from a concerned mother or sister on returning home for a family visit. A young clerk newly arrived in New York or Boston might have allowed himself to get swept up in the sporting culture only to

feel guilty about being lead astray, and turn to Graham's message as a means of salvation. The "flash" weeklies so popular in the 1830s-50s were peppered with advertisements promising miracle cures for "secret diseases" and "those particular afflictions arising from a secret habit, particularly in the youth of both sexes."<sup>161</sup> Might some of these men have heard of Graham's philosophy and sought to change their ways?

While Grahamites believed that sexual restraint enhanced health and longevity, many thought that sexual abstinence destroyed the male body. One can clearly see the difficulties of reconciling Shaker celibacy with male sexuality in the apostate tract written by Reuben Rathbone in 1800, *Reasons Offered for Leaving the Shakers*. Rathbone complained of his struggle "to become a *Eunuch* for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake." In trying to convince others of the dangers of the Shaker religion, Rathbone centered on the sexual unnaturalness of Shaker celibacy which went both against traditional Protestant ideals of healthy sexuality within marriage and the "new" gender ideas of libidinous masculinity. He detailed a Shaker asceticism so severe that men like himself were subject to "involuntary evacuations" of "the seed of copulation." Rathbone also related that he was sent on a missionary errand to Connecticut with the order to "Go forth and circumcise as many as you can." Circumcision is a ritual practice that confirms membership within God's chosen people and can often refer to a spiritual rather than physical state. However, given how concerned Rathbone was with controlling his sexuality, the phallic destruction conjured up by these words was probably intentional. Putting Rathbone in the context of conflicting definitions of masculinity, he emerges as being caught between the inability to control his sexuality in the "old" early modern way of exercising it "naturally" within marriage,

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<sup>161</sup> *Life in Boston and New York*, May 13, 1854.

or emulating the rakish sexuality presented in seduction literature.<sup>162</sup> Caught up in the shifting nature of gendered virtue as described by Ruth Bloch, as a celibate man, Rathbone and other celibate men possessed neither the purity associated with femaleness nor the virility of true manliness.

Castration anxiety also surfaced in the print campaign surrounding the confrontation between the Turtle Creek Shakers and the Ohio militia in 1810. Ohio convert Richard McNemar, one of the first Shaker writers to advocate for the sect in print, found it necessary to refute accusations “that the Shakers castrated all their males.” The recurring image of castration and genital mutilation in anti-Shaker accounts deserves attention. The frequent use of words like “eunuch,” “castrate” and “circumcise” implied that celibacy could only be possible through the destruction of the male body. In anti-Shaker accounts, Shaker celibates were not simply people who made a personal decision not to have sexual intercourse out of religious devotion—they were incomplete people and incomplete men. Given that most anti-Shakers held that celibacy was impossible, the only way the Shakers could possibly achieve it was through an unhealthy and unholy destruction of the male body. In the same pamphlet, McNemar also refuted the accusation that the Shakers “divested of all modesty, stripped and danced naked, in their night meetings; blew out the candles, and went into a promiscuous debauch” during their meetings. Living outside the boundaries of marriage lead the public to speculate that Shaker male sexuality ran to deviant extremes: either they were eunuchs or utterly debauched. Both kinds of

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<sup>162</sup> Reuben Rathbone, *Reasons Offered for Leaving the Shakers*, (Pittsfield, MA: Chester Smith, 1800). 3,7, 24-28. Several members of the Rathbun family joined the Shakers later to quit them. Reuben lasted longer than the rest of his family. Reuben also spelled his name differently which is not atypical for the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. They were all members of the same Western Massachusetts family. Rathbone actually had attained the position of Elder at the Hancock Massachusetts Shaker family. They took his apostasy very hard. See Daniel Goodrich’s history of the early Shaker church at Hancock, “The Rise and Progress of the Church,” Hancock Shaker Village Library, Hancock, MA.

accusations point to the notion that genuine celibacy was less believable to non-Shakers than castration or promiscuity.<sup>163</sup>

The figure of the lascivious priest became a standard stock character in both anti-Catholic pamphleteering as well as popular fiction. When a woman claiming to be the “real” Maria Monk presented herself in New York City with a babe in arms, the product of an illicit liaison with a priest at the notorious Hotel Dieu in Montreal, a great portion of the public had no trouble at all accepting Monk’s story regarding the boy’s paternity. And while a young unmarried woman who had a child out of wedlock might otherwise be shunned and made an object of shame during this era, Monk, because she had been seduced and abandoned by a *priest*, received an outpouring of sympathy from anti-Catholic partisans. She was welcomed into the drawing rooms of the toast of Protestant society and may have even tempted Samuel F.B. Morse, noted Nativist and inventor of the telegraph, to contemplate a marriage proposal.<sup>164</sup> Monk’s tale purported that for nuns, the vow of obedience superseded the vow of chastity, so that lustful priests could compel virginal sisters into sexual relations, claiming it was no sin. A priest told her “anything he did to her would sanctify her.”<sup>165</sup>

Rebecca Reed’s narrative was much less salacious on this count, yet still asserted that because priests lived outside of marriage, they corrupted the sexual morals of the women around them. Reed wrote that priests used the influence of the confessional to ask nuns and otherwise virtuous female parishioners “various improper questions, the meaning of which I did not *then* understand, and which I decline mentioning.”<sup>166</sup> On the heels of the Maria Monk scandal,

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<sup>163</sup> Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival* (Cincinnati: 1807), 94-95. In the same breath, McNemar also denied that the Shakers “divested of all modesty, stripped and danced naked, in their night meetings; blew out the candles, and went into a promiscuous debauch.”

<sup>164</sup> Nancy Lusignan Schultz, “Introduction,” in *Veil of Fear: Nineteenth Century Convent Tales* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Books, 1999), xvii.

<sup>165</sup> Monk, *Awful Disclosures*, 24, 6.

<sup>166</sup> Reed, *Six Months in a Convent*, 139-40.

Samuel Morse published the supposed *Confessions of a French Catholic Priest*, in which he claimed priests sowed the seeds of debauchery women in via the confessional. The ex-priest claimed, with a pretty girl, a priest will start by asking if she has had “bad thoughts” “bad desires” or “bad actions” and then pressure her that if she does not answer, she’ll damn her soul to hell. In doing so, the curate actually taught young men and women the corrupt vices they were heretofore ignorant of.<sup>167</sup> Texts like Reed’s and the *Confessions* again provided that titillating, voyeuristic glimpse into a hidden culture, pornography wearing the respectable garb of reform literature. Some, indeed, saw these semi-pornographic tracts for exactly what they were; on the other side of the Atlantic, an anti-Catholic tract, *The Confessional Unmasked*, put out by the Protestant Electoral Union, was successfully prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act in 1868.<sup>168</sup> It should also be noted that Morse’s sensational *Confessions* has been revealed by scholars to be just as fraudulent as Maria Monk’s convent tale. Large portions of *Confessions of a French Catholic Priest*, especially the priest’s confession of lust for his young female parishioners, was translated nearly word for word from the French version of Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.<sup>169</sup>

Examples of less than celibate Shaker brothers abounded in antebellum popular fiction and drama as well. Similar to the “escaped nun” tales, there was a cottage industry of Shaker romances written during this time. The plot was a fairly formulaic; a young Shaker brother falls

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<sup>167</sup> Samuel FB Morse, ed., *Confessions of a French Catholic Priest* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1837), 109-110, 131. He also claimed that priests took married women as their mistresses, then abused the power of the confessional to grant forgiveness for the sin of adultery.

<sup>168</sup> Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987), 120-21. According to the judge, Lord Cockburn, the tract met the definition for obscenity because of the way it suggested “thoughts of a most impure and libidinous character.”

<sup>169</sup> This discovery was brought to light relatively recently. See Andrea Beaghton, “Hugo and Sand in Morse Code,” *French Studies Bulletin* 31 (2010), 21-24. Transatlantic print culture practices can be traced back to the earliest settlement of the American colonies, and continued well into the nineteenth century. See Eve Tavor Bannet, *Transatlantic Stories and the History of Reading, 1720-1810: Migrant Fictions*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6-9.

for a pretty Shaker sister, they decide to run away together, but are stopped by a villainous Shaker Elder who wants the girl for himself. The short story, “The Shaker Lovers,” later turned into a stage melodrama, made the comparison between greedy and selfish Shaker brothers and cunning and lascivious Catholic priests explicit rather than implicit. When the titular Shaker lovers, Martha and Seth, attempt to run away, they are stopped by the interference of the menacing Elder Higgins, “whose manner was as hateful as his countenance was repulsive, and whose character was a strange compound of the fanatic, the Jesuit, and the voluptuary.” “The Shaker Lovers” claimed to have been based on a true story, and while it is true that many Shakers, male and female, who had been brought up as children in the community left when they reached the age of majority, and some of these ex-Shakers did indeed marry, this tale cannot be matched to actual events within any early nineteenth-century Shaker community. Seth, the ex-Shaker hero warns that the Shakers are neither more virtuous nor angelic than most people, and “could you lift the curtain, and see all that this sober and wonderfully honest exterior is sometimes made to conceal, you might, perhaps, be a little less inclined to exempt them from the common feelings and frailties of other people.”<sup>170</sup>

What emerges from the writings of those Protestant authors, journalists, and consumers attempting to uphold the sexual status quo is a strange gender dichotomy around the subject of sexual restraint. In this logic, men and women who practiced sexual restraint were either rakes or monsters. In portraying priests and Shaker brothers as lascivious seducers of women, they were quite literally rewriting these celibate men back into their own familiar narratives, specifically the familiarity of the seduction novel. Even if the figure of the rake was a hated one, at a time

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<sup>170</sup>Daniel Thompson, “The Shaker Lovers,” in *May Martin and other Tales of the Green Mountains* (Boston: Sanborn, Carter, Bazin & Co, ca 1852), 259. A similarly melodramatic tale of doomed Shaker love was found in Shaker apostate Harvey Elkins autobiography. See Elkins, *Fifteen Years in the Senior Order of Shakers* (Dartmouth: Dartmouth Press, 1853), 102-119. The Shaker lovers were named Urbino and Ellina; they seem more suited to an Italian opera than a Shaker Village and thus seem very fictionalized.

when Female Moral Reform associations were actively campaigning against men who visited prostitutes and seduced young women, he still had a place within the heterosexual matrix, a villainous foil for the virtuous hero.<sup>171</sup> It is notable that the other depiction of those practicing sexual restraint was the figure of the “monster,” which was leveled at those who were perceived as deviating most from gender norms. So, effeminate men like the Grahamites were monsters in the forms of cadaverous cannibals. Masculinized women were also monsters; the characterization of Mary Gove as a “she serpent” or of the Lady Superior as a “siren,” a creature that was half female, half-beast. In these written attacks against celibate persons, the Protestant middle-class not only attempted to police the boundaries of what constituted “normal” gender and sexuality, but also what it meant to be human.

### **The Resiliency of the Gender Order**

Though sexual restraint and celibacy conjured up visions of masculinized women and effeminate men, in practice gender roles within Shaker, Catholic, and Grahamite communities conformed to antebellum social and cultural expectations as much as they transgressed them. Though these groups presented enlarged spheres of influence for women in the realms of spirituality and education, they also upheld antebellum notions of separate spheres and the gendered division of labor. All three groups likewise offered opportunities for women to pursue leadership—as Shaker deaconesses and elderesses, as teachers and nurses within Catholic schools and hospitals, and as lecturers and officers within physiological societies like the LPS and LPI. However, women were rarely allowed to exercise leadership over men in these organizations. In the case of certain Catholic orders and within Grahamite groups, women also

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<sup>171</sup> On nineteenth century moral reform movements, see Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).



had to struggle against the attempts of their male counterparts to usurp the limited authority they had.

The antebellum concept of separate spheres actually aided Catholic orders and Shaker communities in their pursuit of celibacy. By keeping men and women apart during work as well as recreation, these groups removed temptation and discouraged heterosocial bonds from forming between men and women. Catholic sisters within convents and schools lived in all-female communities, often with the exception of a bishop, who was attached to the community to act as confessor and adviser. At the convent of the Sisters of the Visitation in Kaskaskia, Illinois, for example, the bishop was the only white man allowed to stay within the convent walls overnight. Though this rule was put in place presumably to quell suspicions of *Maria Monk*-like allegations, it was often impractical in the frontier environment of the Old Northwest. In 1840, Superior Mary Seraphina Wickham wrote to Father John Timon, Provincial of the Congregation of the Mission, in great distress over whether or not a priest visiting her school for examination day could be allowed to lodge at the convent. “We wish to know if we invite him to occupy the bishop’s bedroom whilst he remains here? Please answer, the question, as we are embarrassed & know not how to act on account of obedience. The Bsp gave us viz that no one of your sex excepting a Bishop may lodge in the Academy.”<sup>172</sup> However, this proscription only seemed to apply to *white* men. Convents in slave states such as the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Kentucky, the Ursulines in New Orleans, and the various orders operating in Missouri all had

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<sup>172</sup> Mary Seraphina Wickham to John Timon, July 1, 1840, John Timon Papers, Provincial Files of the Congregation of the Mission- Western Province, DeAndreis Rosetti Memorial Archives, De Paul University, Chicago, hereafter abbreviated CoM. The Congregation of the Mission encompassed those orders following the rule of St. Vincent De Paul. They were a missionary order headquartered in France but spread about the globe. The Provincial was the leader of that division of the Mission.

numerous slaves, male and female.<sup>173</sup> In this case, the racial and status hierarchy between the sisters and their servants dispelled any notions of sexual impropriety.

Shaker sisters and brothers by contrast lived together and worshipped together within the same community and often slept under the same roof. However, their celibate principles were embedded within their architecture. Dormitories at Hancock, Massachusetts and Enfield, New Hampshire had separate wings, staircases, and entrances for men and women. These separate wings were joined in the middle by shared common spaces, like the refectory, where men and women ate at separate tables. Meetinghouses, too, had separate entrances for men and women. Even the Shaker school year was ordered to keep men and women separate; girls were educated in the summer by Shaker sisters, boys by Shaker brothers in the winter when they could be spared from agricultural labor.<sup>174</sup>

Labor within Catholic and Shaker communities also conformed to antebellum expectations. Shakers were unafraid to challenge some of the most fundamental aspects of American society—military service, private property, marriage. They did not, however, attempt to overthrow the gendered division of labor, presumably because it suited their needs.<sup>175</sup> During the first one hundred years of Shakerism in America, there were no attempts to ask Shaker sisters to learn trades such as carpentry or blacksmithing and no calls for Shaker brothers to darn socks or help in the kitchens. When parents indentured children to the Shakers, it was with the expectation that boys would be taught a trade and girls the basics of needlework and housewifery.<sup>176</sup> It is also telling that as Shaker presence in the antebellum marketplace grew,

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<sup>173</sup> On antebellum Catholicism's understanding of race, see Emily Clark's *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007).

<sup>174</sup> Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 151-53.

<sup>175</sup> Marjorie Procter-Smith was among the first to question just how "feminist" Shakerism actually was, see *Shakerism and Feminism: Reflections on Women's Religion and the Early Shakers* (Old Chatham: Shaker Museum and Library, 1991).

<sup>176</sup> Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 160.

Shaker brothers represented the community in financial and legal matters. Shaker sisters worked in the herb houses, seed gardens, and dairies—typically female agricultural labors. However, their names were never attached to seed labels or packaging, nor did they represent the Shakers in agricultural competitions such as the Boston Mechanics' Association.<sup>177</sup> Despite Ann Lee's legacy and status as the second incarnation of Christ in the form of a woman, Shaker sisters did not preach publicly as often as Shaker men in the meetings attended by the "world's people." Later Shaker tracts written by Shaker theologians actually attempted to bury Lee's influence and central role within the religion entirely.<sup>178</sup> So while following the gendered status quo may have been very practical, it also limited the roles men and women could perform even on the utopian fringe. In Catholic communities, women performed occupations that were seemingly natural outgrowths of women's roles as caretakers: teaching, nursing, and caring for orphans. Nuns did not attempt to preach publicly and priests did not teach young ladies needlepoint. In some cases, nuns were attached to seminaries and monasteries specifically to feed and clothe their male counterparts.

It should be noted that Catholic sisters had a remarkable amount of autonomy and self-governance for women in this period. Catholic sisters lived in exclusively female communities, and the leadership of these orders was exclusively female as well, from the Lady Superior (sometimes called Reverend Mother) on downward to the Mistress of Novices, the school

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<sup>177</sup> See *The Shakers' Manual* (Boston: Boston Stereotype Foundry, 1852); Shaker advertising ephemera, ASC. The contact person for all of the Shaker seeds and medicines was always male during the early to mid nineteenth century. Later in the century as female believers began to dramatically outnumber male ones, Shaker sisters' names would appear in print, especially in regards to more feminine industries like cloak-making or foodstuffs.

<sup>178</sup> Most notably, John Dunlavy's 1818 *The Manifesto* contained not one single mention of Ann Lee. Dunlavy was a former minister who read Hebrew, Latin and Greek and is considered one of the most theologically rigorous thinkers the Shakers ever had. Dunlavy, *The Manifesto: Or A Declaration of the Doctrines and Practices of the Church of Christ* (Pleasant Hill, KY: P. Bertrand 1818). In this way, arguably Shakers follow the pattern of many other "fringe" religious groups identified by Susan Juster, which often begin with egalitarian values and allow women access to spiritual authority, but embrace male dominance as they seek legitimacy in their second and third generations. Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

administrators, to the Treasurer and Procuratrix. Protestant white women did not have the right to elect representatives in American government in the early nineteenth century, but most Catholic orders gave women the right to elect their superiors. In Shaker villages, by contrast, elders of the men's and women's orders were not elected, but seem to have been chosen in secret among the established leadership of the community, often in conference with the central ministry at Mount Lebanon. Many orders, such as the Sisters of Charity, had regulations put in place to see that power was distributed somewhat evenly, limiting a Superior to no more than two consecutive terms of three years each.<sup>179</sup> Moreover, when a novice made her vows and entered a religious community, she swore obedience to the female leaders of her order, not to any male priests or bishops. In a missionary order like the Sisters of Charity, this vow meant a willingness to serve wherever a sister might be needed. In contrast to many secular female seminaries, the teachers at convent schools were also exclusively female. Nuns' charity schools and hospitals in the early republic and antebellum periods were in the words of Emily Clark, "highly visible, self-supported, self-directed enterprises" that "made obvious the lack of an equality between the sexes."<sup>180</sup> Their unique autonomy was provocative not only to Protestant outsiders, but to the priests and bishops who were supposed to be their compatriots.

Conflicts over sex-segregated environments and male presumptions of power caused a schism within the American Catholic community in the 1840s. The growth and success of the Sisters of Charity, founded by Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton in 1809, had brought the sisters far beyond their original sphere of influence in Emmitsburg, Maryland. By 1840, their numbers had swelled to 400 and the sisters had established thirty-five separate establishments in growing

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<sup>179</sup> The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth followed a similar rule. Maureen Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion Irish Catholic Nuns and the Origins of New York's Welfare System, 1830-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 49; Lusignan Schultz, *Fire and Roses*, 97.

<sup>180</sup> Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 4-5.

canal towns like Utica and Albany and the urban ports of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. Bishops around the country flooded Mother Etienne Hall with requests to send sisters to found free schools and nurse the urban poor in St. Louis, Buffalo, and Milwaukee. It was a case in which demand for their services far outstripped the supply of sisters available. However, even when caring for the sick and the orphaned in the most destitute of circumstances, the sisters still had rules and regulations that needed to be followed in order to preserve their vow of chastity. In 1846, the Sisters of Charity and Bishop John Hughes of New York City became embroiled in a showdown that pitted the vow of chastity against the vow of obedience.

Trouble began when the Emmitsburg motherhouse sent a circular letter to bishops in those dioceses in which Sisters of Charity taught notifying them it was against modesty for the sisters to be teaching and caring for young boys. In doing so, they wished to emulate more the style of their affiliates in France. The French sisters cared for orphan boys but

they do not live in the same part of the house; their apartments are distinct from each other. A matron dresses and undresses them, cleans them, feeds them, warms them, puts them to bed and sees that during the night, they are comfortable and behave themselves, etc. The Sisters of Charity have nothing to do with these details. Moreover, it is only Foundlings and not boys 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 years old who come under their charge, and who whilst sucklings, have wet nurses, and when weaned, have matrons.<sup>181</sup>

This decision left bishops with quite a predicament, as there were few orders of women religious in America at the time able to provide such services. The majority, however, were understanding and respected the sisters wishes. Bishop Hughes of New York, however, decided to stage what one Vincentian scholar called “a *coup d’état*.”<sup>182</sup> In a plan that seemed to have been in the works for at least two years, Hughes suggested that the Sisters of Charity in his

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<sup>181</sup> Rev. James Dulol to Bishop John Hughes, June 17, 1846 reprinted in *Mother Etienne Hall* (Emmitsburg, Maryland: Published by the Daughters of Charity, 1939), 28-30.

<sup>182</sup> *Mother Etienne Hall*, 28, 6, 15-16, 18. The Sisters of Charity also established a school in Milwaukee and a well-regarded hospital in Washington, DC. They were arguably the most visible and influential order of nuns

diocese swear their vow of obedience to him, rather than the motherhouse in Emmitsburg. Upon returning from a visit to Rome in 1844, this rising star within the Church bragged that the Pope himself had granted him “full power to govern as he pleased, the Sisters of Charity in his Diocese.”<sup>183</sup> He claimed he acted out of concern for the people of his parish rather than personal gain, stating “I am not a Bishop of Geography, but of the Catholic Church.”<sup>184</sup> Still, many within the Sisters of Charity suspected Hughes’ true motives were nothing but a grab for power, rooted in his desire to keep the generous donations the New York sisters received within his diocese rather than being sent back to Emmitsburg. Allies of Mother Etienne, such as Rev. Dulol of Baltimore, found Hughes’s behavior unseemly and unreasonable. Dulol protested Hughes’s actions in a letter, pointing out that “the central government of the Sisters of Charity” in Paris oversaw six thousand French sisters in addition to “the colonies planted in Switzerland, in Piedmont, in Algiers, in Africa, in Smyrna, and Constantinople, in Lesser Asia, Alexandria, in Egypt, in Mexico.” In Dulol’s point of view, there was no reason the Emmitsburg motherhouse could not do the same within the United States.<sup>185</sup> Mother Hall eventually gave the New York missionary sisters an ultimatum: return to Emmitsburg by the end of the month or be cut off from the order entirely. In the end, thirty-one Sisters of Charity chose to remain in New York City and carry out their work under the auspices of the city’s bishop unaffiliated with their original order.<sup>186</sup>

Much more was at stake in the standoff between Mother Hall and Bishop Hughes than donations and the care of orphan boys. Superiors around the country were alarmed by what Hughes had done. In usurping Mother Hall’s authority he had set a dangerous precedent for other

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>185</sup> Rev. James Dulol to Bishop Hughes June 17, 1846 reprinted in *Mother Etienne Hall*, 29.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, 30.

bishops in other dioceses to do the same. Father Dulol wrote to Hughes in anger, “We may be mistaken but we consider this step of yours as calculated to inflict a deep and dangerous wound on the Community, and if the example be imitated, and every Bishop in the union has the same right, we would consider it as mortal.”<sup>187</sup> While the consequences were never as far-reaching as Dulol originally feared, other bishops used Hughes’s actions as a precedent to set up “diocesan” orders under their direct control, with no final recourse to a motherhouse. In 1847, the bishops of Buffalo, Philadelphia, Brooklyn, and Wheeling prevented the Josephite sisters within their dioceses from attending their order’s national meeting, effectively forcing them to become diocesan communities.<sup>188</sup> Bishop Miles of Nashville pulled a nearly identical ploy as Hughes against the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Nashville in the 1850s. Again, Bishop Miles asked the sisters in his diocese to swear obedience to him instead of their Kentucky motherhouse. Faced with the difficult choice of disobeying their Superior or abandoning the needy children who had been left in their care, several sisters elected to remain under the bishop’s authority. The actions of these male bishops undermined the very foundations of female authority enshrined in female religious orders. Mother Etienne Hall of Maryland and Mother Catherine Spaulding of Kentucky were the duly elected superiors of their orders chosen by their fellow sisters. The orders had set up schools and hospitals in these dioceses by invitation from their respective bishops, not on their command. Rather than regard Catholic charitable work as a collaboration, Bishops like Hughes and Miles invoked a hierarchal authority they didn’t actually possess.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>188</sup> Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion*, 50.

<sup>189</sup> “Sketch of the History of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth,” Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky Records, University of Notre Dame Archives, hereafter abbreviated as NAZ.

Bishops and priests also butted heads with sisters about the administration of schools and convent affairs. Despite the fact that nuns in religious orders elected their own leaders, bishops and priests did have authority over the running of schools and hospitals within their diocese and seemed to have closely monitored the election of lady superiors. In some cases, the bishop's vision for a school or academy clashed with the sisters' own experience as with the "strange misunderstanding" that occurred between the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth and Bishop David of Bardstown, KY. The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth were separate from the similarly named order founded by Elizabeth Seton, yet they both followed the rules set out by St. Vincent de Paul and remained within the same "family" of Catholic orders. The bishop felt one sister, Ellen O'Connell, "dominated" the newly-elected Mother Angela in the running of the academy at Bardstown, so he sent Sister Ellen away on a mission to found a new school in the frontier settlement of White Sulfur, KY. The sisters themselves, including Mother Angela, protested his decision. The fact was, Sister Ellen had received a fine education as the daughter of a middle-class Baltimore family, while Mother Angela had grown up in the backwoods of Kentucky. She felt her limited education inadequately prepared her to run the academy on her own and vowed she would resign if Bishop David insisted on sending Sister Ellen away. This was no idle threat, for when Bishop David failed to heed her wishes, Mother Angela quit in protest. Due to the ill feelings that stemmed from this incident, Bishop David never lived in the spacious new brick residence that had been built for him at the Nazareth convent.<sup>190</sup> The "strange misunderstanding" indeed illustrates the degree to which male priests and bishops tried to mold the will of nuns to suit their liking, and the ways in turn, sisters negotiated to keep the autonomy they had been granted.

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid



Moreover, in their role as father-confessors, priests exercised paternal authority over sisters, whom they referred to as “daughters” regardless of actual age. Letters between nuns and their confessors clearly demonstrate a balance of power that was tilted toward the priests. Sisters often signed their letters “I am your Obedient Child.” Even Mary Seraphina Wickham, Superior of the Kaskaskia convent, signed her letter to Father Timon, “with filial affection and gratitude, Beloved Father, I remain you unworthy daughter in Xt (Christ).” Often the letters themselves read as quite assertive, with such signatures used only to maintain the illusion of deference. In no case was this more clear than with Mary Edmond St. George Moffat, superior of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, who often signed her letters “The Superior” in bold script, double the size of her deferential claim to be “your most humble and obedient servant.”<sup>191</sup>

Paternalistic and even misogynistic attitudes surfaced in Grahamite circles as well. Despite the presence of organizations such as the Ladies Physiological Society and the prominence of Mary Gove within the movement’s ranks, letters and articles within Grahamite publications often portrayed wives as frivolous hindrances to a husband’s successful adoption of Grahamism. And indeed, the dietetic principles on which Grahamism rested required cooperation from the wives, mothers and women who would be preparing these vegetarian meals. As men usually did not cook or supervise the preparation of meals in 1830s America, a man who wished to follow the Graham diet would have to seek his wife’s toleration, if not her enthusiastic participation. And it follows that husbands would also have to negotiate with their wives in the practice of Grahamite sexual restraint as well. Grahamite publications show that male Grahamites resented the authority their wives had over domestic affairs in this regard; though as white men, they enjoyed full political and economic rights, narrow definitions of masculinity

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<sup>191</sup> Mary Edmond St. George to James T. Austin, November 15, 1834. Ursuline Records, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C..

kept them out of the kitchen. David Cambell, editor of the *Graham Journal*, stressed the necessity of finding a Grahamite wife who would be a “help-meet” rather than a hindrance to her Grahamite husband. He cautioned against Graham men so anxious to be married that they marry not fully Grahamite wives that seduce their husbands back into non-Grahamism. First, “her flesh began to smoke upon the table,” then “the flirting against his friends the Grahamites, commenced, till, finally, she hated them because they had influenced her husband to become a fool.”<sup>192</sup>

Grahamite women, too, directed misogynistic attacks against other non-Grahamite women. Asenath Nicholson, keeper of a Graham boarding house in New York City, wrote into the *Graham Journal* denouncing non-Grahamite wives. “The wife, if she have been educated a city miss, flirts, and tauntingly talks of bran bread, salt and potatoes, while she eats her flesh and sips her tea, telling her husband, the same time, if he chooses, he may starve on sawdust, she will not” while a more “industrious” wife “puts on a graver face and talks of the necessity of something to strengthen.” Nicholson asked female readers hyperbolically if they would rather be the wives of drunkards or the wives of Grahamites.<sup>193</sup> Another article “What Shall We Have for Dinner” presented a scene at the breakfast table between a Grahamite husband and his non-Grahamite wife. It is truly a case of “father knows best,” where the reasonable Grahamite husband must educate his ignorant wife, who dares to want hot tea and lobster for dinner. He is forced to tell her that she is no different than a drunkard who desires a pint of rum every day because it “feels good.” And yet, in the same issue, when a wife wrote to Cambell asking for advice on how to persuade her husband to adopt the Graham system, Cambell advised her to win

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<sup>192</sup> “Man Should Have a Help-meet for Him,” *The Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*, February 16, 1839.

<sup>193</sup> *The Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*, August 18, 1838, 266-67.

him over gently with “patience” and “kindness.”<sup>194</sup> Such portrayals fit the antebellum ideal of woman’s use of “moral suasion” over direct confrontation, similar to the advice given to female reformers active in temperance and anti-slavery movements.<sup>195</sup>

Sexual restraint was viewed as reducing women to pale sickly shadows and Grahamite men to emaciated walking cadavers. It could also transform seemingly respectable people like Mary Gove into seductive sirens and celibate priests into hypersexualized scoundrels. Perhaps most notable is the fact that critics of sexual restraint myopically saw gender deviance, while the lived experience of Shakers, priests and nuns and Grahamite reformers showed a remarkable degree of gender conformity. Critics seized on and magnified the differences that did exist, and often imagined monstrous divergences to mark practitioners of sexual restraint as far outside the norm, and in some cases, not human. In doing so, they were blind to the very real ways these groups conformed to antebellum expectations of gendered labor and male dominance. The predisposition to categorize those who practiced sexual restraint as somehow “other” and outside definitions of “normal” further contributed to the development of celibacy as a distinct sexual identity in the antebellum era. The next chapter will examine how Shakers and Catholic priests and nuns understood their celibacy as a sexual identity and how they, along with Grahamite reformers, challenged and critiqued heterosexuality and the institution of marriage.

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<sup>194</sup>“What shall we have for dinner” and “How Shall We Treat Our Friends?” in *The Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*, June 22, 1839. 215.

<sup>195</sup> Lori D. Ginzburg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

## Chapter 3

### Identities of Sexual Restraint

In 1828, Noah Webster's landmark *An American Dictionary of the English Language* defined celibacy as "an unmarried state; a single life. It is most frequently applied to males, or to a voluntary single life."<sup>196</sup> This definition differs greatly from modern understandings of the word, where celibacy implies not only an "unmarried state," but also "abstention from sexual intercourse."<sup>197</sup> In Webster's time, it was possible to be "celibate," but also sexually active, especially if one was an unmarried man. Chastity, too, had a different meaning than one might expect. Americans of the Jacksonian era understood that both married and unmarried persons could be chaste. Chastity meant "Pure from all lawful commerce of sexes. *Applied to persons before marriage*, it signifies pure from all sexual commerce, undefiled; *applied to married persons*, true to the marriage bed."<sup>198</sup> In this latter case, it was entirely possible for a married person to be chaste, as long as sexual activity was confined to one's lawfully wedded spouse. That one could be "celibate," but still impure, and married yet still "chaste," left practitioners of sexual restraint in a bit of a "catch-22." Such ambiguity was doubtlessly what made the celibacy of Shakers and Catholic priests and nuns controversial, for there was no guarantee that their unmarried lives were chaste ones. Language itself did not allow them to define themselves as such.

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<sup>196</sup> Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. "celibacy," (New York: S. Converse, 1828). Italics are Webster's.

<sup>197</sup> *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. "celibacy," accessed October 23, 2012, <http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/celibacy>.

<sup>198</sup> Webster, s.v. "chastity."

In embracing celibacy, Shaker sisters and brothers and Catholic nuns and priests practiced a sexual identity for which nineteenth-century American society did not even have a name. This chapter will explore what it meant to practice sexual restraint as part of one's lived experience. I understand "lived experience" to mean, in the words of Joan Scott, "a discursive event," bound to a particular historical and linguistic moment.<sup>199</sup> The spiritual testimonies and memoirs of these historical subjects challenge the popularly held notion that there were no sexual "identities" prior to late nineteenth century. Foucault's pronouncement that the homosexual was invented in 1870 placed the origins of modern classifications of heterosexuality and homosexuality in psychoanalysis and sexology.<sup>200</sup> I am in agreement with Thomas Foster and the other scholars featured in the anthology *Long Before Stonewall*, that the "acts versus identities pronouncement" ends up privileging sexological models over individual experience.<sup>201</sup> In focusing solely on these binaries of pre-modern versus modern or homosexual versus heterosexual, a great many other behaviors and identities are left in the shadows. Gayle Rubin's pathbreaking article "Thinking Sex" has argued that there are a wide variety of sexual behaviors beyond the hetero-homo binary, some of which (married, with opposite sex partners, in private,

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<sup>199</sup> Scott writes, "Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy... These conditions enable choices, although they are not unlimited. Subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it doesn't happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual." Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 792-93. The identities of sexual restraint I discuss, and Shaker, Catholic, and Grahamite experiences of practicing sexual abstinence are not ahistorical; they are a product of the social and cultural milieu of the early nineteenth century. I am not making any claims to a universal shared experience of sexual restraint, rather I am interested in how practicing sexual restraint created a sense of sexual identity in this specific historical context.

<sup>200</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, (Vintage: New York, 1978). 43. Foucault cites 1870 and the medicalization of homosexuality as the birth of the homosexual as a "species." Such classifications of individuals dovetail with the rise of modern science, social Darwinism and the disciplines of psychology and sexology. Prior to the late nineteenth century, Foucault argues that homosexuality was a sin to be punished by the church, but not an identity to be studied.

<sup>201</sup> Thomas A. Foster, ed. *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 8. I do not dispute that heterosexuality and homosexuality are classifications that have their roots in modernity, I simply wish to get at the greater fluidity of lived experience which may or may not map neatly on to these modern identities.

with only one partner) have been privileged and have historically existed within a “charmed circle.”<sup>202</sup> Even though celibacy is omitted from her analysis, in both the 1970s and historically in the decades of early to mid-nineteenth century featured in this study, engaging in sexual behavior within the context of marriage was considered normative. Complete sexual abstinence was not.

Advocates of sexual restraint promoted a sexual identity based on abstinence. And they did so during a century that saw a dramatic increase in the number of never-married adults. During the colonial era, it was nearly unheard of for women especially not to marry. Men in some locales faced economic discrimination for remaining unwed in the form of a “bachelor tax.”<sup>203</sup> The growth in opportunities for women to support themselves as teachers and for men to participate in the new managerial and industrial economy, far beyond parental influence, meant that in 1830 it was more possible to remain unmarried than ever before. Over the course of the century, the percentage of native-born never-married women would increase from 7.3 percent in 1830 to 10.9 percent in 1870. In New England, home to the Catholic convents, Shaker villages, and Grahamite societies that feature in this study, these trends were dramatically more pronounced. 14.6 percent of Massachusetts women never married in 1830; by 1870, the number had climbed to 22.6 percent, nearly double the national average.<sup>204</sup> Bachelors and spinsters received some of the same ridicule heaped upon Shakers and members of Catholic orders.

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<sup>202</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” reprinted in *Culture, Society and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 143-168.

<sup>203</sup> A 1636 Massachusetts law actually forbid single people- male and female- from living alone. In the second half of the seventeenth century, lawmakers felt that married men were unduly burdened and thus shifted a greater tax burden and more civic obligations onto single men. Over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of these taxes were either repealed or allowed to expire. The last was New Jersey in 1802. See John Gilbert McCurdy, *Citizen Bachelors: Manhood and the Creation of the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 3-4, 207-11.

<sup>204</sup> Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller has argued that the same pattern emerged in the South and West later in the century, especially for the age cohort of women born in the 1840s and 50s and would have reached marriageable age around the time of the Civil War. Marriage data for the United States is hard to obtain, as marital status was not recorded in the census until 1850. See Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband, Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 5.

Bachelors were stereotyped as alternately lecherous and cold. Spinsters were believed to be hag-like and ornery, or, conversely, desperate husband-hunters. And yet, they were never victims of widespread violence or organized pamphleteering. The bachelors and spinsters that were their neighbors and relatives were tolerated and sometimes even championed by their married friends in the newspapers and advice literature of the day. There are several possible reasons for this. For one, unlike Shakers who sought to separate themselves from the “world’s people,” bachelors and spinsters remained within and contributed to the development of their communities. Though they had not chosen marriage themselves, they also did not actively campaign for its dissolution. Moreover, their unmarried state was not the same proclaimed chastity of the Shaker or Catholic celibates; there was always the possibility that one would eventually join the ranks of the married upon meeting the right woman or man.

Celibacy and chastity, sexual identities based on abstinence, were identities to the Shakers, Catholics, and sexual reformers who embraced these ideals. Sexual restraint was at once an individual identity based on one’s personal sexual abstinence as well as a requirement for membership in a larger group, whether that be a Catholic religious order or a Grahamite physiological society. Furthermore, opponents of sexual restraint heaped ridicule and gendered stereotypes upon Shaker sisters, Catholic nuns, priests and Grahamites, promoting the belief that sexual restraint made one’s manner and body different from what was considered “normal.” Individuals practicing sexual abstinence or limitation saw themselves as distinctly different from those who did not. Yet unlike modern-day sexual identities which are often justified by a “born-this-way” biological imperative, celibate individuals prided themselves on the unnaturalness of their restraint. In this sense, the subjects of this study understood desire to be what we would consider to be “socially constructed,” the product of cultural conventions and religious traditions.

Letting individuals speak in their own words of the experiential dimensions of their celibate and chaste identities presents a challenge for historians. Though much has been done to recover sources on sexual experience from the so-called Victorian age, manuscript sources in which sexuality is discussed in explicit terms remain rare. The historical record is equally silent on individuals describing their attempts at sexual restraint, even in circles where celibacy and chastity were cherished tenets of belief. It should not be at all surprising that the two most explicit sources I recovered were diaries written in code; one from a Shaker brother and another from a Grahamite man. It is also notable that all of the first-hand accounts I found that discussed sexual restraint in any explicit way were written by men. Silence in the historical record on this issue from women further underscores the degree to which nineteenth-century women may have internalized their own ideas of women's naturally "passionless" nature. Speaking frankly and explicitly about sexuality, even when done in a coded diary, remained a male prerogative. Based on these two very rich sources and additional material from hymns, prescriptive literature, meeting minutes, and letters to Grahamite journals, I feel confident in my assessment of sexual restraint as practiced by Shakers and Grahamites. Unfortunately, Catholic records on how priests and sisters experienced and understood celibacy in this era are much more opaque. It could be that such sources either do not exist or did not survive. Or, that conversations of such a delicate nature were likely confined to the confessional and not recorded.

### **Trying to Learn the "New Tongue:" Living Shaker Celibacy**

For Shakers, celibacy was a practice that formed a larger part of their identity as followers of Mother Ann Lee. Celibacy was just one of a wide variety of customs the Shakers endorsed that set them at odds with the status quo. Pacifism, communal ownership of property,



and belief in a female deity, Holy Mother Wisdom, formed the fundamentals of Shakerism as much as sexual abstinence. And yet, the writings of Shakers, from printed pamphlets to private correspondence, show that celibacy was the most frequently cited matter of difference between the Believers and those they called “the world’s people.” Such a high degree of importance was placed upon celibacy and the dissolution of marriage that the Shakers refused to abandon this most prized principle as the sect dwindled to near-extinction in the twentieth century. Even when beloved elders and prominent leaders of the community left to marry, the Shakers refused to compromise.<sup>205</sup> In short, to be a Shaker was to be a celibate person.

Though celibacy was a cherished requirement of Shakerism, spiritual autobiographies of prominent Believers reveal that overcoming the lusts of the flesh was not something that came easily to men or to women. Some of Shakerism’s most successful leaders during the early years of the religion, such as missionary Isachar Bates, theologians John Dunlavy and Richard McNemar, and even elders Ann Lee and Lucy Wright had once been married. Accepting celibacy was an essential part of the Shaker conversion narrative, and it was never something one undertook lightly.

The autobiography of Shaker missionary Issachar Bates gives a detailed description of how difficult one man found it to accept celibacy as part of the Shaker faith. Bates had been born in Hingham, Massachusetts to a family of spiritual searchers in 1758. As a young man, he had been a fifer at Bunker Hill and had later been among the soldiers present at West Point when Benedict Arnold betrayed the fort to the British. Bates’ first-hand experiences of the brutality of war made a strong impression upon him and later attracted him to the Shaker’s pacifism. After the Revolution, Bates married Lovina Maynard and became the father of eleven children, nine of

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<sup>205</sup> For references on the decline of Shakerism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 337-353.

whom lived to adulthood. Even years after the war, Issachar could not shake the sense that he had done wrong: “the disease was in my heart, & that had to be broken up from the foundation.”<sup>206</sup> What followed was a powerful conversion experience. Bates wrestled with his faith, felt himself unworthy of God’s salvation, until one day “a hot flash like lightning struck me thro the neck and shoulders into my heart, and drove out the sore lump, and every weight about me, and left me feeling as light as nothing.”<sup>207</sup> For a short three weeks, he felt at peace and swore “I was as happy as I could wish to be, and did not feel one motion of fleshy lust all that time, & never expected to feel it any more forever.”<sup>208</sup> Bates reacted to his newfound spiritual state by becoming a Baptist preacher. He served as one on the New England frontier for six years until 1801. However, Bates came to realize that the Baptist religion lacked the answers he craved. After his three weeks of spiritual bliss “the motions of the flesh began to return, which felt more deathly to me than the bite of a rattlesnake.” When he tried to discuss this with fellow Baptist elders, they had no recourse for him, and would not even let him “confess” what he described as his “secret sins.”<sup>209</sup>

Issachar Bates toiled in this fashion for seven years, wearing the Baptist faith like a garment that didn’t quite fit. He chased after salvation with every new revival, but found “they all ended in the flesh.” It seemed all around him lived in sin “but the Shakers, and there I hated to go.” He longed to go and hear the Shakers testimony, but the nearest settlement was more than seventy miles away. When Bates tried to discuss the merits of Shakerism with his friends and neighbors he was warned “to keep away from those deluded creatures.” Finally he contrived to visit the Shakers at New Lebanon. There he confessed his secret sins at long last. When he heard

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<sup>206</sup> “Life of Issachar Bates,” ASC, 11, 22-23, 29.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, 31-33.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

the Elders' testimony for the first time, it spoke to his deepest spiritual desires: "This was the first straight testimony I ever heard out of the mouth of man. It seemed as tho' my soul was perfectly acquainted with it."<sup>210</sup>

But the future Shaker's trials were only half-done. Bates returned to his family and found "my greatest trouble was at home, with those of mine old household." His fellow Baptists poured "floods" of words into his ears against the Shakers and brought every preacher within sixty miles to battle for his soul. Finally, in August of 1801, Issachar Bates made the decision to quit his family for good and take up with the Shakers at Mount Lebanon. He was resolute, yet his faith was bought at great personal cost:

When I returned home, none but a well-tried Believer can sense what I had to endure. Not one in my family that would unite with me, nor one in the neighborhood but what was opposed to me: even the children in the street, who used to reverence me, now mocked me. Then like Job I had to take it.<sup>211</sup>

Issachar Bates would remain a Shaker until his death in 1837. Though his family at first rejected him, eventually his wife and some of his children would be "gathered in" as well. Bates' family stayed behind at the Watervliet and New Lebanon societies while he went on a missionary errand to the Old Northwest in 1805. He may have failed as a Baptist minister, but his gift for preaching and strong singing voice won the Shakers many converts in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana. Bates was among those missionaries threatened by the mob at Turtle Creek in 1810.

It was fortunate for Issachar Bates that his wife, Lovina, was so obliging, though arguably, she may not have had much of a choice between becoming a Shaker or being left without financial support. As Elizabeth DeWolfe has pointed out in her study of the anti-Shaker movement, when men like Issachar Bates or James Smith left their families to become Shakers,

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 39-40, 42.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 43-44.

it had very real economic consequences for not only their wives and children, but for their entire community. States had very stringent divorce statutes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the rationale being that if divorce was made easily obtainable, it would destroy the family by letting individuals shirk the responsibilities of marriage. Anti-Shaker advocate Mary Dyer did not obtain her divorce until 1824, only after New Hampshire passed a targeted statute that allowed for divorce when one spouse joined a sect that disavowed the bond between husband and wife.<sup>212</sup> Men who decided to embrace a life of celibacy, as with the husbands of Mary Dyer, Eunice Chapman, and Polly Smith, undoubtedly created hardship for their unbelieving family members and communities in an era where divorce was nearly unobtainable under any circumstance. And yet, their status *as* men gave them liberties that women in similar circumstances did not have.

Women who wished to become Shakers also faced trials of faith, yet with the added burden that their lives were not their own to command, subject as they were to the will of their fathers, if unmarried, or their husbands, if married under coverture. Eldress Mary Antoinette Doolittle [Figure 7] wrote a candid memoir of her conversion to Shakerism upon the fifty-fifth anniversary of her “birth” into the society. She was born in 1810 to middling parents who ran a farm and a dairy in Lebanon Springs, NY. A mere stone’s throw away from Mount Lebanon, the seat of the Shakers’ central Ministry, the Shakers had appeared in Doolittle’s peripheral vision since earliest childhood. At the age of fourteen, Doolittle’s curiosity about the Shaker life was piqued when she came across some apostate Shaker sisters lodging at a neighbor’s house. They had left the society to get married, but young Doolittle found “They acted strangely and seemed guilty, as if they had committed some crime, and were afraid of detection.” This chance encounter made her resolve to attend the Shakers’ Sabbath meeting and find out the truth for

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<sup>212</sup> De Wolfe, *Shaking the Faith*, 130-31.

herself. Without her parents' permission, Doolittle attended the meeting in secret and met Polly Lawrence, a Shaker sister who had once been a pupil of Doolittle's mother when she had served as the village schoolmistress. Doolittle found Polly Lawrence to be "a beautiful looking woman" and confessed "I felt drawn to the sisters by a power that I could not comprehend, and could not explain. I finally took courage and said to my parents 'I thought I could be very happy among the Shakers.' Her parents laughed and in jest said, "Yes, you had better go."<sup>213</sup>



Figure 7. Photograph of Mary Antoinette Doolittle, ca. 1870. Courtesy Edward Deming Andrews Shaker Collection, Winterthur Museum and Library

The amusement of Mary Antoinette's parents was short-lived. She took her father up on his offer and returned to spend a week at Mount Lebanon among Polly and the other Shaker sisters. After four days they became alarmed: "They laughed at me, argued with me and tried to reason with me; and at last gathered up all the absurd stories they had ever heard about the Shakers, and repeated them; but all to no purpose." Realizing their daughter was in earnest, Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle panicked, going so far as to arrange for her to spend several weeks at the home of a young man "to whom in early childhood I was strongly attached." Even though her

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<sup>213</sup> Mary Antoinette Doolittle, *Autobiography of Mary Antoinette Doolittle: Containing a Brief History of Early Life Prior to Becoming a Member of the Shaker Community Also an Outline of Life & Experience Among the Shakers* (Mt Lebanon, NY: 1880), 9, 21, 22.

sweetheart's family treated her very kindly, Doolittle was discontented; she felt her body was in one place and her heart was in another. She was torn over whether she should "drown my feelings, and accept the advice of those who had nurtured me in infancy, provided for me in childhood and youth" or "strive to carry out my strong convictions."<sup>214</sup> Mary Antoinette Doolittle's friends and neighbors reacted to her conversion to Shakerism in different ways. Her uncle was supportive and told her "Mary, if I wanted to be a Shaker, I would be one regardless of opposition." The local Presbyterian minister, however, had a much more negative reaction and preached in his sermon, "If I were his daughter, he would head me up in a hoghead sooner than let me go to the Shakers. I gave thanks that I was not a creed-bound minister's daughter."<sup>215</sup>

The adolescent Doolittle finally persuaded her parents that Shakerism was her true calling. Quite understandably, they feared she was too young to truly comprehend the gravity of her choice. The future Shaker elderess remembered her father sat her down and talked with her for two hours: "he reasoned, but did not chide" with a seriousness that "seemed as if it would break my heart." Mr. Doolittle feared his daughter was making a youthful and impulsive decision that she would later come to regret, one that would potentially damage her reputation for the rest of her life. Though he knew the Shakers to be nothing but honest in their business dealings, he found their religious beliefs strange and perhaps delusional. He told her:

Mary, if I thought you could go, and always remain, I would not try to hold you; but I have known many who have lived among the Shakers awhile and left them; and I do not know what the matter is, but they never seem happy after they leave...they are not company for themselves, or anybody else. Now if you go there and stay awhile, then return to me saying, 'Father, I do not like to live with the Shakers as well as I thought I should, I want to come home again' I will still be your friend, and as long as I have a loaf of bread you shall share in it; but I could not feel towards you as I would have done had you accepted my advice.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid, 23-25.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, 28-29.

Like Doolittle's own impression on seeing the "guilty" Shaker apostates at her neighbor's house, she and her father both shared a sense that Shakerism was an all or nothing proposition. The worst fate was not to be a Shaker, but to be a *failed* one, for those who tried to live the chosen life and left it were regarded as neither this nor that. Amid many tears, Mary Doolittle chose to leave her parents' home and trotted up the hill to Mount Lebanon to begin her new life as a Shaker. "Time rolled on, and my conscience did not upbraid me for the choice I had made," she wrote. She confessed that her conversion made quite a stir in her small corner of the world. Later when her family got swept up in the Finneyite revivals and several converted to the Baptist faith "a heavy pressure was brought to bear on me, and many severe reflections were cast upon my parents for the course they had pursued in regard to me." Still, Doolittle felt that in time her parents believed granting their daughter the freedom to make her own choices "was a solace to them in their declining years, and one of the crowning joys of their earthly life."<sup>217</sup>

Mary Antoinette Doolittle was fortunate in that her family eventually came to support her decision to become a Shaker. Many parents did, including those who indentured young children they themselves could not support.<sup>218</sup> It was sometimes the case that women and children—those seen as dependents— who would have liked to remain were removed by parents or husbands against their will. For every James Smith or James Dyer who abandoned his wife to become a Shaker brother, there can be found just as many (if not more) female converts who were simply

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<sup>217</sup>Ibid, 30-31. It is not strange that Doolittle kept in touch with her family after becoming a Shaker, as they lived within the same town. The sect allowed for periodic visits between Shakers and non-Believing family members, as long as the visitors abided by their rules; meaning that married couples must sleep apart if they required overnight accommodations in the Shaker village. In some cases, it may have been helpful to keep on good terms with non-Believing members, as cousins, nephews, and distant relatives could be a source of new members as well as powerful allies within the world.

<sup>218</sup> At a time before state-supported social services, Shaker villages took in hundreds of unwanted children, in rural areas far removed from the foundling and orphan hospitals that mostly existed only in cities. Shaker indentures usually lasted until the age of eighteen or twenty-one, at which point a child would be free to go or stay as he or she pleased. But once an indenture was made, it could not be broken—it was a legally binding document. During the 1820s and 30s, children under the age of sixteen accounted for 20-30% of a given Shaker village's population. Though some might have been brought by Shaker parents, most were probably indentures. This data is taken from Shaker records and U.S. Census schedules. See Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 87-89.

not allowed the same self-determination based on a legal system that regarded women and children as property. Wealthy Storer, a Shaker sister at Hancock, Massachusetts recorded how in 1851, one John Irving “came while the Family were at dinner with a Sheriff and a writ of replevin [writ of replevin] Elmira Irving his daughter piloted them into the dining room where they seized Justiner & Elizabeth Irving very contrary to their feelings they tried to resist but to little or no affect, they had to go, but their bitter cries was enough to melt the hardest heart.” A writ of replevin is a legal document that obligates the return of goods or property and Justiner and Elizabeth Irving were their father’s property. The Shakers’ lawyers somehow managed to overturn John Irving’s writ of replevin, and the sheriff came again to the village a few days later with the girls who “were much pleased to get home.”<sup>219</sup> Two years previously, Enoch Haskins came to the North Family at Enfield, CT with the intention of kidnapping his daughter Jane, whom he had previously bound. Jane Haskins, quite literally, had to fight her father for the right to stay a Shaker: “He clinched her but he met with so much opposition from her & others that he had to give back, but not without reluctance and heavy threats, but no one feared him in the least.”<sup>220</sup>

Shakers like Issachar Bates and Mary Antoinette Doolittle may have believed that celibacy—the Shaker cross—was key to their spiritual salvation, but they did not believe it was something that came easily or naturally. Shaker writings, even ones written by the most devout and enthusiastic Believers, understood that the cross of self-denial was a hard one to bear. Bates saved his most spiteful words for those Believers that turned apostates, who returned to the lusts of the flesh “like the dog to his vomit again.” He wrote, “I have often labored with such people, and it is like throwing water against a goose’s breast; it cannot enter.” The problem with such

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<sup>219</sup>“ Wealthy Storer Diary,” April 6, 1851, April 9, 1851, ASC.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, May 18, 1849.



people was “They do not wish their hearts broken, they choose to keep them whole.” The Shaker way of life, and celibacy, required in Bates’ opinion, the breaking of one’s heart, “to pieces, because it is deceitful above all and desperately wicked; —and have a new heart, such as God has promised to give to the honest.” Only the most humble and submissive to God’s will could make such an unnatural sacrifice.<sup>221</sup> Elderess Doolittle possessed considerably more empathy for those converts who tried and failed. She knew the Shaker way “is narrow and straight,” and that even those who come with sincere motives “find great work to do; for there is a mixture of good and bad, truth and error, in every human heart.”<sup>222</sup>

Shaker hymn lyrics often reveal more about how the Shakers understood and cultivated celibacy than their journals or letters. These hymns were never explicit, but frequently referenced “the cross,” “self-denial,” and a rejection of all things “carnal.” Music and dance were both vibrant and vital parts of Shaker spirituality. The repetition of such words and phrases reified them in a Believer’s mind and gave them a way to understand their faith, as surely as concepts of sin and salvation were used in Protestant services. One hymn, called “The Direct Road to Happiness,” contrasted the “narrow path” of the Shakers with the “broad” road of the people of the world. Shakers find Christ’s burden of self-denial light, but “Few souls desire Christ’s way to go, It crucifies their natures so.” However, the hymn stated the broader avenue leads misguided Christians further and further astray from God’s true path. Only “the upright honest soul, Who every passion does control,” would enjoy true blessedness.<sup>223</sup>

Another hymn, “Solemn Work,” stressed that in order to maintain self-denial, Shakers must cultivate a “searching self” that was as watchful and vigilant about one’s own sins as it was

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>222</sup> Doolittle, *Autobiography of Mary Antoinette Doolittle*, 45.

<sup>223</sup> “Direct Road to Happiness” in “A Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs, Improved in our General Worship,” ASC.

about noticing the faults of others. A “searching self” was not something a Shaker was born with, but was described as the titular “solemn work.”<sup>224</sup> Contrary to modern understandings of sexual identity which are often predicated in naturalness or rooted in a biologically-inclined orientation, Shakers held their celibate identity as something that was indeed unnatural.<sup>225</sup> It was the product of effort, work and sacrifice, but it was an identity nevertheless. And the fact that it was born of artifice and not nature made it all the more valuable to them, as superior as a finished ladder-backed chair is to a pile of lumber.

One of the most concise understandings of how Shakers understood their celibacy can be found in the hymn “A New Tongue,” in which the challenges of learning the Shaker faith are compared to the challenges of speaking a different language. The Shaker “language” and all it encompassed—celibacy, pacifism, communitarianism—was the language of heaven. The hymn urged Believers to “Quit Satan’s hateful language, Come speak in the new tongue.” Celibacy was presented as the language of Christ himself and his first followers as well the language the Shakers expected would be spoken in the afterlife, where people neither marry nor are given in marriage. This guarantee of salvation was something the Shakers held more precious “than mines of purest gold.” Contrary to what outsiders might believe the hymn assured listeners that “The

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<sup>224</sup> “Solemn Work,” in Caty DeWitt, “A Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs Improved in our Worship,” 1834 ASC.

<sup>225</sup> The rhetoric of the modern lesbian and gay rights’ movement, especially organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, has advocated for equal rights and protections for lesbians and gays on the basis that sexual orientation is something one is “born with” and cannot be changed, an inherited biological characteristic like skin or eye color. Queer theorists question the validity of arguing for civil rights on biological grounds; even if sexuality is a “choice” like religious identity, one should not be discriminated against for that choice. Moreover, some argue that the biological argument privileges gay male experience over that of lesbians who when surveyed are more likely to not identify as being gay from birth. See Shane Phelan, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Vera Whisman, *Queer By Choice: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Politics of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

brethren and the sisters, The aged and the young, Find sweetest consolation, In speaking the new tongue.”<sup>226</sup>

The Shakers possessed a self-conscious and deliberate celibate identity; they believed that taking up “the cross of self-denial,” was necessary for salvation. In becoming “eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake,” as referred to in the Gospel of Matthew, Shakers sacrificed sexual expression to ensure their heavenly reward. Just as the “sacred theater” of spirit possession, glossolalia, trances, and visions provided concrete proof of the existence of God among the Shakers, celibacy provided an equally concrete means of ensuring one’s salvation.<sup>227</sup> Compared to Calvinist doctrines of predestination, where only an unknown “elect” would be saved, Shaker theology was much more open and democratic: salvation was open to anyone who joined their community and accepted the Shaker’s cross of self-denial. While strict Calvinists had rejected a “gospel of works,” Shakers rejected the elitism inherent in predestination. Their celibacy was a lifelong work intended to both open heaven’s gates in the afterlife and create a sacred community within each Shaker village. The importance of salvation to Americans at this time cannot be underestimated. The Shakers believed in a celibate Christ. They also believed that in becoming celibate themselves and living communally, they emulated the earliest Christians. Simultaneously, they saw themselves as living in the post-millennial age promised by the book of Revelation. Celibacy further allowed the Shakers to feel that they were a part of both elite groups—the earliest, purist Christians and those who witnessed the second coming.<sup>228</sup> Moreover, Rosabeth Moss Kanter in her study of new religious movements, has argued that

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<sup>226</sup> “The New Tongue” in “A Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs Compiled by the Millennial Church Copied by Mary Hazard” ca1832-1862, ASC.

<sup>227</sup> On the sacred theater of the Shakers see Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion*, 5, 194.

<sup>228</sup> *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing Containing a General Statement of All Things Pertaining to the Faith and Practice of the Church of God in This Latter-Day*, (Lebanon, OH: Western Star, 1808). On how biblical time and quotidian experience merged in early America, see Susan Juster, *Doomsayers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 4.

sacrifice and abstinence are not simply features of successful utopian societies, but *requirements*. Sacrifice makes membership “more valuable and meaningful.” The more it “costs” an individual to do something, the more “value” he or she will assign to the activity.<sup>229</sup>

Despite the assurances that celibacy was a pearl of great price, the Shakers knew all too well that the lusts of the flesh were hard to quit. For while some remained Believers for life, for others Shakerism was more of a passing phase, an enthusiasm to be tried until a person tired of it or could find a better situation for him or herself. The popular conception of Shaker villages is that they were (and are) peaceful places, removed from the hustle and bustle of the wider world. However, during the antebellum era, they were places of great upheaval. The comings and goings of zealous converts and jaded apostates make them seem more like a railway station than a spiritual sanctuary. In the New Lebanon Church family during the mid-nineteenth-century, most brothers only stayed for an average of ten years; for sisters, the average was closer to twenty years. Between 1830 and 1860, the rate of apostasy in this family averaged roughly 12 percent.<sup>230</sup> As the Church family was considered to be comprised of the most spiritually advanced believers, it can be assumed that other families experienced even more turnover in membership. Though the Shakers were prepared to absorb the ebb and flow of curious inquirers and casual turnoffs, the loss of Believers of long-standing, especially those who had been appointed to positions of leadership, hit a given community especially hard. To see a dear friend lose his faith could often shake the belief of even the most ardent Shaker. Moreover, to a certain degree, apostasy was viral and people tended to leave in waves. The departure of a beloved elder, for example, could lead to subsequent apostasies from those brothers who were closest to him.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 75-78.

<sup>230</sup> Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives*, 210-11.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid*, 139-43.

The diary of Isaac Newton Youngs, a lifelong New Lebanon brother as well as a craftsman, teacher, and musician, provides a glimpse of how these apostasies affected the Shakers' rank and file. It is also remarkably candid on the difficulties of practicing celibacy. Youngs kept many public diaries of the New Lebanon Shakers and compiled a history of the sect completed in the 1850s. But his struggles to accept the Shaker's rule of celibacy and leave off solitary vice come not in plain prose, but coded diary entries that would have been unintelligible to the casual observer. When Youngs' close friend Bushnell Fitch apostatized in 1815, it drove young Isaac into his own dark night of the soul. Brother Fitch returned a year later and begged a second trial, having been unable to make a go of it among the world's people. Fitch came to the Office, the liminal space where Shakers conducted business with outsiders, and asked to come back, but the Elders were unwilling to let him return. Youngs wrote, "Bushnell comes to the office to settle...he cried at dinner there, asked liberty to kneel with them once more—said he did not expect to take any more comfort And surely I think he cannot—I think he never can regain his privilege here."<sup>232</sup>

Most distressing of all was when apostate Bushnell Fitch returned to the village for a final time in 1817 with the intention of carrying off "a Shaker wife." Fitch talked to several of the sisters, trying to entice at least one of them to elope with him. He repeated the careworn rumor "that their girls were held in bondage &c." But truly, it was not the well being of the Shaker sisters that motivated Bushnell Fitch, but his own financial self-interest: "he told them that his father told him that he would not give him any of his interest if he did not come back and get him a Shaker wife." The following day he came back with a one-horse wagon to carry off an unnamed Shaker bride, who at that moment refused to go along with his plan. Bushnell

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<sup>232</sup> Isaac N. Youngs, "Narrative of Various Events," ca April 1815, March 1816, April 16. 1816, Library of Congress Shaker Collection, Box 3, Folder 42, hereafter abbreviated as LOC.

protested, refused to leave and created quite a scene. Youngs recorded, “He seemed to think it strange that they would not let him have a wife! He seemed to think they might let him have [name crossed out] as she was not much accounted of, and would never make a believer &c.” At the last, Fitch told the Elders, “that if they had any sort of feeling for him, they would let him have someone and seemed to be quite effected to take at it very hard.” His longtime friend Isaac Youngs was horrified and thought Fitch had quite lost all his wits, lamenting, “A Shaker Wife!! O who would have once thot that of you Bushnell? I should have that you would have been too shamed.”<sup>233</sup>

The episode of Bushnell Fitch and his attempts to acquire “a Shaker wife” are significant. It shows how deeply ingrained notions of compulsory heterosexuality were even among those who had once been Shakers themselves. It was not unusual for ex-Shakers to try to reclaim back wages or property after they left the community, even though in signing the Shaker covenant, they had foresworn all claims to either. Bushnell Fitch stands alone in feeling he was entitled to a *wife* in return for all his years of labor and faithful Shaker celibacy. Fitch via his father’s fiat attempted to force the Shakers to adhere to standards of patriarchy—where women were property. His masculine pride demanded he should be given “some one,” even a woman “not much accounted of” as a form of reparation, as the Elders might let another apostate have an extra bolt of cloth or some spare carpentry tools.

Shortly after Fitch’s apostasy, Isaac Youngs found himself immersed in his own trial of faith, which pitted the desires of his soul against the desires of his body. Contrary to what their critics thought or what even present day individuals might believe about a sect that practiced sexual abstinence, Shakers were not made of stone. While Mother Lucy Wright preached in meeting to “labour more within us to take up our cross against our own natural dispositions and

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid, undated entries, ca. 1817.

ways,” Youngs underwent temptation and torment in secret. A young man in his prime, Isaac felt tempted by the pleasures of the world, a world he had renounced before he even understood what it had to offer. He wrote, “My natural part within me says ‘shall I live here on earth all my days and not know any thing of this world or understand the evil with the good—O let me give way a little, what can be the harm to feel after knowledge?’” He wondered if it was truly possible for a person to live a life completely free of sin and temptation. Youngs struggled with involuntary physical functions beyond his control, most likely nocturnal emissions: “!! I experience I know what—But how long! How long shall I remain subjected to weakness, why is it? Why can’t I break out and be a free soul...O if I could once get my head out, I would hate the flesh with all my feelings & never get...with it again.” What might have seemed to some a mere embarrassment was to this young Shaker man nothing less than a battle for his soul. He wrote in great despair, “!!! For some cause it appears that my soul & body is bound & I do those things that I would not...I feel exceedingly shiftless & good for nothing.” Brother Isaac’s spiritual crisis went on for years. He tried confessing his sins to the Elders, as was the remedy for such behavior, but they seemed at a loss at how to deal with Brother Isaac’s persistent lust. They finally told him he must talk to Mother Lucy or Elderess Ruth about it. This suggestion shamed the young Shaker man so much, he never wrote of his sexual struggles in his diary again.<sup>234</sup>

The lives of Isaac Youngs, Antoinette Doolittle, and Issachar Bates provide important insight into how Shakers understood their celibacy. Yet another powerful example is the life of Shaker elderess Rebecca Cox Jackson. Jackson’s life begs the question of what celibacy might have meant in the context of antebellum racial ideology. Rebecca Cox Jackson was born a free woman of color outside of Philadelphia in 1795. She spent most of the early years her life in the home of her brother, Joseph Cox, a high ranking member of Philadelphia’s Bethel African

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid, July 19 1816, July 24 1816, February 29, 1820.

Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. She was briefly married to a man named Samuel S. Jackson, with whom she had no children. Jackson's spiritual awakening came in 1830, when she began to experience the prophetic dreams and visions that would form the foundation of her preaching in the decades to come. She soon became an active participant in both the AME Holiness and Sanctification movements underway at the time. Jackson began holding small meetings in her home and preaching before large numbers of black men and women. Her unsanctioned preaching and especially her belief in celibacy soon brought her into conflict with the AME establishment, including her own brother. She attacked what she saw as the "carnality" of the AME church and held that the only way to achieve true sanctification was through "holy living," which included celibacy. In 1837, these radical beliefs led to her being accused of heresy by the leading lights of Philadelphia's black religious community.<sup>235</sup>

Rebecca Cox Jackson embraced celibacy as part of her own spiritual discipline long before she ever came into contact with Shaker theology. Though her beliefs sparked outrage among the AME Church of Philadelphia, she found a community of kindred spirits among the South Family Shakers in Watervliet, near Albany, N.Y. She first visited them in 1836, and would return to stay in 1847 as a full member. Though the Shakers' religious beliefs forbade them from voting, military service, and other outward displays of political activism, they were sympathetic to antislavery causes and integrated black believers into their order as full and equal members alongside white ones. Pleasant Hill, KY and other southern Shaker communities had originally owned slaves, but manumitted them early in the nineteenth century; several ex-slaves decided to remain on as full members of their communities after manumission. When Rebecca Jackson joined the Watervliet Shaker community, she was allowed to preach publicly both in Shaker

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<sup>235</sup> Jean Humez, ed. *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Elderess*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981) 21-22.



meetings and in those the Shakers opened to “the world’s people.” The Shakers were quite taken with her preaching style and recorded how on September 10, 1848 “Sister Rebecca Jackson rose up and spoke beautiful of the good way of God.”<sup>236</sup>

While satisfied with the Shakers commitment to celibacy and their recognition of her spiritual gifts, Jackson eventually grew discontented with their inaction on “gathering in” more free black members like herself. Partly this was due to reluctance of the Shakers to engage in missionary activity beyond the confines of their established settlements—the last village had been founded in Sodus Bay, New York in 1826.<sup>237</sup> In 1851, Jackson and her lifelong spiritual companion Rebecca Perot [Figure 8] departed Watervliet of their own volition to start a Shaker ministry in Philadelphia among the free black community without the blessings of the official Shaker ministry. Though the Watervliet Shakers seem to have greatly valued Jackson and her preaching, they were governed by a strict hierarchy. They also greatly feared the intermingling of Shakers with “the world’s people,” another reason they may have been hesitant to sanction Jackson’s Philadelphia venture. Eventually, Jackson’s evangelical efforts persuaded the Shaker leadership to officially recognize the Philadelphia “out-community” in 1858. They appointed Jackson as Elderess and she went forth to spread the Shaker gospel with the sect’s full endorsement. Jackson’s urban Shaker community was the only one of its kind in the sect’s 230 year history.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Watervliet Family Writings, quoted in Jean Humez, ed. *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Elderess*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 28.

<sup>237</sup> Shaker villages were founded in two flurries of missionary activity, the first in the Northeast in the 1780s and 90s, the second in the Midwest on the heels of the Kentucky Revival in the 1810s. The Shakers underwent a spiritual revival, called the Era of Manifestations, during the 1830s and 40s, during which time attention was focused internally on Shaker communities and less on an outward public ministry. Though the Shakers welcomed “spectators” to their meetings and printed many pamphlets during this era, the central ministry at Mount Lebanon decided against sending out missionaries. See Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 112.

<sup>238</sup> Humez, 40-41; Richard E. Williams, *Called and Chosen* (London: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1981), 109-11. The Philadelphia Shaker community that Jackson founded was predominantly composed of black women and ranged from thirteen to twenty members at any given time. Letters to and from Jackson’s Philadelphia community reflected



Figure 8, Elderess Rebecca Perot, Rebecca Jackson's spiritual successor, ca. 1880. Courtesy Hancock Shaker Village.

It is important to consider what Rebecca Jackson's embrace of celibacy meant in the context of attitudes toward black female sexuality in the antebellum era. Aside from being a spiritual discipline that helped Jackson and her followers lead (in her words) a "sanctified" life, it also challenged antebellum racial ideologies that held black women to be sexually available and sexually promiscuous. And while many Americans, white and black, found the Shakers' celibacy unnatural and disturbing, the black Shaker sisters of Philadelphia showed that chastity was not

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that there were a smattering of white sisters and black brothers gathered in as well in the 1870s. The community continued to endure after Jackson's death in 1871, and could boast a small gathering of members living in two houses as late as 1908. The Philadelphia sisters lived together in one house, and often worked as seamstresses or laundresses to support themselves. Though they visited and received visits from the other established Shaker communities throughout the late nineteenth century, it is difficult to discern if they received the same level of financial support as the larger more formal Shaker settlements. The Philadelphia community was tiny in comparison to Shaker villages in the Northeast and Midwest, which at the time boasted hundreds of members living in several smaller groupings, or families, spread across hundreds of acres of farmland. See Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 88-89.

merely the provenance of “passionless” white womanhood.<sup>239</sup> Elderess Rebecca Cox Jackson and her “little band” were not alone in this. The Oblate Sisters of Providence, an order of African-American nuns founded in Baltimore in 1829, also provided an example of celibate black womanhood. Free women of color also attended anti-masturbation lectures of sexual reformer, Sylvester Graham, and participated in the Female Moral Reform movements of the 1820s and 30s.<sup>240</sup>

Though neither Rebecca Jackson nor any of her immediate family members had been enslaved, it would have been impossible for her to escape knowledge of the sexual degradation and violence black women experienced under slavery. The so-called “pornography of pain,” especially the sexual violence perpetrated against female slaves by white masters, saturated abolitionist discourse during Jackson’s time.<sup>241</sup> In light of this, the choice of Jackson and her female followers to pursue celibacy can be seen as a right to sexual and bodily autonomy as well as a form of spiritual discipline. In doing so they defied the expectations of both antebellum whites as well as fellow church-going blacks, such as Jackson’s own minister brother. The AME church located African-American women’s virtue in respectable Republican motherhood, not in a religiously-based sexual abstinence.<sup>242</sup> And while other converts like Isaachar Bates and Isaac N. Youngs struggled to maintain the Shaker doctrine of celibacy, Rebecca Jackson’s celibacy was her own independent revelation.

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<sup>239</sup> On “passionlessness” see Nancy Cott, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850,” *Signs* 4 (1978), 219-236

<sup>240</sup> For insight on African American women’s participation in the Grahamite sexual reform movement, see April Haynes, “Riotous Flesh,” (University of California Santa Barbara, diss, 2009), chapter six. Amy Cassey founded the Moral Reform Association in Philadelphia in 1837. See Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 126.

<sup>241</sup> Describing the sexual violence women experienced under slavery and the licentiousness of white masters was a prominent fixture of antislavery literature, especially in the 1840s and 50s. Such lurid and near-pornographic descriptions were accepted as suitable middle-class reading material as long as they were in the service of reform. See Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 2 (Apr., 1995), pp. 303-334.

<sup>242</sup> Dunbar, 68, 117.

## Living the Graham System

Unlike the Shakers who believed celibacy was necessary for spiritual salvation, Grahamite sexual reformers believed the benefits of sexual restraint would be reaped in this life, not the next. Early histories of the movement have interpreted Graham's advocacy surrounding hygiene and chastity as a metaphor for the entire American antebellum age. Works, such as Jayme Sokolow's *Eros and Modernization* and Stephen Nissenbaum's *Sex, Diet, Debility* have assumed that the prescriptive literature written by Graham and colleagues like William Andrus Alcott was uncritically internalized by the majority of the American middle class during the nineteenth century.<sup>243</sup> Scholarship on sexual reform in the 1830s has also been too quick to understand Grahamite ideas about sex and diet as a proxy for urbanization and social change. These studies envision sexual reform as a metaphor for modernization, where adapting Grahamian values about culinary and sexual excesses led to the internalization of middle-class values. Stephen Nissenbaum, while not discounting the roles social change and urbanization might have played in Graham's ideology, is both more correct and more sympathetic in his analysis. People turned to Graham "not in order to enter the emergent middle class" but because "they were sick, and they wished to become well."<sup>244</sup> Graham's system—which encompassed not just sex but diet, sleep, and temperance—provided a needed "regimen" to antebellum middle-class men, displaced from the traditions of home and village to the urban center. While perhaps accurate in his analysis of young merchants and tradesmen, Nissenbaum's argument

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<sup>243</sup> On histories of Grahamian reform, see Jayme Sokolow, *Eros and Modernization* (London: Associated University Presses, 1983) ; Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform* (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

<sup>244</sup> Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, Debility*, 140.

cannot explain Graham's appeal to his substantial number of female followers or his popularity beyond urban centers.

On the whole, historians have either uncritically accepted the prescriptive doctrines of Graham at face value, or on the other hand, dismissed them altogether as irrelevant to the sexual lives of antebellum Americans. The diary of Worcester horticulturalist George Jacques reveals that followers of Sylvester Graham struggled with prescriptions for health and vitality bought at the cost of sexual restraint. George Jacques was a young man of about twenty-four years of age when he began keeping his diary in 1841. Like many of the men attracted to Grahamism, he was an educated New Englander of the middle class, having graduated from Brown University in 1836. Like William Andrus Alcott, he was a former schoolmaster, having taught in Rhode Island and Virginia for three years prior to returning home to participate in his family's nursery business in 1840. Jacques was an intellectually curious and intelligent man; he spoke French, Italian, Spanish, and German and as of 1841 was teaching himself to read Hebrew. He was also an avid reader and fan of Samuel Coleridge, Charles Dickens, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Most importantly, Jacques was a devoted Washingtonian and attended meetings of the society in both Worcester and Boston.<sup>245</sup>

Despite his cleverness and perhaps because of it, George Jacques considered himself to be sickly, weak, and of a nervous disposition. As a Washingtonian, rather than just an ordinary temperance advocate, Jacques may also have been a recovering alcoholic, as the Washingtonian Society was established for drunkards, by drunkards in a Baltimore tavern in 1841.<sup>246</sup> It is possible Washingtonian connections introduced him to Grahamism and sexual reform; Jacques

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<sup>245</sup> "George Jacques Diary," Vol. 1 1841-1845, Vol. 2 1852-1856, WML.

<sup>246</sup> The Washingtonians were unique among Temperance societies for their secular, rather than religiously oriented nature. See Ian R. Tyrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800-1860* (Westport, CT, 1979); Jonathan Zimmerman, "Dethroning King Alcohol: The Washingtonians in Baltimore, 1840—1854." *Maryland Historical Magazine* 87 (1992), 374-98.

quoted a passage from Dr. Woodward's latest book on solitary vice in his diary after attending the annual Washingtonian Convention.<sup>247</sup> Certainly, Graham's ban on alcohol and stimulating drinks would have complemented his temperance pledge. But he also may have converted to Grahamism for health-related reasons; "If Phrenol[ogy] Is true, I am constantly inclined to underrate myself, self esteem being the smallest organ in my head My temperament being strongly nervous, I have too much sprightliness and physical activity for my strength—teeth liable to decay—extreme sensitiveness to physical suffering—sensibility." Jacques believed himself predisposed to consumption, dyspepsia, sleeplessness, mental insanity, and subject to extremes of feeling. He fretted over trouble with his eyesight, his weakness for liquor and his general ill health to the extent that at one point he wondered if he should commit himself totally to celibacy, for fear of passing these unhealthy traits along to his own children. "Would it not be best to live un vieux celibate? Would it not have been better for me had mon pere done the same? Infinitely! Infinitely! Oh Dieu that it had been so!" he wrote in his journal.<sup>248</sup>

George Jacques may have been attracted to the promises of the Graham system to treat his melancholy and nervous disposition, but he struggled against its prohibitions against solitary vice, and the expectations antebellum reform culture had regarding the male libido. He wrote tips to himself on how his life might be improved: "Remedy for Melancholy. 1 Early Rising; 2. Plain nourishing food; 3. Exercise in the open air. Also associate with the cheerful—Study the scriptures—Avoid Sin—....—Prayer" Next to this he also wrote, "Remedy pour l'autre chose— 1. Keep employed, body or mind; 2. Guard the senses.. to these may be added 4 Guard the Imagination and avoid every thing that excites it or the senses... Tabac, intoxicating drinks.

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<sup>247</sup> Jacques quoted Samuel B. Woodward's *Hints for the Young in Relation to the Health of Body and Mind* (Boston: Light, 1840). Woodward was the superintendent of the Worcester, Massachusetts state lunatic asylum. His study drew a link between masturbation and insanity.

<sup>248</sup> An educated man, Jacques was fond of sprinkling his diary with French expressions. Jacques diary Jan 4 1844. June 5 1843, September 4, 1843

Indulgence...5. Take regular exercise, wholesome food, bathe occasionally—ex. Mod & gen cold bath....dormissait solitaire...Noth short of total abst. can save those addicted to it.” While the “remedy for melancholy” certainly followed the directions of Graham and Alcott, “remedy for l’autre chose,” or “the other thing,” the issue he declined to name, was the universal sexual reform prescription against masturbation.<sup>249</sup> These most private entries about “l’autre chose” were written in Jacques’ unique code which substituted Greek letters for Roman ones, undecipherable to a curious parent or servant who did not have the benefit of a classical education.

In his mid-twenties, George Jacques also struggled with the prescriptions of antebellum middle-class white masculinity. Social norms dictated that Jacques find a wife and marry, yet the reform circles he moved in also required Jacques to practice sexual restraint while he remained a bachelor. Courtship was difficult for Jacques and his diary entries on the subject reflect the sorrows of an unhappy man twice spurned by potential brides.<sup>250</sup> In Worcester, Jacques again attempted courtship and risked rejection. In his coded diary entries, he chronicled his courtship with one Miss Louisa Inman. He first mentioned her in October of 1843: “played backgammon with Miss I and got beat every time.” For the next two years, he continued to visit with and play backgammon against Miss Inman. Once in 1844, he recorded having “Loved with L alone on the sofa.” Despite his intense fondness for Louisa, his health and recovering drunkard status made him doubt whether or not he was fit for marriage: “Objections to my marriage—1st—incapacity

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid, April 8 1841.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, February 23, 1843. Jacques at times seemed to indicate that he might have been living with his parents upon his return to Worcester, which might explain why he took such pains to camouflage his diary entries. “A female Jonathan” seems to indicate that Jacques longed for a woman who was a true partner and comrade-in-arms as in the tale of David and Jonathan found in the Bible.

to get a living. 2nd should not be loved by my wife—3rd my children would inherit mon defects.”<sup>251</sup>

It is unclear whether these were Jacques own fears or the objections of Louisa and her family. It is also strange in light of the fact that Jacques owned over 130 acres of land valued at \$64,000, not including the various outbuildings on them. In April of 1845, he seemed to have asked her father’s permission to marry her and was rebuffed; he wrote of his frustration, “the great want of my life—ergo must ergo will get married!” He kept up his acquaintance with Louisa throughout 1845 and tried to propose again several months later. She tried to let him down easy, telling Jacques she could not accept him as a husband “only in the light of a friend.” Despairing, he resolved to take the moral high ground and not seek revenge against Louisa and her family for spurning him, in hope that he would one day find another woman to marry. Unfortunately for George Jacques, this also was not to be. He remained a bachelor until his death in 1872. The second volume of his diary, begun more than ten years later in 1852, reveals a much more somber and misanthropic man.

What conclusions can be drawn from George Jacques’ experiences with sexual restraint? He was neither a priest nor a Shaker, but a somewhat average white middle-class man of his time, who believed Grahamite principles would improve his health. He sought to free himself of solitary vice as well as his weakness for spirits, and may have believed the two were interrelated. And yet, though he vowed to get plenty of exercise, leave off stimulating food and drink, and think pure and pious thoughts, he never wholly embraced the vegetarian aspect of the Graham diet. There were many avenues individuals pursued to Grahamite sexual restraint. Some came to it out of concern for their health. For others, sexual restraint was always the end goal, and the prevention of disease was secondary. The example of George Jacques shows that those who

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid, December 18, 1843.



subscribed to Grahamism were not the dogmatic, blind followers the popular press imagined them to be. It was more of an “à la carte” ideology for someone like Jacques; he practiced the parts that seemed most relevant and beneficial to him.

Though sexual abstinence and limitation was as much a part of the Graham system as bran bread and a vegetarian diet, the few testimonies that remain are hardly as explicit as those of George Jacques. In the case of published testimonies, whenever sex was discussed explicitly it was done so anonymously. Conversely, wherever anyone was willing to attach his or her name to an endorsement of Graham’s system, they spoke openly of Graham’s diet but not of his sexual prescriptions. This even carried over into the privately recorded meeting minutes of the Ladies’ Physiological Society (LPS). As part of their constitution, the female members of the LPS promised to “to give some account of their health before and since adopting the Graham system” when called upon. Furthermore, no member should “feel at liberty to refuse when called upon” to discuss her experience, presumably including her sexual experiences.<sup>252</sup> During a meeting in which they hosted Sylvester Graham himself, Graham instructed the ladies to speak frankly with one another; “all restraint being laid aside in this society and the meeting as a band of sisters.”<sup>253</sup> And though the secretary dutifully noted occasions on which LPS members spoke openly of their experiences on the Graham system, their words were never recorded.

In print, Grahamites were more likely to speak in more general terms of their miraculous recovery on the Graham system. Adeline Brooks’ letter to the *Health Journal* was typical. Brooks blamed her ill health on her work as a dressmaker from the age of fourteen to twenty-one: “During this time I thought I had pretty good health, but took almost no exercise, lived on rich food, attended a great many evening parties.” Brooks was plagued by a great many ailments,

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<sup>252</sup> “Records of the Proceedings of the Ladies Physiological Society,” April 7, 1837, Rebecca Codman Butterfield Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, hereafter abbreviated MHS.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, April 10, 1837.

including at her lowest point, the stoppage of her menses. After having spent the past two years on the Graham system, including frequent cold water bathing and liberal use of the “flesh brush” she experienced a total recovery. She wrote to the editor, “My system now possesses a capability of endurance and resistance which it never did before.”<sup>254</sup> Reading between the lines of Brooks’s published letter, with its mention of “evening parties” (presumably spent in the company of the opposite sex) and her strict adherence to Graham’s regime of both diet and bathing, it is fair to assume she most likely practiced sexual restraint as well. And as she lived near Oberlin College, which at the time ran its dining system entirely on the Graham diet, managed by former *Graham Journal* editor and boardinghouse keeper David Cambell, she lived in a community with many kindred spirits.<sup>255</sup> Sylvia Cambell, David Cambell’s wife and a charter member of the Ladies Physiological Society, would have been there as well. If Cambell met with Adeline Brooks and other interested women to discuss those controversial tenets of Graham’s “Lecture to Mothers,” no record exists. Such conversations were deemed too indelicate to be printed in the newspaper.

### **“I would prefer the life of a religious to any other”: Chastity and Catholic Religious Communities**

As difficult as it is to uncover the experiential dimensions of sexual restraint for Shaker and Grahamite subjects, it has been even more so for the Catholic priests and nuns that feature in this study. Such sources (if they ever existed) may have either been purged from the historical record or highly restricted in terms of access. In this way, writing about nineteenth-century subjects’ feelings about *not* engaging in sexual activity mirrors many of the difficulties historians of sexuality have in obtaining their sources. This quotation from the biographer of Mother

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<sup>254</sup> Adeline Brooks, “A Truthful Testimony From Woman,” *Health Journal, & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, March 26, 1842, 83-84.

<sup>255</sup> On the circle of Grahamites living in Oberlin, OH see “Letter From P. D. Hathaway,” *Health Journal, & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, August 28, 1841, 300-302

Elizabeth Boyle, first mother superior of the Sisters of Charity of New York, sums up the challenges of this work neatly; “A sister’s life, however, although before the world, is intended to be shielded from observation.”<sup>256</sup>

Like the Shakers’ commitment to celibacy, in its most idealized form a nun or priest’s vow of chastity was intended to be a sacrifice. It was not a state that was supposed to come easily or naturally, but something consciously chosen in emulation of a celibate Christ, to bring one closer to God by rejecting earthly concerns and pleasures. It was considered analogous and of equal weight to vows of poverty and obedience, which were also intended to be difficult sacrificial behaviors. Priests and nuns rejected personal comfort and personal freedom in hope of gaining eternal treasure and love in the afterlife. Nineteenth-century Catholics, like their Shaker counterparts, believed celibacy allowed a person to emulate the life of the angels; “chastity crucifies sensual life and makes one participate in the angelic nature as far as is possible with this mortal state.”<sup>257</sup> Chastity worked in concert with poverty and obedience as a spiritual discipline that perfected human nature.

Yet when sisters made a vow of chastity and entered religious life, they also simultaneously became “brides of Christ.” This was often ritually enacted in a literal marriage ceremony, where a prospective nun, dressed in bridal attire, made her vows and married herself to Jesus Christ and the rest of her religious community. The ceremony of Profession performed by the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, included a psalm with lyrics based on the Song of Solomon. Its words gave the occasion a distinctly marital feel: “who is she, that cometh up from the desert, flowing with delights, leaning upon her beloved? Thou art all fair, my beloved, meek and beautiful. Come my spouse, from Libanus; come thou shalt be crowned.” The ceremony also

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<sup>256</sup> Rev. James J. Dougherty, ed. *Life of Mother Elizabeth Boyle* (Staten Island, NY: Press of the Immaculate Virgin, 1893), x.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

called for Superior to affix a wedding ring on the newly professed sister's hand.<sup>258</sup> Nuns thought of themselves (and Catholics thought of them) as the brides of Christ. And in this state they were as expected to be as faithful and as submissive to the will of the Church as any nineteenth-century wife living under coverture. Elizabeth Boyle, a Protestant convert and the first novice to be received by Elizabeth Seton's Sisters of Charity, was instructed to think of herself as a submissive bride by her male mentor and confessor, Father Moranvillé. When she informed him of her decision to become a sister against her mother's will, he told her that her mother's feelings were to be expected but:

You ought not to give way. Mind that the Spouse of your soul is a jealous lover... Never hesitate to give the preference to your dear Lord and to seek for your comfort in your generous submission to His blessed will. It is not you who have chosen Him but it is He who has chosen you.<sup>259</sup>

So, although Elizabeth Boyle may have shown agency and initiative to pursue her spiritual calling as a Sister of Charity, Catholic doctrine and male priests like Father Moranvillé urged her to make herself passive to Christ's will. She had not chosen Christ, he had chosen her, surely as any jealous husband chose a young innocent wife.

Catholic tracts made a strong case for the religious life as a valid and fulfilling option for young women, equal to the calling of wife and mother. One tract asked Protestant critics, "If they imagine that they will correspond better to their holy vocation, by living in retirement, with companions of their own sex, should such a liberty be denied them? Is there any law divine or human compelling women to marry?... Is there more virtue in idling away our time in visits, balls, frequenting the theater, &c &c than in living in the company of pious friends."<sup>260</sup> While such

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<sup>258</sup> *Form of Ceremony for the Reception and Profession of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy* (Boston: Patrick Donahoe, 1854), 11, 22.

<sup>259</sup> Father Moranvillé to Elizabeth Boyle, April 4, 1810 reprinted in *Life of Elizabeth Boyle*, 21.

<sup>260</sup> Catholic Tract Society of Baltimore. *Nos. 15 & 16 Nuns and Monastic Institutes*, 3.

tracts on the one hand championed women's religious liberty and right *not* to marry, on the other they took an equally controlling and male-dominated view toward women who had already entered religious life. Catholic authorities insisted that a nun's vows were based on trial and experience of the novitiate years, unlike a youthful bride who married with foolish "desires and hopes." But at the same time, a sister's vows were as irrevocable and binding as any nineteenth-century marriage. For the convent to have a revolving door would constitute chaos and would be detrimental to the individual nun as well as her community as a whole. She would become "half a fashionable lady in her convent, as she was a formal old maid in the world, —an object of compassion and trouble to her religious sisters, and of contempt and raillery to her worldly friends."<sup>261</sup> These words seem to echo the warning of Mary Antoinette Doolittle's father—that those who joined the Shakers and left them seemed to be fit neither for the Shakers' utopia nor the vicissitudes of ordinary life. So while these Catholic pamphleteers were willing to allow women the freedom *not* to marry, they were also unwilling to allow them the right to divorce, or to live a single life unaffiliated with either a husband or a convent. In that regard, Catholics and the most conservative Protestant moralists would probably agree; women did not have a right to autonomy as single women.

Notably the Catholic Church did not ask priests to conceive of themselves as "married" to the Church in the same fashion they did for their female counterparts. Male priests were also expected to give their lives to the church and make vows of poverty and obedience, but they were not considered "brides" of Christ, nor were they married to the Virgin Mary. Marriage in no way served as a metaphor for joining the priesthood. These men were members of an ancient religious fraternity, unbroken in lineage all the way back to Christ himself and the first male apostles. In the hierarchy of the Church, priests may have been celibate, but they were still *men*,

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<sup>261</sup>Ibid, 4-5.

and endowed with an independent status female religious did not possess. They were obedient, but not submissive.

However, while many men gave their lives to the service of the Church and agreed to live by the priesthood's rules, it did not mean they always did so unquestioningly. Doubts about celibacy and its continued necessity in the new American priesthood can be found in the writings of Richard L. Burtzell, who served as Catholic priest in New York City during the mid-nineteenth century. Burtzell was born in 1840 to a wealthy New York Catholic family who could trace their ancestry back to Maryland's first colonial settlers. His family had high hopes for him and sent him at the age of ten to study at the Sulpician seminary in Montreal. At the age of only thirteen, it was decided he would become a priest, and he travelled alone to Rome to study at the Urban College of Propaganda, sponsored by Archbishop John Hughes himself. In Rome, Burtzell earned both a Doctor of Philosophy and a Doctor of Theology degree. Though he had been intended for the priesthood since childhood, he was not formally ordained until the age of twenty-two. In November of 1862, Burtzell returned to his native New York City as the assistant pastor to St. Ann's church in Astor Place.<sup>262</sup>

Still fresh from the seminary in 1865, Burtzell and his colleague from the College of Propaganda safely concluded that celibacy was still in the "great characteristic" of the priesthood despite "many individuals' frailty." In their opinion, marriage made their Protestant counterparts selfish and narrow-minded, while celibacy allowed the priest to care for the whole human race.<sup>263</sup> Yet only a year later, the young priest questioned whether the celibate priesthood was in the best interests of the Church. On a steamboat trip from Saratoga Springs to New York, Burtzell and two of his fellow priests spent the afternoon debating the merits of celibacy for

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<sup>262</sup> Nelson J. Callahan, ed. "Preface," *The Diary of Richard L. Burtzell Priest of New York: The Early Years, 1865-1868* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), iii.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

priests. “We discussed on the propriety of letting the clergy marry: and we agreed on its propriety.” The reasoning of Burtzell and his two companions, Dr. McSweeny and Father Nilan, was that “celibacy never allows priests to become men... Celibacy brings lonesome hours to the priest: marriage would give him a perpetual object to be loved: Celibacy makes priests selfish, marriage would make him more social.”<sup>264</sup> Father Burtzell and his colleagues in the priesthood knew of fellow priests who had failed to keep the vow of chastity. They spoke in hushed tones of rumors of a fellow New York priest caught buying venereal medication and of priests “taking liberties with girls of well-to-do families.”<sup>265</sup> While hardly the stuff of Know-Nothing pamphlets, Burtzell’s words echoed many Protestant criticisms against celibacy and public opinion on bachelorhood in general.<sup>266</sup>

Richard Burtzell had spent almost half his life in Catholic institutions, yet he was hardly dogmatic. Many of his own arguments against celibacy seem more suited to the post-Vatican II era than the middle of the nineteenth century. He left Rome where priests were abundant to return to an urban metropolis that had a desperate need of priests to minister to the city’s growing population of Catholic immigrants. Burtzell felt these needs keenly and wished for more priests to meet to the spiritual and material needs of the city’s Catholics. In his opinion, “so few choose celibacy, that few smart and good men become priests” and “any one, however vulgar or untalented becomes a priest, if a celibate.”<sup>267</sup> Not only did Burtzell feel that celibacy kept good candidates away from the priesthood, he also felt it interfered with his mission as a priest, and kept him from ministering to his parishioners. Burtzell saw his influence on his flock deriving

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid, 288-89

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 286-87.

<sup>266</sup> Flash papers frequently made fun of bachelors as objects of pity, simultaneously licentious and too cold hearted to wish upon any woman. See *Boston Satirist*, April 14, 1843; *The Monthly Cosmopolite*, July 1, 1850; *The New York Whip*, March 19, 1842.

<sup>267</sup> *Diary of Richard Burtzell*, 289.

from a “superstitious reverence” that was rooted in his own separation from his fellow men. He also argued that celibacy kept a priest from exercising any true social and political influence as he was required to “fly a woman as the very devil.” On the surface, Burtzell might appear sheltered, but he was savvy to the balance of political power and social capital in urban New York; he knew priests could not hope to cultivate influence and participate in organized benevolence if they were not allowed to collaborate with women. As Burtzell was an abolitionist active in antislavery, his frustration undoubtedly stemmed from personal experience as a priest in largely Protestant and heavily female reform circles.<sup>268</sup> One of his colleagues, Dr McGlynn, disagreed and insisted celibacy was “the divine characteristic of the Catholic clergy.” In response, Burtzell wrote derisively that such men would “allow many individuals go to hell than deprive the church of this beauty.”<sup>269</sup>

Despite his misgivings around celibacy, Richard Burtzell remained a priest until his death in 1912. One can’t help read his words and wonder if Burtzell, a young man, had begun to regret what he had given up to gain his calling. His feelings seem to mirror in many ways the doubts of Isaac N. Youngs, who had been a Shaker since childhood. Burtzell, ensconced within first the seminary at Montreal and later the College of Propaganda, had, like Youngs, come of age in a community where celibacy was both idealized and also the norm. Later, in his mid-twenties surrounded by the hustle and bustle of urban New York, it is easy to imagine Burtzell becoming aware of the possibilities, especially for family life, that had been closed to him when

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<sup>268</sup> Burtzell was thoroughly committed to antislavery and also spreading the Catholic faith among African-Americans. He later helped found St. Benedict the Moor, the first African-American Catholic Church north of the Mason-Dixon line in 1883. His radicalism continued into his later years when he would defend his friend, the radical Dr. McSweeney’s participation in the controversial Anti-Poverty Society. McSweeney might have been traditional about celibacy, but he was willing to risk excommunication for socialist economic reform. See Thomas J. Shelley, *Greenwich Village Catholics: St. Joseph's Church and the Evolution of an Urban Faith Community, 1829-2002* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 127-28; Kevin E. McKenna, *The Battle for Rights in the United States Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 86-99.

<sup>269</sup> *Diary of Richard L. Burtzell*, 290.



he chose to become a priest. Or perhaps equally, Burtzell's doubts were the musings of a pragmatist who wished to attract the best and the brightest men to the service of the Church. Overworked and spread thin, Burtzell and his liberal-minded colleagues understandably desired policies that would allow the Church to do the greatest good for the greatest number. For all his extraordinary activity, he confessed to feelings of melancholy, "excessive gloom," and loneliness, which he attempted to dispel with "artificial engagements" to fill his hours.<sup>270</sup> In his diary, Burtzell never seemed to question his vocation as a priest, but he does seem to have wished at times that being a priest did not require celibacy.

Richard Burtzell's diary is remarkable for its candor on the subject of celibacy. Most extant Catholic sources are much less forthright. One of the things that can be gleaned from these opaque sources is that becoming a nun or a priest was something done with extreme care and intention. Contrary to the picture presented in "escaped nun" stories of Mother Superiors and scheming Jesuits looking for wealthy naïve Protestant women to "seduce" into convent life, Catholic records of religious orders actually reveal that it was very difficult to become a priest or a nun in the antebellum era. While these tales of intrigue and seduction may have sold books and pamphlets, they were a far cry from what a novice priest or nun experienced as they formed their vocations. Even at a time when Catholic orders in the United States were in desperate need of men and women to serve in their missions, convents and seminaries were very discriminating in admitting new members. Rather than trying to recruit Protestant heiresses, no one in the records of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky or in the convents at Kaskaskia, Illinois or St. Genevieve, Missouri was taken without being a professed Roman Catholic.

Working-class women like Bridget Brophy labored for many years to acquire the funds necessary to present themselves as sisters. Becoming a nun for someone like Brophy was not

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid, 96-102.

happenstance, but a goal several years in the making. Father De Luynes of New York gave his wholehearted endorsement of her vocation, writing, “She would have long since availed herself of her having been received as Postulant by you and the good Sisters at Nazareth to go to her new home, but want of means detained her. She has, by her labor, earned every penny she needed for her travelling expenses and I mention the circumstances as indicative of perseverance and sincerity on her part.”<sup>271</sup> The convents usually favored women who were young, literate, and without family ties. Father De Luynes of New York City presented several such women to the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth over the years, and seemed to get the reputation as something of a recruiter. One, Rose Devlin, he described as twenty-three years of age, healthy, “small sized, nothing disagreeable in her appearance, can read and write, has no other intention but the purest motive of the love of God, in asking to be received, will make a wonderful sister.” De Luynes made sure to acknowledge that “by her own industry she has \$300,” and could therefore pay her own way to Kentucky. Another, Mary McKensie, was only nineteen. He thought she “May be trained and taught so as to become a school teacher; has a genteel appearance, quiet manners.” De Luynes commented that neither woman had parents or relations and were considered “quite free.”<sup>272</sup> A rare case of an older postulant was Miss Mary Byrne. Though at thirty she would have been older than the majority of postulants, Byrne “was never married, has not encumbrance of parents, brothers or sisters dependent on her.” Mary Byrne was indeed given a trial and became Sister Dominica only two months after she departed for Kentucky in November 1859. She remained until her death in 1908.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Bridget Brophy became Sister Mary Ida on February 24, 1855 and served as a sister for forty years until her death. Father H. DeLuynes NYC to Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, June 26 1854, NAZ.

<sup>272</sup> H. de Luynes to Father Haseltine, April 11, 1859, NAZ.

<sup>273</sup> H. de Luynes to Mother Frances, September 15, 1859, NAZ.

Even in the cases of those women who seemed to meet all of the requirements of the sisterhood—youth, vitality, education, and spiritual zeal—orders took great pains to vet prospective members. When Miss Theresa Eberle of Cincinnati called on the Mother Superior to present herself as postulant in Louisville in 1841, she carried with her testimonials of good character and capacity to teach. But since she was not local and did not present “a letter from her confessor or some responsible person” she could not be accepted as a postulant until such a recommendation was presented.<sup>274</sup> In some cases, even a wholehearted endorsement from a confessor did not guarantee that a woman was fit for the sisterhood. Rose Devlin, who Father De Luynes, had thought possessed the makings of “a wonderful sister,” was not admitted to the order after her two years of novitiate expired. De Luynes was sorry to hear of it, but acknowledged that when a candidate showed a “deficiency of piety or in sense, or health,” they should not be admitted. He himself supposed that “defects latent in the world, are evolved in a religious community.”<sup>275</sup>

This level of scrutiny also applied to male applicants to the priesthood. The Domestic Councils Minutes kept by the leadership of the St. Mary of the Barrens Seminary in Perrysville, Missouri reveal that prospective priests were carefully screened both before and after admission to the seminary. A want of piety, humility, or aptitude for liturgical study was enough to disqualify a candidate from the priesthood.<sup>276</sup> After a year of study, a seminarian was allowed to

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<sup>274</sup> Surviving records from the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth collection do not confirm or deny whether or not Theresa Eberle ever took her vows. Father Haseltine to Father J A Elet S.J., Oct 16, 1841, NAZ.

<sup>275</sup> Father De Luynes to Father Haseltine, Jan 25 1861, NAZ.

<sup>276</sup> “A Sketch of St. Mary’s Seminary as an Educational Institution,” St. Mary of the Barrens’ Seminary Records, DeAndreis Rossetti Memorial Archives, hereafter abbreviated SMOB. St. Mary of the Barrens was a seminary run by the Vincentian order, with the objective of training priests who would serve in a missionary capacity. They also taught male lay scholars and non-Catholics and welcomed pupils from as far away as New Orleans. When St. Mary’s was founded in 1818, it had distinction of being the oldest institution of post-secondary education west of the Mississippi in what then constituted the United States. It was also the third seminary established for the training of priests on American soil. The first seminary established in the Catholic haven of Baltimore, the second in Bardstown, Kentucky, where they worked in concert with the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, who also served under

“make the good purposes,” or declare his intention to enter the priesthood according to the rules of the Vincentian order. He would then enter into a novitiate period in which his character would be examined to see that he possessed the necessary poverty, chastity, piety, and obedience his vocation required. A student from the seminary wishing to apply to the priesthood might be put off several times before he was finally accepted, as a way of testing the sincerity of his calling. Rather than beguiling innocents into their ranks, the seminary leadership seemed to feel it was necessary that a young man gain maturity before making such an important commitment. They denied admission twice to an otherwise pious and “exemplary” scholar, simply because they felt he was not yet old enough.<sup>277</sup>

Seminary records also indicate that there was more to being a priest than just celibacy. Prospective priests needed to be bright enough to acquire the Latin and Greek necessary for the makings of solid theologians, yet not too vain about their intelligence. An otherwise enthusiastic novice who had the misfortune of being a bit dim was refused after two years “on a want of talent & energy necessary to acquire the science required for the exercise of our functions.” Meanwhile, the vows of an extremely bright novice were delayed because of “having studies more at heart than piety.”<sup>278</sup> Among the priests themselves, vanity and lack of obedience were considered serious obstacles to becoming a good priest, as much as the difficulties of keeping the vow of celibacy. Although on one instance they did dismiss a novice after they found letters in his possession whose content was scandalous enough for the Council to conclude “he has no

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the Vincentian banner. There were older seminaries in the American southwest, but at the time of St. Mary’s founding, they were not part of the United States.

<sup>277</sup>“Domestic Councils Minutes,” April 18 1857, Feb 4 1858, SMOB. In one of the only situations where a young applicant of eighteen was fast-tracked it was because they were afraid if he returned home, his father would not agree to let him join the priesthood. They agree to admit him, so as to keep him away from the “danger” of losing him, and write a letter to his father.

<sup>278</sup>Ibid, February 4, 1858. The Council was fearful of his intellectual vanity and an obedience that came from the head and not from the heart. The keeper of the minutes recorded that vanity was especially dangerous and considered an “occasion of losing one’s vocation.

vocation.” This same novice was guilty of “transgressing the rules & keeping particular friendships.”<sup>279</sup>

Guarding against “particular friendships” was a warning issued at both convents and seminaries. It has often been interpreted as a proscription against homosexual relationships.<sup>280</sup> Even if it was platonic, a “particular friendship,” or an exclusive bond between two individuals, interfered with a sister or priest achieving the all-encompassing Christ-like love she or he was supposed to feel toward all persons. Convents and seminaries established a number of rules and regulations to guard against both heterosexual and homosexual attachments. The rules for seminarians at St. Mary of the Barrens in 1844 were as strict, if not more so, than any of the Millennial Laws adhered to by Shakers. They were designed to discourage both physical and emotional intimacy between fellow seminarians as well as priests and their male pupils. For example, students were forbidden from calling each other anything other “than their proper names” even during times of recreation. Seminarians and priests were told to exercise modesty and “diligently avoid that kind of levity and curiosity of looking about in the church or in other holy places, such as the chapel, the sacristy.” This also carried over into the schoolroom, where making jokes and passing notes were expressly forbidden. A seminary student could not enter a fellow student’s room without the permission of his Superior. Contact with the outside world was closely monitored; seminarians were forbidden from talking to strangers during recreation and books sent to them were subject to the Superior’s inspection, lest they contain material that might interfere with a student’s desire to become a priest. Students should also “avoid most

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<sup>279</sup>Ibid, March 12 1858, July 28 1857

<sup>280</sup>Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion*, 32. Oral histories with nuns who entered convent life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century remember being taught a jingle “Never one, seldom two, always three or more,” as novices as device for steering clear of particular friendships. While most seem to have interpreted it as a prohibition against being “exclusive” with any one sister, others wondered if “it was something about chastity.” See Nancy Sylvester, I.H.M. “PFs, Persistent Friendships,” and Joan Gilsky, I.H.M. “The Official IHM Stance on Friendship 1845-1960” in *Building Sisterhood A Feminist History of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

carefully laying their hands on one another without necessity. Neither will they lie down in an indecent posture, in summertime especially.” Such behaviors were “quite contrary to holy Modesty.”<sup>281</sup> While celibacy was the ideal, seminary rules implied that it might be disturbed as much by same-sex attachments as by opposite-sex ones. This acknowledgement of same-sex attraction is remarkable for the time period, in which such desires were rarely acknowledged to exist even the most risqué “flash press” weeklies.<sup>282</sup>

Over the next twenty years, the rules for the seminarians at St. Mary’s only increased in severity. One possible reason is that the intermingling of lay scholars and seminarians at the school was regarded as highly suspect by the order’s motherhouse in Paris.<sup>283</sup> The back of the 1844 pamphlet for the seminarians included such rules as number 14, “Do not touch one another, even through jokes nor entertain yourselves alone with one another,” and number 15, “Do not make yourselves familiar with women, though they be some relation to you.” The overall impression it makes was a sense that the formulation of the vow of chastity was a fragile and temperamental thing that could easily be swayed or broken by the merest connection with another person. In this regard, these rules actually lend credence to the many anti-Catholic and “escaped nun” stories that made seminaries and convents out as cruel places, filled with coldhearted people. It actually also ran contrary to the lived experiences of many priests and sisters whose letters show a great affection for each other and for the people of their community.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> “Rules of the Seminarians of the St. Mary’s Preparatory Seminary” 1844, SMOB.

<sup>282</sup> References to homosexuality did appear in these sexually explicit publications, but the amount is miniscule in comparison to the many mentions of heterosexual debauchery. See Cline Cohen et al, *The Flash Press*, 192-198.

<sup>283</sup> “A Sketch of St. Mary’s Seminary as an Educational Institution,” SMOB. The Parisian Vicentians tried to ban lay scholars from the institution altogether from 1835-1850, to which the Missouri Vincentians protested this decision. This historical record is unclear to what degree the Missouri seminary defied their orders.

<sup>284</sup> “Rules of the Seminarians.” Such rules were apparently received directly from St. Vincent de Paul himself who charged his followers “To fly as the plague of communities, all kind of private connexions, partialities and friendships” and “Not to seek to gain the affection of anyone.”

Official rules and regulations may have proscribed displays of physical affection for both sisters and priests, but lived experience was another matter. Letters between former pupils and teachers show that strong emotional bonds were formed between the sisters and the students placed in their care at these institutions, away from their biological family. One former pupil of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth's school in Kentucky, Clara Bowen, felt moved to write to Mother Catherine Spaulding, the headmistress of the school, two years after her departure. Bowen had entered the school a Protestant at the age of twelve. At one point during her three years at school, she became extremely ill, so close to death they gave her the last rites. Believing she was on her deathbed, Bowen converted to Catholicism. Now fully recovered and back home with her parents in Cincinnati, Bowen wrote to Mother Spaulding, "Your dear face has always claimed a prominent place among the pictures memory loves to paint."<sup>285</sup> One incident in particular stood out in Bowen's mind:

Mother, do you recall one evening when I was just recovering, you were alone in the infirmary with me, and throwing your arms around me, you suddenly knelt down and kissed me? I have never forgotten it, for until then I thought you cold, but after that, I knew you loved me. If I am vain in writing thus, you must excuse for I follow the principle that so much love must need a little return, and therefore, I cannot help being just a bit dear to you.<sup>286</sup>

Mother Catherine took the instruction of her pupils very seriously and had a reputation for befriending the most troublesome and recalcitrant girls in the school, perhaps in Christian emulation of the shepherd who wanders after the lost sheep. As head of her order, Spaulding would also have been the one charged with rebuking sisters who transgressed the rules. Perhaps we can conclude that in regard to emotional intimacy, much was left up to the discretion of a particular superior and that there were many shades of grey in terms of what was permitted. Mother Catherine Spaulding was clearly on the indulgent side of the spectrum.

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<sup>285</sup> Clara Bowen to Mother Catherine Spaulding, November 7, 1852, NAZ.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

## **Remaking the Traditional Family**

As the example of Mother Catherine Spaulding and her pupil Clara Bowen indicate, Catholic sisters and priests created relationships outside those of the traditional family structure that were nevertheless meaningful and important. Though bonds between confessors and sisters or superiors and sisters, often seem to have replicated a parent-child relationship (as evidenced by use of titles like “Father” and “Mother”) they also connected across gender lines as colleagues and comrades. Such bonds were indeed emotionally, if not physically, intimate, and were perhaps right to spark the antebellum Protestant imagination. Eulalia Kelly, a Sister of Loretto, was sent to found a free school in rural Jefferson County, Arkansas in 1840. By all appearances, Sister Eulalia enjoyed religious life. But she hated to be parted from her confessor, Father Timon, whom she had met as young nun in Missouri. She explained in a letter, “To leave the house of my Parents was, for me, a great sacrifice, but to be deprived of your council and advice, is one much greater. Maryland is long since forgotten by me, but the kindnesses I have received from you are not forgotten.” Sister Eulalia concluded wistfully, “I believe I would be very happy here could I see you, say only once a year” though she knew the hundred- mile journey between frontier Arkansas and Timon’s post in Perrysville made even such a small wish unlikely to come true.<sup>287</sup>

Shakers, too, formed intense, life-long bonds with each other. As both Catholic priests and nuns and Shaker sisters and brothers lived in sex-segregated environments, it is not at all surprising that many of these close friendships were with members of the same sex. As nineteenth-century culture itself cultivated “a female world of love and ritual” such friendships

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<sup>287</sup> Sister Eulalia Kelly to John Timon, July 4, 1840, Provincial Files of John Timon, CoM.



would not have been out of place in “the world.”<sup>288</sup> In the autobiography written toward the end of his life, Issachar Bates saved his fondest remembrances for his missionary partner, Benjamin Youngs, not his wife or children, though they were Shakers, too. Bates and Youngs logged thousands of miles together preaching in the Old Northwest. “Little Benjamin,” was Bates’ “beloved companion,” and though he admitted he learned something from all of those with whom he travelled, Benjamin Youngs was special: “I am persuaded that there never were any David’s & Jonathan’s hearts more closely knit together.”<sup>289</sup> Unlike Catholic communities that guarded against “particular friendships,” Shakers seem to have held close same-sex bonds in high esteem. At the age of seventy-five, the western society Shakers arranged for this David and Jonathan pair to meet one last time before Issachar made his way back east to Mount Lebanon. “The people at Pleasant Hill were determined to see us both together once more in this world,” Bates recorded, so in August 1833, he made a farewell tour of Kentucky “and visited every family, Benjamin and Issachar together once more, like former times, which was a great satisfaction.” On September 6, 1833 they parted on the banks of the Ohio: “My beloved Elder Benjamin and others accompanied us across the river, and we then exchanged a few kisses, and bid, as I supposed, a last farewell.”<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg first coined the term “female world of love and ritual” to describe the intimate friendships between women in the nineteenth century. Close male friendships were also common, and were not necessarily viewed as abnormal or homosexual in nature. Jonathan Ned Katz describes the physically and emotionally intimate relationship experienced by Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Speed during Lincoln’s days as a young lawyer in Springfield. The two shared the same bed for more than eight months and Speed declared “no two men were ever more intimate.” See Katz, *Love Stories: Sex between Men Before Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3-7. Richard Godbeer has also examined the normalcy of same-sex male friendship during the early republic in *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

<sup>289</sup> *Sketch of the Life and Experience of Issachar Bates Sr*, 49, 71-72.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

Contrary to what one might expect among Shakers for whom opposite-sex attraction was both a taboo and a grave sin, there seems to have been an understanding that pure expressions of affection between members of the same sex were both necessary and desirable. In this regard, they again differ from the harsh regimes of the Catholic orders who strived to prevent any kind of intimacy, regardless of gender. When two brothers from New Lebanon were sent on a friendship tour of the western Shaker societies in 1834, their Ohio counterparts were glad to receive them. Yet, they were dismayed that no sisters from the east accompanied them and expressed their displeasure to the central ministry at Mount Lebanon. The “poor sisters,” they reported, “looked so lonesome and wishful to be obliged to stand and see the brethren hugging, shaking hands, and even kissing without being suitably represented, so as to afford them a like opportunity was grievous to borne, and indeed who can blame them for feeling this?” While brothers Rufus and Isaac did their best to include the sisters in conversation and were happy to visit the sisters’ workshops, because of the taboos around opposite-sex interaction in Shaker communities, the Shakers themselves knew it was not the same. The Ohioans strongly urged the Ministry to send both brothers and sisters next time, adding “we have open doors and inviting hearts.”<sup>291</sup> Shakers may have interpreted same-sex bonds of affection as evidence for the divine love they aimed to share with all members. Rather than the “fleshy” or selfish love that existed between husband and wife or parent and child, the love between spiritual partners like Isachaar Bates and Benjamin Youngs appeared pure, platonic, and transcendent.

Relationships like that between Bates and Youngs exemplified the Shakers’ spiritual ideal. Yet, the sect also carved out spaces for emotional and spiritual intimacy between men and women within their communities. Shaker sisters and brothers routinely came together for conversation in a ritual known as the “union meeting,” which developed during the earliest years

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<sup>291</sup> William Sharp and Andrew Houston to the Ministry at New Lebanon, Sept 29, 1834, ASC.

of the sect and continued throughout the nineteenth century. In 1792, Father David Meacham, successor to Ann Lee, conceived of a “the Union of the Sexes,” that would benefit the society both spiritually and pragmatically. As each Shaker society was ordered into families, and separate male and female orders within each family, it was necessary to find a way for the male and female Shaker leadership to come together to discuss the spiritual and temporal needs of the community. Beyond that, it was Meacham’s opinion that if Shaker men and women “had not a spiritual union, they would have a carnal” one.<sup>292</sup> The “union meeting” was his solution to this problem. Every Shaker was assigned a “union meeting” partner of the opposite sex. They would meet regularly for conversation: sisters lined up opposite their assigned brothers no closer than “five feet apart” and took care to “not to be too profuse, contracted, or particular in their freedom & union with the opposite sex.”<sup>293</sup> In addition to engaging in conversation on “any familiar suitable subjects,” union meeting partners were expected to fulfill gender-specific tasks for one another. So, the female half of a union meeting partnership mended the clothes of her assigned brother. The brother, in turn, aided his female “union meeting” partner in any tasks she needed doing that required manual labor or craftsmanship.

The platonic affection and bonds developed between “union meeting” partners did not threaten the Shakers’ gospel of celibacy; on the contrary they enhanced it. Union meetings allowed “for mutual comfort & protection” but were also seen as “a preventative against all disorderly and unchaste union.” The need for union meetings again points to the gendered and sexual assumptions that prevailed even under the Shakers’ regime of celibacy. Rather than have brothers sew or sisters make furniture (a premise that would have allowed for stricter separation between the sexes) they created an allowance for heterosocial if not heterosexual partnerships.

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<sup>292</sup> Isaac N. Youngs, *A Concise View of the Church of God and of Christ on Earth* New Lebanon 1856, ASC.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid*,

That public “union meetings” between men and women would discourage any kind of private “unchaste union” again affirms that Shakers did not believe their celibacy was anything “natural.” On the contrary, the need for “union meetings” show that the Shakers assumed that the sexes were naturally drawn to one another, and would seek out illicit opportunities to interact if they were not provided them through official Ministry-approved channels.<sup>294</sup> Both the example of the “union meetings” and the loving friendship of Bates and Youngs demonstrate that embracing celibacy did not mean abandoning human affection and attachment altogether, simply abstaining from behaviors that would lead to heterosexual intercourse.

The lived experience of the individuals discussed in this chapter show that celibacy and sexual abstinence were sexual identities to nineteenth-century Shakers, priests, nuns, and Grahamites. Their lives offer a strong counterexample to scholars who see sexual identities as indigenous only to the modern era. However, if the struggles of Issachar Bates, George Jacques, and Richard Burstell are any indication, sexual restraint was not an identity that came “naturally” or easily. The individuals featured in this chapter add a face and a humanness to a sexual behavior that was demonized and thought strange by the majority of their contemporaries. Their lives also show the complexity of celibate experience in Shaker and Catholic religious orders, for celibacy did not require an embargo on affection or emotional intimacy. Catholic sisters formed relationships with their confessors and pupils and Shaker missionaries forged affectionate lifelong bonds while still practicing celibacy. In doing so, these individuals challenged marriage and the normative biological family by regarding platonic friendship as the purest form of love. Those who practiced sexual restraint marked themselves and in turn were seen as marked by

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<sup>294</sup> Unfortunately, these union meetings (however platonic they were intended to be) provided the basis for allegations of “spiritual wifery” by apostates such as Mary M Dyer—the assumption being that where there was smoke, there must be fire in these platonic pseudo-marriages.

others. Their sexual identity made them distinct. The sexual uniqueness of Shakers, Catholic sisters, and Grahamite sexual reformers would be an advantage as they entered the antebellum marketplace. The very behavior that made them targets for violence also helped them develop a kind of “brand name” recognition among consumers.

## Chapter 4

### The Purity of the Mixture

Sexual restraint for Shakers, Catholic priests and nuns, and physiological reformers was not only an identity and a behavioral practice, it also functioned as a kind of brand which helped distinguish their goods and services in an ever-expanding marketplace. Shaker seeds, medicines, and bonnets as well as the convent schools and nursing care provided by Catholic nuns were enhanced by the aura of celibacy. Advocates of sexual restraint were not bystanders, but active participants in the ongoing market revolution and capitalist transition.<sup>295</sup> As Charles Sellers and others have demonstrated, American society was dramatically transformed from a land-based to a market-based economy. New wealth was concentrated in America's growing port cities, spurring the birth of a middle class of white-collar businessmen, lawyers, and clerks.<sup>296</sup>

Grahamite sexual reform, based as it was upon a distinct course of diet and behavior developed by Sylvester Graham himself, was ostensibly its own "brand" from the very start, distinct from more traditional allopathic medicine and newer Thompsonianism. The strictures of the "Graham

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<sup>295</sup> Nancy Beadie, *Education and the Creation of Capital in the Early American Republic*, (New York: Cambridge UP 2010), 4-5. A fall in the price of agricultural commodities after 1839 led many young men and women to seek their fortunes in manufacturing and cities; the urban population of the United States increased fivefold between 1820 and 1850. See Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 525-26.

<sup>296</sup> Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America 1815-1846*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). See also Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway, eds., *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800-1880* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996). Some scholars have questioned whether the term "market revolution" has been used too capaciously, as a kind of short-hand for describing all of the social upheaval of Jacksonian America. I understand it more narrowly to describe the rise of the urban-middle class and the increased access to consumer goods from the 1820s onward. See Daniel Feller, "The Market Revolution Ate My Homework" *Reviews in American History*, 25, (1997), 408-415; Mary Ryan, "Narratives of Democracy, or History without Subjects," *American Literary History* 8 (1996), 311-327. I agree with Ryan's critique that Sellers analysis of the market revolution relies too much on a dualism between a "heroic" pre-capitalist class and a nearly faceless bourgeoisie.

system,” and the victimization Grahamites received in the popular press allowed Grahamism to take on many of the aspects of a religious movement, complete with a charismatic leader in Sylvester Graham. At a time when the marketplace was being flooded with manufactured goods as well as a growth of educational services, sexual restraint became the brand by which Shaker, Catholic, and Grahamite products distinguished themselves from competitors. These three groups occupied the intersection of religion and market capitalism in ways that were often similar, yet in their own way distinct. Sexual restraint endowed Shaker goods and Catholic services with a purity and sexual virtue that American consumers sought to buy and gave Grahamites a market solution to the social reorganization created by the triumph of that same market.

### **“Alterative Extracts:” Shaker Goods in the Antebellum Marketplace**

In the Edward Deming Andrews Collection at the Winterthur Museum and Library, there is a broadside dated circa 1850 which advertised “Shaker Medicines- Approved by the Regular Faculty, For Sale Here” in bold, five-inch high capitals. [Figure 8] Given that the broadside was printed in Boston and the medicines advertised made at the Shaker community in Enfield, New Hampshire, it was most likely hung in a shop window in eastern New England.<sup>297</sup> The broadside also told customers that these medicines were indeed prepared by a medical professional, Dr. Jerub Dyer, who in addition to being a Shaker deacon, had also trained at Dartmouth Medical College only twelve miles northwest of the Enfield Shaker settlement. Five medicines were advertised—“Arnicate of Tannin;” “Shaker Family Cough Syrup, an “Alterative Syrup,” a cure-all for everything from pimples to gout and leprosy, “Vegetable Pills....for “Billious

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<sup>297</sup> Newspapers from this period advertised that similar Shaker patent medicines could be found in Boston, Concord, New Ipswich, New Boston, St. Albans, VT. See *Barre Patriot*, November 23, 1849; *Barre Patriot*, February 15, 1850; *Constitution*, January 9, 1850; *Constitution*, May 22, 1850.

Complaints” and finally the Shakers’ “Pure Fluid Extract of ENGLISH VALERIAN,” a distillation of valerian roots, known for its sedative properties. In addition to their descriptions and claims, the Extract of Valerian in particular featured testimony from no less than seven doctors, including two on the faculty of Dartmouth Medical College. Similar advertisements from the period reveal that they are most likely the “regular faculty” that approved of these medicines.

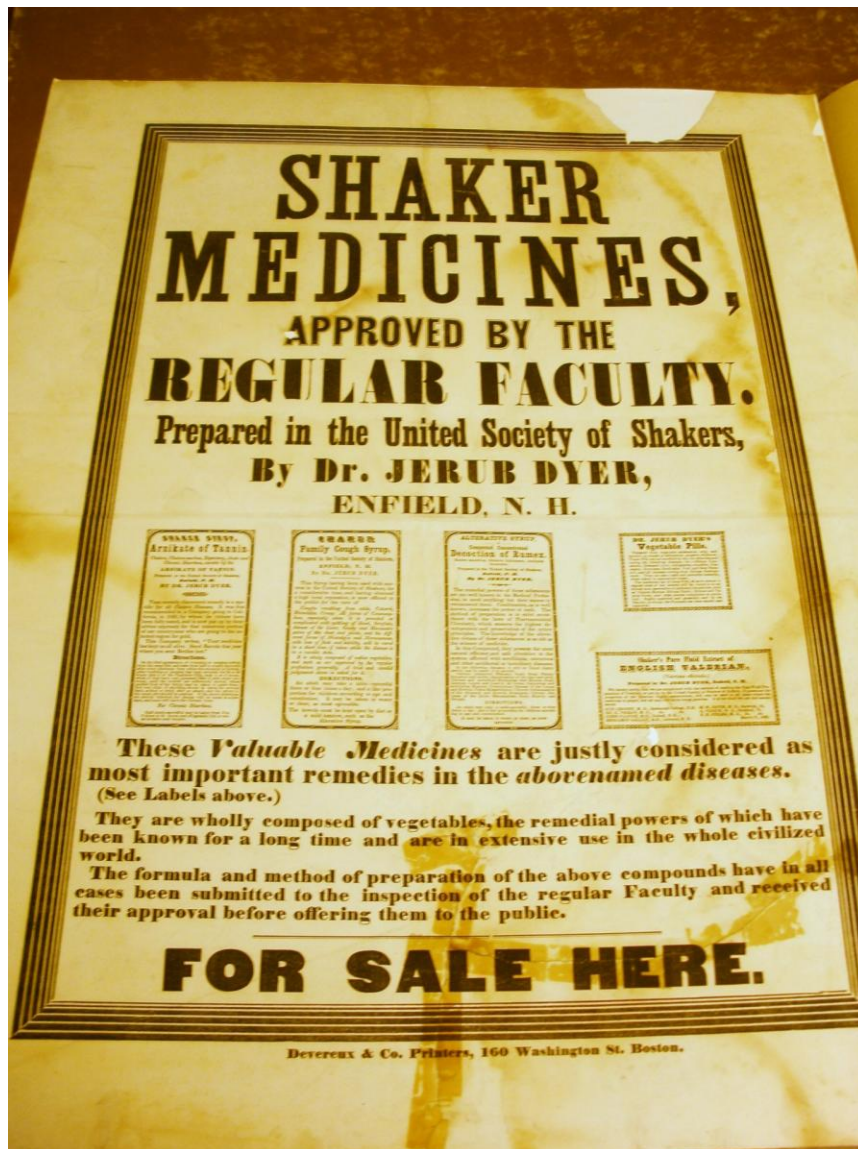


Figure 8. Broadside for Shaker Medicines (ca. 1850). Courtesy Edward Deming Andrews Shaker Collection, Winterthur Museum and Library.



As a source, this broadside provides a small window into the Shakers and the antebellum marketplace in which they sold their nostrums and extracts. “Shaker Medicines,” being the largest and boldest printed text on this poster reveals that the sellers of these products wanted to highlight, rather than hide, their association with the utopian sect. Medical doctors (even ones affiliated with well-known colleges) believed in the efficacy of these products enough to have their names appear in print alongside Shaker goods. And the Shakers themselves were willing to share their own medical recipes and partner with second-party dealers to market their products, despite their own desire to live separately from those they considered to be “the world’s people.”

Even more than the Protestant groups Laurence Moore describes in *Selling God*, the Shakers succeeded merging the demands of their religion with commercial enterprise; they were renowned for their seeds, medicines, furniture, baskets, cloaks, and foodstuffs. While the realm of fiction may have portrayed Shaker women as damsels in distress or “vinegar-faced sisters,” in the realm of the marketplace, there was a widespread attraction to the goods manufactured by the Shakers. This was especially true of their extracts and herbal medicines.<sup>298</sup> The tag of “Shaker” and its connotations of religious and sexual otherness when applied to herbs, seeds, and medicines further exoticized these products. There was a connection between the unique sexual practices of the Shakers and their ability to establish a kind of “brand name” recognition in the emerging marketplace. In the same way other patent medicines and tonics made use of racialized and Orientalist monikers to aspire to “authenticity,” Shaker goods carried a sexual distinctiveness that gave their products a mystical purity. The Shakers’ strange practice of celibacy allowed their products to be both wholesomely pure and tinged with the exotic at the same time,

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<sup>298</sup> References to Shaker-made apparel often appeared in short fiction, indicating the common-place nature of such objects. See “A Dangerous Woman,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, April 1860.

By the time the broadside advertising Jerub Dyer's Shaker medicines was printed, the Shakers had been growing herbs for half a century.<sup>299</sup> While the Shakers had already pioneered a successful traffic in garden seeds in the early decades of the nineteenth century, they did not begin selling herbs in large quantities to the general public until the late 1820s and printed their first catalog of herbal medicines in 1830.<sup>300</sup> This initial catalog included 127 different kinds of roots and herbs, seven extracts and twelve medicinal preparations that ran the gamut from compounds of sarsaparilla and black cohosh, to flour of slippery elm bark and rose water— all prepared by the Shakers' at Mt. Lebanon in New York's Hudson Valley. In 1850 the Shaker herbal repertoire had grown to include 186 herbs, 27 extracts, 73 varieties of garden seeds, four ointments, five pulverized herbs for cooking, and one kind of snuff.<sup>301</sup> Shaker herbalists were revered by the French botanist Constantine Samuel Raffinesque who proclaimed theirs the finest medical gardens in the United States. The California Gold Rush provoked a strong uptick in sales. By mid-century the Shakers regularly shipped herbs and medicines to San Francisco, Vancouver, Australia, and London, as well as locations throughout the American South and Midwest.<sup>302</sup>

Advertisements for early Shaker herbs and medicines capitalized on the sect's difference and uniqueness to sell Shaker products. Shaker herbs and medicines were available for sale directly at Shaker villages scattered throughout the Northeast and upper Midwest or by catalog order beginning in 1830. Mt. Lebanon in New York's Hudson Valley, Canterbury and Enfield in

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<sup>299</sup> On Ann Lee and eighteenth century herbal knowledge see Amy Bess Miller, *Shaker Herbs: A History and Compendium* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1976), 9; On the origins of the Shaker herb industry see Edward Deming and Faith Andrews, *Shaker Herbs and Herbalists*, (Stockbridge, MA: Berkshire Garden Center, 1959), 3

<sup>300</sup> Miller, 9; *Newburyport Herald*, February 11, 1831, 4; *Providence Patriot & Columbian Phoenix*, May 11, 1831, 4.

<sup>301</sup> Miller, 11-13, 17.

<sup>302</sup> Andrews, *Shaker Herbs and Herbalists*, 3, 8-9.

New Hampshire, Harvard, Massachusetts (close to Boston), and Union Village, Ohio (outside of Cincinnati) specialized in producing botanical medicines. These particular villages took advantage of their proximity to key transportation networks (steamboat lines, post roads and eventually railroads) and growing urban centers to sell their products. Shakers also relied on relationships with second-party dealers and consignment sales. Shopkeepers, apothecaries, and grocers bought Shaker goods at a wholesale price in bulk quantities and then resold them at retail price in their own establishment.<sup>303</sup> In the case of consignment sales, Shakers left a certain amount of product with a shop-owner and returned at the end of the season to collect a percentage of the sale and any unsold merchandise. Consignment sales were not unique to the Shakers and were employed to sell everything from books to tobacco in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>304</sup> They were especially useful in those cases where goods were sold far from where they were produced. Since the market opportunities near rural Shaker villages were limited and the Shakers themselves had no desire to relocate to be closer to urban markets, consignment and second-party sales provided ideal solutions. The Shakers had first pioneered this business model with their garden seeds; Shaker peddlars developed distinct routes—down the Hudson to Poughkeepsie from Mt. Lebanon, or up north as far as Pawtlet, Vermont. In a few days' journey, a Shaker peddler could do as much as \$300 in sales, reaching roughly sixty individual customers.<sup>305</sup>

It was these second-party shopkeepers who were primarily responsible for marketing Shaker products to the general public. The earliest advertisements for Shaker herbs and

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<sup>303</sup> Elisha Myrick, *Diary Kept for the Convenience of the Herb Department* [ca. 1853], ASC.

<sup>304</sup> On the Shakers' use of consignment, see Larry Kreiser and Philip N. Dare, "Shaker Accounting Records at Pleasant Hill: 1830-1860," *The Accounting Historians Journal* 13 (1986), 19-36. On the history of consignment in general, see Hugh Sanford Cheney Baker, "A History of the Book Trade in California, 1849-1859," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 30 (1951), 97-115; Jacob M. Price, "The Last Phase of the Virginia-London Consignment Trade: James Buchanan and Co., 1758-1768," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 43, (1986), 64-98.

<sup>305</sup> "Account Book of Shaker Travelling Seed Salesman 1834-1843" [ca.1834], ASC; Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 138.

medicines were placed in newspapers “close to home” as it were, and offered little in the way of grandiose claims associated with most patent medicines; they were honest and to the point, much like the Shakers themselves. One Dr. John Wadsworth, apothecary of Providence, R.I., offered “A General Assortment of Drugs, Medicines, Shakers’ Herbs, Roots and Extracts, Dye Stuffs, Spices, Perfumes... constantly on hand and for sale, for cash only, at the sign of the Great Mortar.” Another salesman, Elijah Porter of Salem, NH, promised “Pressed Herbs, Extracts, &c *Prepared by the United Society (called Shakers)*. The Herbs, Flowers, Bark, and Roots are set in papers of one pound each, and of the first quality.” An 1846 ad in the New Orleans paper, *The Jeffersonian*, illustrates perfectly how broadly and how deeply Shaker medicines had permeated the market; the words “Flowers, Herbs and Roots from the Shakers, for sale at Shakers’ prices,” do not offer much description, but the laconic nature of the ad is telling. In many of these advertisements, the tag “Shaker” alone was enough of a selling point and needed no further explanation. It is significant that Wadsworth the Providence apothecary, though he offered a variety of medicines for sale, only mentioned “Shakers’ Herbs” by name. The appellation “Shaker” was used in these advertisements in a way similar to a brand, or a region of origin. As dry goods dealers would advertise “St. Croix Rum” or “best Cognac Brandy,” so did they advertise Shaker medicinals and garden seeds. The development of post roads and print catalogues in the beginning of the nineteenth century made it easier to sell products farther away from their place of production. Under these circumstances, brand identity became more important than ever before. The Shakers’ celibacy was their brand.<sup>306</sup>

The limitations on printing technologies during the antebellum era meant that advertisers of Shaker medicines were forced to rely on words rather than images to attract a customer’s

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<sup>306</sup> *Providence Patriot*, November 6, 1824; *Salem Gazette*, July 15, 1828, 4; *Providence Patriot Columbian Phoenix*; May 11, 1831; *The Jeffersonian*; February 5, 1846, 3.

attention. The broadside and newspaper advertisements were printed by letterpress, which allowed text to be broken down and reassembled by the printer for different jobs. Letterpress printers used “stock cuts” (the equivalent of a stock image or clip art) as a cheap way to add illustrations to their work. However, if a given image wasn’t in an individual printer’s stock, it couldn’t have been added to the advertisement. Shakers certainly were distinctive, but were not commonplace enough to end up in a printer’s set of stock cuts.<sup>307</sup>

It is useful to examine how marketers of Shaker products used words to paint a picture. Significantly, these shopkeepers assumed that the Shaker origin of medicines (and other products) would help and not hurt sales. As with the aforementioned broadside, often “Shaker” is the most prominent word on the advertisement, printed in the largest type or in all caps, and would have been the most visible at a distance to a casual passerby. Marketers also employed a subtle, almost subtextual reference to the Shakers’ unusual celibacy in these advertisements. Shaker medicines were often described as “pure” and indeed one of their products was named “Shakers’ Pure Fluid Extract of English Valerian.” One doctor made sure to call the Valerian extract a “*pure article*” and another claimed it was in “a *purer*, more simple and concentrated state, than *any other* preparation of this root with which I am acquainted.” Likewise, Shaker medicines such as their compound of sarsaparilla and alterative extract promised to alleviate “impurities of the blood.” At the Sixth Annual Exposition of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association, Dr. Charles Jackson awarded the Shakers a medal for their sarsaparilla

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<sup>307</sup>By contrast, in advertisements for “Indian Medicines,” a crude figure of a Native American often did appear. It was not until the rise of chromolithograph printing in the 1880s and 90s, that the iconic and collectible medicine card with its brightly colored images came to be. The Mortar and pestle, the eagle, Lady Liberty, and a steamboat were among the more common stock cuts. Color lithography provided more detailed illustrations than letterpress or copper engravings as it allowed an image to be painted or inked directly onto the stone from which the impression was made by an artist. See Graham Hudson, *The Design and Printing of Ephemera in Britain and America 1720-1920* (London: The British Library, 2008), 25, 43, 48-49. In the late nineteenth century, Shakers did appear alongside advertisements for their products, as a popular colored advertisement for “Shaker Family Pills.”

syrup and said, “The Committee have entire confidence in the fidelity of the Shakers in the preparation of this mixture.”<sup>308</sup>

To a modern observer, raised in an era where the FDA (ideally) requires strict laboratory conditions and clinical trials before a drug can be approved for sale, the association of “pure” with “medicine” seems obvious and expected. It is surprising to note that of all advertisements in the Downs Collection of Advertising Ephemera at the Winterthur Museum and Library, no other patent medicines were marketed in this same way. Antebellum patent medicines in these advertisements were described as “safe” or “delightful,” they promised to “regulate” or in the case of “Kickapoo Indian Sagwa,” give one’s system an eponymous “kick,” but they did not claim to be pure or faithful. So while shopkeepers may have used the “Shaker” tag to catch a buyer’s eye, much as others used Indians, “Hindoos” or “Egyptians,” [Figures 9 & 10] Shaker medicines employed a marketing that was unique to them and their distinctive celibate practices.<sup>309</sup> Shakers had many qualities. They were known for their simplicity as well as for their strange religious fanaticism and ecstatic worship. But advertisers never used the words “simple,” “divine,” or “exciting” to market Shaker goods. It was their “purity”—and by extension their celibacy—that was their most distinguishing characteristic for consumers.

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<sup>308</sup> *The Shakers’ Manual* (Boston: Boston Stereotype Foundry, 1852), 7, 1.

<sup>309</sup> Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Museum and Library, hereafter abbreviated as JDC.

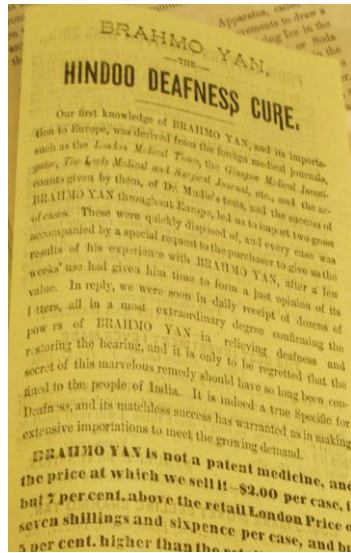


Figure 9 and Figure 10. Mid-Nineteenth Century Medical Advertisements. Courtesy, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Museum and Library

The one instance in which “pure” did show up in antebellum medical advertisements is very telling. So-called “Blood purifiers” promised to cleanse the system of venereal diseases. While often just advertised as a “blood purifier” or “sarsaparilla tonic,” an advertisement in the “flash press” sporting paper *Life in Boston* for “Dr. Gay’s Blood Purifier,” shows that advertisements for “blood purifier” may have been code for the treatment of syphilis and other venereal diseases. “Dr. Gay’s,” an obvious pseudonym, using the slang term for prostitute (“gay girls”), guaranteed to remove syphilis entirely from the system, “making the blood perfectly pure.”<sup>310</sup> Outside of the *demimonde*, blood purifiers, such as “Goodwin India Vegetable and Sarsaparilla Bitters” and “Ayer’s Sarsaparilla” promised to “Purify the blood!” without the explicit references.<sup>311</sup> Aside from the extract of Valerian, the Shakers were most regarded for Canterbury Shaker Thomas Corbett’s “Sarsaparilla Syrup.” It, too, promised to purify the blood, and was among the Shaker products awarded a medal by the

<sup>310</sup> *Life in Boston*, April 11, 1857. The etymology of the word “gay” indicates that from the seventeenth century onward it was used to refer to a life of indulgence and sexual dissipation or to outrageous and flamboyant style, both associated with prostitution. Not until the early twentieth century did “gay” emerge as slang for homosexuality. See Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 19, 379.

<sup>311</sup> Collections of Trade Catalogues and Ephemera, JDC.

Boston Charitable Mechanics Association in 1847; the committee pronounced it “the best preparation of sarsaparilla syrup yet known.” Sarsaparilla was a popular ingredient in many nineteenth-century patent medicines and indeed, Corbett’s syrup promised to treat everything from syphilis to indigestion, asthma, bad skin, diarrhea, and consumption. But it is perhaps possible that those most in need of blood purification, especially as the result of a sexually transmitted disease, may have regarded the Shaker’s sarsaparilla syrup as being infused with an extra purifying punch.<sup>312</sup> The sarsaparilla syrup was also marketed as an “Alterative Extract.” Consumers who bought the medicine presumably believed it had the power to “alter” them physically, and perhaps morally.

If, as Jackson Lears suggests, patent medicine advertisers sought to “modernize magic,” offering the promise of metamorphosis and physical and spiritual rejuvenation, the Shakers seem to have engaged in a bit of reverse psychology.<sup>313</sup> One would imagine that as a religious sect, often couched in terms of the mysterious and secretive, the Shakers would have played up their inherently mystical angle. Instead, they tacked in the opposite direction and sought the endorsements of scientists and medical professionals. They did so at a time when medicine itself was consolidating itself through professionalization—the American Medical Association was founded in 1847.<sup>314</sup> Though the Shakers adhered to simplicity and eschewed ornamentation, they were not the Amish and they did not yearn to turn back the clock of innovation. The Shakers welcomed new technologies and labor-saving devices and were among the first to add an outer layer of coating to pills, increasing their shelf-life and potency. The herb house at Mt. Lebanon

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<sup>312</sup> Quoted in *The Shakers’ Manual*. More information about the syrup operation at Canterbury can be found in “A Short Sketch of our Journey to the East” [ca 1850], ASC. The unnamed Shaker sister who kept this travel journal made a special visit to see the aforementioned *Shakers’ Manual* being packaged alongside the Sarsaparilla Syrup.

<sup>313</sup> On the spiritual nature of nineteenth-century medical advertising, see Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 43.

<sup>314</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 470-72.



was state of the art and was described lavish detail in a mid-century piece for *Harper's Magazine*.<sup>315</sup> Rather than trying to keep their formulas a closely-guarded secret, they sent their recipes off to doctors and chemists at Dartmouth and Harvard, inviting them to check their work and soliciting advice on how to improve their formulas. In return, these doctors felt confident enough to testify “it is no *mystic* compound—the Formula form which it is prepared being open to the inspection of the medical profession.”<sup>316</sup>

Perhaps the Shakers and their business partners shrewdly detected that the Shaker origin was mystical enough and did not require further flash. But more likely, it was the Shakers own spiritual values of simplicity, honesty and perfection at work. To wrap a product in smoke and mirrors, gilt and adornment, was not only poor marketing, it was heresy. The Shaker valuation of simplicity can be seen in the labels used on the packets of medicine bottles.<sup>317</sup> [Figure 11] These uncut labels for sage and marjoram show the Shaker aesthetic in labeling and packaging—they are clear and straightforward, with little ornamentation. Block-printed Shaker labels of black text on colored paper were so iconic for their minimalism, they have their own listing in *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*.<sup>318</sup> And though the Shaker name is not quite as prominent as in other forms of advertisement, it is not hidden either.

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<sup>315</sup> The Shakers even developed a pill drying rack that could dry as many as 120 coated pills at a time. See June Sprugg, *By Shaker Hands*, (New York: Knopf, 1975). “The Shakers,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, June 1857, 172-174.

<sup>316</sup> *The Shakers' Manual*, 7. The Shakers' did own printing presses but did not make their own labels- diaries from various herb departments reveal that the Shakers sent to printers in Boston and Albany for their labels and catalogues.

<sup>317</sup> *Diary Kept for the Convenience of the Herb Dept 1853-57*, January 5, 1853; May 10, 1853.

<sup>318</sup> “Shaker Papers,” in *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*, Maurice Rickards, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 290.

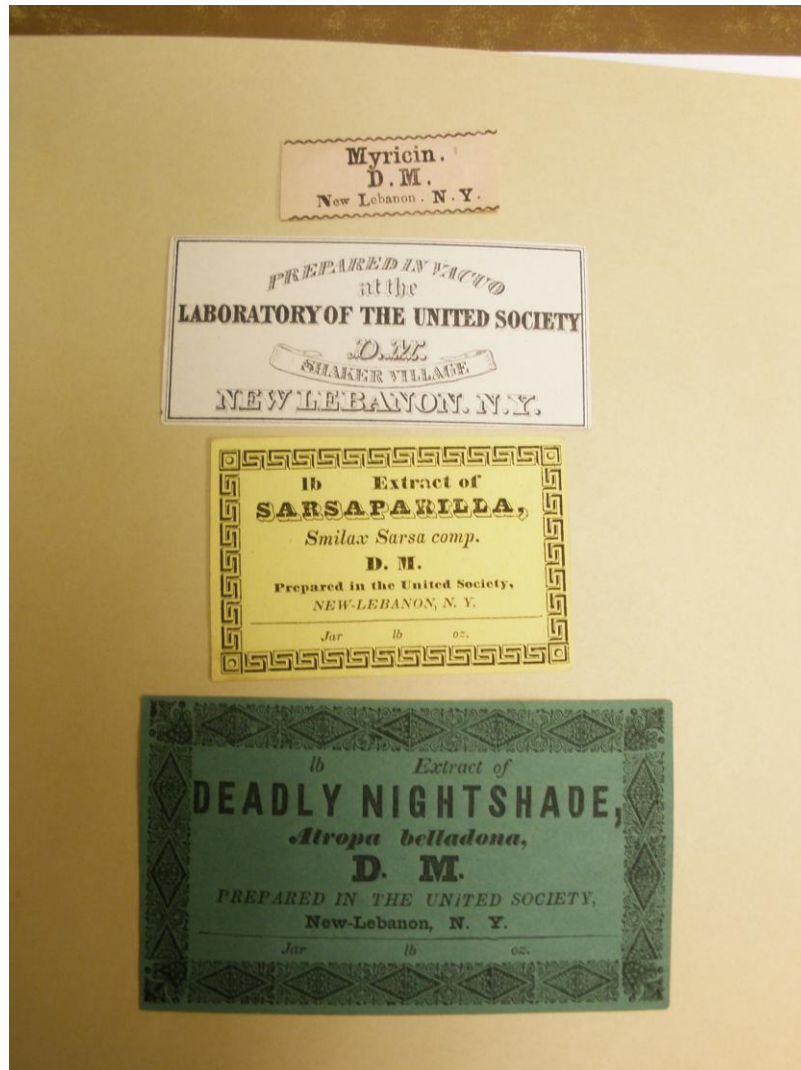


Figure 11. Shaker Labels. Courtesy Edward Deming Andrews Shaker Collection, Winterthur Museum and Library.

The Shakers' celibacy endowed their products with a distinctive aura of purity that was in its own way sexually exotic in the way that "Kickapoo Indian Sagwa" and "Egyptian Regulator Tea" were racially and ethnically exotic. Shaker marketers also cultivated their products' American origins, allowing their medicines and extracts to be both foreign and familiar at the same time. Prior to the American Revolution, American colonists imported the majority of their medical compounds, pills, and powders from Europe. The boycott of British goods accelerated a trend—instead of importing British patent medicines, apothecaries mixed British formulas in the

colonies, refilling and using British bottles and labels with American ingredients. Post-revolution, British medicine sales were never as strong as before. James Harvey Young's history of the patent medicine industry argues that nationalism and a fear of dependence on British imported goods spurred the creation of "made-in-America" remedies and an interest in using American-grown botanicals and native plants.<sup>319</sup> The Shakers were well positioned to take advantage of this sentiment. The first Shaker herb catalogue printed contained this verse on its cover:

Why send to to Europe's bloody shores  
For plants which grow by our own doors?<sup>320</sup>

At a moment when fear of foreign contagion was running high, provoked by the recent outbreak of cholera in New York City in the 1830s, the Shakers were able to make their products look American, wholesome, and trustworthy.

Name brand recognition extended to other Shaker products beyond medicines and seeds. Despite the persistent belief that Shaker celibacy masculinized women, turning them into sickly, dried-up shrews, during the 1850s, Shaker cloaks and bonnets were heralded as the height of fashion for young women. The distinctive Shaker style bonnets were made of straw or palm leaf and often adorned or covered with silk ribbon. They fit closely toward the back of the head but had a deep brim that circled the face. Shaker sisters wore the bonnets themselves over their own modest muslin caps. They would have been ideally suited to frame the "worldly" hairstyles of the 1830s and 50s, in which elaborate arrangements of braids and ringlets framed the face. In turn, the Shaker cloaks, usually made of a vibrant cardinal red wool, had wide hoods which

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<sup>319</sup> James Harvey Young, *Toadstool Millionaires* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 14-15, 21.

<sup>320</sup> Miller, 11. *Catalogue of Medicinal Plants and Extracts* (Ohio: Day Star Print, 1847). Later catalogues would modify this to "Why send to the Atlantic shores/ For plants that grow at our own doors?"

could easily be worn over the bonnet's large brim. These "Dorothy" cloaks came in and out of fashion throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; they soared to popularity again in the 1890s after First Lady Frances Cleveland commissioned a dove-grey one for the Inaugural Ball.<sup>321</sup> Ladies magazines of the antebellum era, such as *Godey's* informed readers in the fall of 1853 that "The Shaker bonnets came into fashion again the past summer for school children."<sup>322</sup> In 1858, *Godey's* suggested that with travelling season upon them that "Shaker straws, also for the country, offer the most complete protection to the complexion." Shaker bonnets and cloaks were so ubiquitous and popular, they were often referred to as simply "Shakers," as in the short story "Mrs. Vining's Help" featured in *Godey's*. In the story, the heroine "crowned her straight figure with a long, deep caped Shaker" at the end of her long day of house-work.<sup>323</sup>

While these cloaks and bonnets were considered fashionable (and the Shakers themselves anything but) it is notable that they were most often worn by young girls. These fashions were simple and modest and perhaps, like the medicines, carried an aura of chastity around them—all attractive and admirable qualities for an unmarried young woman to possess. Shaker men also had distinctive dress and fashion; they were known especially for their low broad-brimmed hats and for an unusual haircut, short in the front and sides, long in the back, a kind of nineteenth-century mullet. These male fashions never caught among the "world's people," and indeed a majority of their contemporaries found the Shaker mullet just as unattractive then as many do today. The appeal of chaste and prim Shaker fashions for women was indicative of the ways

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<sup>321</sup>On women's early Victorian hairstyles, see Georgine de Courtais, *Women's Hats, Headdresses and Hairstyles, Medieval to Modern*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publishing, 1973). 114-116. Stephen J. Miller, *From Shaker Lands and Shaker Hands: A Survey of the Industries* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 161-62. The "Dorothy" cloak was named after Dorothy Durgin, the Canterbury Shaker sister that designed the pattern. Famously, the Mt. Lebanon Shakers made two cloaks for Mrs. Cleveland; the first one was found to have an imperfection so they gladly sent her a new one.

<sup>322</sup>"To Correspondents," *Godey's Lady's Book*. October 1853.

<sup>323</sup>Mary W. Janvrin, "Mrs. Vining's Help." *Godey's Lady's Book*, November 1863.

female “passionlessness” had become thoroughly normalized by the 1850s. Conversely, fashions for men that conveyed chastity were unmarketable.

Finally, while the tag “Shaker” was used to sell and market medicines, seeds and other products, there is evidence that the reverse was also true. The Shaker brand sold herbs and extracts, but these products also helped “sell” the Shaker religion to a public that was at best, curious and at worst, prejudiced and hostile. Evidence of using the medicine to familiarize people with Shakerism survives in a printed booklet, *The Shaker Manual*, which contained testimonies about the efficacy of Shaker medicines paired with articles explaining Shaker religious beliefs. *The Shaker Manual* was intended to be kept on hand by druggists and apothecaries that carried the products advertised, the award-winning Corbett’s Shaker Compound of Sarsaparilla and Brown’s Shaker Fluid Valerian Extract.<sup>324</sup> The odd-numbered pages contained the usual claims of the sarsaparilla compound’s ability to cure a variety of ills as well as testimony from a Mexican War veteran, a Lowell mill girl, a bourgeois housewife, and a sexton from Boston’s Mariner’s Church, in addition to that of doctors and apothecaries. The other half of the booklet taught the public about Shaker customs, gave the location of all the different Shaker communities from Maine to Indiana, and told the history of the sect’s founding under Ann Lee. Most importantly, the pamphlet detailed the sect’s “moral principles,” the first of which was “A life of innocence, strict temperance, and *virgin purity*, according to the example of Jesus Christ...entire abstinence from all sensual and carnal gratifications.”<sup>325</sup> The Shakers deliberately took advantage of the public’s enthusiasm for their products to evangelize their customers.

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<sup>324</sup> *The Shaker Manual* was printed at the Boston Stereotype Foundry: stereotype plates were expensive to manufacture, though they allowed for larger print jobs and were usually only undertaken in cases where the printed material was expected to have a large circulation. The fact that this pamphlet was stereotype printed indicates that the Shakers expected it to be widely distributed along with their medicines.

<sup>325</sup> *Shaker Manual*

Given the decline in numbers in Shaker converts following the Civil War, it would seem that the Shakers were less successful in marketing the religion than they were in marketing their medicines and bonnets.<sup>326</sup> Scholars of Jacksonian and antebellum America have thoroughly examined the use of racial difference to sell products, like food and medicine, as well as performance in the case of blackface minstrelsy or “Playing Indian” type melodramas.<sup>327</sup> Though the majority of Shakers were overwhelmingly white, the consumption of their consumer goods reveals an enthusiasm for their sexual otherness. Shopkeepers were willing to sell, doctors were willing to prescribe and, most importantly, consumers were willing to buy these medicines, concocted by a religious sect whose spiritual beliefs and sexual practices ranged far from the norm. Antebellum patent medicines promised excitement, delight, and instantaneous renewal in a bottle. Should we be surprised that purity of formula, and by extension, sexual purity, was also something to distill, extract, and consume?

### **“Catholic Envy” and the Caring Professions**

While the Shakers’ sexual distinctiveness led to a branding of their products, antebellum Catholic nuns attained distinction by excelling in the service professions of education and nursing. Convent schools, charity hospitals, and orphan asylums affiliated with Catholic orders became synonymous with quality education, nursing and social services in an era before formal professionalization and state regulation of these fields. While the sexual restraint of the nuns and priests providing instruction was certainly not the only factor in the success of these various

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<sup>326</sup> The decline in the numbers of Shakers is attributable to a number of factors. The industrial revolution opened up new opportunities for men and women outside of agriculture. The Shakers’ own spiritual revival, the Era of Manifestations, in the 1830s and 40s, also turned off many believers. See Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 236-37.

<sup>327</sup> On studies of white audiences and minstrelsy see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) and David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1991). The antebellum phenomenon of white actors “playing Indian” is well documented by Phil Deloria’s *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999).

institutions, it did play a role in how these institutions were marketed to a non-Catholic public. As discussed in Chapter 2, the affect of celibacy on traditional gender roles, especially the way it caused celibate women to be perceived as more masculine, prepared nuns to take on roles outside the home that required bravery and stoicism. Celibacy also defined Catholic sisters as “off-limits” to men in a way their Protestant counterparts were not. And yet their status not only as women, but as “ladies” positioned nuns and sisters as holders of traditionally feminine virtues like compassion and tenderness, making them appear ideally suited to nursing or charity work.

Convent boarding schools for girls run by nuns gained a reputation for elite, exclusive and rigorous female education in the early-nineteenth century. The most prominent were the Ursuline-run schools in Charlestown (1827) and New Orleans (1727), the Convent of the Visitation in Georgetown (1799), St. Joseph’s Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland (1809) and the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Manhattan (1848). Ostensibly for the education of Catholic girls, such institutions often catered more to the daughters of wealthy Protestants. For while they often took on charity pupils, these schools were very elite and expensive. Convent schools emerged as places where upper-middle-class girls were schooled in the traditional ladies’ “accomplishments” as well as the liberal arts, amid picturesque and peaceful surroundings, removed from the hustle and bustle of the nation’s growing urban centers. Unlike some traditional ladies’ academies that often employed male dancing masters, language instructors, or headmasters, the leadership and instruction at the convent schools were entirely female.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>328</sup>*Fourth Annual Catalogue of the Teachers and Scholars in the Young Ladies’ High School* (Boston: WW Clapp 1831), *First Annual Catalogue of the Mount Vernon Female School 1829-1830*, (Boston: TR Marvin Printer, 1829). The Young Ladies High School of Boston in was one such institution in the 1830s. All of the major teachers, especially the language and dancing “masters” were male, while female teachers served as “assistants.” The Mount Vernon Female School had female teachers but an exclusively male executive board of trustees, including the Rev. Lyman Beecher.

Sarah Josepha Hale wrote of the fondness for sending daughters to convent schools as “a new thing” for Protestant parents. She supposed “the romance connected with the idea of living in a convent with real nuns who had taken the vows and wore black veils, and kept themselves apart from the world” enticed both pupils and parents.<sup>329</sup> The brochures and advertisements for these convent schools emphasized the grandeur of these environments and exemplified the antebellum phenomenon art historian John Davis has termed “Catholic envy.” Davis argues that American Protestants of the early nineteenth century were simultaneously repulsed by and drawn to the ritual culture of Catholicism, which they experienced as “religious tourists.” Protestants consumed Catholicism vicariously by visiting churches and convents, viewing paintings of Catholic settings, and by reading the harrowing “escaped nun” stories of Maria Monk and her ilk. Antebellum Protestants were drawn to Catholicism’s emphasis on achieving spirituality through the body versus Protestantism’s emphasis on “the word” alone. In Catholic ritual, the worshipper experiences religion through the five senses; the harmony of vespers, the visual iconography of statues and stained glass, the smell of incense, the taste of wine and communion wafer, and even the physicality of kneeling during the mass. A convent education provided a more prolonged exposure to the material culture of Catholicism, and yet, like a visit to a cathedral or monastery, it was intended by Protestant parents to be a liminal experience for their daughters with a finite endpoint.<sup>330</sup> It may seem strange to reconcile “Catholic Envy” with the sensationalist anti-Catholic literature of this period, but they were actually two sides of the same coin. “Catholic Envy” was precisely what gave the “escaped nun” novels their teeth. Fears about women being “seduced” into convents would not be enough to provoke a riot or sustain a

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<sup>329</sup> *Catholic Herald*, September 25, 1834.

<sup>330</sup> John Davis, “Catholic Envy” in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, John Davis and Sally Promey, ed. (Berkeley: UC Press, 2001), 107-109.



publishing phenomenon like *Awful Disclosures* if Protestants did not believe on some level that there was something dangerously seductive about Catholicism.

Given Protestant tendencies toward “Catholic Envy,” it is no coincidence that brochures for Catholic academies took pains to emphasize the aesthetic beauty of their surroundings. Brochures issued to promote these institutions included engravings featuring the school buildings and grounds, remarkable at a time when commissioning an engraving was expensive. The St. Joseph’s School’s prospectus proclaimed, “The Institution is pleasantly situated in a healthy and picturesque part of Frederick County, Maryland,” with “convenient and spacious buildings.” and the Georgetown Academy of the Visitation announced its “view of the Potomac, and a distant perspective of Washington city.” The Sisters of Notre Dame went so far as to tout their Young Ladies’ Literary Institute and Boarding School outside of Cincinnati as “spacious and airy...a delightful resort.” Protestant and secular schools, such as the Oakland Female Institute of Norristown, PA, often marketed themselves similarly; like the St. Joseph’s and Ursuline brochure, there is an engraving of the school and grounds. The cover and script, Victorian and ornate, stressed the school’s location “on an eminence” outside Philadelphia, but accessible by train lines, stagecoach and canal boat. Such descriptions which emphasized the beauty and seclusion of these institutions, as well as the purity and splendor of the natural environment, appealed to the type of antebellum-era fascination with the romantic vistas and panoramic views of the paintings of Thomas Cole and Edwin Church.<sup>331</sup>

However, most non-Catholic schools, especially those located within the limits of a city, did not attempt to brag whatsoever about the schools’ locations. If anything, they often sought to

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<sup>331</sup> *Catalogue of the Pupils of Saint Joseph’s Academy Near Emmitsburg Maryland for the Academic Year 1856-57* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co, 1857), *Catalogue of the Students, and Award of Premiums of the Young Ladies’ Literary Institute and Boarding School of the Sisters of Notre Dame* (Cincinnati: AG Sparhawk, 1846); *Catalogue of Pupils of the Georgetown Academy of the Visitation, B.V.M. 1860-61*, (Baltimore: 1861).

assuage the fears parents of day-scholars might have had about leaving their daughters to mix within the temptations and dangers of city life. The Young Ladies' High School of Boston assured parents that the students "are not allowed to go into the street, unless by permission of their parents." Miss D.T. Killbourn's Academy in Baltimore promised that boarders "are always accompanied by one of the Teachers," never leave without permission, "hold no intercourse with domestics."<sup>332</sup> On the one hand, the placement of Catholic female seminaries and convents reflected Catholic religious aesthetics that emphasized beautiful surroundings and large and lavish buildings as a way of experiencing spirituality. But in the Catholic brochures, one does not find the same over-assurances of safety or emphasis on rules as in their Protestant counterparts. They did not need to advertise that their female charges would be in a pure, safe, chaste environment, because as the schools were attached to convents, those qualities were very much implied to begin with.

There is evidence that indicates a convent education was perceived as more elite than similar non-Catholic female seminaries of the day. The accomplishments at the convent schools were more refined, the tuition higher, and the quality of the pupils from just an echelon higher on the social strata. As Mary Kelley has demonstrated in *Learning to Stand and Speak*, during the early Republic there was an unprecedented growth in the number of women attending academies and female seminaries; at least 158 such institutions opened between 1830 and 1860 alone. To have the income available to send a daughter away for secondary education was already a mark of middle-class status.<sup>333</sup> At convent schools like St. Joseph's and Mount Benedict, female scholars learned reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as history, rhetoric, and science in the

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<sup>332</sup> *Curricular and Catalogue of the Oakland Female Institute* (Philadelphia: Young & Deross, 1853); *Catalogue of the Teachers and Scholars in the Young Ladies' High School*; Miss DT Kilbourn's Academy Baltimore, *Third Annual Circular 1854-1855*(Baltimore: John W Woods, Printer, 1854)

<sup>333</sup> Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* ( Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 28, 67.

upper grades. Parents could also pay extra for lessons in foreign languages, music, and art. Mount Benedict offered classes on such exotic subjects as “Japanning,” (lacquer painting) “painting on Velvet, Satin and Wood; and the beautiful style of Mezzotino and Poonah Painting.”<sup>334</sup> Because of the presence of many native francophone speakers in the sisterhoods, St. Joseph’s offered French lessons free of charge and the School of the Visitation allowed the most advanced pupils to complete their course of study entirely in French, adding an extra European cache to these institutions. By contrast, the most strictly Protestant schools, such as the Mount Vernon Female School, a rival institution to the Ursuline Academy at Mount Benedict, did not offer anything in the way of traditional female “accomplishments.” Their all-male leadership believed such learning frivolous, preferring to give “the best *discipline* to the thinking powers, and secure the most *solid* and *useful* attainments.”<sup>335</sup>

Adding the “accomplishments” to a daughter’s education did not come cheaply. When music, painting, and foreign languages were tacked on to the cost of room and board (around \$150 per year) a family could end up spending as much as \$300 on a daughter’s education. This was a very hefty sum at a time in which the average laborer earned no more than a dollar a day. To put this in perspective, tuition, room, and board at male colleges such as Dartmouth, Williams, Amherst, and Wesleyan ranged from \$100-\$135 during the antebellum era.<sup>336</sup> Such fees did not include all of the extra clothing, bedding, and tableware that female scholars were expected to bring in order to be a part of the institution. St. Joseph’s school required:

Every young lady, at her entrance, should be provided with two white dresses, one of Swiss muslin, for Distribution day, and the other of thicker material for ordinary occasions, six calico or chintz dresses, two or three colored under-skirts for summer

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<sup>334</sup> Mount Benedict Pamphlet, ca. 1830. John Gilmary Shea Collection, Georgetown University.

<sup>335</sup> *Catalogue of the Pupils of Saint Joseph’s Academy Near Emmitsburg 1856-57*, 3. *Catalogue of Pupils of the Georgetown Academy of the Visitation, B.V.M*, 4.; *Catalogue of the Mount Vernon Female School 1829-1830*, 9-10.

<sup>336</sup> \$150 per year was definitely at the higher end of tuition for a female academy; the Greenfield High School for Young Ladies charged the same. Yet, there were also schools in the \$100-\$130 range. See Kelley, 81-82.

Balmorals, three gingham and three white aprons, one silk apron, and a straw hat or sun-bonnet, for the summer; and, for the winter, four dresses of merino...three black merion or alpaca aprons, and one hood, six changes of under-clothing, one dozen and a half pocket handkerchiefs, six towels, four pairs of shoes, and one pair of gum over-shoes.<sup>337</sup>

Parents who wished for the school to provide their daughters with these necessary items were required to pay the school \$50 in advance for clothing alone. There were not many families who could afford to outfit a daughter with a Swiss muslin white dress to only be worn once a year—"on Distribution Day," a commencement ceremony that honored the graduates and awarded prizes to the best pupils. Boarders also were required to furnish two silver spoons, one silver fork, one ivory-handled knife, a napkin ring and six napkins, a glass or silver goblet, a soap dish, a tooth-brush tray, and a cup for the wash stand.<sup>338</sup> The high material cost—and the specificity of the dress and accoutrements necessary to attend an elite institution like St. Joseph's—point to an aesthetic valuation and type of gate-keeping that went far beyond learning the three Rs.<sup>339</sup> Historian David Cohen has argued that "escaped" Ursuline postulant Rebecca Reed, author of notorious best-seller *Six Months in a Convent*, was initially attracted to the Ursulines because their education would have allowed her to transform her class status from that of a servant to a "genteel" well-bred lady. Studying needlework and French among the Ursulines would have elevated her from the cooking and cleaning that characterized the life of a woman of the class she was born into.<sup>340</sup> Like postulant Rebecca Reed, well-to-do parents who sent their daughters to convent schools believed such an institution would give them an added aura of refinement and gentility.

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<sup>337</sup> *Catalogue of the Pupils of St. Joseph's Academy*, 1856-57.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>339</sup> In the post-Revolutionary years, a daughter who had "accomplishments" in the visual and musical arts was a marker of elite social standing. Even as female academies began to mirror the academic curriculum of male colleges, the most elite schools still offered the "accomplishments" at an additional charge. See Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 69-71.

<sup>340</sup> David Cohen, "The Respectability of Rebecca Reed: Genteel Womanhood and Sectarian Conflict in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 16, (1996), 419-461.

In addition to teaching the liberal arts as well as “accomplishments,” female academies and seminaries were also expected to impart “moral culture” to students. Having your daughters’ schooled by nuns may have been attractive to parents because they provided positive examples of purity and virtue at a time when chastity was prized for young women. Many middle-class nineteenth-century women were caught in an unjust sexual double standard. The social and economic consequences for unmarried pregnancy were so much steeper for women than men, many women practiced “passionlessness” to their own advantage, to ward off would-be seducers and entice men into proposing marriage.<sup>341</sup> While *permanent* lifelong celibacy for women was considered unnatural, premarital chastity for middle-class women was a universal requirement—one could not achieve a respectable marriage without it. Sarah Josepha Hale remarked in her own magazine that “The nuns teach by example the gentle and graceful movement and the soft low tone of voice, and in these particulars might be advantageously recommended as models to all instructresses.”<sup>342</sup> Nuns and their chaste behaviors were marketed to the public as surely as the facilities and curricula of convent schools. In this sense, education at a convent school may have functioned in the same way as a Shaker cloak or bonnet, metaphorically wrapping up a young woman in chastity and virtue. Emulation, the practice of learning by imitating the mastery of others, played a substantial part in nineteenth-century pedagogy. Who better to teach young girls modesty and virtue than an order of women sworn to lifelong celibacy?<sup>343</sup>

Although the chaste example of nuns may have attracted parents and pupils to these schools, their ambiguous status as women who were neither wives nor mothers may have caused some trepidation. The teaching sisters were very aware that many outside the Catholic

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<sup>341</sup> Nancy Cott, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850,” *Signs* 4 (1978), 233.

<sup>342</sup> Excerpt from *Mrs. Hale’s Magazine* in *Catholic Herald*, September 25, 1834.

<sup>343</sup> On emulation as a pedagogical practice see J. M. Opal, “Exciting Emulation: Academies and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1780s-1820s,” *The Journal of American History* 91 (2004), 445-470.

community perceived them as cold or even cruel because of their celibacy. Convent schools took pains to explicitly state that the sisters who ran the school were “Ladies.” At Mt. Benedict in Charlestown, the Ursulines promised “The Ladies of the establishment provide the students with healthy and wholesome meals” and watch over their charges’ morals “with all the solicitude of maternal tenderness.” Likewise, at St. Joseph’s the Sisters of Charity took their role of *in loco parentis* very seriously and stated pupils would receive the same “physical care which they would receive under the parental roof.”<sup>344</sup>

The unique celibate identity of Catholic nuns also made them ideal candidates for the field of professional nursing. While celibacy, on the one hand, often masculinized nuns in public perception, this gender deviance was a positive quality when it came to performing nursing work in dangerous locations. Throughout the 1830s, poems and articles appeared in both Catholic and secular newspapers lauding the work of the Sisters of Charity during the recent cholera epidemics in New York and Philadelphia. Though these items were reprinted in premiere Catholic periodical, *The Catholic Herald*, they initially debuted in non-Catholic papers, *The Commercial Advertiser* and *Mrs. Hale’s Magazine*. “The Sister of Charity” for example, depicted a nun treating a dying man, being with him in his last moments as he dies of disease. The poem described her as being angelic but also brave, with “fair slight hands” and “large, dark and trembling” eyes. The nun bends to comfort over “the bed of torture like the fair lily o’er the troubled wave” as the patient shrieks and cries in pain. The author sets the unnamed sister’s courage as above that of a man; “Men veiled their eyes and fled. Yet *she* stood there Still sweetly calm and unappalled.”<sup>345</sup> Another poem by Alaric A. Watts specifically praised the nursing work of the Sisters of Charity as more selfless and heroic than that of contemporary male Protestant

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<sup>344</sup> *Catalogue of the Pupils of Saint Joseph’s Academy Near Emmitsburg 1866-67.*

<sup>345</sup> “The Sister of Charity,” *The Catholic Herald*, August 21, 1834.

missionaries. Protestant preachers founded foreign missions out of a “hollow zeal that loves to climb,” neglecting the sick and dying on their own shores. By contrast, the Sisters of Charity ministered to America’s outcasts at great personal cost.<sup>346</sup>

While it is understandable that a Catholic publication such as the *Catholic Herald*, which was presumably for a Catholic audience, would enjoy reading these positive portrayal of the Sisters, it is remarkable that most of these verses derive from Protestant sources. The cholera epidemics of the 1830s were so destructive and severe, and the lack of institutional welfare so profound, that the Sisters of Charity were able, quite justifiably, to gain the admiration and respect of non-Catholics.<sup>347</sup> In these circumstances the masculine heroism of the sisters was not deviant, but welcome. Their spiritual zeal and willingness to risk illness and death in service to the victims of the epidemics set them apart from married Protestant women doing the work of benevolence. Their celibacy and their renunciation of husbands and children allowed them to venture into these dangerous situations and the public, Protestant and Catholic, recognized this. That sisters died ministering to cholera victims in the nineteenth century is not romantic hyperbole. The letters of Mary Ignatia Greene, a Emmitsburg Sister of Charity, reported four of her fellow sisters had died in just one year and that there had been over 900 deaths from cholera in St. Louis in 1849. Mary Ignatia herself died of cholera in Panama en route to a mission in San Francisco in 1852.<sup>348</sup>

“Catholic Envy” and gender deviance at work in the convent schools and hospitals may have seemed an attractive proposition for some pupils and parents, but to many of the most

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<sup>346</sup> Alaric A. Watts “The Sister of Charity...written after meeting a Sister of Charity in the Hotel Dieu” from *Lyrics of the Heart and Other Poems* in *The Catholic Herald*, March 13, 1834.

<sup>347</sup> Charles Rosenberg has argued that the cholera epidemics of the 1830s fundamentally shook American faith in their own progress, especially at a time when disease was often associated with a lack of virtue and immoral behavior. Though tuberculosis and malaria claimed more victims between 1832-1866, cholera was especially frightening to Americans, as it was both a novel and terrifying way to die. See Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 1-17.

<sup>348</sup> See *Letters from Sister Mary Ignatia to her Own Mother*, 18, 44-46.

outspoken anti-Catholic agitators, they were a risky proposition. A cornerstone of many an “escaped nun” novel, (including the bestsellers by Rebecca Reed and Josephine Bunkley) was the naïve Protestant girl who entered a convent school only to be “seduced” into becoming a nun. “Escaped nun” stories traded upon Protestant fears that the trappings of Catholicism—the smells and bells, strange rituals, and bizarre devotions—would be too much for an innocent young girl to resist. Furthermore, in such stories, seemingly pious sisters and kindly priests often turned out to be cruel abusers in disguise. The nameless heroine of aptly named *The Escaped Nun* described it thusly; “after witnessing the imposing ceremonies, the display of ornaments, and all the gorgeous paraphernalia of worship peculiar to the Romish Church, I felt as though I was about to be drawn within the mysterious but attractive pale of that church...a fluttering and terrified, but irresistibly attracted bird.”<sup>349</sup> Such stories simultaneously portrayed Catholicism as something to be feared, preying upon the most vulnerable of society, and young women as its hapless victims. “Escaped nun” stories were so frightening and believable precisely because “Catholic envy” was very powerful and very real.

Maine schoolgirl Rebecca Usher’s education at the Ursuline Convent at Trois-Rivières, Canada reveals both antebellum “Catholic envy” and its darker side. While she was not a real-life Rebecca Reed, many in her own family feared that her two terms of study among the Ursulines would cause her to succumb to the allure of the convent. The daughter of a wealthy Maine lumber merchant, Usher ended up enrolling at Trois Rivières while accompanying her father on a business trip to Lower Canada during the fall of 1840. After meeting a priest on the steamboat ride across the St. Lawrence, Rebecca convinced her father to let her stay at the

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<sup>349</sup> *The Escaped Nun* was actually what DeWitt & Davenport published after Josephine Bunkley obtained her injunction and bears little resemblance to Bunkley’s story or experience, other than it takes place in the middle states. *The Escaped Nun or Disclosures of Convent Life; and the confessions of a Sister of Charity* (New York: DeWitt & Davenport, 1855), 19-20.



convent for a term while he conducted his business so that she might perfect her French. She aspired to gain enough proficiency to give lessons herself one day. One term turned into two, much to her family's chagrin. When Rebecca failed to respond to letters in a timely fashion, her family assumed the worst. Her sister Martha wrote to her on New Year's Day 1841, "You must come home with Pa. We shan't consent to your remaining any longer but shall indeed give up if you don't come home this month. You must write us immediately on the reception of this."<sup>350</sup> Somehow, Rebecca was able to convince her family to let her stay until the spring term was finished; she explained to her sister, "I should be sorry to go home now, knowing only a few short and disconnected sentences of a language that I have attempted to learn." To try and study French at home would be "an entire failure" in Rebecca's mind after having been immersed in the culture of the Ursulines.<sup>351</sup>

Rebecca Usher may have convinced her family to let her remain at Trois Rivières, but that failed to put an end to rampant speculation among her friends and acquaintances that she had entered the nunnery. Ellis Usher wrote to his daughter that "some of the old Ladies say you will never get back again they think the nuns will not part with you...they were amazed if not confounded how came I to be so crazy as to part with a daughter to be imprisoned."<sup>352</sup> Her sister Martha's letters confirmed "the thousand and one reports that are flying about the country" about her sojourn in Canada: "Miss Hays of Bangor received a letter from an Aunt in New Hampshire telling the sad story that 'you were kidnapped from Father when he went to Canada and thrown into a convent and that all his efforts to regain you proved unavailing.'"<sup>353</sup> And while these rumors were referred to in a half-teasing manner, only six years after the burning of the Ursuline

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<sup>350</sup> Martha Usher to Rebecca Usher, January 1, 1841. Rebecca Usher Papers, Maine Historical Society. Hereafter abbreviated as MeHs.

<sup>351</sup> Rebecca Usher to Martha Usher, January 14, 1841. Rebecca Usher Papers, MEHS.

<sup>352</sup> Ellis Usher to Rebecca Usher, March 13, 1841. Rebecca Usher Papers, MEHS

<sup>353</sup> Martha Usher to Rebecca Usher, March 13, 1841. Rebecca Usher Papers, MEHS.

convent at Charlestown and on the heels of the overwhelming sensation of Maria Monk, such fears were perhaps no laughing matter for Rebecca's sister and father. It is telling that in her letters to her sister at the convent, Martha took special pains mention the names of several young men who had asked after Rebecca, and expressed her excitement over the prospect of a moonlit stroll along the Saco once Rebecca returned home in the summer. A young male acquaintance of Rebecca's, George Woodman, a law clerk recently moved to New York City, also seemed willing to cast Rebecca Usher as the heroine of a picaresque novel. In the potential suitor's mind, Rebecca "had retired, for a time, from that great school of the world in order the better to fit and prepare yourself for its thousand duties, if in fact, you intend to let the light of your countenance be seen again among us."<sup>354</sup>

For her part, Rebecca shrugged off the wild speculation about her life among the nuns with amusement. "I never dreamed of being immortalized, much more of becoming the heroine of a fiction worthy of the lost days of chivalry... buried alive in a convent what a dreadful thought!!! But then it's romantic. I did laugh well over that part of your letter," she responded to Martha. She told her sister to tell the gossips of the neighborhood that "I have seen all the nuns to the number of fifty, I believe, and there is nothing very terrible in the appearance of any of them, or very remarkable, except that they dress in black and wear veils." She even suggested to her father that should he really wish to give the old women something to gab about, some of the nuns had playfully threatened not to let her return to America.<sup>355</sup>

Though Rebecca conceded to her father's wishes and returned home with him in April of 1841, she kept in touch with the sisters and seemed to have grown genuinely attached to them and they to her. She admitted she had been something of a "pet" at Trois Rivères. She sent her

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<sup>354</sup> George Woodman to Rebecca Usher, March 27, 1841 Rebecca Usher Papers, MEHS.

<sup>355</sup> Rebecca Usher to Martha Usher, March 26, 1841. Rebecca Usher Papers, MEHS.

father to the convent in the fall of 1841 with many “petits cadeaux” for the sisters, who sent back affectionate letters thanking her. Her former French mistress, Sister St. F. Borgia, wrote back *en français* teasing her that she wished she had sent her new pupils instead of gifts, but “in all seriousness, you know my occupation doesn’t give me much leisure, but I must tell you that you are as loved as you always were.”<sup>356</sup> Sister Mary Joseph wished she had been able to send back a painting in return for Rebecca’s gift and expressed wish for Rebecca to return; “Perhaps you may make a visit to Canada then we could say to our inestimable Miss Usher many things that would not do for a letter.”<sup>357</sup> Sister Mary Joseph sent Rebecca’s father home with Catholic tracts about the founding of the Ursulines, so it is possible that they hoped their favorite American pupil could be persuaded to become one of them, or at least return for another term of lessons.

Rebecca Usher was never imprisoned in a nunnery. Her law clerk sweetheart was never forced to skate across the St. Lawrence in bitter January to rescue her in a feat of romantic heroism. And yet, perhaps her family’s fears were not entirely unfounded. Despite the interests of George Woodman and other young men, Rebecca never married, the only child of Ellis Usher not to do so. It is unclear whether or not she ever succeeded as a teacher of French in Maine, but twenty years later she emerged in the historical record again, this time as a Civil War nurse, recruited by Dorothea Dix herself. As she once went to Canada on her own to study French, so did she serve in battlefield hospitals in Chester, Pennsylvania and Northern Virginia. In the 1890s, she applied for a veteran’s pension under her maiden name. Did Rebecca Usher remain unmarried out of emulation for the nuns who had been her teachers as a girl? Or did her own independent nature cause her to seek them out? Perhaps it was a mixture of both. Later in life Usher became well-acquainted with the nearby Shakers of Alfred, Maine and considered them

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<sup>356</sup> Sister St. F. Borgia to Rebecca Usher, October 28, 1841. Rebecca Usher Papers, MEHS.

<sup>357</sup> Sister Mary Joseph to Rebecca Usher, October 27, 1841. Rebecca Usher Papers, MEHS.

“real friends.” They were frequent guests at her residence, the “Brick House”<sup>358</sup> Whether it was “Catholic Envy” or a longing for a life outside of marriage, Rebecca Usher treasured her time at Trois Rivières. According to her niece’s family history, her adventures as an Ursuline pupil were among Aunt Rebecca’s fondest memories, “a great experience for her and one which she remembered through life with pleasure and satisfaction. In telling of it she always dwelt upon the invariable sweetness and kindness of the sisters to her, an unbeliever.”<sup>359</sup> Though she never became either a nun or a Shaker, as a never married woman, Usher seems to have regarded both groups as kindred spirits.

Rebecca Usher was one of many Protestant girls sent to better her “accomplishments” in an antebellum convent school. As part of New England’s rising middle class, Rebecca and her family believed her studies in Trois-Rivières would cement her status as a lady of refinement and open the door to future economic opportunities for her as a teacher fluent in French. And yet, because of antebellum prejudices and fears surrounding convents and nuns, the Usher family was forced to weigh these potential advantages against the possibility that convent life would prove irresistible to their young daughter. The Ushers dilemma over Rebecca’s education points to the genuine and pervasive impact “escaped nun” stories had upon the American psyche. The story of Rebecca Usher also illustrates the elite cache of convent schools and the opportunities they represented in the Protestant imagination.

### **The Graham System as a Religious System**

Sylvester Graham’s prescriptions for diet and regimen perhaps most clearly form the link between sexuality and “brand.” Graham’s name itself became synonymous with the system of

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<sup>358</sup> Mrs. George B. Hobbs, *The Brick House and Its People*, (ca. 1918), 13.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid*, 19-20.

health he created, from books and lecture series to “Graham bread,” “Graham flour” and “Graham boarding houses.” Devotees of Graham were commonly called, often mockingly, “Grahamites,” though the followers themselves preferred the term “pure livers.” Grahamism, with its rules for sleeping, eating, bathing, and sexual relations, was much more than just a diet—it was an entire way of life.

Grahamites, too, walked a fine line between capitalism and benevolence. As with the *Graham Journal*, Grahamite publications were often not intended to be money-making enterprises. For editors like David Cambell, it was more important to spread the gospel of pure living on the Graham system than it was to turn a profit as a journal editor. Graham himself, often sponsored by a group of citizens for a given lecture series, did not charge for his lectures in Portland, Maine in 1834. The *Christian Mirror* reported Graham’s “free lectures are generally thronged and his course is somewhat numerously attended.”<sup>360</sup> And yet, Sylvester Graham, William Andrus Alcott, Mary Gove Nichols and other reformers certainly were entrepreneurial as authors. Moreover, the fact remains that despite the philanthropic impulses within Grahamism, Graham’s revolutionary system created a demand for products and services that had heretofore not existed in the marketplace.

Where was one to obtain the “Graham” flour to make “Graham bread” and the potatoes and fresh vegetables that were the staples of the Graham diet? Where could a young Grahamite find an establishment free of forbidden foods and stimulating drinks? Some leading Grahamites such as merchant Nathaniel Perry, publisher Bela Marsh, and boarding-house keepers David Cambell and Asenath Nicholson were only too happy to seize upon these enterprising opportunities. Only a week after Graham began his lecture series in Portland, an enterprising baker John Pearson ran an advertisement for “Graham Bread” in the *Daily Evening Advertiser*,

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<sup>360</sup> “Graham’s Lectures,” *Christian Mirror*, June 26, 1834.

encouraging the newly converted to stop by his Casco Street bake house. But it was not always just business men and women looking to capitalize on the newest trend; often the demands for these products came from the Grahamites themselves. One of Boston's young clerks wrote to Dr. Alcott, suggesting the need for a "Graham Restorator," or a restaurant on the Graham system in a central location where the young men of the city could obtain a healthy, cheap meal. Alcott, however, disapproved of "restorators" and "refectories" of any kind, even Graham ones. Such places encouraged young men to mix with strangers of dubious morals. He suggested the young man either purchase bread and milk for his supper, or return to his boarding house for dinner rather than indulge himself in the decadent practice of taking meals outside the safety of the home.<sup>361</sup>

The presence of local societies, boarding houses, and businesses that catered to Grahamites created sites and places where Grahamism could be performed and enacted. In this sense, Grahamism functioned in a way that was very similar to a religion. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz has defined religion as

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>362</sup>

Geertz acknowledged that persons may feel "religious" about aspects of culture that not explicitly proclaim themselves so long as the believer saw the activity as embodying certain "transcendent truths" (i.e. it is possible to be "religious" about basketball if one gets a transcendent experience from playing). Grahamites certainly understood their larger system as a

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<sup>361</sup> "City Restorators," *Library of Health*, 3 (1837):33-35.

<sup>362</sup> Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

way of consciously choosing virtue over vice and health over disease. Becoming a Grahamite and rejecting meat, tea, and coffee was to reject the sinful and licentious pleasures such stimulating foods were thought to inspire. This sense of transcendent and moral feeling can be seen in an 1841 article taken from the *Health Journal & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, in which a devotee of the Graham system proposed that instead of calling themselves Grahamites, it would be more apt to call themselves “Millennarians.” Grahamites are “Millennarians” because “by strictly observing the physical, moral, and intellectual laws of our being—sinless in every respect—would constitute the Millennium.”<sup>363</sup> Like other true believers, Grahamites were compelled to confess their sins in order to prevent back-sliding into bad sexual and dietetic habits. In return for their sacrifice of pleasure, they would be reborn into a new and healthy in the present moment.

The quasi-religious aspects of Grahamism can be seen in the testimonies of his ardent followers. Delivered in person at meetings of the APS or in print in various pro-Graham publications, individuals detailed what can best be described as a conversion experience.<sup>364</sup> There is a marked contrast between the life of sin and gluttony, where they ate whatever they wanted and suffered dire consequences in terms of health to a sort of being born-again and regaining health and vigor through the Graham system. Grahamites themselves were actually fairly self-aware of the religious nature of the new regimen. One “new subscriber,” having tried and failed at “Thompsonianism, Quackism, Regular-ism” and desiring Grahamism to be the last stop” asked the journal for some advice: “must I ‘cut’ with my old friends, tea and coffee, flesh

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<sup>363</sup> “Grahamism alias Millennialism” *Health Journal, & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, February 10, 1841.

<sup>364</sup> Christine Heyrman in describing conversion experiences among Methodists and Baptists in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century American South, has written of the way that such moments of spiritual epiphany were often preceded intense feelings of despair and worthlessness. Many Grahamites felt the same helplessness regarding their physical and emotional health before accepting the Graham system. See Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 33-36. Conversion has also been described as a liminal experience, the transition between an “old” and new” self. See also Juster, *Disorderly Women*, 15, Daniel Shea, *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

and all?...Please give a *novitiate* a little instruction in this ‘more excellent way.’”<sup>365</sup> George Williams of Russell, MA testified to the readers of the *Health Journal* that prior to adopting the Graham system, he suffered “much from severe pain in my side, and felt a direful surety, both physical and mental, that my days were nearly numbered.” Worst of all, Williams, like many Grahamites, “was given to low spirits” and experienced “melancholy.” However, he cheerfully wrote that “living on the Graham system, so termed, has been the death-blow to all my pains and sorrows.”<sup>366</sup>

Because of the religious fervor that surrounded conversion to the Graham system, followers of Graham struggled living under the label of “Grahamite.” For while on the one hand, Grahamite implied secular medical fads—“Thompsonianism, Quackism, Regular-ism”—it also invoked the “antebellum spiritual hothouse” out of which grew the new charismatically-led religions such as Mormonism and the Kingdom of Matthias.<sup>367</sup> To be a Grahamite was in some ways to be a fanatic, an “ultraist,” a misguided soul lead astray from conventional wisdom by a charming fraud. In response to these implied accusations, the editors of the *Health Journal* tried to distance themselves from Graham. They assured the public that it was the principles of physiology, not Sylvester Graham himself, that had earned their ardent devotion: “We advocate these views because we believe, with a confidence not to be shaken, that they are immutable, eternal truth. If men choose to call us Grahamites, so be it. We will promise to hold on our way unmoved. We are pledged to principles, not men.”<sup>368</sup> To those who embraced the Graham system, it mattered not whether those who opposed them—“bloated wine-bibber(s) and gluttonous flesh-

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<sup>365</sup> *The Graham Journal*, January 5, 1839.

<sup>366</sup> “Testimony of George Williams, Russell, June 1, 1840,” *Health Journal and Advocate of Physiological Reform*, June 17, 1840.

<sup>367</sup> Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 226. Paul Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>368</sup> “To Our Friends and the Public,” *Health Journal, & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, May 6, 1840.



eater(s)” considered them ultraists or enthusiasts. Though they disclaimed they considered Graham their “master,” Grahamites could not help but speak about their faith in pure living in spiritual terms, believing these principles to be “immutable, eternal truths.” The latter, especially, is reminiscent of Geertz’s definition of religion. Grahamites found transcendence and moral value in the sexual and dietetic prescriptions put forward by Graham, Alcott, and Gove. If their testimonies are to be believed, they also found improved health and greater peace of mind.

In spite of glowing testimonies from Grahamites, it can be difficult to understand why a person would choose such a restrictive regimen. The life of physician and reformer William Andrus Alcott is an object lesson in how the world Grahamites, medical science, and transcendentalism crossed and connected in Jacksonian America. William A. Alcott was born in Wolcott, Connecticut in 1796. William and his second cousin, Amos Bronson Alcott, the future educational reformer and father of the novelist Louisa May Alcott, grew up together in the sleepy New England town.<sup>369</sup> As a young man of twenty-two, William followed his cousin Bronson to the Carolinas, where they both hoped to spend the winter teaching school. William admits it was a kind of “gold fever” that lead the boys there; he desired a liberal education, but as the son of a middling farmer had not the means to pay for one. When their teaching appointments fell through, the duo fell back on the time honored tradition of Yankee peddling. Unfortunately for Bronson, this particular tour proved especially disastrous. In January 1821, Bronson took seriously ill in Norfolk and William was forced to quit peddling in order to care for his sick

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<sup>369</sup>William and Bronson were contemporaries and great friends who aspired to a life of letters beyond their sleepy Connecticut town. They founded a library together in Wolcott as adolescents .See Samuel Orcutt, *History of the Town of Wolcott*, (Waterbury, Conn.: American Printing company, 1873), 265-267, 435. Bronson Alcott, *Autobiographical Sketches* MS Am 1130.11: III, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

cousin. It was the first of many brushes with illness that inspired young William to embark upon a medical career.<sup>370</sup>

After that incident, William's career as a peddler was done, but a fascination with teaching and medicine would weave throughout his life. Supporting himself off and on as a schoolmaster, it wasn't until his sister and brother-in-law died from something William called "Connecticut River Fever" that he aspired to become a doctor. It was his belief that it was not the fever itself that cut down his sister and brother-in-law in the prime of life, but the poisonous doses of calomel used to save them. William Alcott's medical education appears sloppy and haphazard by modern standards. To finance his education and support himself, he taught school in the winters and worked on a farm in the summers. With a smattering of practical apprenticeships in surgery and anatomy and only five months of lectures at Yale College's school of medicine under his belt, William Alcott finally received his medical degree: "*How well qualified I was supposed to be, did not exactly appear.*"<sup>371</sup> But all of this ambition came at the cost of his health. Five months of medical school had taken a toll on him. William taught school while he tried to establish himself as a physician only to have his "old enemy" of ill health return to him, forcing him to resign his position. He confessed, "This was one of the darkest periods of my life." In debt, too proud to ask for help, unable to practice medicine or teach, the young doctor approached "the very borders of despair."<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> William Andrus Alcott, *Forty Years in the Wilderness of Pills and Powders or the Cogitations and Confessions of an aged Physician*, (Boston: John P Jewett & co, 1859) , 23. This particular book of Alcott's is half medical case study, half autobiography. In addition to criticizing his own addiction to opium, Alcott also critiqued patent medicines in general, such as Mrs. Kidder's Cordial.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid, 39.y

<sup>372</sup> Ibid, 78-79.

To get him through these dark times, the staunch temperance man and strict Grahamite reformer turned to opium pills and dubious patent medicines. William had given up drink and signed the Temperance pledge in 1830. But he remained a hypocrite because of his drug use.

I was yet one of those who lay aside one stimulus and retain or resort to another...All I did for some time, whenever I had been particularly exposed and feared I had taken cold, was go and swallow a small pill—say about a grain—of opium...the necessity for recurring to it became more and more frequent and imperious, till I was, at length, a confirmed opium taker. And yet—strange to say it—all the while I regarded myself as a rigid temperance man.<sup>373</sup>

At his worst, William took opium every day, sometimes as many as three times a day. In his memoir of school teaching, *Confessions of a Schoolmaster*, Alcott attested that the little pills of opium “tranquilized and even cheered my mind, made me strong in body, gave me courage.” He took the opium out of fear of future illness and rheumatatic attacks, and for the ease and comfort the drug brought to his life. As long as the opium lasted, “I was a very happy man, and an excellent schoolmaster; yes, and I had most excellent pupils. You cannot think how finely they behaved and recited, and what wonderful progress they made—in my own imagination at least—while I was under the influence and excitement of the narcotic drug.” But as soon as he stopped taking the pills, Alcott suddenly found he hated his students, his career, and his life; “How roguish, how ungovernable were the scholars! How little they cared for books or learning! How gloomy everything appeared, how dismal my prospects!”<sup>374</sup>

William’s friends and family found his behavior troubling as well. In 1831, Bronson had tentatively offered William a position at the Germantown School in Philadelphia. But Bronson and his partner had misgivings about William’s fragile health: “We know your zeal about education and about agriculture and we think this would go very far. But a question has arisen with use whether your health would admit your engaging to any great extent in personal labour.”

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid, 139-40.

<sup>374</sup> William A. Alcott, *Confessions of a Schoolmaster* (Andover: Gould, Newman and Saxton, 1839), 290-91.

Bronson himself wrote a very angry and disappointed letter to his cousin in late December of that year, complaining that William has not thoroughly responded to his long and conciliatory letters. Bronson was willing to chalk up his cousin's "seeming bitterness" to "ill health" but believed that something else was at the root of William's odd behavior.<sup>375</sup> Reading between the lines of Bronson's letters, it would seem that more than a sickly disposition prevented him from offering the teaching post at Germantown to his cousin William. On some level, William's family and acquaintances were well aware of his addiction to opium and the psychological depression that caused him to abuse such drugs.

Reading these two autobiographical accounts of Alcott's life before the Graham system allows for a greater understanding of why someone would go to such great and almost unimaginable lengths in the name of preserving health. William Alcott was a bright and ambitious man. He was traumatized by the seemingly senseless deaths of those around him and the powerlessness of the medical profession to prevent and understand illness. In his experience, calomel and patent medicine cures were worse than the disease itself. Illness and a weak constitution prevented him multiple times from practicing his chosen profession. In pursuit of better health, William Alcott developed a dangerous and shameful dependence upon opium despite signing the temperance pledge. Is it any wonder to someone like Alcott and the numerous others who distrusted the heroic medicine of the day, that vegetarianism and sexual restraint might have seemed a better alternative than addiction, disease, and death?

In the years to come, Alcott would adopt the Graham System, forswearing all alcohol, meat, tobacco, and the opium pills that made his days as a schoolmaster pass more pleasantly. About the same time Sylvester Graham published his *Lectures to Young Men on Chastity*, Alcott

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<sup>375</sup> Amos Bronson Alcott Papers (MS Am 1130.9-1130.12). Houghton Library, Harvard University. Letter from Russell to William Alcott, March 6, 1831. Letter from A. Bronson Alcott to William Alcott, December 20, 1831.

took up the sexual reform cause, and published *The Young Man's Guide* in 1834.<sup>376</sup> There was such a clamoring for this kind of reform book that *The Young Man's Guide* sold over 5000 copies in a matter of months; it was its thirteenth printing by 1839. As a professional sexual reformer, William Alcott found the success that had eluded him as a teacher and a physician. He wrote eighteen books on topics ranging from school-reform to house-keeping, all inspired by Grahamite principles, right up until his death in 1859. His transformation from opium-addicted schoolteacher to successful author and lecturer echo the conversion narratives of other less famous Grahamites and reinforce the Graham system's inherently religious angle.

The same roads that carried Shaker medicines and seeds away from the villages brought word of Graham and Alcott's innovations in sexual reform. Shakers were well aware of Sylvester Graham and his revolutionary system of living. In the 1830s, some Believers successfully adopted the Graham diet. While Shakers' lived separately from the "world's people," they by no means lived in an intellectual vacuum. *The Graham Journal* had an agent in New Lebanon, and arguably the journal could have been easily obtained by an interested Shaker reader.<sup>377</sup> The American Physiological Society in Boston in turn, was aware of the presence of the Harvard and New Hampshire Shaker villages, and mentioned them in the *Graham Journal*. George Kendall, a Harvard Shaker brother wrote in to the *Graham Journal* to praise the remarkable recovery he had after adopting the Graham diet at the age of 22 and to encourage others to follow Graham's system; "Please to accept my kind and affectionate love with my well wishes for those who may feel disposed to undertake the Graham system of diet." As for the Grahamites, they certainly viewed themselves as allied with Shakers, and proclaimed

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<sup>376</sup> William A. Alcott, *The Young Man's Guide* (Boston: Perkins and Marvin 1836), thirteenth edition 1839.

<sup>377</sup> Although there was a resort at Lebanon Springs that certainly catered to the health seeking crowd as well as tourists, the Shaker community would have certainly provided a more abundant and permanent set of readers. See *The Graham Journal*, 3 no. 2 (1839): 40.

Grahamism's non-sectarian nature; "we shall with pleasure insert communications from individuals of every sect or denomination," the editor wrote alongside Kendall's letter.<sup>378</sup> Alfred Maine Shakers produced the whole wheat Graham flour used to make the infamous Graham bread, ridiculed as "sawdust bread" by critics. It is possible that this was the flour sold in Portland and Boston bakeries and Graham stores.<sup>379</sup>

The mutual interest of both Grahamites and Shakers in promoting sexual restraint might have made Grahamism seem a natural fit for a community that celebrated celibacy as one of its most sacred tenets. Indeed, George Kendall of Harvard was not alone in his embrace of the Graham diet and several other Shakers in the Eastern communities also wrote openly of their experiences. Seth Wells, a Watervliet Shaker schoolmaster and theologian, detailed his experiences after four years on the Graham system in manuscript form for circulation among his fellow Shakers. Wells, like many Grahamites, testified to experiencing poor health prior to adopting Graham's recommended diet. In 1834, he "could not walk a mile" and had lost the majority of his teeth and hair, which he attributed to a conventional allopathic doctor's prescription for calomel during an illness in 1806. He was familiar with the works of the foremost health reformers of the day and cited Alcott and Graham for his decision to abstain from coffee and meat in 1835. Now, his health radically improved, Wells believed "what is vulgarly called the Graham system of diet" to be but a natural extension of the self-denial and cross he already bore as part of his Shaker faith. For him, it was such a "small cross" to enjoy improved health and the Graham's diet "so far subdued the depravity of my appetite that I feel

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<sup>378</sup> "Grahamism Not Sectarian," *The Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*, May 2, 1837; *The Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*, May 26, 1838. The *Graham Journal* recommended Shaker mattresses made from hickory shavings for Grahamites looking to eschew the decadent feather mattresses believed to promote ill health and licentiousness. David Cambell furnished his own Brattle Street Graham boarding house with such mattresses, purchased from the Shakers.

<sup>379</sup> Alfred Maine Shaker Community flour sack, ca. 1850, ASC.

no more hankering after the various delicacies of the table than if I had never tasted them.” A Shaker brother or sister might (and did) talk in the same manner about carnal sexual appetites as Wells did about gustatory ones.<sup>380</sup>

Ephraim Prentiss, caretaker of the boys’ order at Watervliet, applied the Graham diet explicitly to induce sexual restraint among his charges during 1835-37. He also wrote of this experiment in manuscript form for the larger Shaker community. When he was appointed caretaker in 1831, he found the boys a violent, sickly, troublesome, bedwetting lot. Even worse “their stimulating food evidently excited and brought into action those base propensities which boys of their age ought not to feel—in short, their venereal excitements & filthy indulgences caused me much tribulation.” In 1835, the boys were given the liberty to choose for themselves whether or not to embrace the Graham diet and Prentiss decided to lead by example. Gradually, Prentiss and his young charges gave up first meat and lard drippings, then baked beans and pork, cheese, butter, and milk, embracing a wholly Grahamite diet. Prentiss reported that after only five or six weeks the boys were “less ferocious, more cheerful & simple, and more attentive to business.” They no longer fought amongst each other but transformed into a “playful, harmless and agreeable” bunch. Most importantly, the Graham diet had successfully cured them of the base indulgences alluded to earlier, and even “the most addicted to venereal pollution, had become to all appearance as harmless as babes as to any indulgence of the nature.”<sup>381</sup>

However, Prentiss’ application of the Graham diet, though he made it seem consensual, was not well received among his fellow Shakers. As strict and relentless in pursuit of sexual restraint as the Shakers could be, there were some among them that felt that Prentiss had gone too far and was starving his charges, who had been adopted or indentured into the Shakers’ care

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<sup>380</sup> Seth Wells, *Experience and Testimony in Favor of Plain and Simple Diet* (Watervliet, NY: ca. 1838). ASC.

<sup>381</sup> Ephraim Prentiss, *Report of Interesting Experiences with the Boys of Whom He was Caretaker* (Watervliet, NY: ca.1837), ASC.

by their parents, into submission. Prentiss' own elder, Freegift Wells, believed he had "restrained his boys altogether beyond the bounds of reason." It is hard not to be suspicious of Prentiss' experiment; withholding food on top of hours of farm labor would probably render any group of boys "teachable and tractable."<sup>382</sup>

Controversy over the Graham diet spilled over into the larger adult Shaker community. While some like Seth Wells saw it as a larger expression of the Shaker cross of self-denial, others chafed at the change in diet and disruption to routine. Debates over the Graham diet nearly caused a schism among the Shakers, who prided themselves on being in "union" with one another. Plentiful and delicious food (and most travelers praised Shaker cooking as being very tasty) was one of the few indulgences to be had in a sect that had already sacrificed many pleasures. And unlike the city-dwelling Grahamites who patronized the APS or the clerks and students that subscribed to the *Graham Journal*, Shaker brothers and sisters performed a great deal of physical labor in their farms, kitchens, laundries, and workshops. In 1835, the Ministry ultimately decided against taking a position on whether or not the Shakers as whole should wholly embrace the Graham system and become vegetarians. Notably, Grahamism was twice as popular among Shaker brothers than it was among Shaker sisters, perhaps either because men were more in need of Graham's promise of sexual control, or because women knew the extra labor involved in having to cook separate meals for both vegetarian and non-vegetarian members.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Freegift Wells, *Notebook #4* (Watervliet, N.Y. ca 1835) WRHS VII B 270, p. 11.

<sup>383</sup> The aforementioned spat between Wells and Prentiss radiated out among other Shaker communities, causing much partisan feeling. Both men eventually ended up being transferred away from Watervliet. Brewer argues that the Ministry's failure to take a position on Grahamism paved the way toward further indecision and poor leadership, especially in dealing with the Era of Manifestations, the Shaker spiritual revival of the late 1830s-1840s. See Priscilla Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1986), 109-112.



In his history of the Shakers, Brother Isaac Newton Youngs explained that even as late as the 1850s the benefits of the Graham diet were still subject to debate. Youngs recorded that “People have run very wild on this subject, and are of two parties, going to great extremes in opposite directions; the one discarding all indulgence of appetite, all rich or delicious, or high seasoned food, all flesh meat, all grease, butter &c confining themselves to brown bread...the other...saying, that their own appetite is their best rule and judge of what is best for them.” The Graham diet was divisive, he said, not only because people wished to rule their own appetites, but because it required “additional labor, especially to the cooks, as it has rendered it necessary for themselves to put upon the table, both vegetable and animal food, at one meal.” Contrary to Graham and Alcott’s promise of easier to prepare food and more free time for housewives, preparing two sets of meals made more, not less, work for the kitchen sisters. The end result was such that the Church settled more toward the vegetarian “simple diet” out of “a general conviction that plain living is more conducive to health.” As a matter of compromise, the Ministry banned intoxicating spirits (except for medicinal purposes), cider, foreign teas, and pork around 1840. In 1855, foreign teas were again allowed; older Believers were allowed to keep taking tea and coffee if they so wished.<sup>384</sup>

The celibacy surrounding Shaker products and Catholic services helped mark these products as distinctive in a crowded marketplace. The purity of Shaker extracts, the demureness of a Shaker bonnet, and the chaste, ladylike example of an Ursuline sister proved attractive to antebellum consumers. And indeed, exposure to these minority religious groups through their goods and services helped overcome Protestant prejudice a small bit, especially in the case of Catholic nursing sisters who were willing serve even in the most dangerous of conditions. It is

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<sup>384</sup> Isaac Newton Youngs, *A Concise View of the Church of God and of Christ on Earth New Lebanon* (New Lebanon, NY: 1856) , 282-302, ASC.

notable and not at all coincidental that goods seemed to arouse less suspicion on the part of consumers than services. While one can find a great deal of outcry against Protestant girls and orphans being educated by Catholic sisters, it is difficult to find anything but praise for Shaker medicines, seeds, and consumer goods. Because even while one might swallow a spoonful of Valerian Extract or Sarsaparilla syrup, a Protestant consumer never had to worry about it talking back, challenging his religious beliefs or inducing his daughter to become a nun. The “Graham System” was certainly a distinctive brand of its own, but its ends and means were rather the opposite of that of Shaker and Catholic products. Shaker and Catholic celibacy *marked* their goods and services; the Graham system—the diet, the lectures, the boarding houses—was all in the service of *attaining* sexual restraint. All of the various commercial accoutrements of Grahamism further allowed Grahamites to take something which was ostensibly secular and endow it with the transcendent qualities associated with religion. Furthermore, none of these groups could have successfully marketed their products, educational services, or health reform regimes without the sweeping changes in transportation infrastructure that went hand-in-hand with the market revolution.

The lived experiences of Rebecca Usher and the Grahamite Shakers also show that antebellum consumers did not accept these premise of these products unthinkingly. To study abroad in a French Canadian convent or to embark upon a new dietetic system were both ambiguous propositions that required individual agency. Neither Usher nor the Shakers were blind followers; each accepted the products offered on their own terms and attempted to use them to suit their own needs and ambitions.

The connection between the sexual restraint of these groups and their ability to succeed in the antebellum marketplace further demonstrates that sexual otherness was in fact a commodity

worth buying and selling. More than just a set of behaviors, sexual restraint was an identity and a brand. But antebellum American's consumption of sexual restraint did not simply end at purchasing products. As tourists and spectators they also paid money to see sexual otherness performed and enacted, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 5

### Performing Sexual Restraint

In 1850 Eph Horn, J.B. Fellows, and the rest of the New York's Fellows' Ethiopian Minstrel Troupe debuted a routine that was soon to become a sensation on the minstrel circuit. Horn and his fellow minstrels blacked up to perform a song and dance combination that came to be known as "Fi Hi Hi: The Black Shakers' Song and Polka" or simply "Black Shakers." From the few extant descriptions of the routine that exist we can surmise that the "polka" involved a blackface comic imitation of the dances and ecstatic worship of the Shaker sect. "Black Shakers" was a hit and was soon adopted by a variety of groups such as the Virginia Serenaders, Christy's, and Bryant's at mid-century. Touring minstrel companies made "Black Shakers" a national sensation, with performances springing up across the country, far beyond the troupe's home in New York City. The enthusiasm for "Black Shakers" was not limited to the northeast where the Shakers themselves resided; touring troupes performed the act throughout the 1850s-1870s in South Carolina, Louisiana, and even California.<sup>385</sup> And though the "Black Shakers' Song" is unfamiliar to 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, it once shared the bill with such popular tunes as "Camptown Races" and "My Old Kentucky Home." Like these more familiar standards, the song was sold as

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<sup>385</sup> *Charleston Courier*, February 12, 1851; "Brooklyn Letter," *Times-Picayune*, September 20, 1851; *Daily Ohio Statesman*, November 3, 1851.

sheet music, to be played in the parlor or the saloon, long after the troupe had moved on to their next engagement.<sup>386</sup>

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Tremont Street, between Court and School Streets.

Museum open Day & Evening. Hall or Stairway open till 8 P. M. Exhibition Room opens at 7 1/2 o'clock. Performances commence at 8. Admission 25 Cts. Seats Reserved for 50 Cts. Children under 12 years of age 12 1/2 Cts.

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Opening Chorus—The Fashion of Longmeau, (introducing the Bostonian's Dance)..... Serenaders  
Song—Jenny Lane, originally sung by..... Campbell  
Song—Nelly Bly, originally sung by..... S. A. Wells  
Tyronean Solo—(displaying a compass and flexibility of voice hitherto unknown)—Christian Gahiamo  
Song—Camptown Races, (with Bone imitations of horse racing, &c.)..... Birch  
Song—Ring, Ring the Banjo, written and composed expressly for this company, by  
S. C. Foster, Esq., and sung only by..... Campbell  
Chorus—Fenced road by grateful hearts, (from Gustava)..... Serenaders

**MASQUERADE WALTZ,** With Accompaniment and Street Organ imitation. FULL BAND

**PART SECOND.**

Violin Solo—(with Variations)..... J. B. Farrell  
Tyronean Barlesque..... Company  
Banjo Solo..... E. F. Briggs

**BLACK SHAKERS,**  
As originally performed by E. HORN & COMPANY.

PLANTATION JIG..... BIRCH  
Banjo Trio..... Wells, Horn and Briggs

AN INTERMISSION OF FIVE MINUTES.

**PART THIRD.**

**DUTCH DRILL!**  
By CAPT. S. A. WELLS & LIEUT. E. HORN.

Song and Chorus—Love March..... Campbell  
Song and Chorus—I wish I was in Old Virginia..... S. A. Wells  
Song and Chorus—I'm off for Charleston..... E. Horn  
Banjo Solo..... T. F. Briggs  
Finale—The Laughable Barlesque of

**DAMON AND PYTHIAS.**

DAMON..... E. HORN | PYTHIAS..... S. A. WELLS  
Executioner..... Christian Gahiamo | Messenger..... Birch  
Dynamite..... Campbell | Jailer..... Briggs  
Citizens, &c., Company.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON AND EVENING.  
**POSITIVELY LAST PERFORMANCES OF THE**  
**Serenaders!**

Horton's Press—No. 19 Haskins' Buildings, corner of Howard and Tremont Streets.

Figure 12. Broadside advertising “Black Shakers,” August 1, 1851. American Broadside & Ephemera Series.

<sup>386</sup> On performances of the “Black Shakers” routine by Fellows and other minstrel troupes, see “Local Intelligence Deacon Foster’s Concert,” *Daily Atlas*, February 2, 1850; *Salem Observer*, December 21, 1850; On the advertisement of “Fi Hi Hi: The Black Shakers’ Song” as sheet music, see “New Music,” *Times-Picayune*, March 15, 1850; *Charleston Courier*, February 21, 1851.

The “Black Shakers’ Song” is more than simply a lost cultural artifact. It offers an ideal lens for viewing nineteenth-century America’s fascination not only with performances of racial otherness, but also sexual otherness in the form of Shaker celibacy. Audiences not only flocked to see the “Black Shaker” minstrel routine, but also melodramas such as *The Shaker Lovers* and *The Pet of the Petticoats*, which promised behind the scenes glimpses of closed celibate communities. Intrigued by what they had read in pamphlets, books and newspapers, non-celibate Americans went to see the celibate identities of nuns, priests, and Shakers embodied, turning Shaker Villages and Catholic convents into some of North America’s earliest tourist attractions.

### **“The Black Shakers’ Song” and the Antebellum Stage**

Analysis of the “Black Shakers” phenomenon as well as these other performances of sexual restraint can broaden the scope of scholarship on race, sexuality, and performance during this time period. There has been extensive and insightful work on how nineteenth century white Americans interpreted and consumed racial difference in the form of blackface minstrelsy.<sup>387</sup> Performances of gender identity and sexuality in this era have received considerably less attention. The circulation of these performances, whether by imitators looking to turn a profit (as with J.B. Fellows & co.) or in the touristic draw of the genuine article (pilgrimages to Mount Lebanon or the Hotel Dieu in Montreal) also illuminate the confluence of religion and the marketplace during the mid-nineteenth century. As Scott Gac and David Paul Nord have shown,

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<sup>387</sup> For scholarship on blackface minstrelsy in the antebellum era see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); W.T Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and their World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

religion and entertainment and religion and capitalism did not live in separate spheres.<sup>388</sup> In the “The Black Shakers’ Song” and other kindred performances, religion, political satire, and discourses of race and sexuality converged, all while turning a sizable profit.

How did Shaker dances find their way from the relative isolation of their utopian community to the urban masses in the minstrel hall? First, perhaps, it would be helpful to understand exactly *what* the act was and why it achieved such overwhelming popularity. Only the most vague descriptions of the “Black Shakers” routine can be gleaned from newspaper advertisements and broadsides of the period. It was sometimes called “the Black Shaker polka.” Its sheet music indicates that it began as a song (featuring a male soloist) that grew into a larger dance chorus. Minstrel broadsides list “Black Shakers” as being performed “by the company.”<sup>389</sup> “Black Shakers” was routinely performed in the second act, or *olio*, a part of the minstrel show typically devoted to topical issues of the day, such as burlesques of political stump speeches or social reform lectures. Second-act routines were often minimal in terms of spectacle, used as way to keep the audience engaged as more elaborate scenery and costumes could be readied for the final act.<sup>390</sup> As a form of biting social satire, “Black Shakers” exemplified the *olio* routine. Faux-women’s rights’ lectures delivered in blackface were also a popular fixture in the second act *olio*. Fellows’ Minstrels performed in July 1851 “Burlesque Shakers, with new material” alongside hornpipe sung in Bloomer drag: “the new style of costume lately introduced and now adopted by

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<sup>388</sup>David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading*. Scott Gac, *Singing for Freedom: The Hutchinson Family Singers and the Nineteenth-Century Culture of Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 202-5. Gac traces the career of the Hutchinson family singers, who were both fervent anti-slavery advocates and an outstanding commercial success in the antebellum era. Their routines combined popular standards with songs explicitly advocating for reform causes. Gac further argues that blackface minstrel promoters borrowed the sentimentality of the Hutchinsons in order to appeal to rural New England audiences at mid-century. One could be a fan of both the minstrels and the Hutchinsons. Nord’s work more explicitly deals with the overwhelming commercial success of religiously-inspired literature at the time and how religious print inspired innovation in commercial publishers.

<sup>389</sup>“Home again! Second week! Music and mirth! at the Horticultural Hall, School St. 1851.,” American Broadsides and Ephemera series 1, accessed 12/7/12.

<sup>390</sup>Toll. *Blacking Up*, 161.

some of the most fashionable ladies of our city.”<sup>391</sup> Satirical portrayals of suffragettes and middle-class reformers in blackface represented a recent innovation in minstrel performance. The earliest minstrel shows often used a trickster figure to ventriloquize working class discontent against elites, but actually portraying these characters onstage was a relatively new phenomenon.<sup>392</sup> In this way, “Black Shakers” would have been understood by audiences to be a modern and innovative minstrel routine.

Like minstrel send ups of Bloomers and suffragettes, “Black Shakers” satirized Shakers for their deviance from antebellum gender and sexual mores. In the song, the lead singer laments that his sweetheart, a “lubbly yallar gal” named Dinah, has rejected him and “gone away to Leb’non state” to become a celibate Shaker sister. The chorus includes the phrase “massa says it is too late, let her go to Leb’non state” as well as repeated rhyming nonsense syllables “fi hi hi” and “lumi dum diddle lum.” In the second verse, the pining suitor, at a loss for what to do, comically announces, “I’ll buy a rope and drown myself: Dat make her mad, I know.”<sup>393</sup> An instrumental polka, presumably a Shaker-style dance with the rest of the company, ended the routine.

These lyrics represented a kind of one-two-punch, an attempt to satirize religious and sexual outsiders in addition to the minstrel show’s usual grotesque portrayal of African-Americans. Shakers themselves considered both their dances and ecstatic twirling and shaking as forms of divinely inspired worship.<sup>394</sup> To see them burlesqued and aped by actors upon the stage, especially by plantation slaves, represented an opportunity to ridicule a dour and prim religious

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<sup>391</sup> George C.D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage Vol 6* (New York: Columbia University Press 1931), 76.

<sup>392</sup> Toll, *Blacking Up*, 162-63.

<sup>393</sup> “Fi, Hi, Hi. The Black Shakers Song & Polka,” <https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/5802>, accessed 12/21/12.

<sup>394</sup> On the meaning of dance in Shaker worship, see Priscilla Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1986), 124; Stephen Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 101-2.



sect. Yet, “Black Shakers” also took aim at black sexuality. For a mulatto slave woman, whose body and sexuality were the property of her owner, to run away and become a celibate Shaker, would have appeared to antebellum audiences as an oxymoron of the highest order. Dinah, the sweetheart turned Shaker sister, provided an interesting twist on a common minstrel archetype of the mulatto woman, or “wench” role. The “wench” was meant to combine the light skin and facial features of a white woman with the assumed sexual promiscuity of a black woman. One must understand that white minstrel performers as well as their predominantly white working class audiences projected their own sexual fantasies onto characters like Dinah in the way the “wench” role was hypersexualized. The character was both flirtatious and elusive and the male character types would spend much of the show attempting to win her favor. In the case of “Black Shakers,” the “wench” became not only elusive, but impossible to get by joining the Shakers. Turning a character type expected to be overtly sexual into a celibate woman was undoubtedly part of the song’s punchline.<sup>395</sup> However, the lyrics reveal that Dinah was much more than just a “wench” turned Shaker sister—she was also a runaway slave, “gone away” from the plantation to the “Leb’non state” and freedom in the Shaker villages of the north. The chorus of “master says it is too late” implied that a celibate Dinah was a lost cause and a bad investment for her white master. Though the song was intended to be a comic piece, played for laughs, its lyrics contained dark undertones of slaveholding men’s ownership of enslaved women’s bodies.

The routine further mocked the masculinity of the nameless rejected suitor. That the lovely Dinah would chose celibacy over him drives him to contemplate a comic suicide—in true minstrel fashion, he can’t even do this properly as he searches for a rope to drown himself.

Contrary to the portrayals of aggressive black masculinity that followed in the wake of the Civil

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<sup>395</sup> Toll, *Blacking Up*, 140, 144. On portrayals of black men as sexually aggressive in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 8-9.

War, the minstrel shows of the 1840s and 50s tended to feature luckless suitors like the singer of the “Black Shakers’ Song,” who lamented lost loves or expressed nostalgia for their plantation homes.<sup>396</sup> Under the slave regime, enslaved men were denied masculinity and considered to be not fully men. They could not protect their wives and children or themselves from the violence and indignities of slavery.<sup>397</sup> The male singer of “Black Shakers” was thus further unmanned by Dinah’s rejection; she chose to become a celibate Shaker rather than accept him as her lover. Indeed, one was more likely to find representations of hypersexualized black women in early minstrelsy as well as in the political cartoons of the era, such as Edward Clay’s notable “Life in Philadelphia” series, dating from the 1820s and 30s. Some of the most popular minstrel songs, “Lucy Long” and “Juliana Phebiana Constantina Brown” described the sexuality of black women in lurid and graphic detail.<sup>398</sup> As Deborah Gray White has shown, enslaved women were caught between the twin roles of “Jezebel” and “Mammy” in the white imagination. A young enslaved woman like the Dinah of the “Black Shakers’ Song” was understood to be “governed almost entirely by her libido.” Portraying black women as creatures of uncontrollable sexual desire only further served to excuse the sexual abuses perpetrated by white men.<sup>399</sup> To the white male fans of the Fellows’ Minstrels, a character like Dinah was a complete oxymoron.

To further complicate these representations of race, sexuality and gender, “wench” roles were played by white men in drag, who would coyly flirt with male performers in front of audiences largely composed of other working-class men. Though “Bloomerizical” bits mocked

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<sup>396</sup> David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 121.

<sup>397</sup> Enslaved men were themselves victims of sexualized violence under slavery, often forced to strip naked and endure public beatings or ordered to put their bodies on display in the slave market. See Pierre Orelus, *The Agony of Masculinity: Race, Gender, and Education in the Age of “New” Racism and Patriarchy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 67-70; Pamela Scully, “Masculinity, Citizenship, and the Production of Knowledge in the Postemancipation Cape Colony, 1834-1844,” in *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, ed Pamela Scully et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 37-55.

<sup>398</sup> Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 121.

<sup>399</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 27-30.

women's rights reformers wearing of pants, minstrel performers and their male audience had no such qualms about men appropriating female dress. In the gender politics of early minstrelsy, white male performers laid claim not only to their right to interpret blackness upon the stage, but also femaleness. Just as African-American performers were not given the right to embody blackness in early minstrelsy, neither were women, white or black, allowed to interpret their own femininity.



Figure 13. Currier & Ives Print of Shakers Dancing. Notice the two African-American brothers in the back row. Courtesy the American Antiquarian Society.

It is unclear if Eph Horn or other minstrels who performed “Black Shakers” as regular parts of their travelling routines would have been aware of Rebecca Jackson and her “little band” of black Shaker sisters living in Civil War-era Philadelphia or the free black believers in other rural Shaker communities in Canterbury, N.H., New Lebanon, N.Y., or Pleasant Hill, Kentucky.<sup>400</sup> He may have obtained his inspiration from a lithograph of New Lebanon Shakers dancing, which featured two black male Shakers. This lithograph [Figure 13], a Currier & Ives print, dates from the 1830s. It is arguably the most famous pictorial representation of Shaker dancing, and was reproduced throughout the nineteenth century in at least eighteen different known variations.<sup>401</sup>

Eph Horn and the rest of the Fellows’ Minstrels were not the first to transpose Shaker dances from the austerity of the meeting house to the greasepaint of the stage. The credit for that belongs to the “Shaker Sisters and Brothers” troupe. Here is where fact blends with fiction, and authenticity meets imitation. The Fellows’ Minstrels most likely did not derive inspiration from Rebecca Jackson and the actual free women of color who lived in her community of Philadelphia, but from a group of white Shaker impersonators. The “Shaker Sisters and Brothers” troupe consisted of three men and three women, all supposedly apostates from the Canterbury, N.H. Shaker settlement. Two of them, Dr. and Mrs. Tripure were married, the others consisted of two unmarried women and two unmarried men. Both J.M. Otis and Dr. Tripure were in fact bona fide Shaker apostates, but it is unclear if the other members of the troupe were as well. In the summer of 1846, the six gave a concert at Brinely Hall in Worcester, MA, promising “instructive amusements.” Though anti-Shaker activists had given lecture and lyceum tours since the beginning of the century and though the Shakers themselves had long welcomed “the world”

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<sup>400</sup> Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 201.

<sup>401</sup> Robert Emlen, “Shaker Dance Prints,” *Imprint* 17 (1992), 14-26.

to watch their Sabbath meetings, this concert marked the first time Shaker religion had been consciously packaged as commercial entertainment. The handbill capitalized on curiosity and fascination with the Shakers' strange spiritual practices, especially their dances and trances. Promotional materials promised "visions and conversations with Angels and the Departed Spirits," hymns sung in unknown spirit tongues, songs by Osceola and Pocahontas, "given by inspiration." The highlight of the bill was Miss Julia A. Willard, "the Miraculous Shaker Teetotum," raised in the sect since childhood. A young lady "whose grace and Beauty are of uncommon Fascination," Willard would "whirl round 1500 times," with perfect lighting-like precision. The "Shaker Sisters and Brothers" assured theirs was an entertainment suited to the whole family and that there was "nothing in their performance can offend refinement or the eye of modesty."<sup>402</sup>

The "Shaker Sisters and Brothers" were not for provincial venues like Worcester's Brinley Hall for long. Only two months after their debut in Worcester, they were playing the Apollo Rooms in New York City in September 1846. And within of their New York debut, showman P.T. Barnum snapped up the troupe for an extended engagement. Rechristened "The Shaking Quakers," the six Canterbury apostates performed their routine at Barnum's American Museum twice a day, matinees and evenings, through mid-December of 1846. Barnum advertised that in this performance "three beautiful ladies, and three gentlemen from the Society...who will sing, dance, whirl, and shake in the unique Shaker costume."<sup>403</sup> Later Barnum added a second element to their now familiar routine, in the form of a comic Shaker romance, "A Shaking Courtship," starring comedienne Fanny Wheeler. Like the futile wooing of Dinah in "The Black Shakers' Song," "A Shaking Courtship" played on the oxymoronic idea of love and

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<sup>402</sup> "Concert at Brinley Hall, Worcester, on Monday evening, July 27th, 1846," accessed December 7, 2012, American Broadsides and Ephemera Series.

<sup>403</sup> Odell, vol 5, 305; *Evening Post*, Oct. 7, 1846.

romance within the confines of a celibate Shaker village. As Fellows' Minstrel Hall was located at 444 Broadway in New York City, a little more than half a mile's walk away from Barnum's American Museum, there is a high likelihood that Horn and his company would have seen "The Shaking Quakers" perform at some time during their well-publicized engagement at the American Museum.<sup>404</sup> Interestingly, "Black Shakers" only came into being *after* the "official" "Shaking Quakers" had left the New York theater scene for good, perhaps as replacement for what had been a theatrical mainstay in the city.

The *Evening Post* claimed that the "Shaking Quakers" had been enjoyed by crowds of thousands, and notably, "their grotesque appearance and interesting performances... afford a great deal of rational amusement." "Groteseque" is perhaps the operative word here, as the "Shaking Quakers" shared the bill at Barnum's Museum with other such exotic creatures as an "ourang-outang," a dwarf, and the "twin Caffres" who had white bodies and "ebony faces."<sup>405</sup> Barnum was known for his collection of human oddities and grotesqueries; he made his career showcasing such specimens as Tom Thumb and "the Nondescript" to middle-class audiences. His exhibitions of humans of unusual race, size, and shape are well known—it was the birth of the freak show.<sup>406</sup> With the "Shaking Quakers" concert, Barnum capitalized on American audiences' desires to see sexual deviance and religious eccentricity. The Shaker celibate body—and the erratic dances and trances associated with it—were as unique as Santa Ana's sword and in good company with dwarves and exotic beasts, the latest in a long line of "living curiosities."

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<sup>404</sup>Odell, *History of the New York Stage* vol. 6, 75.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid, 305, 228-229.

<sup>406</sup>James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing With Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001), 121. Some of Barnum's most popular attractions were those that were explicitly liminal and blurred the lines between man and animal (The Nondescript), young and old, (Tom Thumb) individual and other (Siamese twins), female and male (bearded lady). Cook argues that middle-class audiences rendered their own shifting status more secure by defining themselves against these liminal figures. I do not see the Shaking Quakers as possessing the same degree of obvious liminality, except perhaps in the duality of sacred/profane they embodied as they performed religion for profit. I would still argue that they qualify as "living curiosities" even if they are not liminal.

Whether it was watching the “Shaking Quakers” dance or inspecting Barnum’s “Nondescript,” the middle-class claimed the labels of natural and normal for themselves by contrast.

Performances like the Shaking Quakers at Barnum’s museum were part of a larger nineteenth-century fascination with “artful deception.” Barnum specialized in providing his predominantly middle-class audience with both “hoaxes”(epitomized by such items as the Feejee Mermaid) and the spectacles which predominated in his circuses.<sup>407</sup> Yet, illusion and spectacle were not mutually exclusive and the Shaking Quakers performance provided both. The spectacle aspect is perhaps the most obvious—they sang and danced and Julia Willard spun round and round with astonishing velocity. And yet the act was also a kind of artful deception which operated on two distinct levels. First, the six-member troupe no longer claimed the status of genuine Shakers, if indeed the majority of them ever were. They themselves straddled the line between stage performers and sanctioned representatives of the religious sect. The second artful deception was a more expansive one, and also applied both to the minstrel dramas and spectatorship at *real* Shaker Sabbath meetings. Audiences, whether at the American Museum, Fellows’ Minstrel Hall, or in the meeting house at New Lebanon, flocked to see whether or not the Shakers’ ecstatic spirituality—and by extension, their celibacy—was real or, in nineteenth century parlance, “humbug.” Andie Tucher argues that antebellum audience’s fascination with humbug resided in its unmasking; “Those who managed to solve the puzzle...could rightly consider themselves select and special.”<sup>408</sup> The Shaking Quakers, like other Barnum acts, invited audiences to engage, scrutinize, and evaluate. And part of that engagement was a scrutiny of the Shakers’ celibacy, their perceived deviance from sexual and gender norms.

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<sup>407</sup> Cook, *The Arts of Deception* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 14-16; Cook, ed. *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2005), 4. Cook argues that “artful deception” was a kind of world-view at this time. At a time when middle-class Americans were extremely fearful about deception and inauthenticity in their midst, artful deceptions like Barnum’s hoaxes invited them to investigate and engage

<sup>408</sup>Tucher, *Froth and Scum*, 58-59.

The Shaking Quakers and Black Shakers were not simply spectacles or opportunities for middle-class audiences to engage in artful deception. They signaled the latest iteration of the anti-Shaker activism that had first emerged in the 1780s in response to Mother Ann's evangelical tour of New England and manifested itself in outbreaks of mob violence in Lebanon, OH and Enfield, NH in the 1810s. Though the Shakers continued to fend off lawsuits and prejudicial legislation in the mid to late nineteenth century, it would be incorrect to paint this as a total transition from activism to benign satire. Anti-Shaker violence and for-profit Shaker dancing remained interrelated. After the overwhelming success of the Shaking Quakers at Barnum's Museum, a second Shaker performing troupe appeared on the scene, giving a Christmas Eve performance in Washington, DC in 1846. This second troupe mostly toured in the south. It is mostly notable for the fact that lifelong anti-Shaker advocate, Mary Marshall Dyer, whose pamphleteering had inspired mob violence against the New Hampshire Shakers nearly thirty years before, shared the bill. Promotional materials prominently advertised a lecture by Dyer as well as traditional dances.<sup>409</sup>

Mary Marshall Dyer was not the sole connection between imitation Shaker dance performances and anti-Shaker politicking in the antebellum era. J.M Otis, one of the performers prominently featured on the broadsides advertising the Shaking Quaker performances, testified against the Shakers in a hearing before the New Hampshire legislature in 1848. Several damning yet familiar allegations were heard before the New Hampshire legislature, including charges of abuse against women and children, attempts to implicate the Shakers in a untimely death of child in their care, and tales of children born out of wedlock at the Shaker settlement. Otis, Dyer, and

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<sup>409</sup> *Daily National Intelligencer*, December 24, 1846; *Richmond Whig*, January 19, 1847. During June of 1847, one troupe of Shaking Quakers performed in Columbus, OH while the original troupe returned for an engagement at Barnum's Museum in New York City. Since they couldn't not have been in two places at once, the Ohio troupe must have been the imitator, possibly related to the second troupe Mary Marshall Dyer toured with in Washington and Virginia. "Novel Concert and Lecture," *Ohio Statesman*, June 28, 1847; *Commercial Advertiser*, June 29, 1847.



others had gathered close to 500 signatures to petition the legislature for this hearing, on the grounds that the New Hampshire Shakers were guilty of “many gross and inconsistent practices, subversive of the public good” requiring the legislature’s intervention.<sup>410</sup> The prosecutor opened his argument by demanding the legislature take action against the Shaker community and “stop these Shakers from creeping about, like the Serpent of old, destroying many a fair Eden of domestic happiness. There is no relation existing in society, of which the law is more jealous and watchful, than that which exists between husband and wife.”<sup>411</sup>

Erstwhile Shaker dancer J.M. Otis’ performance in the legislative hearing was colorful to the point of lurid. While others talked of abuse, financial swindles, and mysterious deaths, Otis offered up a sexual scandal of the most bizarre variety. Otis had attained the rank of Elder, but left the Shakers in 1845. Three years later, he claimed to reside in Portsmouth where he worked as a carpenter. After affirming some of the other allegations of abuse, Otis told the hearing of a strange incident involving a Shaker sister named Catherine Lyon. He related how one sister, Hester Ann Adams, “inspired by the prophet Elisha, or some other prophet or Angel” had claimed before the entire community “that Catherine Lyon had been committing some great sin; something that was abominable in the sight of God.” When Lyon denied the accusation, Hester Ann in her role as spirit medium said ‘The cleaver, the cleaver...Oh, what abomination! What corruption! What filth! Gratifying your lusts with a cleaver!’ The offending kitchen implement, which Otis testified measured “about three feet long; handle two feet” was brought before the accused Catherine Lyon where she was made to repent. Otis claimed this incident happened shortly before his departure in 1843. Catherine Lyon had been a Shaker since the age of ten, and she remained one still, regardless of the scene Otis had described. There is no way to confirm the

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<sup>410</sup> *Report of the examination of the Shakers of Canterbury and Enfield before the New-Hampshire Legislature November Session 1848* (Concord, NH: Ervin B. Tripp, 1849), 5.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

validity of Otis' testimony. But his words were certainly intended to shock, disgust, and render the Shakers and their spiritual and sexual practices obscene.<sup>412</sup> The defense introduced a handbill for the "Shaking Quakers" troupe into evidence to discredit his testimony. When questioned, Otis replied, "I have performed upon the stage, to represent Shakerism. I was hired to give representations of Shakerism." He denied, however, actively seeking a career as an entertainer and claimed his career as a professional Shaker impersonator was entirely accidental; "The man who hired us, wrote in the bill what he chose to , and we performed as well as we knew."<sup>413</sup> Otis' ambivalent response reflects the marginal status of actors and performers in antebellum America.<sup>414</sup>

For J.M Otis and Mary Marshall Dyer, there was no disconnect between the politics of the stage and the politics of the courtroom in their campaign against Shakerism. For both of them, any opportunity to keep Shakerism in the forefront of public attention, to win hearts and minds, and to earn a living while doing it, was undoubtedly worthwhile. Otis, like other Shaker apostates, would have left his community with little more than clothes, tools, and a few months' support as a parting gift for his many years as a Shaker. When a man or woman signed the Shaker covenant, he or she renounced rights to back wages upon leaving the community. In return, the believer received room and board while he or she lived and contributed to the sect. These financial claims on behalf of Otis and the other apostates constituted one part of what the petitioners were trying to get the New Hampshire legislature to address in 1848. Without a place to live or an established occupation, a steady income in return for a few Shaker dances might have seemed like a good proposition to Otis and the five other members of the troupe. Like the

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid, 23-24.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>414</sup> David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 86. Grimsted has argued that nineteenth century actors *could* be respected as individuals and accepted into polite society, but as a profession they were regarded with mistrust.

narratives of escaped slaves, convicts, and prisoners featured in Ann Fabian's *The Unvarnished Truth*, these performances were often the only thing Shaker apostates had to sell. And by revealing Shaker dances and singing to be works of artifice rather than gifts of the spirit, these apostates further distanced themselves from the strange sect they had once embraced wholeheartedly. Performing Shakerism for profit ironically made them *more* normal, not less.<sup>415</sup> Ultimately, Otis, Dyer and the other petitioners were only halfway successful in passing their anti-Shaker bill. Despite an impassioned defense of the Shakers by their counsel and hero of the Mexican-American War, General Franklin Pierce, the bill overwhelmingly passed the New Hampshire State Legislature by a 4 to 1 margin. Yet, it failed in the Senate, the senators recognizing that singling out a religious sect (especially one that paid a large amount of taxes to the state of New Hampshire) was a potential political minefield. Instead the Senate offered up a compromise to the petitioners, loosening the divorce statutes, to better aid women like Mary Marshall Dyer, who had been abandoned by Shaker spouses.<sup>416</sup>

Enthusiasm for performances of celibacy was not just limited to the Shakers. There was never a Catholic equivalent of the "Shaking Quakers" phenomenon, but representations of Catholic celibacy also appeared frequently on the antebellum stage. Most notably was the farce, *The Pet of the Petticoats, Or, the Convent*, an operetta performed with regularity on American stages. *Pet of the Petticoats* was a British import. Like those foreign texts rushed into translation following the burning of the Charlestown convent, *Pet of the Petticoats* made its American debut in 1835, the same year Maria Monk and Rebecca Reed rose to fame. It was performed in

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<sup>415</sup> Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth*, 4-7. Fabian argues that people sold captivity narratives (or in the case of the Shaking Quakers, a captivity "performance") "to demonstrate life among the 'aliens' had not altered them beyond recognition" to "rejoin the society of family and friends" or "gain compensation for property lost." The performances of J.M Otis and company fit all three criteria.

<sup>416</sup> *Daily National Intelligencer*, January 8, 1849; "The Shaker Case," *New Hampshire Patriot*, January 11, 1849; *New Hampshire Patriot*, January 18, 1849.

repertory consistently into the early twentieth century.<sup>417</sup> The operetta was essentially the “escaped nun” tale in theatrical form, albeit a much more sanitized version than Maria Monk’s story of whips, chains, and infanticide. The essential features were the same: set in a vaguely French locale, the protagonist Paul (the eponymous “pet” and a woman playing a breeches role) reunites two wives being held prisoner in the convent with their dashing soldier husbands. The play even featured a cruel nun named “Sister Vinaigre”; in a comedic twist on the vinegar-faced sister archetype, she is found to be having an affair with the convent-school’s dancing master. In the end, all of the couples are reunited, including Sister Vinaigre and her beau. Audiences could watch as heterosexual marriage triumphed over celibacy again and again in every performance. Paul defended his actions in his final monologue: “I have but restored husbands to their wives and wives to their husbands; and those who have been once united in Hymen’s bonds we are instructed never to put asunder.”<sup>418</sup> On this point that marriage was sacred and inviolate, both the comic actors and the petitioners to the New Hampshire legislature were in complete agreement.

Antebellum audiences thrilled to this comedic farce and the *New York Herald* called the 1848 production, “one of the most amusing pieces that has been performed in some time.”<sup>419</sup> *Pet of the Petticoats* was far from obscure; it was a staple of the nineteenth century theatrical scene and would have been familiar to theater-going audiences. Moreover, as a forerunner of the musical comedy genre, “escaped-nun” stories—and by extension, performances of celibacy—occupy a significant place in the history of the American theater.<sup>420</sup> There were other Catholic themed entertainments in the antebellum era, but none achieved the success or status of *Pet of*

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<sup>417</sup> “Amusements,” *Times-Picayune*, August 27, 1911; “March Stage History,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 25, 1912

<sup>418</sup> J.B. Buckstone, *The Pet of the Petticoats : an Opera in Three Acts* (New York : O.A. Roorbach, 1856), 44.

<sup>419</sup> “Theatrical and Musical,” *New York Herald*, September 10, 1848.

<sup>420</sup> Paul R. Laird, *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical* (Cambridge UP, 2002) 18.. *Pet of the Petticoats* debuted in the 1830s; however it did not have the distinction of having the appellation “musical comedy” appended to it until the 1860s. It remains one of the earliest pieces ever to have that term associated with it. Like a modern “musical,” *Pet of the Petticoats* featured dialogue along with songs and dancing.

*the Petticoats*.<sup>421</sup> The repeated success of the play and its frequent revival throughout the nineteenth century point to the ways in which antebellum audiences took pleasure in seeing marriage defeat celibacy. Like its close cousin, the “escaped nun” story, in which the victim-heroine is rescued by her beau from the horrors of the convent, the operetta reinscribed heterosexual norms back onto celibate characters. By having even the dreadful Sister Vinaigre succumb to the charms of romance, the play demonstrated that marriage was inevitable, natural, and inescapable, and celibacy, by contrast, a losing proposition.

### **Belles, Blues, and Sexual Others: Encounters with the “Fashionable Mob”**

Some antebellum Americans were not merely content with second-hand representations of sexual deviance that could be found in an “escaped nun” story or newspaper account of a Grahamite lecture. Not even the imitation “Shaking Quakers” or the convent antics of a farce like *Pet of the Petticoats* could compete with the genuine article. Having read *Awful Disclosures* or encounters with Shakers in travelogues by such luminaries as Harriet Martineau and Charles Dickens, Americans set forth to see these identities embodied. The burgeoning American tourist industry gave these middle-class white Protestant Americans the opportunity to have encounters with sexual others and to take the “artful deception” gaze they had honed in places like Barnum’s Museum on the road.

It no coincidence that Shaker villages and Catholic convents emerged as North America’s first tourist attractions. Though the “fashionable tour,” which included the Hudson Valley, Niagara Falls, and Montreal came into being in the 1820s with the publishing of a guidebook of

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<sup>421</sup> Arthur Herman Wilson, *A History of the Philadelphia Theater 1835-1855* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 59, 64, 596, 694. Other such amusements included *Sisters of Charity* which had two performances at Philadelphia’s Arch St. Theater in March of 1850, *The Jesuit’s Colony or the Indian’s Doom*, a “new national drama written by a gentleman of Philadelphia” in 1838, and *The Convent Ruins or Father and Sons*, a melodrama by Mrs. H. Siddons which ran for two performances in 1837. I have not seen them revived to the same extent as *Pet of the Petticoats*.

the same name by Gideon Davison, the convents of Montreal and the Shaker villages at Mount Lebanon and Watervliet appeared in the earliest known American travel guides. As early as 1812, George Temple's *The American Tourist's Pocket Companion* encouraged tourists to include a visit to Lebanon Springs and the nearby Shaker settlement while travelling between Albany and New York City.<sup>422</sup> This early attention is remarkable, showing Americans had an interest in viewing these others, even before the roads, canals, and steamboats created by the "transportation revolution" made the fashionable tour accessible to the middle-class men and women of metropolitan New York and Boston.<sup>423</sup> Because Shaker Villages at Mount Lebanon, Watervliet, NY and Canterbury, NH were located in close proximity to key transportation networks like the steamship lines of the Hudson or the Erie Canal, one wonders if this is "a chicken and the egg" type situation. Did these places turn into tourist attractions because of their proximity to other tourist attractions? Or were they places of interest and pilgrimage in their own right? That interest predates infrastructure points to the latter. However, location mattered as well. Being part of the "fashionable tour" and proximity to the urban homes of the "new middle class" transformed these places from mere tourist sites to tourist institutions over the course of the nineteenth century.

Scholars of tourism such as Dean MacCannell and John Urry have posited that the emergence of tourism as a behavior went hand in glove with the creation of both middle-class identity and modern concepts of work and leisure in the early 1800s in America and Western

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<sup>422</sup> Gideon Davison, *The Fashionable Tour: Or a Trip to the Springs, Niagara, Quebeck, and Boston in the Summer of 1821* (Saratoga Springs: G.M. Davison, 1822); George Temple, *The American Tourist's Pocket Companion, or, A Guide to the Springs and Trip to the Lakes* (New-York: D. Longworth, 1812), 72.

<sup>423</sup> George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York: Rheinhard, 1951), 132. Taylor was the first to coin the term "transportation revolution" to refer to the remarkable development of stagecoach routes, canal lines, and railroad networks that dramatically cheapened the movement of goods and persons in the United States between 1815 and 1860. On the rise of the "fashionable tour," and the influence of the market revolution on tourism, see Will Mackintosh, "Ticketed Through": The Commodification of Travel in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Early Republic* 32 (2012), 61-89.

Europe.<sup>424</sup> The “new middle-class” had the discretionary income to travel for pleasure as well as a newfound approach to bracketing work from leisure. At this moment, the concept of “holiday time” underwent a transformation from a religiously-based calendar of sacred versus profane time to one based on the duality of vacation and work.<sup>425</sup> During this time the ability to visit touristic sites such as Niagara Falls or the White Mountains, and to experience leisure culture at Saratoga Springs and other American “first resorts” became markers of middle-class identity.<sup>426</sup> Will Mackintosh has defined the period between 1815 and 1845 as a time when tourism became increasingly commodified as the middle class applied the principles of the market revolution to travel. The transportation revolution provided the canals, roads, and railways that allowed tourists to access these sites, but it was “the passenger’s consumeristic attitude towards travel that suggested the touristic possibility of the consumption of leisure, which laid the cultural foundation for the birth and growth of the domestic tourist industry.”<sup>427</sup> It was these middle-class tourists who made Shaker villages and Catholic convents “must-see” sites on the travel itineraries of the antebellum era.

Tourism not only produced and reproduced nineteenth-century middle-class identity through social encounters and cultural touchstones, it also allowed middle-class Americans to cultivate what John Urry has called “the tourist gaze.” The “tourist gaze” in any historical period “is constructed in relationship to its opposite, to non-tourist forms of social experience and consciousness. What makes a particular tourist gaze depends upon what it is contrasted with.”

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<sup>424</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Sage Publications, 2002)

<sup>425</sup>This duality in the organization of time and how it maps onto modernity is discussed in Nelson H.H. Graburn, “Tourism: The Sacred Journey” in *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, Valene Smith, ed., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989). 28.

<sup>426</sup> On middle-class leisure culture at mineral springs, see John Sterngass, *First Resorts: Pursuing Pleasure at Saratoga Springs, Newport, and Coney Island* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Thomas Chambers, *Drinking the Waters: Creating an American Leisure Class at Nineteenth-Century Mineral Springs* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002).

<sup>427</sup> Mackintosh, “Ticketed Through,” 67.

Theoretically, tourism is always predicated on deviance from one's routine, from normal experience—tourists seek out the strange, the exotic, and the grand in their touristic experiences.<sup>428</sup> This gaze, rooted in difference and opposites, can be seen in the numerous travel encounters between American tourists and Shakers, Catholics, and even Grahamites in the nineteenth century. Tourists to these sites of sexual deviance validated their own identity as “normal” in contrast with sexual practices they found strange. Visits to convents and Shaker villages constituted a type of “cultural tourism.” Jane Desmond defines cultural tourism as “leaving home (even if it just means going outside your own neighborhood) to encounter cultural practices different from whatever you conceive your own to be done by... people who are ‘different’ from you.”<sup>429</sup>

Though these nineteenth-century visitors doing the fashionable tour may not have crossed national, regional, or even state boundaries, they were consciously seeking out encounters with the different cultural practices of priests, nuns, Shakers and Grahamites. One can see cultural tourism at work in the various nineteenth-century travel guidebooks that advised travelers on how to visit Mount Lebanon or Montreal's Hotel Dieu. Pocket manuals like *The Tourist*, printed in 1830, recommended visitors to the resort at Lebanon Springs also visit the nearby Shaker settlement: “In the vicinity of the spring is the Shaker Village, consisting of a considerable number of plain wooden houses, painted and adorned in the most unostentatious manner. The peculiar religious services of this people excite the curiosity of strangers, and access to them is easily obtained.”<sup>430</sup> In the large fold-out map that accompanied the pocket-manual, the route to

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<sup>428</sup> Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 1-2.

<sup>429</sup> Desmond's study examines what she calls “people tourism,” the cultural tourism of American and Western European encounters across racial and ethnic boundaries in Hawaii and “animal tourism” of zoos, theme parks, and safaris. Desmond sees both types of tourism as being rooted in a kind of bodily difference between the tourist and the people and animals that are the objects of tourism. Jane C. Desmond, *Staging Tourism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), xv.

<sup>430</sup> *The Tourist or Pocket Manual for Travelers*, (New York: J & J Harper, 1830), 58-59.



Lebanon Springs from the steamboat landing at Hudson, twenty-five miles to the southwest, was clearly marked. The springs and the Shaker settlement were marketed as a package deal, and were such a popular destination, that stages ran between the steamboat landing and Lebanon Springs twice daily, specifically timed to accommodate travelers taking the steamboat up from New York City.<sup>431</sup> *The Fashionable Tour*, which helped to codify American nineteenth-century leisure travel in the antebellum era, similarly took pains to advertise both the Shaker villages of America and the convents and seminaries of Quebec as tourist attractions. In this 1821 guide, the three convents of Montreal along with the Jesuit and Ursuline institutions at Trois-Rivières are described in detail, down to the number of nuns living there and the color of their habits.<sup>432</sup>

Travel journals and guidebooks contained not only factual descriptions of convents and Shaker villages, they also proffered judgment on the religious, sexual, and gender deviance of the people that inhabited these spaces. In this case, published travel guides were more than just how to get from A to B, tips on where to stay, and the names of stagecoach companies; they were mini-ethnographies. Dean MacCannell in his pioneering study of tourism has argued that this criticism and distancing is also intrinsic to the touristic experience. Any attendee of “a cultural production” either accepts its “moral and aesthetic conclusion” or uses this experience to reject, “trash” or call it a “fraud.”<sup>433</sup> And yet, it is important to recognize that these touristic evaluations were as complex as the individuals who made them. So, the pseudonymous author of *Taghkonik*, Godfrey Greylock, could within the span of scarcely two pages denounce the Shakers’ “strange distortions of the social system” while praising their great circular stone barn at Hancock, MA as “the noblest looking agricultural structure I ever saw.” For Greylock (whose

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid, 25-26.

<sup>432</sup> Davison also described “the Shaker’s village” in his guide, and included details such as the color of the buildings and how many acres of cultivated land the Shakers had at the time. 128-134, 149.

<sup>433</sup> MacCannell, 31.

name was itself a touristic pun on the tallest mountain in Western Massachusetts) a trip to Mount Lebanon was nearly the equivalent of a trip to Europe, for Mount Lebanon was “the capital of the Shaker world—the rural Vatican which claims a more despotic sway over the minds of men than ever Roman Pontiff assumed.”<sup>434</sup> Greylock was far from the only traveler to hold this view; he gives a thorough description of the “fashionable mob” of antebellum urbanites come out to witness the Shaker’s Sabbath meeting:

portly citizens in the glossiest of broadcloths and most rubicund of faces, with massive watch seals and heavy gold headed canes, hirsute exquisites, redolent of Broadway and *eau de vie*; ladies, radiant in smiles and diamonds; men, eminent in politics, science and literature; belles, blues, and heiresses; in short they were a fashionable mob.<sup>435</sup>

Though Godfrey Greylock’s 1853 travelogue has faded into obscurity, cultural tourism to Shaker communities also made appearances in the most well-known travel literature of the antebellum era. Charles Dickens, Harriet Martineau, De Tocqueville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and even the actress Charlotte Cushman made sure to see the Shakers while doing the “fashionable tour.”<sup>436</sup> And all of them took the opportunity to observe and critique the sect and their sexual behaviors, and share their critiques with a national and often international audience. Harriet Martineau remarked upon her visit to Mount Lebanon in the 1830s, “I have never witnessed more visible absurdity than in the way of life of the Shakers.” Martineau found the Shakers’ fields, orchards, and gardens “flourishing,” and their homes spacious and well-kept. But she could not separate their sexual practices from their religiosity; “their thoughts are full of the one

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<sup>434</sup> Greylock, 118-121.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes vol. 2* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1842); Harriet Martineau, *Society in America vol 1*, (New York: Sunders and Otley, 1837); Alexis de Tocqueville, Harry Reeve, tr. *Democracy in America* (New York: G. Adalard, 1838); Nathaniel Hawthorne, Randall Steward, ed. *The American Notebooks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932); Charlotte Cushman, *Some Lines in Verse About Shakers* (New York: William Taylor & Co., 1846).

subject of celibacy... Their religious exercises are disgustingly full of it.”<sup>437</sup> Dickens, in his *American Notes*, also stopped by the Shakers at Lebanon on the final leg of his journey through the United States and Canada. The novelist’s visit coincided with the Shakers’ spiritual revival, the “Era of Manifestations.” During the “Era of Manifestations,” the Shakers closed their meetings to the public for the first time in their history out of fear that spectators would drive away their honored guests from the spirit world.<sup>438</sup> Even after having been denied the right to see the Shakers at their worship, Dickens nevertheless felt comfortable passing judgment on them all the same from the little he was able to glimpse from roadways of New Lebanon. Based on his impressions from a “print in my possession” (most likely the Currier & Ives print in Figure 13) Dickens described the Shaker meeting he was not allowed to attend. He concluded based on the visuals of the print and secondhand accounts from friends who had seen the Shakers at worship that it was “infinitely grotesque.” Dickens had a visceral dislike of the Shakers and what he thought they represented. To him they embodied all “which would strip life of its healthful graces, rob youth of its innocent pleasures, pluck from maturity and age their pleasant ornaments, and make existence but a narrow path towards the grave.”<sup>439</sup>

Dickens was annoyed to have been denied admittance to the Shakers’ Sabbath meeting. The tone of his account smacks of entitlement denied. To Dickens the Shakers were a touristic attraction, where one went after taking the stage from Albany but before embarking on a steamboat down the Hudson. For the Shakers to be forbidden to visitors was to him as absurd and inconvenient as for Niagara Falls ceasing its flow. For Dickens and other visitors, the Shakers were not simply a religious organization with a Sunday worship service, but specifically a touristic site. There is the unspoken assumption that like the “Shaking Quakers” at Barnum’s

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<sup>437</sup> Martineau, *Society in America*, 310-316.

<sup>438</sup> Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 216-17.

<sup>439</sup> Dickens, *American Notes*, 218-22.

museum, actual Shakers should also be able to present their religious exercises at regularly appointed times for any visitor who wished to see them.

Less famous travel diaries and letters reflect similar degrees of the voyeurism as expressed by Harriet Martineau and Charles Dickens. These travelers were renowned published authors, but the “tourist gaze” empowered them to critique the Shakers, priests, and nuns they encountered. Professional critics and ordinary tourists alike sought out these moments of “staged authenticity” in their touristic encounters, to gain access to what Erving Goffman has called “the back region” or “backstage.” In contrast to the “front region,” the official location where outsiders observe a performance, the back region reveals the performance to be an “illusion” or fabrication by showing the mechanics of the performance, similar to the actual backstage of a working theater where props and costumes are stored and actors drop the masks of their characters.<sup>440</sup> MacCannell identified six “stage sets” of touristic settings, a spectrum of Goffman’s front and back region dichotomy, and arranged them on a scale of least to most authentic. I would argue that encounters with Shaker impersonators and minstrel performers fall into stages two and three, touristic “front regions” that have been “decorated” or “organized” to appear like the more authentic back regions.” Tourism to convents, Shaker villages, and Graham houses bears closer resemblance to stages four and five, authentic “back regions” that are set up to be open to outsiders. Both Goffman and MacCannell’s model allow for a nuanced sliding

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<sup>440</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959), 144-45. Goffman explains that a “back region or backstage may be defined as a place relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted,” a place where “suppressed facts make an appearance.” Goffman, 112-13. It is these “suppressed facts” that make the “back region” more authentic and elusive for the tourist or audience.

Goffman used “backstage” and “back region” interchangeably in his work, to contrast with his notion of the “front region,” the bounded space where the performance takes place. Since Goffman was discussing performance, his playing with theatrical terms to discuss “everyday life” was intentional. He employs “back region” to apply his theatrical metaphor more expansively to understand the performative nature of households, hotels, restaurants, and other “everyday” stage sets. I will continue to use the term “back region” for the sake of clarity because it contains this more expansive definition and coincides with MacCannell’s reading of Goffman as it pertains to tourism.

scale of authenticity.<sup>441</sup> One can observe tourists pursuing access to the truest and most authentic “back region” experience, the final stage that MacCannell argues is “the social space that motivates touristic consciousness.”<sup>442</sup> It was never simply enough to view the Shaker village or Montreal’s Hotel Dieu from the outside, nineteenth-century tourists were forever trying to gain access to *real* Shakers dancing, *real* nuns at prayer. Like Dickens, they became frustrated when their scopophilic desires were denied.

One can see these same sentiments in the travel diary of Mira Sharpless Townsend. A Philadelphia Quaker, she journeyed with her husband from Philadelphia to Montreal via Niagara Falls in 1839. Townsend was disappointed at Montreal to find that though she was allowed to view the “grey nuns” at Montreal’s Recollet convent at prayer “their own private apartments we could not get to see ... At the Hotel Dieu (Maria Monks convent) we were particularly curious of course, but we were told that since her disclosures, they keep themselves much more secluded & the public are not admitted to even guess at the hidden mysteries of the place.” Townsend was yet again frustrated when denied entrance to the Ursuline Convent at Trois Rivières. Such secrecy only confirmed her worst suspicions about the lives of nuns and priests; “so much privacy is a bad design.” Even though Townsend had no more interaction with the Canadian Ursulines than Charles Dickens did with the Lebanon Shakers, she felt comfortable proclaiming them birds in cages, “chartered by sorrow... heart broken exiles.”<sup>443</sup> Maria Fay, who did the “fashionable tour” with her parents in the 1830s, similarly expressed her disappointment at being turned away from the nuns’ private quarters at the Hotel Dieu in Montreal. Fay’s disappointment is especially ironic, as she was the daughter of a wealthy Boston judge and herself a pupil at the Ursuline convent at Charlestown when it burned in 1834. Even though she was quite familiar

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<sup>441</sup> See MacCannell, *The Tourist* 92, 98-102.

<sup>442</sup> MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 102.

<sup>443</sup> Mira Sharpless Townsend Diary, 1839, Schlesinger Library.

with nuns and the “back room” experience of life at a convent school, she sought out the touristic sites of Catholicism with the same zeal as she did Niagara Falls or Auburn prison.<sup>444</sup> Mary Clark, a native of Concord, NH, was inspired to take a weekend jaunt to the Shaker village at Canterbury with a gentleman friend after reading Mary Marshall Dyer’s pamphlet. Clark’s 1823 visit only served to confirm what she already believed—that the Shakers were “deluded” and that Dyer’s narrative was the truth. Her visit inspired her to purchase a copy of Dyer’s book and send it to her cousin along with the letter describing her trip to Canterbury.<sup>445</sup>

To a much lesser extent, Graham boarding houses were also sites of tourism and voyeurism. Between 1832 and 1845, approximately sixteen boarding houses were founded in the northeastern and Midwestern United States, run entirely on the “Graham System.” A Graham House, was in a way, its own kind of closed community. Asenath Nicholson’s New York Graham house, in addition to banning spirits, tobacco, and all stimulating foods, also adhered to a strict regime of cold water baths and early rising, Graham’s additional prescriptions for controlling the libido and staving off solitary vice.<sup>446</sup> On a few occasions, journalists conducted a bit of investigative reporting on Graham houses. One Mr. Murdock, an actor, reported of his encounters at David Cambell’s Brattle Street Graham boardinghouse for the *New York Herald*. When Cambell said they’d be happy to have the actor and his family as long as they lived on the Graham principle, Murdock told him, “That fact, with your appearance to corroborate it, is amply sufficient to induce me to look further. I wish you a very good morning, sir, and an appetite for your dinner. You should have that sauce at least, for it seems you get no other.” In

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<sup>444</sup> Maria Fay Diary, 1835, Schlesinger Library.

<sup>445</sup> Mary Clark to Francis and Eliza Jackson, July 16, 1823, Francis Jackson Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>446</sup> Nicholson wrote a “how-to” instructional manual for setting up a boardinghouse (and housekeeping in general) on the Graham system. She was a frequent contributor to Grahamite journals and publications during the 1830s and 40s. Asenath Nicholson, *Nature’s Own Book* (New York: Wilbur & Whipple, 1835).

his rebuttal, Cambell offered that he was of average height and weight and that there was “nothing remarkable” about his appearance.<sup>447</sup> Boardinghouses in nineteenth century America were semi-public spaces that mixed the private sphere of domesticity with the commercial needs of the marketplace. Like convents and Shaker villages, they were places the public felt they had a “right” to enter.<sup>448</sup>

Tourists, from Charles Dickens with his lithograph of Shakers dancing to Mira Sharpless Townsend’s familiarity with Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures*, came to sites having already pre-experienced through print what they were about to experience in person. The “mechanical reproduction” that MacCannell cites as a criteria for touristic sites led Townsend to specifically seek out Maria Monk’s convent, in the same way others travelled to Niagara Falls or Mammoth Cave after encountering these through engravings or published travelogues.<sup>449</sup> What MacCannell describes is a cyclical and self-perpetuating process—tourists like Townsend and Dickens read about the Shakers about Lebanon or the Hotel Dieu at Montreal, leading them to visit these places. Finally, they in turn wrote about their experiences, reproducing their accounts for another generation of tourists, leading more to come and experience these sites, beginning the cycle again.<sup>450</sup> The end result is a product even further removed from authenticity. This cyclical process is how a cultural phenomenon like “The Black Shakers’ Song” came to be; a minstrel version of a Shaker performance concocted by P.T. Barnum and a group of Shaker apostates. The performance became farther removed from real Shaker worship every time a new minstrel troupe performed the routine.

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<sup>447</sup> “Murdock the Actor” reprinted in *The Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*, November 28, 1837.

<sup>448</sup> Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth Century America*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 58

<sup>449</sup> MacCannell has four criteria or processes for how a given locale becomes a touristic site: sacralization, enshrinement, mechanical and social reproduction. MacCannell has argued that anticipation of sites is part of the touristic experience. Shaker villages and Catholic convents meet these other criteria as well, 44-45.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*

A desire to access the authentic “back region” of a Catholic convent or to replicate the touristic encounters of others may not have been the sole motivation that drove tourists to these sites. Nineteenth-century tourists were complex and sometimes contradictory people. They were drawn to encounters with strange sexual and religious others, yet they also regarded convents and Shaker villages as places of industrial innovation. Contrary to what might motivate someone to visit a reconstructed “living museum” like Hancock Shaker Village or Pleasant Hill, Kentucky today, nineteenth-century tourism to such sites was often driven by the desire to see cutting-edge modernity, not nostalgia for an agrarian past. Many of the “fashionable mob” that came to Sabbath worship at Mount Lebanon were urban dwellers. In their eyes, the Shakers with their vacuum-operated herb distillery, steam-powered workshops, and giant kitchens that could feed upwards of hundreds were not markers of a quaint rural existence, but the very latest science and technology had to offer.<sup>451</sup> Large buildings like the Great Stone Dwelling at Enfield Shaker village, and the convents in Montreal were in of themselves impressive architectural wonders at a time when such structures were far from commonplace. In this regard, tourism to convents and Shaker villages resembled another brand of antebellum tourism; visits to prisons and asylums. Maria Fay and her family also visited Auburn prison on their tour through upstate New York and Canada.<sup>452</sup> John Sears in his history of nineteenth-century American tourism, *Sacred Places*, has argued that tourists flocked to see prisons and asylums not merely for their architectural uniqueness, but because of the radical social reorganizations they housed. For foreign visitors, especially, prisons like Auburn, Ossining (Sing Sing), and Pennsylvania’s Eastern State Penitentiary were to America what cathedrals were to Europe.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> The Shakers and their technological innovations graced the pages of *Scientific American and Harpers*. “The Shakers,” *Harper’s Magazine*, July 1857; “The Shaker Washing Machine,” *Scientific American*. March, 1860

<sup>452</sup> Maria Fay Diary.

<sup>453</sup> John Sears, *Sacred Places*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 87-89.



Shaker villages, Catholic convents, and to a certain extent Graham houses, also represented a radical social reorganization. Just as penitentiaries and asylums attempted to revolutionize society's treatment of the criminal and the insane, these spaces proposed a radically new sex-gender system, one in which sexual intercourse was either absent or severely limited. In touring these locations of sexual otherness, nineteenth century tourists participated in the systematic branding and exile Foucault deemed an integral part of the modern age. Tourism operated as yet another disciplinary mechanism in the nineteenth-century society.<sup>454</sup> Like prisons and madhouses, convents and Shaker villages were undoubtedly "institutions," physically bounded spaces set apart from the normal world. However, unlike the prison and the madhouse, inmates of Shaker, Catholic and Grahamite "inmates" were there by choice, not by the disciplinary power of the state.<sup>455</sup> The invisible line between tourist and actual nun, priest or Shaker, was a sexual one that kept the sexually normal separate from the sexually abnormal.

Yet, Shakers and Catholics were not passive victims to the tourist gaze. They were remarkably self-aware of their status as tourist attractions and the curiosity they incited. Records from the time reveal a careful negotiation on the part of these sexual others between how much they were willing to allow outsiders access to the types of "back room" experiences that were typically members-only. It was a delicate balance; appear too standoffish and they were accused of secrecy, too open and they risked desecrating private rituals by opening them up to the public gaze. For example, it was a remarkable bit of public relations that inspired Bishop Fenwick of

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<sup>454</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 199. Foucault argues that the nineteenth century saw the rise of bifurcations and dichotomies in the service of creating a perfect society whereby symbolic lepers (the mad, the abnormal, the criminal) were excluded from society in "disciplinary partitioning." Authority comes from the ability to enforce the binary brand of – of abnormal/normal, mad/sane, dangerous/harmless. I would argue that there is a similar type of disciplinary partitioning at work in this type of tourism, even if it is not directly related to state power.

<sup>455</sup> It was actually fairly commonplace to refer to nuns and Shakers as "inmates" of their respective institutions. Such references are found even in Catholic newspaper sources. The word may have had a more neutral connotation than it does today, when it is usually associated with prisoners. See "Disgraceful Outrage," *The Catholic Herald*, August 21, 1834.

Boston to allow Protestant spectators to attend the veiling ceremony when the Ursuline convent first opened in Boston. Bishop Fenwick and Superior Mary Edmond St. George Moffat invited “a number of respectable Protestant ladies” to attend the veiling ceremony of Mary Barber in 1828 as a political move to cultivate interest in the school and curry the goodwill of the community. However, the Protestants in attendance were disappointed that though they were allowed to witness the prayers and incense of the ritual, its most sensational aspect—the cutting of the new nun’s hair—took place behind closed doors.<sup>456</sup>

This kind of shrewd negotiation can also be seen in the experiences of travelers Maria Fay and Mira Sharpless Townsend in their travels to the Canadian convents. The nuns allowed Townsend and her companions to see their patients in the hospital and the orphaned children in their care at Montreal’s Hotel Dieu. They encouraged the travelers to buy trinkets made by the nuns to help support their good works, “but nothing very pretty & everything very dear,” Townsend complained. But, Townsend still found what she had read about in the pages of Maria Monk’s scandalous tale more plausible than what she saw with her own eyes. She had a hard time believing that the sacrament of confession was not often sealed with a kiss when the penitent was a young woman. And as far as the nuns’ care for the sick and orphaned went, “charity covers a multitude of sins.”<sup>457</sup> Young Maria Fay, herself a former pupil at the Ursuline convent school in Boston, expressed a more favorable opinion of the Hotel Dieu. Though she could not see the nuns’ private apartments, Fay remarked of the nursing sisters, “I almost think their dress becoming.” It was the sort of offhand romantic observation that struck fear into the heart of every staunch anti-Catholic who worried about young impressionable Protestant women

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<sup>456</sup> *Fire and Roses*, 57-60. Diary of Bishop Benedict Fenwick, August 15, 1828, Archdiocese of Boston archives.

<sup>457</sup> Mira Sharpless Townsend Diary.

like Fay being “seduced” into convents.<sup>458</sup> It is significant that Fay desired only the superficial outward trappings of the life of nun—she desired their dress, not their life of celibacy and service. Despite her long-standing familiarity with the Ursuline sisters who tutored her as a student at Mount Benedict, in the end Fay evaluated them only on whether or not their dress was “becoming.”

Shakers were at times willing participants in their own commodification. It was a very difficult line to walk, as they were torn between the prospect of gaining new converts through public exposure and their own desire to keep themselves apart from “the world.” When the Shakers made the conscious decision not to engage in missionary activity after the founding of the western societies in the first decades of the nineteenth century, they became more dependent than ever on recruiting new converts through open worship services at their existing villages. For every twenty or thirty spectators that came merely to gawk at the Shakers’ worship, there was always the possibility that one or two would open their hearts and minds to the Shaker gospel. One such person was young Octavia Fitton who stopped at one of the Maine Shaker communities while en route to visit her grandfather in New Hampshire. Fitton extended her visit longer than her father thought prudent. He wrote an angry letter to the Shaker Elders telling them young Octavia was there without his permission and had better be on her way. Should she disobey him, he promised to be “troublesome” to both Octavia and the Shakers.<sup>459</sup>

But the gawking spectators that clogged up the drive at Mount Lebanon with their coaches far outnumbered potential future believers like Octavia Fitton. In 1849, the Shakers at Watervliet attempted to set some boundaries on their interactions with visitors. “In consequence of the frequent intrusions and annoyances from many of the multitude who visit this Society for

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<sup>458</sup> Maria Fay Diary.

<sup>459</sup> N Fitton to Isaac Brackett, Oct 16 1827, MHS.

recreation, we are constrained by a sense of duty and propriety to give the following NOTICE: Hereafter, we shall not admit people to walk around and among our buildings, and in our gardens as frequently as we have done.” The Watervliet Shakers found that interest in their community, located as it was near the junction of the Hudson River and the Erie Canal was more than they could reasonably handle without interrupting the rhythm of their daily routine. “We consider it unreasonable to wait upon every coach load, or company who resort here and ask to be admitted to the Church...we shall sometimes have more than twenty such applications from different companies in one day. This is a heavier tax on our time and duties, than we feel able, or consider reasonable to meet.” The second half of the Shakers’ “Notice” was targeted specifically at those spectators who came to attend Sunday worship. Reminding visitors that they had built their new meetinghouse entirely of their own expense without one penny of outside or public assistance, they were happy to admit the public to worship with them—“all the recompense we ask or desire...is good behavior.” The Shakers’ defined “good behavior” as the public taking their seats on time, using the spitting boxes provided instead of spitting on the floor, wiping their feet before entering the meetinghouse and finally, “To show no approbation with anything like mockery, or uncivil department.”<sup>460</sup> They were hardly unreasonable requests to make of visitors.

Shakers also required their overnight guests to abide by the requirements of Shakerism while within the confines of their village: if a married couple stayed the night, husbands and wives were required to sleep separately. As one Shaker told a Boston doctor visiting Hancock, “It’ll do ‘em good to sleep separate now & then, they ought to have a little cross once in awhile.” But some visitors felt that the Shakers should accommodate them, rather than the other way around. The Hancock Shakers reported, “A man came here one time to stop, & they told him what the regulation was, ‘what I can’t sleep with my wife?’ & he called for his carriage right

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<sup>460</sup> “Notice to Visitors,” Watervliet Shaker Community, 1849, ASC..

off.”<sup>461</sup> The Shakers said that if on the steamboat men and women could endure having separate cabins, why should it be any more onerous for a night’s stay in their village?

In his study of tourism as a social phenomenon, the last stage MacCannell describes is “social reproduction” where “groups, cities, and regions begin to name themselves after famous attractions.” Both the “Shaking Quakers” troupe and the “Black Shakers” minstrel routine can be considered examples of this phase of “social reproduction” of Shaker tourism.<sup>462</sup> They were not authentic performances of Shakerism by real Shakers, but audiences sought out these encounters all the same. Viewing these artificial performances might have even motivated a few to seek out that truer back region experience by joining the “fashionable mob” at Mount Lebanon. Artful deception and the “tourist gaze” were linked, both part of the critiquing investigative process that helped these middle-class tourists and spectators differentiate themselves from those they found abnormal. Citizens of the middle-class sought out these encounters with sexual others to discover for themselves whether a Shaker or a nun’s sexual restraint was real or just “humbug.” And being able to judge celibacy as performed by the Shakers at Mount Lebanon or the nuns at Montreal gave them all the more power to reject it and walk away from their travels secure in the supremacy of married heterosexuality. On the surface, there was no danger of them being swayed into staying behind, “going native” at the Shaker Village or the Hotel Dieu because they were protected by the veneer of the touristic encounters. The point of tourism is that it is a temporary departure from “normal” ordinary life. If one were to stay, he or she would no longer be a tourist, but would become a convert instead. One can see this anxiety in the experience of Olivia Fitton, whose father thought she had overstayed what was supposed to be only a temporary sojourn to the Shakers’ settlement.

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<sup>461</sup> “Lucius Sargent Diary,” MeHs..

<sup>462</sup> MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 45.

The development of tourism and performance surrounding these groups was not apolitical, but merely a subtler, newer iteration of the politics of violence that surrounded the mob attacks earlier in the century. Performance as a political tool could be quite effective, if the near-passage of a anti-Shaker bill in the New Hampshire legislature in 1849 is any indication. By the 1850s, the violent mobs of the 1810s and 30s that terrorized Shaker villages, Catholic convents and Grahamite lectures had transformed themselves into fashionable ones. Yet the same suspicion, abhorrence, and odd fascination with sexual restraint endured.

## Conclusion

The decision to close this study of sexual restraint in 1860, the beginning of the American Civil War, is not an arbitrary one. Controversy around the sexual practices of Shakers, Catholic priests and nuns, and Grahamite reformers arose out of the particular social, cultural, economic conditions of the first half of the nineteenth century. Revolutions in print and publishing, in consumer goods and services, and in travel and transportation created a context that allowed these groups to emerge as sexual minorities. These innovations also provided advocates of sexual restraint mediums to engage with their critics and promote their sexual philosophies to a curious and often hostile majority. In the specific landscape of the early American republic and antebellum era, discourses converged on sexual restraint. The post-bellum years were instead marked by divergence.

The Shakers experienced a sharp decline during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From a membership of 6,000 at their peak in the 1850s, the number of Shakers dwindled to 855 by 1900. Of those remaining at the turn of the twentieth century, almost a third were over the age of sixty. Four Shaker villages—West Union, Indiana; North Union, Ohio; Sodus Bay, New York; and Tyringham, Massachusetts—closed in the second half of the nineteenth century. By 1925, only six Shaker settlements remained in the Northeast.<sup>463</sup> The sect which had always granted spiritual authority to women lost male members in droves after the Civil War. While this situation allowed for more women to take positions of leadership in the society, it also made the Shakers reliant on hired male laborers to work their farms, as they were

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<sup>463</sup> On the declining membership in the society, see Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 339, 114-15.

still a predominantly agricultural society. The very market changes that had allowed the Shakers to sell their garden seeds and medicines throughout the United States in the earlier half of the century soon outpaced the Shakers' ability to produce and they became increasingly dependent on the "world" even for food and clothing.<sup>464</sup> Only one Shaker settlement, the village at Sabbathday Lake, Maine, is currently active. There are at present only three covenanted Shakers left in the world. Even in the face of what might be an inevitable extinction, the Shakers have refused to compromise their beliefs on celibacy. Their website defiantly states that "Shakerism is not, as many would claim, an anachronism; nor can it be dismissed as the final sad flowering of nineteenth-century liberal utopian fervor."<sup>465</sup> The membership roles are still open for any who wish to join. Brother Arnold Hadd remains optimistic about gaining new converts: "God did it once before, and I don't know why God can't do it again."<sup>466</sup>

Contrary to the decline of the Shakers, American Catholics experienced a period of dramatic expansion after the Civil War. A surge in immigration from Catholic nations in Europe meant that Catholics were much less of a minority than they were at the beginning of the century, demographically speaking. The rapid increase in the American Catholic population created a greater need for priests and sisters to serve these communities, as well as a larger pool from which to recruit new members. The number of Catholic women religious in America grew exponentially from roughly 1,300 sisters spread across nineteen congregations in 1850 to more than 40,000 sisters in forty-five congregations in 1900. In less than a century, Catholic sisters

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid, 353.

<sup>465</sup> "About the Community," Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village, accessed April 18, 2013, <http://www.shaker.lib.me.us/about.html>.

<sup>466</sup> "The Shakers," Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, published September 17, 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/september-17-2010/the-shakers/7026/>.



founded over 4,400 schools and academies, 645 orphanages, and 500 hospitals.<sup>467</sup> American Catholics might not have been welcomed in the corridors of power, but the late nineteenth century was not a time of convent burnings, either. Catholic clergy would experience their own decline in numbers following the reforms of Vatican II and the sexual revolution of the late twentieth century. The number of priests in the United States has decreased by 34 percent since 1965. The decline in the number of women choosing a religious vocation is even starker. There were 179,954 nuns and sisters in 1965. Only 54,018 remain today, a drop in membership of roughly 70 percent.<sup>468</sup>

The number of people calling themselves “Grahamites” shrank after Sylvester Graham died in 1851. Though Graham himself was gone, his ideas linking health to diet and sexuality lived on, most of all in fellow health reformer John Harvey Kellogg. Kellogg, who had been a sickly child, absorbed Graham’s ideas about vegetarian diet at a young age. As a medical student doing his residency at New York’s Bellvue hospital, Kellogg ate no more than an apple and seven “Graham crackers” for breakfast every day. When he was appointed superintendent of the Battle Creek Sanitarium in 1876, Kellogg imposed a regimen inspired by the Graham system for all his patients. Kellogg was also known to speak out against alcohol and sexual “self-abuse” as leading causes of disease, preaching Graham’s ideas into the late nineteenth century.<sup>469</sup>

Shakers, Catholic men and women religious, and Grahamites had remarkably different trajectories during the latter half of the nineteenth century, but the questions they raised were of

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<sup>467</sup> Statistics on the growth of the American Catholic Church in the nineteenth century are taken from Patricia Wittberg, *The Rise and Decline of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 39.

<sup>468</sup> Statistics on the number of priests and sisters in the United States obtained from “Frequently Requested Church Statistics,” Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, accessed April 18, 2013, <http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/requestedchurchstats.html>.

<sup>469</sup> Richard W. Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.: Pioneering Health Reformer* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2006), 32-35, 46; Ruth C. Engs, *Clean Living Movements: American Cycles of Health Reform* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000), 114-15.

real and lasting importance. They challenged the assumed naturalness of sexual activity and the centrality of marriage to the human experience. In doing so they radically posited that the positive value accorded to sex within marriage was a matter of perspective. Long before the idea of sexuality being a socially-constructed phenomenon was discussed in academic and activist circles, advocates of sexual restraint saw prevailing sexual norms as a matter of custom, rather than an inevitable fate. Moreover, they successfully navigated the print, consumer, and performance cultures of their time as active participants, not passive victims.

How much sex should a person have? With whom? What sexual activities are “normal?” These were the questions being asked during the first eighty years of the history of the United States. We are still asking them today. A century and a half later, American society has its own assumptions about the “naturalness” of sex, which vary according to religious identity, gender, class, race, and ethnicity among other factors. But similarly to our nineteenth-century forbearers, many would probably consider a life without sex to be unnatural or oppressive. Celibacy still remains a suspect sexual behavior. In the wake of recent sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, concerns have been raised about celibacy’s place in the modern priesthood. Some critics have argued that celibacy encourages sexual abuse. In a recent opinion piece for the *New York Times*, columnist Frank Bruni wrote that “the pledge of celibacy that the church requires of its servants is an often cruel and corrosive thing. It runs counter to human nature. It asks too much.”<sup>470</sup> The villains in this modern story are the same, but the victims have changed—innocent children instead of impressionable young women. In all of these debates about the place of celibacy for the Catholic priesthood, no one ever questions whether or not celibacy is good for Catholic sisters. Assumed ideas about women’s “passionlessness” and the male libido which turns monstrous when repressed have persisted into the twenty-first century.

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<sup>470</sup> Frank Bruni, “The Wages of Celibacy,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2013.

Challenges to the assumed naturalness of sexual activity also echo in the voice of the growing asexuality movement. Asexuals, according to David Jay, founder of AVEN, the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network, are people who do not experience sexual attraction. Jay and other asexuals work very hard to differentiate themselves from celibates. Like nineteenth-century Shakers and Catholics, they believe that celibacy is a choice, whereas their asexuality is a biologically-determined identity. Asexuals often speak of their sexual identity and struggles in a way that appropriates language from the gay and lesbian civil rights' movement. They speak of the need to "come out" as asexuals and to resist those who would dismiss their asexuality as "just a phase" or pathologize them as mentally ill.<sup>471</sup> Members of AVEN see radical potential in having a culture-wide conversation on sexuality that includes asexuality. David Jay and other asexuals find the current sexual dialogue "inauthentic," one "that fetishizes and celebrates sexuality, and equates it with the sum of our value and relationships."<sup>472</sup>

Determining what sexual practices were "natural" and "normal" was as much of an issue in 1830 as it is today in 2013. In the context of these recent debates, a history of sexuality that includes sexual abstinence appears very relevant. Studying sexual restraint gives us a broader picture of the sexual landscape of early America as well as the sexual landscape of our own present moment.

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<sup>471</sup> For general information on the Asexuality movement and AVEN see Rachel Hills, "Life Without Sex: The Third Phase of the Asexuality Movement," *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2012 and AVEN's website, [www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org). Currently, AVEN in cooperation with researchers from the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University is lobbying for the removal of "hypoactive sexual desire disorder" as a condition in the revised DSM-V. Asexual activists believe that their identity is being pathologized as an illness, similar to the way homosexuality was treated by the psychiatric community prior to 1974. See Nicole Prause, Cynthia A. Graham, "Asexuality: Classification and Categorization," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 36 (2007), 341-356; Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, "New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice," *Feminist Studies* 36 (2010), 650-64.

<sup>472</sup> David Jay, quoted in Hills, "Life Without Sex."

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