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Turning from Conversion

Shakers, Anti-Shakers, and the Battle for Public Opinion

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Abstract

The Shakers, a small ecstatic religious group, found themselves at the center of controversy in the early nineteenth century when a number of apostates published accounts accusing the sect of all variety of malfeasance. This forced the Shakers to publish responses, and the resultant public battle had a number of interesting features. In this article I examine how these attacks mask a general national anxiety regarding religious identity. Anti-Shakers sought to vilify the group by employing captivity and conversion narratives to a nineteenth century audience weaned on such tales. However by manipulating established tropes, these anti-Shakers over-played their hand, and the Shakers proved remarkably adept at reversing the terms of the argument.

Keywords: Shakers, apostasy, rhetoric, captivity, utopias

Introduction

In 1817 an Ohio newspaper called *The Western Star* apologized to its readers for having “so long remained inattentive observers of the noxious conduct” of the Union Village Shakers. Based on “testimony” the reporters had recently come to possess, they felt it their duty to inform their readers that “wealth and power is the object at which this society aim” and, more ominously, “. . . they are holding our young, innocent, *free born* citizens in bondage – and instilling the most abominable principles into every mind that can be duped or deluded by their vile sophistry” (Van Vleet: 23). Though this particular attack was motivated by a real incident, the Shakers saw it as part of a larger campaign, one they

attributed to the popularity of two anti-Shaker pamphleteers, Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer. Both writers had published accounts exposing the Shakers as dangerous, seductive “Imposters,” capable of “mesmerizing” potential converts, holding members against their will, kidnapping children and lying about their faith. Both deeply affected their readers, reinvigorating the debates about Shakerism that had dogged the religious sect since its founding forty years earlier. This point in the early nineteenth century can be seen as a sort of anti-Shaker “moment” when rhetorical attacks on the sect spilled over into the mainstream.

From the earliest point, the Shakers understood the power of public opinion. The cases of Chapman and Dyer and the ensuing hostility towards Shakerism prompted the anonymous work by the Society, *The Other Side of the Question* (1819). It accused their detractors of deliberately misrepresenting the Shakers. Chapman and Dyer, they claimed, were motivated by their respective husbands’ decision to abandon them and join Shaker communities, while the *Western Star’s* editor, Abram Van Vleet was a “propagator of impious charges and romantic tastes.” The tropes, themes and tone of eighteenth and early nineteenth century anti-Shaker tracts established specific ways of managing Shaker subjects, which later writers consistently addressed and adopted. They also initiated, with their condemnation of Shakers, a stance which (unintentionally) left the door open for the celebration that Shakers later experienced.¹

This article traces the themes of this anti-Shaker rhetoric, namely, the importation of captivity and conversion narratives into the larger frame of their tales. The multivocality introduced by these genres simultaneously helped and hindered their ultimate goal of disparaging the Shakers and advancing personal agendas. Aspects of captivity and conversion tapped into the language of sentiment, playing upon the readership’s affective empathy with the experiences of the captive or the lost soul.² These extra-textual narratives had a fascinating effect on the overall creation of an anti-Shaker rhetoric, since they allowed authors to explain their connection with Shakerism and provided the audience with formulaic patterns for understanding the subject’s stance outside of mainstream American culture. Occasionally, the insertion of these genres escaped the control of the authors. The gothicism inherent in abduction and coerced conversion infected the sentimental ideology

¹ Vicious criticism had inspired the Shakers to respond before, defending their beliefs and practices, but this time they directly took on their “enemies.” Most likely authored by a Shaker who frequently wrote for the community, Richard McNemar, it answered, in three parts, the sensational cases of ex-Shaker Mary Dyer, a scorned wife of a Shaker, Eunice Chapman, apostate, and *Western Star* editor, Abram Van Vleet.

² Andrew Burstein offers a clear sketch of “sensibility;” it “had arisen in the seventeenth-century French novel as a combination of amour, amitie, and the capacity to feel pain. When medical research yielded more precise terminology, men with philosophic minds in eighteenth-century France and England combined their respect for science with social responsibility, as they came to identify the progress of civilization with decency, generosity, and optimism. The meaning of sensibility expanded accordingly, linking the physiology of the nervous system with feminine delicacy and masculine self-control, with matters of private conscience and public virtue. To be endowed with sensibility in its most attractive . . . form meant to have an enlarged capacity to perform benevolent deeds, to show affection readily, to shed tears and empathize strongly with human suffering” (7).

of their texts, distorting their claims of victimization by fracturing the sensibility the texts rely upon.³

Anti-Shaker writers are not unknown to scholars of religion and American Studies. The specifics of the work of Chapman and Dyer has been intelligently handled elsewhere, especially by Jean Humez, who emphasizes the gendered nature of their writings. Mary Dyer's child custody battle, and her fifty-year anti-Shaker campaign that ensued, are richly examined in the work of Elizabeth De Wolfe, while a recent book of popular history by Ilyon Woo regards the divorce trial of Eunice Chapman as a turning point for gender and the law of the early Republic. None of these authors can resist exploring the novelty of a female-led sect, especially one that presents a "female Christ" and suggests a radical alternative to the era's cult of domesticity. Although I am in agreement with Humez and De Wolfe about the important role played by gender in the language of captivity, I argue here from a slightly different perspective, that is, the degree to which these relied on rhetoric initiated by a man – Valentine Rathbun – a fact which at the very least complicates some of the gender-centered argument (Stephen Stein has made this point about Rathbun). Moreover, I demonstrate how the other imported genre, the use of the conversion narrative in a Shaker context, also has its origins in Rathbun's writing. An appreciation of Rathbun, I argue, is essential foreground. I accept the challenge put forth recently by Adam Jortner, who suggests that our focus on gender has obscured the way Shakers themselves sought legitimacy. Forced to fight their battles in the public sphere, the Shakers developed sophisticated means of appealing to public opinion. As Jortner argues, they did not so much threaten domesticity as privilege and adapt it, and when forced to defend themselves from anti-Shaker attack, they argued that they were patriots, firmly within the American mainstream.⁴ It is the construction of these arguments I find most interesting; how both the Shakers and anti-Shakers understood their audience. By concentrating on argument, I seek to explain precisely that adaptability.

Shakers and Anti-Shakers

The Shakers entered the American scene at the dawn of the Revolution, and flourished in the early years of the Republic. These were, we sometimes forget, times of intense religious crisis. The churches, enlisted in the struggle for independence, now had the tricky task of containing the ideas of "rebellion," "dissent," "doubt," and "anarchy" that had served them well during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Now, with the war over and the hard work of constructing a new order underway, the churches began to change their attitude toward "authority." For some patriots, like Thomas Paine, the

³ This reading is suggested by Julia Stern's analysis of novels of the Republic. Her use of Eve Sedgwick's interpretation of the Gothic as "literal, figurative or structural . . . live burial" and the idea of the "unspeakable" functions equally well for the anti-Shaker writers.

⁴ Jortner also faults De Wolfe's account of the Dyer case for emphasizing "performance over argument," and, as a result "assures that social roles and gender norms are continually being affirmed" (196). Elizabeth De Wolfe's book is more idiosyncratic than her dissertation, and Jortner takes issue with her assessment of Dyer, saying she "suggests that Dyer was in fact something of a thwarted religious leader, trying to alter Shaker teaching on celibacy." Neither Dyer nor the Shakers, however, presented themselves in this context in their writings" (see Elizabeth De Wolfe 2002: 32–37 and Jortner: 200).

whole notion of religious authority, indeed the very idea of “divine kingship,” was now suspect. Susan Juster sees the strategies of these churches as reasonably straightforward – moving from a spiritual focus toward more structured political engagement – but for Amanda Porterfield the compromises were more complex.⁵ Porterfield deftly argues that early 1800s revivalists (particularly Baptists, but also Congregationalists, Anglicans, and Methodists) worked out intricate bargains with the new politics, subtly replacing the monarchic paternalism with a sort of spiritual one. The chaos unleashed by the Revolution made the spiritual securities of divine authority more comfortable.

The Shakers had arrived at a promising moment. The New Light revivals of the late 1770s and early 1780s had stirred up religious fervor, and the group had benefitted from the accompanying openness to apocalyptic predictions and the possibility of perfectionism. As Porterfield puts it, this was a time and place of religious voluntarism, where people joined religious movements “as they would political parties” – that is, those which appealed to their interests and worldview (76). It was also a time of openness to women in church life. Juster, in particular, emphasizes this, arguing that women’s active participation (especially common among Baptists) was in full bloom, and did not fade until the early 1800s (10). The Shakers, however, went well beyond the norm, since they not only put forth the possibility that women might be preachers, but eventually claimed that their founder, Ann Lee, was the “female vessel” of Christ. According to Shaker hagiography, Lee received a vision telling her to leave for America and establish a millennial kingdom. At the outbreak of the Revolution, the group had purchased and moved to a small plot of land near Albany, New York, where, piloted by Lee, they began to farm their land and form a living religious community – soon attracting the attention of individuals from the surrounding towns.

Observers were attracted by their espousal of an immediate relationship with God and the spirit world and their charismatic worship. Songs, shaking, running, and other physical actions demonstrated the presence of the divine within the group. Conversion to Shakerism entailed turning from existing as a child of Adam to a child of God. They demanded confession of sins and a commitment to a form of primitive Christianity. Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, or “Believers,” renounced private property and relinquished marriages. Family had to be set aside, replaced by the reconfigured Shaker family. Their unique feature, of course, was that Shaker converts lived celibate lives. Lee picked up on traditional metaphors of spiritual union, while advocating radical familial reconstitution. She explained, “You must forsake the marriage of the flesh or you cannot be married to the lamb” (Brewer: 5).

As Amanda Porterfield argues, the chaos and democratic anarchy that characterized the Revolutionary era soon gave way, in the decades after, to a more orderly theology. Although Porterfield notes that women played a critical role in the “supernatural revivalism” of the early 1800s, these women no longer posed a serious challenge to the political order. Put otherwise, the codification (and subsequent disappointments) of democratic politics sent believers searching for transcendence elsewhere – but also encouraged the paternalism of religious authority. Or, as J. Spencer Fluhman put it, in

⁵ Susan Juster puts this in terms of a movement from “feminine to masculine” engagement (10).

most societies religion was seen as dangerous when it “coupled with power,” whereas in early America, it appeared dangerous when it was “unmoored” (21).

For the Shakers, however, trouble had come even earlier. In 1781, only seven years after Ann Lee led her tiny band of ecstatic followers from England to New York, one of them, Valentine Rathbun, left the movement and published his cautionary *An Account of the Matter, Form, and Manner of a New and Strange Religion*. This work proved fundamental in the establishment of apostate narratives, a genre later influenced by the non-Shaker Eunice Chapman whose *An Account of the Conduct of the People Called Shakers* suggests the evolving paradigm. Her motivation stemmed from her husband’s conversion to Shakerism and her subsequent wish to regain her children. She, in turn, influenced Mary Dyer who had long fought a similar custody battle. The most carefully crafted and representative of Mary Dyer’s five anti-Shaker works, the 1822 *A Portraiture of Shakerism, Exhibiting a General View Of Their Character and Conduct*, was inspired primarily by her desire to regain custody of her children from the Shakers.⁶

These events highlight one of this story’s central ironies – the Shakers, a messianic sect who rejected marriage, and, indeed, shunned all sexual contact, were from the beginning tied into the highly sexualized language of divorce. Celibacy was their most obvious point of weakness, and it was exploited by many anti-Shaker writers. It was presented as unnatural and, simultaneously, a cover for salacity. Several apostates claimed that their rejection of sex was an attempt to sever all familial bonds. Daniel Rathbun likens Mother Ann to Jezebel the seducer, and other accounts claim that Shaker celibacy hid various perversions (indicated by alleged “epidemic” rates of venereal disease within the villages) (see Wenger). Apostates and others denounced the Shakers for perverting sexuality in ways which resonate with anti-Catholic bias. They used their “alleged” celibacy as a cover for orgies and secret trysts between unmarried converts. In 1783, the president of Baptist Rhode Island College, James Manning, wrote of “learning” that “some carnal fruits have inadvertently resulted from their chaste embraces” (Brewer: 8). Whether or not readers believed these lascivious tales, Shaker celibacy served to cordon off the group from their anti-Shaker readership.

Historian Louis Kern has observed that anti-Shaker writers reflect and formulate a national anxiety derived from “a fear of fanaticism, the failure to control, an improper balance between the mental and the physical, and an overwhelming sense of disorder” which, in turn, reflects “an anxious trepidation that these qualities of life might be attributable not only to communitarian attempts to change society, but to the very dynamics of the inevitable process of change itself in a rapidly evolving society” (53). Both apostates and anti-Shakers seem aware of this tension, and of their audience – trading on their knowledge of what images, tropes, and voices would elicit the most visceral response from non-Shakers. In early nineteenth century America, this rhetoric was familiar, and there were significant elements among moralistic Protestants who were ready to listen to disparaging

⁶ Although Chapman was married to a Shaker, she herself never converted. Nonetheless, I refer to her writing as an “apostate” account because it shares nearly all of the features of that genre.

connections between the Shakers and Catholic hierarchy and sexual licentiousness, as well as Native American captivity.

Those who sought to criticize the Shakers, and there were many, made extensive use of the writings of Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer. Some wrote to warn the public of what they perceived to be authentic dangers posed by Shakerism; some wished to publicly reestablish themselves in mainstream society by justifying a conversion to the sect; occasionally they wrote out of bitterness that the Shakers had “ensnared” family members (Brewer: 8). Finally, some wrote in order to sway public opinion because they were trying to win a legal dispute against the Shakers – typically one involving property, divorce, or children. Whatever the motivations of the writers, this tiny sect attracted an extraordinary amount of public debate.

The Shaker Other

In order to establish credibility for their story, apostates needed to isolate readers from the Shakers, minimizing the possibility of sympathy and affectively casting them as outsiders. To this end, they emphasized the very elements of Shakerism which chafed at conventional American ideology. Attackers accused the Believers of treason, intoxication, cruelty, raucousness and various manipulations and abuses of converts. They also played on newly-born patriotism to accuse the sect of treason – for, as Fluhman points out, “propagation of true religion” was necessary for national strength, thus, to be a “deceiver” is to be a sort of traitor (27). Unlike evangelical Protestants, the Shakers’ split from “the world” remained a key aspect of their belief system, not to mention their spatial practice, after the Revolution. While the Shaker villages came to invite limited commerce with outsiders, they did not actively reject their evangelical perfectionist roots. They remained, as well, committed to continual revelation, a principle that also precluded or at least made less desirable the movement toward traditional religious structure. This consistent refutation of worldly values recalibrated the Shakers’ view of the world; it became “a place to be redeemed” (Brewer: 205).

Using Revolutionary rhetoric, apostates (particularly male ones), drew upon the 1780 arrest of six Shaker elders, including Ann Lee for “dissuading the friends to the American cause from taking up arms in defense of their liberties” (Stein: 13). Shakers, with their communalism, female “Christ,” and rejection of traditional family, furnished ample fodder for writers. In the early decades of the Republic, some located a threat in the sect’s belief in the “duty” of “joint interest,” or communism, an implicit criticism of the concept of private property and the burgeoning commerce of America. While this is compromised somewhat by the Shakers active participation in real estate, they still appeared to offer a radical, if appealing, alternative, providing “wearied” individuals with “rest” from the world. The Shakers evangelical tendency toward what Stephen Marini calls “clan influence,” “[encouraging] entire family groups to mold their households into model

celibate communities,” exemplifies the immediacy of the threat they posed to the nuclear unit (100).⁷

Shaker critics did their best to attach the sect to known enemies in colonial America. Impressions of the Society’s institutional church hierarchy, and their “monastic gloom” led to comparisons with the Roman Catholics, at a time when “popery” called to mind corrupt power and depraved control over congregations. Kern explains that the rationale for comparing the Shakers with the Catholics derives from the “predominantly Puritan” post-Enlightenment condemnation of “priestcraft,” secrecy, and dependence on authority” (53). Adversaries claimed that Shakers, like Catholics, maintained an elite monopoly on spiritual “knowledge.” They controlled access to resources, deceiving their followers by manipulating the dissemination of information. An anonymous 1795 magazine writer describes the Shakers as having “popes, saints, oral confession, exorcisms [and] purgatory . . . Shakers also forbade marriage . . . and believed in miracles” (67).

Print culture, flourishing at the time, assisted the aims of these writers in disseminating their message to the world. Pamphlets were a popular means of introducing private arguments and debates into the public sphere. Further, to use Michael Warner’s thesis, in occupying a public realm “apart from” that occupied by the state, these pamphlets offered a means of criticizing government dealings with the Shakers.⁸ The anti-Shaker writers availed themselves of this medium, in addition to books and lectures. To engage the readership in sympathy and outrage, in the course of casting the Shakers as mysterious, dangerous and bizarre fanatics, they accordingly drew upon and refracted worldly concerns. These tracts register larger social anxieties over changes in economics, families, and women. They construct the Shakers as the locus for anxiety over pressing social and political issues. Using print suggests another anti-Shaker strategy – exposing the absence of Shaker writing.

By their very act of writing, apostate authors called attention to the Shakers’ initial devaluation of the written word. As a result, some detractors based their attacks on the negative contrast between the written word of the Bible and the Shakers’ reliance on orality. Valorizing writing, as such, called attention to the Shaker’s tradition of oral confession and Ann Lee’s illiteracy, two sensitive issues.⁹ In her exploration of what she calls “Shaker

⁷ The Shakers further threatened familial order with their rejection of marriage and family and substitution of the “family” of Believers. As one apostate, Daniel Rathbun, put it, quoting 2 Timothy, “. . . they creep into houses and lead captive silly women . . . and then the whole family” (83).

⁸ Michael Warner offers a relevant interpretation of the changing nature of print culture in this period “. . . the reader does not simply imagine him- or herself receiving a direct communication or hearing the voice of the author. He or she now also incorporates into the meaning of the printed object an awareness of the potentially limitless others who may also be reading” (xii). The anti-Shaker writers relied upon this construction of “an arena” of people to reform a group into which they might enter. However, these texts also evidence the burgeoning voice which Jay Fliegelman identifies, and Christopher Looby sees in his book as well. As Julia Stern explains, “the embodied voice which speaks through print in the early national period relays a charismatic authority, a cultural force equal to if not actually inseparable from the power Warner finds in the ‘impersonality’ of writing” (16).

⁹ Though by the eighteenth-century American religion had moved away from the Puritans’ agonizing inwardness and “propensity for reporting the exact order of events in their conversion,” the Shaker’s were

literacies” (that is, the nexus created by what sect members read and what they wrote), Etta Madden explains, “With the presence of the Christ Spirit embodied in the physical living Mother Ann, written texts such as the Bible, when used, were in subordination to the primacy of orally conveyed teachings” (17). Those who seceded, in turn, accused the Society of suppressing reading material and controlling access to various texts. The apostate narratives offer a sub-plot presenting a *written* version of their conversion and de-conversion. The implication here is that the author’s words are not amorphous like those of the Shakers; they are cemented by the writer’s commitment to set them down and speak the vocabulary of the world. Both Valentine Rathbun and Mary Dyer explained the roots of their de-conversion with a turning to the Bible. In this “turning” (the word conversion denotes “turning”), they rejected as false the Shaker oral theology and reliance on the Elders’ explication of the Bible. By centering their conversion on a text, the established Christian text, they underscored the importance of the written word, their own and that of religion.

These matters allow the apostate writers to point to the “slipperiness” of Shaker theology and highlight links to another group with an oral tradition and a lack of a written language – the Native Americans. The presence of captivity narratives, very similar to Indian Captivity texts, helped the writers express their condemnation of the community. The Shakers were “an entity foreign to the ideas and goals of eighteenth-century Protestant American culture” (De Wolfe 1996: 61). The descriptive parallels are striking; they “kidnap” children, “dance naked,” live outside the world’s laws and religions, and seduce “Christians” from the “true” path. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Americans were weaned on tales of Indian captivity and had developed a taste for them, as well as for sentimental fiction – a genre which eventually subsumed the captivity tales (see Ebersole).¹⁰

Anti-Shaker writers prompt connections to the Native Americans by manipulating the established rhetoric when telling their tales. Shakers are “savages,” “treacherous,” “dark” deceivers of “fierce appearance” who “carry away” children. They construct the Shaker community as a band of “bloody Heathens.” Affidavits in the case of Mary Dyer present the Shakers as captors who torture members to coerce them into breaking off natural affections.¹¹ Apostate writers, in particular, tell tales of bondage and torture which echo Indian Captivity claims, right down to the reaffirmed conversion/test of faith of the

commonly criticized by apostates for forcing confession of all sins to Elders who were often presented as listening with a prurient interest, see Caldwell: 163. Though Shakers would come to write their own spiritual autobiographies, in this early period there were few, if any, written by them.

¹⁰ The popularity of these new forms sprang from a new national ideology, increasing religiosity, domesticity and the power of emotion to sway belief. The emotional affectiveness of a text, whether the austere, gut-wrenching rhetoric of an early conversion like one from Thomas Shepard’s congregation, or the latter florid prose of Olive Oatman’s captivity, offered writers a potent means of persuasion. Early nineteenth-century writers maintained an interest in the didactic possibilities of the written word. The writing community came to appreciate the importance of the readers’ emotional response to the lives of the characters portrayed in texts as well as the moral implications of their responses.

¹¹ For example, when his father converted to Shakerism, Andrew Ward went to live in a Shaker “family.” There, he reports, he saw his younger brother tied up and “hung . . . upon a tree . . . he screamed a considerable time . . . his hands were turned black” (Dyer: 205).

redeemed captive. These writers, at some point, de-convert from the “trial” of Shakerism, and recast themselves as momentarily misled souls who, by the end of their reconversion to an “acceptable” Christianity can claim, “Now my soul holds its integrity” (V. Rathbun: 87).

The Nuances of Captivity and De-Conversion

The inclusion of a captivity narrative within the apostate text reflects the convert’s moving from one space to another, and the transitional or liminal space occupied in between. The morphology of the conversion narrative indicates a process of separation and integration similar to a captivity narrative.¹² This morphology, which would be familiar to the reading public, not only helped to explain the apostate’s conversion to a sectarian religion, but also provided a framework for the text itself. Since 1682 when Mary Rowlandson wrote of her deliverance from the “murtherous Wretches” and return to “civilization,” the process of discussing conversion through captivity had demonstrated the appropriateness of intertwining the two.¹³

For Shakers, the reports of their conversion(s) and ensuing captivity almost always present two types of independent narratives which themselves explore entry and exits from circumscribed groups. As former members of the Believers, the writers considered themselves well-situated to comment on the Shakers, as Elizabeth De Wolfe explains “It was the *public* expression and *enactment* of dissent that distinguished an apostate from a silent seceder . . . the apostate authors saw themselves as separate from the Shakers and from the general public. They existed betwixt and between both worlds and were uniquely situated to describe the inner workings of Shakerism” (1996: 8).

In the course of their narratives, apostate writers stress the “captivity” and conversion elements of their experiences.¹⁴ The captivity mold, in particular, “abjured

¹² Virginia Lieson Brereton identifies the “classic” conversion narrative of the nineteenth century as including “(1) life before the conversion process began . . . (2) a period when narrators became acutely aware of their sinfulness . . . (3) the surrender to God’s will in conversion proper, during which converts felt . . . sinfulness lifted . . . (4) a description of the narrator’s changed behavior and attitudes . . . (5) an account of periods of discouragement and low spiritual energy followed by renewals of dedication” (10).

¹³ The Shakers had a particular experience with apostasy and the writings of ex-Shakers. Apostasy was very common in their communities, and membership fluctuated greatly; indeed ex-Shakers eventually outnumbered Shakers (De Wolfe 2002: 174).

¹⁴ In his essay on exits from new religious movements, David Bromley explains that “the polarized situation and power imbalance” involved in leaving a subversive organization leads the subject to “negotiate a narrative with the oppositional coalition that offers an acceptable explanation for participation in the organization and for now once again reversing loyalties” (37). That is, a significant portion of apostate tracts is taken up with explaining to the audience why the subjects joined the religious community to begin with, and why they then de-converted. The whole process of de-conversion is fascinatingly complicated. After all, in order to be an apostate one must admit one’s “weakness” in initially joining. The author, therefore is, from the start, calling into question the reliability of his or her own judgment. This concern often manifests itself in the use of the captivity formula “in which,” as Bromley explains, “apostates assert that they were innocently or naively operating in what they had every reason to believe was a normal, secure social site; were subjected to overpowering subversive techniques; endured a period of subjugation during which they experienced tribulation and humiliation; ultimately effected escape or rescue from the organization; and subsequently renounced their former loyalties and issued a public warning of the dangers of the former organization a matter of civic responsibility” (37).

them of responsibility for their mistaken attraction” to a given religious movement” (De Wolfe 1996: 8). In combination, therefore, conversion and captivity gave apostates a means of justifying their actions, and, because they employed formulaic genres, a means of controlling the public’s understanding of the writer’s potentially damaging and dangerous experiences. They provided writers a measure of safety, by couching their experiences in familiar terms. Subjects are “forced” into their aggressive, antagonistic stances, as writers and petitioners, by this threatening community. The various and opposing voices of these genres, however, often imply meanings unstated in the text itself. Both captivity and conversion experiences involve, to use Victor Turner’s expression, liminal, and therefore dangerous experiences (cf. 93-111). As Michelle Burnham explains, the “cleavage” between “one cultural paradigm” and another provided a space for captives like Rowlandson to engage in, often, subversive discourse. Women who stridently stood against the abuses of males were “[teetering] on the very edge of telling an entirely different story” than the patriarchal Puritan society would like (Burnham: 8). Rowlandson demonstrated a type of uneasy reintegration, suddenly unable, once she returns, to “sleep quietly without workings in my thoughts” (Andrews: 64). The contrast between her “goodwife” status in Puritan society and her position as “independent producer-exchanger” within Algonquin culture suggests the appeal of “cultural escape,” from the alternate captivity of domesticity (Burnham: 28).

The heteroglossia that results from the divergent voices of the conversion, captivity, and apostate tract contained within a single text, can introduce a sort of multivocality that may disclose tension within the text, the writer, and the intended audience. The apostates tend to compensate by creating caricatures of the Shakers. Since the Shakers occupied a space outside of traditional society, they also carried the danger and possibility of this type of freedom. The extent to which the writers forced the Shakers into formulaic patterns, casting them as simply evil, betrays the difficulty of managing these complex perfectionists, who might offer a possible alternative to the world. The Shakers offered converts the potential for spiritual “power,” in terms of charismatic gifts, and, more prosaically the possibility of rising through the ranks of elders. Though the apostate certainly occupies a space between Shakerism and the world, and thus speaks from something of a privileged position, the heavy-handed implementation of the captivity and conversion formula cannot be read without acknowledging that these forms necessarily distort the subjects and communities, and insure a subjective understanding of the self in relation to community. The tensions which erupt by inserting these genres into larger texts suggest the possibility that the Shakers have real power by virtue of their ability to hold, physically and emotionally, their converts.

Captive Manhood, Male Apostasy

Though both female and male anti-Shaker writers employed these tools, the management of the captivity trope exposes some of the major differences between the two. Critics have long noted the possibilities the captivity format offered women writers. Both Christopher Castiglia and Gary Ebersole connect these ideas with the transgressive possibilities the form provides. Captivity writers can move beyond conventional boundaries and occupy a space which allows increased maneuverability. Shaker women also

could use the captivity narrative to critique the world from a safer position, not bound by strict social conventions and could speak from the “wilderness” of Shakerism without the conventional restrictions of patriarchal culture. In these ways, then, they transgressed the traditional limitations of their gender – leveling accusations at male, religious, and governmental authorities who ignored their plights – because they “wrote” a territory beyond the bounds of convention. The male writers used captivity to excuse spiritual weakness by justifying their own presence among the Shakers. On the one hand, they confirm reigning gender ideologies by attributing “powers” to the Shakers, which excuse their conversion. On the other hand, they subvert traditional masculinity by suggesting a weakness in their inability to resist this religion founded by a woman. Captivity, thus, becomes a means of locating the writers’ attempt to control their relation to the Shakers.

The writings of Mary Dyer and Eunice Chapman, which are addressed in more detail below, seem to embody this sort of story of Shaker apostasy as a captivity. But these actually follow the first true Shaker apostate narrative, that of Valentine Rathbun. Although we are accustomed to associate this language with the female, this male Shaker also gestures towards Indian captivity, but in constructing his experiences as, in part, a captivity, he would be reluctant to relinquish the type of power to the Shakers that female apostate writers can. Were he to do so, he would risk accusations of weakness, which could call into question his ethos and threaten his post-conversion identity. To inoculate himself against this, Rathbun emphasized the seductive elements of Shaker theology, thus negotiating a space where he can maintain traditional masculinity. This however, carries the paradoxical implication of weakness, which he attempts to counter by casting the seduction as a female one, originating in Ann Lee’s words. Mother Ann’s power in the formation of the society, threatened the “natural order” represented by the husband’s leadership of the family (Proctor-Smith: 16). The danger of female seductive energy could legitimize the male convert’s inability to resist, and Valentine Rathbun warned his readers that a woman was again being used as Satan’s tool.

Through positioning their apostate accounts within the captivity tradition, Valentine Rathbun, his brother Daniel, and future Shaker apostates could garner many of the same associations as the captives. They are seen as reluctant participants on a journey into dangerous lands, where salvation only comes by their own strength and the grace of God. From this “foreign” Shaker land, apostate narrators emerge, carrying with them a text which reclaims their experience. As David Sewell cleverly explains, the very act of writing the text reverses the power relation between the captive and the captor. “The captivity narrative’s author is always able to counter a physical humiliation with a linguistic victory: the captors may have controlled the brute events, but the captive controls the storytelling” (42). Their defection from the Shakers transforms into an escape or rescue in spite of Shaker attempts to prevent their desertion.

Valentine Rathbun’s vituperative *Some Brief Hints of a Religious Scheme* serves as a model of the accounts. Future anti-Shaker writers made explicit references to this text, and the themes it initiates appear in later fictional portrayals of the community. For example, in 1798 a future Shaker apostate, Thomas Brown, saw “a small pamphlet, written by Valentine Rathbone” (sic). In an odd twist, this tract sparked Brown’s own conversion to Shakerism, not because the religion was presented as appealing, but because the tract seemed so

bitterly biased. In his own apostate narrative, *An Account of the People Called Shakers*, published in 1812, Brown recalls thinking that the Shakers, “must be very different from what they were represented, as truly religious people have always been misrepresented” (14-15). This provides us with an unintentional example of the instability inherent in this anti-Shaker rhetoric – that is, a fair-minded reader could potentially draw the exact opposite conclusion. Rathbun’s vehement denunciation of the Shakers therefore, potentially undermined his aim, eliciting Brown’s sympathy for the Shakers, rather than his contempt. Rathbun anticipated this possibility, for at the end of his narrative he apologizes, “If I have been in any measure a means of leading any person into this wicked and dreadful delusion, I am very sorry, and I heartily repent of my folly” (20).

Though Rathbun may have been speaking of past influences related to friends, family, and members of his congregation, Brown, a reader, is a victim of it as well. Rathbun’s text had indirectly led Brown to the Shakers, and not until Brown’s own ultimate de-conversion from Shakerism is Rathbun’s attack on the society reaffirmed. Rathbun’s text forms the bedrock for Brown’s experiences with the Shakers as well as a model for his narrative. Indeed, Valentine Rathbun’s influence on Brown would even extend beyond his own text; it is Valentine’s son Reuben’s apostate tract which initiates the de-conversion of several of Brown’s friends and family in his text. The appearance of these two texts in Brown exemplifies the influence of earlier apostate narratives on later ones. Mary Dyer and Eunice Chapman both adopt the language of Rathbun at least partially through the intermediary of Brown. Thus, a kind of literary web of influences appears,

Dyer, Chapman, and other female apostates played on sentiment (as women, wives, mothers) but male apostates like Rathbun made more of the political threat the Shakers posed to America. He situated his arrival at the New York community so as to foreground the chaos the Shakers represent in Revolutionary America. Rathbun emphasized their European origin, calling them the “Europeans,” and claiming that they preach “all our authority, civil and military is from hell” (11). At a time when American identity was defining itself against the British, and rooting out those who threatened this burgeoning, separate, self, accusations of sedition were sure to sway public opinion. Though Rathbun’s experience with the Shakers took place before they all lived communally, he still constructs them as a distinct danger to the welfare of American moral, political, and spiritual life. However, Rathbun conceived of the Shaker identity as powerful enough to deceive observers, and thus unstable and ultimately unknowable by those outside the community: “when any person goes to see them, they meet him with many smiles, and seeming great gladness; they bid him welcome, and directly tell him they knew of his coming yesterday” (3). Rathbun repeatedly referred to their attempts to “touch [potential converts] with their fingers in different places [and] get their hand on his head,” and described them like mesmerists, who have a “very extraordinary and uncommon power [attending] their instruction” (8, 10).

As a Separate Baptist minister writing “at the earnest request of many enquiring minds,” Valentine Rathbun has much invested in redeeming his character after dallying among this “new and strange religion” (1). By warning people away from the Shakers, he can recover his own character and become a sort of professional ex-Shaker. They are weapons of Satan, and Rathbun appoints himself a sentry since, “There never was a day

that more loudly called for faithful watchmen . . . while we see Satan transforming himself into an angel of light, and bringing forward his deep laid scheme to undermine the glorious plan of Redemption by Christ” (21). In order to justify his initial contact with the Shakers, he carefully frames it within his pre-conversion ministerial responsibilities. He visits the United Society on his way home from attending a church conference in Stillwater, and then only at the behest of two of his brothers. Within Rathbun’s portrait, the Shakers’ power is undeniable, given their aptitude for beguiling an active minister from the correct path. Rathbun emphasizes the strength of Shaker conversion practices in order to explain his “fall,” and to legitimize his rhetorical performance. They are, in fact, a signal of Armageddon and Ann Lee’s witchcraft might easily sink the “unskillful mariner” (21). Rathbun’s textual self is this “mariner,” navigating his way through the heresies of Shaker theology.

Early on, Rathbun accused the Shakers of snaring religious seekers with their “logic,” and mesmerizing them into conversion, a conceit which later transformed into charges of captivity. To “terrify” a potential convert and “bring” him into an absolute dependence on them,” the Shakers “tell him, if he had never come to see them, and had died in his ignorance without receiving the Holy Ghost, he would have gone to hell or a prison state, and suffered a while and then come out and gone to heaven; but now if he turns his back, there is no forgiveness” (9). Prior to meeting them, an individual had the possibility of eventual salvation; however, the first meeting with the Shakers promises a subject who rejects them certain doom. After hearing the “words” of the Society, there is no possibility of redemption. Later, in the conversion proper, Rathbun falls prey to the “smiling,” “mistical,” voice of Mother Ann, whose “mixture of words, known and unknown” seemed to the minister “a perfect charm” (19). He attributes his conversion explicitly to her exotic seduction. Whereas John Bunyan’s Christian must battle manifestations of internal doubts, Rathbun encounters the female temptress, patriarchal society’s internal peril. Conjuring up the image of the serpent, which is to recur in anti-Shaker narratives (most notably in Mary Dyer’s 1847 *Rise and Progress of the Serpent*), he writes that when he felt compelled to “separate the precious and the vile,” the Believers “rose upon me with a dismal hiss” (19). Soon Rathbun’s previous ideas of religion begin to seem like a dream, and his mind is “turned wholly up-side down,” which is subsequently reflected in a “twitching” of his nerves. He attributes his strange experiences to the “new dispensation,” but in the space of one page he realigns himself with those outside the Society. He moves through his conversion quickly, continually pointing to his troubled mind, never discussing the life of the Niskeyuna Shakers.¹⁵

Male apostates often equate themselves with biblical figures, and so order their experience. Daniel Rathbun, emphasizing his despair and helplessness while converting to Shakerism, exclaims, “Here I stopped, like Israel at the Red Sea, and cried to

¹⁵ Rathbun’s tract begins with impersonal, almost anthropological observations regarding their methods of persuasion, his critique of Shakerism gradually shifts to the first person as he introduces his conversion experience, or what could be called his “seduction.” The effect of his narrative strategy is a gradual heightening of tension and sympathy. By instituting what Clifford Geertz would call a “experience-far” approach to explaining their techniques, Rathbun attempts to invest himself with a cool assessing air; however, he soon resorts to a vituperative tone which undermines his initial interest in evoking intellectual interests and demands, perhaps too aggressively, a sympathetic response on the part of the audience.

God . . .” (83). He argues for a parallel with the chosen people at a point where they temporarily feel abandoned by God, Moses, and at the mercy of the pursuing Egyptians, but where ultimately their faith and God lead them. Though in a land of danger (the desert/the Shakers), he intimates that he is protected by the de-converted status from which he writes. By modeling himself on the Israelites at the Red Sea, Rathbun maintains a “respectably” victimized status; his captivity is a test of his faith. The parallels between the subject’s experience with the Shakers and the Israelites’ captivity in Egypt exploits the readers’ association with the Old Testament story of a people tested repeatedly and harshly, found worthy, and ultimately led out of enslavement. Thus the biblical captivity as well and the Indian captivity inform the apostate’s appropriation of the genre.

Thomas Brown follows a similar strategy in dealing with his awkward position as male captive. Like Valentine Rathbun, he problematizes Ann Lee’s sex, and resorts to conventional tropes of gender — bewitched by the teachings of (the late) Ann Lee, he describes her as embodying every female flaw. Brown presents his entire story as a kind of impartial study. Assuming a detachment that is almost (*avant la lettre*) sociological, he presents himself as an explorer — approaching the Shakers as participant/observer, and, indeed by interviews with elders and community originals, he assumes a façade of fairness. But the themes and assumptions reveal him to be operating in the world of Rathbun. He confronts Ann Lee and cannot resist taking on her “effeminacy” (sic). Brown’s narrative, which runs to hundreds of excruciating pages, builds to a kind of denouement wherein he reveals Ann Lee to possess (among Shakers) the truly heretical status of co-redemptrix. Later, in a coup de grace, he claims to have uncovered “factual” evidence that she was also a drunk — a realization he finds so damning that he insisted on meeting Reuben Rathbun to receive the account first-hand (291).

Interestingly, for Brown, Valentine Rathbun’s book appears as a kind of voice from the good patriarch. His first knowledge of the Shakers came from Rathbun’s apostasy, but, unwilling to heed the wise father, he sojourns into the wilderness. Brown tells us, from the start, he should have known better, and when the flaws and hypocrisies of the Shakers began to multiply he is reminded of Rathbun’s warnings — admitting he entered the community with half an eye cocked for trouble (288). But the most telling indication of Brown’s reliance on Rathbun comes in his defense of American republicanism against the Shakers. Ever the rationalist, Brown gently confronts the Shaker elders first about their disdain for written word, suggesting that it makes them “like the Roman Church” (229). Then, moving in for the kill, he attempts to coax patriotism out of the Shakers, saying, “I may with propriety exclaim, Hail! America, what a highly favored people under the blessings of God, all in consequence of a republican government” (238). The Shakers, taking the bait, respond that America is, on the contrary, like the Jews, formerly favored by God, but refusing to see the truth that stands before them. Thus they reveal themselves as harboring foreign sympathies and contempt for the values of the nation that gave them refuge. Brown, like Rathbun, shows the Shakers contempt for republican values — for the uniqueness of the nation. Thus, for these male apostates the dilemma of victimhood is solved. As a result, the Shakers femininity and their unpatriotic foreignness can be joined. By condemning them, male apostates are not emasculated by captivity, but strident in their patriotism.

Ultimately, Rathbun plays the Shaker's greatest heresy (i.e., the female Christ) against the group in the most conventional manner. He constructs the Shakers' "seductive" rhetoric as a direct outgrowth of Ann Lee's distorted theology. They prove to be the "Scylla" to his "mariner," a female monster seducing him off the true path. He genders his language to reflect the beguiling discourse of a succubus. The Shakers are charmers and seducers who pose a significant danger to misguided Christians. In a 1785 "letter," he explains, referring to Lee, "if the Mother or any other woman call herself a prophetess and set herself up for a teacher and leader, usurping power over men, and deceive, debauch, and mislead people, she come full into the character of a Jezebel, and is a seducer" (53). But that is not all. As Adam Jortner has demonstrated, Rathbun was just as willing to accuse the Shakers of treason or lack of patriotism. Their pacifism, he said, was a mere cover for their hatred of America and love for its enemies (190). The closer we look, the more it seems that the total war launched by anti-shakers used gender opportunistically, but was not motivated by it.¹⁶

Female Apostates and the Battle for Public Opinion.

Ann Lee's appropriation of male ministerial power and social organizational power menaced an America in which the seeds of, what Ann Douglass calls, a "feminized" religion were already sewn. The appearance within ten years of Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791) and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) would signal the shifting role of women in the realm of sympathy-based pious directives. Both these novels indicate a new complexity to the women's novel – *The Coquette*, in particular, with its multiple perspectives and not so subtle criticism of social expectations (Ebersole: 99). These sentimental novels privileged the separate sphere ideology, but did so in order to emphasize the importance and power women had in their role as spiritual and emotional protectors of the home. Ann Douglass sees them as emerging in contrast to the "toughness" of Calvinism, while Jane Tompkins regards the sentimental craze as more pedagogical – examples of what sort of behaviors the new middle-class should embrace or shun (Douglass: 12-13). The sentimentalism in Shaker apostate writing seems closer to that identified by Annette Kolodny – a tool wielded by "otherwise disenfranchised" writers (163).

Eunice Chapman begins her tale with "WEEP, oh WEEP for such unfortunate mothers!" Her story (which manages, despite her non-Shaker status, to be an apostate tale, captivity narrative, and a plea for divorce all in one) makes full use of this new language of sentiment (19). It is, after all, as protectors of family that female apostates thrive. While Rathbun posits the Shakers as captors of his soul, later women authors constructed them as captors of children – and what better, more morally loaded, role to

¹⁶ For later writers, hostile toward Shakerism, it was natural to pick up on the possibilities of the conversion/captivity topos, and many incorporated versions of it into their own texts. In fact, their agendas were best served by exploiting the captivity element in particular. The metaphor and language of entrapment come to be seen as useful not only for condemning the Shakers, redeeming the post-conversion identity, but also for presenting the Shakers as conventional antagonists. Even much later, more sympathetic texts which celebrate Shaker ingenuity and community would employ versions of the conversion/captivity theme. It was as if the very nature of the Shakers' utopian society implied these issues

place the Shakers in than that of kidnapper? The captivity genre is most potent when the threat is to the physical and spiritual health of children. Consider, for example John Williams' concern with his children's fate in *Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion* (1707). The horror of his family's captivity among the Indians is equaled by the threat posed by French Jesuit attempts to convert his family with "such crafty designs to ensnare young ones" (Williams: 430). Both the Native Americans and the Catholics enact an "exercising," seductive danger on his family, and his daughter Eunice's decision to remain with the Native Americans ultimately confirms the fear that captivity of one sort or another might lead to miscegenation. Likewise, the ex-convert's fear for a child's captivity among the Shakers relies upon a concern with propagating Shaker doctrines and bolstering un-American ideology. The power of captivity to arouse tears, not only from the captive, but also from the readers, serves a pragmatic function in apostate tales of children "held hostage" by the Shakers. Two of the most famous cases of "captivity" involving children are found in the anti-Shaker narratives of Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer. Both women relied on their writings to arouse public sympathy for their plights.

The evolving public response to this anti-Shaker rhetoric was sometimes sympathetic fury, particularly with regard to women's claims that their children were being restrained. In 1818, when Mary Dyer met fellow anti-Shaker writer, Eunice Chapman, for the first time, they managed to instigate a mob attack on the Enfield Shakers. Both women's husbands had joined the Shakers, and though Dyer had initially joined with her husband, her apostasy left her in the same position as Chapman – powerless and without an identity as a mother or a wife – and yet unable to remarry. Both faced the dilemma of attempting to redefine themselves after abandonment by their husbands. These women were caught in the untenable position of having to support themselves without remarrying. Without getting a divorce, they could not be remarried, yet, the two states in question, New Hampshire and New York, only granted divorce for a limited number of grounds. The Shakers' unintentional role in making divorce more accessible underscores their destabilizing of traditional family structure. Both Chapman and Dyer's husbands exploited this fear in publishing scathing rejoinders to their wives' books. Both charged their spouses with being willful, disruptive wives and mothers as well as deviants. Interestingly, the men, while Shakers, evoke the standard ideology of womanhood and motherhood to denounce Chapman and Dyer's anti-Shaker campaign. By appropriating patriarchal values when it suits their argument, they demonstrate how the women stood, in certain ways, opposed to it.¹⁷

¹⁷ Divorce in New York, Chapman's state, was particularly difficult to obtain. In 1813 the revised law allowed for only one ground for absolute divorce, adultery. In New Hampshire, where Dyer resided, a 1791 statute provided four grounds, impotency, adultery, extreme cruelty, or three years absence, and for wives, abandonment and failure to provide for three years. In addition to the limited claims for divorce, the entire process had to move through the legislature. By the late eighteenth, and early nineteenth century, each legislative session would see between thirty and forty divorce petitions. The lengths to which these women went in attacking the Shakers were no doubt partially necessitated by the difficult machinations required to achieve a divorce in a society heatedly divided about the its very moral implications. Partially because of public acceptance of apostate's claims, legislatures granted divorces to people whose spouses joined the Shakers. Though Dyer and Chapman eventually had their marriages officially dissolved, one consequence was to expose to the public compilations of affidavits from apostates and anti-Shakers, acting as character witnesses.

Writers interested in gender have, quite naturally, clustered their arguments around the case of the Chapman divorce. Indeed Ilyon Woo's *The Great Divorce* manages to take this rather obscure case and transform it into a highly readable story of women in early America.¹⁸ As for scholars more directly engaged in Shaker literature, Jean Humez claims that Dyer's and Chapman's narratives "represent significant early contributions to critical public discussion about the patriarchal family and state, from the perspective of the self-identified abused wife and mother" (91). And, more recently, in her book examining the nature of the "web of apostasy," and the resourcefulness of Mary Dyer, Elizabeth De Wolfe contends that Dyer's narrative, among others, "helped shape the public definition of a proper home, family, and religious practice" (2002: 11).

Women writers like Chapman and Dyer offered themselves and their children as the victims in the drama. This decision was dictated in part by social restrictions which determined appropriate forums for women writers. De Wolfe argues, "For women authors texts which addressed religious themes were limited to circumstances of duress. The duress, the urgency to tell a tale in order to impart a warning to fellow citizens, allowed a woman author a momentary step beyond cultural boundaries" (1996: 277). By venturing into the "wilds" of Shakerism in their lives, or their texts, they cross the limitations of their society. By writing aggressive, condemnatory and very public tracts, they risked being accused of improper behavior outside of their acceptable sphere. By creating the space of the captivity, they minimized this critique.¹⁹

In order to evoke a sympathetic response from their readership, the women retake control of their experiences by reclaiming them through writing – writing that is itself within an established genre. Like Hannah Dustan's 1697 slaying of her Indian captors, the female apostate writer takes control even while risking the judgment of patriarchal society. However, unlike Dustan, they do not have an established Puritan minister, such as Cotton Mather, to excuse and indemnify their actions (cf. Mather's account). They have crossed barriers between the Shakers and the world, as well as female and male forms of expression. Moreover, they fluctuated between their role as wife and mother, and their circumstance as abandoned women with no children. Yet they appeal to legislature, publish books and pamphlets and organize meetings and people. Trading on their experiences with the Shakers, the authors commodify their ability to move between roles. At the same time, they maintain the acceptability of their project by emphasizing their captive position.²⁰

¹⁸ Woo is, however, only indirectly concerned with Shakerism. The story she tells, while undeniably an interesting one, includes a great deal of speculation about participants' motives.

¹⁹ Dyer and Chapman are two participants in what De Wolfe identifies as the "network of apostasy." They used each other's texts to refer to similar experiences, validate Shaker practices, and legitimate their claims. According to De Wolfe, they formed a support system that participated in using "a specific cultural script to communicate their message" (1996: 19).

²⁰ De Wolfe actually takes this intriguingly further, suggesting that base economic motives may have influenced Mary Dyer and those who followed her (2002: 184).

Mary Dyer's work inspired a bitter Shaker counter-attack, one which came, for the first time, in writing. In *The Other Side of the Question* they attacked her as a thwarted preacher. Dyer used extracts of various other apostate accounts to link to voices, often male, which carried even greater authority when invoking ministerial language, generally regarding captivity, punishment, and redemption. "Oh! What a bondman I have been in Egypt; shut up in Babylon . . . I began to suspect I had missed my way to Mount Zion, and come to Sinai; for I could hear little else but thunder and tempest" (83). This is crucial – under pressure to defend herself, Dyer summoned the writing of Valentine Rathbun. As previously mentioned, this language of biblical typology, reminiscent of Indian captivity narratives, invokes the drama and fear of an enslaved, lost Israelite, trapped in the storms of Exodus and excluded from the Promised Land. By finding "male" voices and traditions, Dyer legitimizes her own distinctly female agenda, reclaiming her role as a mother, even while rejecting that of wife. In the majority of her affidavits the tone of despair and hopelessness, typical in conversion tales, ultimately gives way to direct accusations of abuse and licentiousness. The images of enslavement and ominous forebodings come to dominate the texts Dyer includes in her apostate tract. Her own narrative, which begins three hundred pages after the first deposition, is the crescendo after the echoing voices of the previous testimonies. These, along with the affidavits, introduce a historical thread into her narrative. They link her story to that of others; her story was presented as exemplifying a common experience.²¹

For Eunice Chapman, too, the echo of Rathbun is a loud one. When her husband, James, is "seduced" by the Shakers, she goes on her own errand into the wilderness in search of him, "reflecting on how similar my situation was to those poor mothers who had their children forced from their breast by the savages." The Shakers vex her along the way – in one case literally, when their misdirection leaves her "lost and [wandering] in a thick woods" (16). Her entire experience is cast in these terms, and only "those who have had their friends taken captive by the savage can better realize my feelings than I can describe" (16). In making the case that she has no options but divorce, she argues that divorce is, in her circumstance, a way of regaining, rather than disrupting, true family. Like Rathbun, she invokes Catholicism to underline her situation as a woman kept from divorce by a popish cult, one that "functions in a more slavish fear, than though they were under the power of the Court of Inquisition!" (56). And, again like Rathbun, she condemns a society that refuses to see that the threat to its health is from within: "Can Christians . . . so anxious to send Bibles and Missionaries to Asia and Europe . . . let children who are born by their side be carried among a people where they

²¹Mary Dyer may have resorted to affidavits out of fear that, as a woman, she would be taken less seriously. Though the Shakers used affidavits in their published defenses as well (including one by Mary's husband in 1818, and the bluntly titled, *A Review of Mary M. Dyer's Publication, Entitled 'A Portraiture of Shakerism, ~ Together with Sundry Affidavits, Disproving the Truth of her Assertions'*), they seemed not to use the narrative form as effectively, constrained, no doubt, by being put on the defensive, and reluctant to engage any more than necessary in exposing her story to the public eye. They had, after all, defended themselves against persistent rumors of enslavement, intoxication, and lewdness. They were, therefore, understandably reluctant to republish much of Dyer's narrative, even to refute it; nevertheless, they did engage, quite effectively at points, in debunking Dyer's more extravagant claims.

can never hear the Gospel?" (56). In ways both subtle and explicit, Valentine Rathbun created a language that female apostates would rely on to argue their captivity.

Conclusion

Apostate accounts were critical in introducing the world to the Shakers. They began a tradition of associating the sect with threatening impulses, and contributed to the indissoluble links with the rhetoric of captivity and conversion. But such was the instability of this writing that anti-Shakers also occasionally became fodder themselves for those who questioned the apostates' positions. By 1838, apostate C. C. Hodgdon included a poem in his defense of the Shakers, *Life and Manner of Living among the Shakers*, which was entitled "To Mary Dyer as a Slanderer." It includes the lines "Thou canst not sleep till others weep/O'er virtues names destroyed/This, to thy soul is mad'ning bliss-/The food of all thy happiness . . . /Avaunt! Thou fiend! Nor hither bend/Thy dark mischievous way!" (De Wolfe 2002: 143). It was not long after the earliest apostate tracts that the Shakers began to appear in *belles lettres*, and other aesthetic enterprise. The power to inspire passionate response faded, and the Shaker subject appeared to take on other roles.

The anti-Shaker moment was passionate, therefore, but brief. The imagined threat of the religious sect receded, and the business of Jacksonian America went on. Somewhere along the way, the Shakers made the transition into a charming curiosity. Only a few short decades after these passionate debates the Shakers were being recuperated for the purposes of nostalgia.

While there have been many reasons presented to explain this, it might be, in part, because the goals of anti-Shaker rhetoric were thwarted by their method, that is, the exaggeration to which they inevitably resorted undermined their claims and character. Much of the criticism of Shaker practice was destabilized by an initial attraction to spiritual or practical aspects of the Believers. This, coupled with the increasing reports of Shaker productivity, hospitality, and cleanliness, served to modify their hostile exposés. However, a precedent was set whereby later treatments of this community acknowledged their potential to threaten established mores, bewitch vulnerable citizens, and hold hostage innocent victims. What manifested itself to a greater degree in the years that followed was the positive potential of the Shakers – hidden though it may have been in the rhetoric on the early nineteenth century. In post Civil War America it is easy to understand the nostalgia, but what is harder to classify is the moment when the "Shaker threat" lost its seriousness.

In this regard, it is worth noting the hints of an already shifting role played for Shaker subjects in the odd play *Indoctum Parliamentum* (which came at the very early date of 1818). Mary Dyer may have been slandered in poetry, but at least she escaped the excoriating gaze of the playwright. That honor fell to Eunice Chapman, who inspired this farce – an anonymously authored drama that highlights the anxieties surrounding a woman seeking divorce and custody in a society reluctant to grant either. But in this drama it is not the Shakers who provide instability – the author constructs Eunice Chapman herself, rather than the Shakers, as the locus for anxieties regarding family stability and female power. He uses her, and by association, the Shakers to serve as a conservative critique of shifting divorce laws. This play was a very early signal, then, of the Shakers ironic utility as enforcers of social conservatism and their potential shift in popular culture.

Few extant copies of *Indoctum Parliamentum* exist, and though some scholars refer to it in passing, no in depth information about it is available.²² The title is surely a reference to the “Parliamentum Indoctum,” or unlearned parliament that met in medieval Coventry and, to which it was stipulated, no lawyer could join. In the early American context it must have been a direct attack against the government institution responsible for hearing Chapman’s bid for divorce. It exists as a short piece, based on Chapman’s petition for divorce (finally heard in 1818) in consequence of her husband’s conversion to Shakerism. Probably never performed; it might have only been released for a number of the anonymous writer’s friends. In any event, the staging (which includes a group of “20,000 ruffians of all nations”) would have been challenging. A one-act verse play, its tone is satirical and the roles caricature actual participants in the Eunice Chapman case – in the play recast as “Eurice.”²³ The satire is, thus, broad and brutal. Indeed, the only participants who get off relatively unscathed are the Shakers – alluded to as faddish, but unthreatening. In order to critique the dangerous liberality of the courts, the writers locate the threat to marriage and family with Eunice rather than the Shakers. Since she, not the Shakers, petitioned for divorce, she embodies the true threat posed to society.

Eurice repeatedly refers to herself in gendered language; she is a witch and a seductress, calling herself “bewitched widow,” and a “witching elf,” stressing the role her sexuality played in her manipulation of the courts. She is constructed as a lusty conniving woman; however, as the sole woman among the cast, she cannot free herself from her husband without the help of the male characters. They claim to recognize the suppression of her sensuality caused by her husband’s “quaking whim,” and, invoking the generative, though Edenic, symbol of a tree, “vow to sever” her “lively limb,” from the “branch of withered Jim” (I: ii; “Jim” is a reference to Chapman’s husband, James). Eurice disappears altogether from the play after the third scene. The legislative parody involves only the men, who parody corrupt politicians, and fleshly desires of Eurice, who should be “left at liberty to love” (I: vii). The Shakers only crop up in the final scene in a dismissive reference to lawyers, and what should become of their generative capabilities: “Lawyers learn’d, by clpp’d and branded, and then on Jemmy’s island stranded” (I: vii). The quality that had lent itself to the harshest criticism, their celibacy, turns into a mockery. In a social world unhinged by the sexual liberty of women, the Shakers seem quaint. As the tumultuous nineteenth century went on, and the actual numbers of Shakers declined, the sect looked more charming and less and less threatening.

Over time, these two opposing forces, that is, the traditional hostility to Shakers and their new-found exemplarity, would surface and descend depending on the intentions of the writers and the historical milieu. The importation of the language of conversion and captivity gave the writers a means by which to weave these threads. It is only when we

²² And these *en passant* references are only in an older generation of works (see Andrews; Blake).

²³ The rendering of Eunice as “Eurice” is one of a number of satirical name changes. Eurice might be a reference to Eurydice, Orpheus’s wife, a dryad, who was killed by a snake. When Orpheus ventures to Hades to retrieve her, he looks back, against Hades’s order, she is returned to Hades. Orpheus is inconsolable and uninterested in anyone else. The Thracian women, outraged, kill him in a bacchanalian revel. Eurydice’s role, then, is as innocent instigator of chaos and disruption.

separate ourselves from the specific historical instant, the early nineteenth century, that we can fully appreciate the peculiarity of this anti-Shaker moment. What had been an “un-American” threat, on par with Indians and Papists, was effortlessly recuperated, Americanized, and sentimentalized. As the United States grew more stable, prosperous, and its values more solidly established, the Shakers came to represent a nostalgia for a simpler time – their primitive religion and folksy ways a pleasant reminder of the lives of our forebearers. This was a misunderstanding, to be sure, but it was one that generally satisfied the Shakers, so it persisted, more or less unchallenged, all the way into our own era. It is worth noting that “Shaker nostalgia” did not truly come into its own until after the Civil War. The possibility of any serious alternative to capitalist, urban, America thus thwarted, a wholesale celebration of backwoods utopianism could begin. But when writers from William Dean Howells to John Fowles used Shaker subjects, they (perhaps unknowingly) unleashed all the gothicism and cultural instability from that earlier era.²⁴

It is a minor historical irony that contemporary celebrations of the Shakers constantly, inadvertently, revisit the group’s complexities. Thus, when writers bring in Shaker characters they cannot easily force them into the role of local color or nostalgic objects; their commitment to a complex set of principles and ultimately a heaven on earth shakes off easy appropriation. But, nonetheless, the Shakers, poorly understood in their own time, seem fated to appear again and again as symbols of an America they themselves rejected. Rather than threatening Americans with capture, they appear to have been captured by America.

But perhaps even this is too simple. Maybe, as Jortner has convincingly argued, the Shakers were always focused on becoming a part of the American mainstream. For all their presumed radicalism, it is not clear that their actual practice truly challenged nineteenth century codes of gender. Like the Mormons, their beliefs, castigated as threatening and foreign, ultimately become a specifically American story. By understanding and manipulating the rhetoric of the nation, the Shakers may have, in the end, outmaneuvered all of those who tried to use this rhetoric against them.²⁵

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²⁴ I am referring specifically to William Dean Howells’ *Undiscovered Country* and *The Day of Our Wedding* and John Fowles’ *A Maggot*. These are discussed at length in Miller.

²⁵ Not everyone, of course, accepts this conclusion. Wergland and Thurman, among others, have insisted otherwise. They maintain that the prominence women found in the organization was almost singular in American religion, and cannot be easily dismissed.

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