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Kate Campbell
Connecticut College, ccampbe3@conncoll.edu

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"Other Domesticities: Utopian Alternatives for White, Middle-Class Women in the Antebellum North."

An Honors Thesis
Presented by:

Catherine F. Campbell

To:
The Department of History
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College
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Introduction

Imagine yourself as a young, middle-class woman living in New England during the nineteenth century. Your society does not see you as equal to men. Thus, instead of higher education in a field you might be interested in, you are trained from a young age in the tasks of running a home, leaving you unskilled in tasks outside the domestic sphere. Because of your limited skill set, your entire future will be confined to your home, whether it be your guardian's or your husband's. By your teenage years you are already searching for a suitable spouse. You are expected to marry, and marry *well*; thus, your life is consumed with presenting yourself as an eligible and qualified young lady to potential suitors who hopefully wish to court you, and ultimately marry you. By your early twenties you are likely married, and within months pregnant with your first child. Your life now becomes solely dedicated to the wellbeing of your husband and children. Your work is never done. You are essentially an unpaid house servant and constant caregiver, maintaining your home and raising your children. If you are lucky, you have found an enlightened spouse, someone who financially and emotionally supports you and cares for your children. If you are unlucky, you have chosen a husband who ignores you, finds more comfort in alcohol, abuses you emotionally or physically, or perhaps abandons you altogether, leaving you destitute and socially ruined, unable to respectably support yourself or your children.

Perhaps you remain unmarried, by choice or by chance. If such is your situation and you happen to live in an urban center, you may find work in a factory or as a domestic servant or with some luck a teacher in a dame school; however, none of these options provide you an independent livelihood. Unfortunately, if you live in a rural

environment, your opportunities for employment are just as limiting. Thus, regardless of your geographic location, you will remain dependent on your male kin for financial support, because the society you live in does not pay you enough to survive on your own and offers you few opportunities for property ownership. Furthermore, you remain a social pariah, constantly stigmatized by your "spinster" status. Your social ranking drops. You have failed to achieve your one life's goal – marriage, and your society will never stop reprimanding you for this disappointment.

Now imagine you hear of a community not far from where you live that offers you an opportunity to live differently. By joining this community you can avoid marriage; have communal help with childrearing, or avoid having children all together; become educated in fields outside of the home; possibly explore traditionally masculine realms; and, perhaps for the first time, become independent and autonomous. Would you take a chance?

Although Utopian communities of the nineteenth century have received much public criticism for their radical social practices and religious beliefs, both during their time and by contemporary historians, history shows us that many single women chose to join these "radical" Utopian societies rather than remain in their normative society. With this in mind, the intention of this thesis is to unveil the motivations of these women and to help explain why these women chose to leave everything they knew behind to join a new, widely unpopular society.

This thesis first explores the experience of single, white, middle-class women in the normative society of the nineteenth century in order to help contextualize what these

women were leaving behind when they joined a Utopian Society. Therefore, in the first chapter, I explain the options that single, white, middle-class women had in the nineteenth century. As described above, these single women essentially had two equally bleak options during the nineteenth century: to marry or to remain single. Because of the gender norms of the Antebellum north, which strictly divided men into a public sphere, and women into a domestic sphere, the expectation was that women would marry, have children, and live her days as a "angel in the house". Yet, marriage, although expected, typically offered women a difficult, exhausting life with little autonomy to alter or better their situation. The only alternative within this society, however, was to remain single, but this life, too, presented many challenges. Spinsterhood often left women financially insecure and often socially stigmatized. Neither option provided women with much security or autonomy.

On the other hand, the Oneida Community and the Shakers, two of the most controversial Utopian societies of the nineteenth century, differed dramatically from the normative society in their treatment of single women, and offered what seemed like a better life for some women of the nineteenth century. Based on the personal experiences of their leaders, both societies were founded with the intention of radically altering gender relations among their communities with the ultimate goal of bettering the female experience.

The Oneida Community, for example, offered many ways for Oneida women to remain autonomous and powerful. Their highly contested system of "Complex Marriage," essentially a free love system in which all members of the Community were married to one another, allowed women to control whom they shared their time with, and,

most importantly, with whom they were sexually intimate. This system also called for the practice of "Male Continence," wherein male members were forbidden from climaxing during sexual intercourse, protecting women from accidental or frequent pregnancy and allowing the experience to remain dedicated to female pleasure. Thus, pregnancy in this community became a choice, not an obligation, and children were communally raised, allowing women to have not only a choice in when and how frequently they had children, but also the opportunity to enrich their own lives instead of dedicating all of their energy and attention on their children and their husbands.

The Shakers, the first Utopian experiment in American history, also offered women the opportunity for more independence and power within their society, because of the Shaker dedication to obtaining gender equality within a community. Because of their controversial celibate lifestyle, the Shakers also provided an alternative to marriage and constant childbearing for their female followers. Women who were perhaps afraid of marriage and sex, or who had had a difficult or dangerous experience in their marriage or pregnancies and wished for a way out, could find a save haven among the celibate Shakers, who rejected sex, and therefore rejected marriage. Additionally, the Shaker ideology was rooted in a "separate but equal" sentimentality that called for the strict division of the sexes, but with the understanding that both genders were equally as important and powerful. The strict gender division, which has previously been described by some as more harsh and oppressive than the division experienced in the normative society of the nineteenth century, actually afforded women the opportunity to focus on themselves, not their husbands, and for the first time, believed their work and talents to be equally as important and worthy as their male counterparts. This "separate but equal"

ethos also motivated a political structure among the community that had equal representation of both sexes. Women, for the first time in American history, were able and encouraged to lead and preach to their fellow women *and* men.

Chapter two and three, which closely analyze these practices of the Oneida Community and the Shakers respectively, help to explain the opportunities that women had among these Utopian Societies in contrast to the lifestyle they would have experienced had they remained in the normative society, as described in chapter one. By offering this comparison, I hope to ultimately offer an explanation as to why single women joined Utopian societies during the nineteenth century, for although we know that nearly ninety percent of all women chose to marry during the nineteenth century, it is worth considering the ten percent who chose a different lifestyle, and *why* they chose to.

My research suggests that though in many ways the normative society and its gender relations were not drastically different from previous centuries, women were increasingly limited in their options during this era, and oppressed in terms of their autonomy and power both in politics and society in general. With this in mind, I argue that Utopian societies, with their dedication to restructuring gender relations and redefining traditional norms like marriage and sexual relations, offered women an appealing alternative to the strict and limiting lifestyle of the normative society. After researching an analyzing the opportunities that Utopian societies like the Shakers and the Oneida Community afforded single women of the nineteenth century, it becomes easier to understand why some of these women chose to leave the normative society for a more radical alternative, because in many ways these "radical" societies were revolutionizing female power and opportunity in the Antebellum period. What they found appealing and

why they decided to take a chance, and perhaps shake away some of the negative stigmas that exist about these Communities.

Chapter One

"Matrimonial Entrepreneurs": Examining Lifestyle Options for Women among the Northern, White, Middle Class Society of the Nineteenth Century

In 1854, Coventry Patmore published his now infamous poem "Angel in the Household," which described his courtship and marriage with his wife, Emily, whom he believed to be the perfect woman. Today, more often than not, Patmore's poem is not read for the beauty of its lyric, but rather for the nature of its content. He poem is as a window into gender relations that existed during the nineteenth century.[1] When Patmore writes, "Man must be pleased/ But him to please is woman's pleasure," or "Dearly devoted to his arms/ She loves with love that cannot tire," Patmore implies that the ideal woman was a perfect wife and mother, selflessly devoted to her children and always submissive to her husband. Unfortunately, Patmore's expectations were not singular, but rather the norm during the nineteenth century. His poetry was so emblematic of the nineteenth-century domestic ideology that not long after its first publication, the term, "Angel in the House" was used to describe any woman who adhered to these standards.[2]

The nineteenth century organized its entire society by gender and a set of sex-specific roles that were determined "on the basis of body." Women and men were now viewed as different kinds of creatures, with "maleness implying aggression, competiveness, and market-related skills, and femaleness including nurturance, emotion,

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[1] Granted, Patmore was English and first published his poem in England. That being said, the same ideology of domesticity that was prevalent in American during this era existed in England as well, and because of England and America's close relationship, American society was actually likely influenced by the Victorian culture of England more than any other culture during this time.

[2] Joan M. Hoffman, "'She Loves with Love that Cannot Tire': The Image of the Angel in the House across Cultures and Across Time," *Pacific Coast Philology,* 42 No. 2 (2007), 1.

and altruism." A new feminine script emerged that emphasized supposed qualitative sexual differences between men and women, "symbolized by their different reproductive function."[3] This distinction gave women of this period, "a limited and sex-specific role to play, primarily in the home."[4] Women were appreciated for their domestic qualifications and reproductive capabilities alone, confining them to the domestic sphere because they were only considered capable of being a wife and mother. This canon of domesticity minimized a woman's public life, demeaned her capabilities greatly, and segregated her severely from men and the public sphere, yet, adhering to this ideology was often the only option for these women.

Some historians argue that gender relations of the nineteenth century were, in many respects, "no harsher than women knew in 1770;" however, the gender relations of the Colonial Era, as Nancy M. Theriot described them in her book *Mothers and Daughter in Nineteenth Century America*, designated middle-class women to the role of a "helpmeet," rather than a dependent, a distinction that provided seventeenth and eighteenth century women much more authority and equality than was provided within the domestic ideology of the nineteenth century. Theriot explains that during the Colonial Period, the "differences between the sexes were seen as a matter of degree, not of kind." Although a woman differed from a man in her "relative physical, mental, and moral weakness," she could help with his work and labor under his guidance.[5] Furthermore, women's work was considered equally important to the man's work during this time, as a wife's production of home goods contributed to the economy of the household. Thus,

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[3] Theriot, 18.
[4] Cott, 5.
[5] Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century American,* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 17.

although a man was considered superior to a woman during the Colonial Era, as a helpmeet a woman could retain some autonomy and garner some independence and power.[6]

This helpmeet role was unattainable for Antebellum women. At the same time American Republic began to formalize itself, offering white men universal suffrage and calling for greater democracy for the common man, women's social and "political incapacity appeared more conspicuous than it had in the colonial period."[7] Due to the prevalent ideology of domesticity, the nineteenth century society became increasingly restrictive. Men and women lived in two entirely different realms -- the public and the domestic – with the public sphere offering men opportunity and increasing power and authority, and the domestic sphere offering women exhausting work and little to no autonomy.[8] The entire society saw women as inferior to men in everyway, and confined them to a limited role as wife and mother.

Immense pressure was placed on single women of this period, starting as early as childhood, to devote their lives to finding the right spouse and doing their part to create a successful union and marriage. As one newspaper article from the time aptly explained,

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[6] Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America,* 17.
[7] Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Women's Sphere' in New England, 1780-1835,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 5-6.
Gerda Lerner suggested in an early study of sex and class in Jacksonian America, that the ideology of separate spheres intensified during this period in order to camouflage the devlining social-political status of middle-class women during this period. See Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America,* 32.
[8] Furthremore, Any economic contributions they may have offered in previous centuries through household production were obsolete as the production and sale of home goods was now taken over by the industrial factories that produced domestic trade, crafts, and services. Additionally, marriage contracts prevented wives from engaging in business ventures on their own, literally preventing them from independently working in any field outside the home. See Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America,* 18.

"Marriage is the duty, the privilege, and the destiny of every woman."[9] Marriage and motherhood were the expectation, and it was generally accepted that a woman's adult life did not begin until she was married and began her lifelong career as a wife and mother. Antebellum men chose a professional career and a worthy spouse, but for Antebellum women, these choices were on in the same.

Women from an early age were trained in how to attract a suitable partner. Courtship began early, with young women beginning to participate in courtship rituals as teenagers, sometimes devoting over a decade to the process of finding, knowing, and choosing a proper husband.[10] If they were not physically participating in courtship customs, they were listening to sermons or reading pamphlets and articles that advised them on how best to achieve their goal. Essays, sermons, novels, poems, and manuals offering advice and philosophy on family life, child rearing and women's role began to flood the literary market in the 1820s and 1830s.[11] Catherine E. Kelly mentions one such pamphlet in her book, *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century,* written by a local pastor, which appeared in the *Hampshire Gazette* in 1873. Entitled "A Pastor's Offering on Courtship and Marriage," the pamphlet provided advice on the best way to find a suitable partner, but also urged women and men to take a long time reflecting on their partners before jumping into marriage.

Of course, men and women were required to question different elements of their partner's character when searching for a proper companion, character traits that were highly influenced by the gender norms of society of that time. For example, the pamphlet

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[9] "Advice to Young Wives," *Harper's Bazaar (1867-1912),* 21 Aug. 1880.
[10] Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984), 23.
[11] Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood,* 63.

mentioned above suggested that eligible men question those womanly qualities of their partners that “contributed much to domestic peace” within a home: i.e. the ability to manage his household and his children. The Pastor is also quick to remind young men that they should be wary of “slatterns and tyrants” who always “lowered a man’s stock within the community by ‘[refusing] to yield to the [husband’s] prerogative of directing [his wife.]” For it was always the man’s prerogative to direct his wife in her activities. Although this is advice for men and not women, it is interesting for it provides insight into the qualities that single women were meant to embody in order to attract a suitable husband. As Catherine Kelly explains, “Marriage to this type of woman [who disrespects or questions her natural responsibilities] portended disaster not because it would ruin the household’s affairs, but because she would ruin her husband’s ‘influence and character’ at home and abroad.” Much like Coventry Patmore’s “Angel in the House,” therefore, this pamphlet is emblematic of the oppressive qualities that were placed on women during the nineteenth century, but especially once married.

Sadly, the married life of women during this period had few charms. As Nancy Cott reveals in her book, *The Bonds of Womanhood,* although all women were subordinated by the structures of their society in general, married women of this period were subjugated still further. A married woman during the nineteenth century had no autonomy or legal existence apart from her husband’s. “She could not sue, contract, or even execute a will on her own, [and] her person estate, and wages became her husbands when she took his name.” A wife was entirely dependent of her husband, especially for financial support. Antebellum society profoundly disadvantaged women in terms of education, preventing women from gaining the skills and knowledge needed for

professional occupations outside the home.[12] Even the female academies that opened during the nineteenth century assumed that domesticity would ultimately occupy their students once graduated. Thus, middle-class women who attended these schools were prepared only in the topics of domesticity and education.[13]

Furthermore, the actual requirements of running a home, raising children, and dutifully serving a husband were physically demanding and exhausting. The role of a wife and mother was a heavy burden for women during the nineteenth century. One article, entitled, "Advice to a Young Lady on her Wedding," published in *Ladies Miscellaneous* by "an attached Friend," wrote of the many responsibilities marriage brought. The "Friend" advises:

> "The home ought to be the center of domestic happiness; and it is the wife's duty to make it both cheerful and sweet… Always receive [your husband] with cheerfulness and good humor, and never omit any polite attention to his friends; for every civility you pay to those he is attached to he will consider as a mark of affection to himself. Be always elegant in your dress, but never expensive; never suffer yourself to be profuse; in the management of your family, be regular to exactitude: it will prevent tradespeople and servants from combining to cheat…Be kind, and even affectionate to all your domestics; but at the same time never suffer them to be guilty of the slightest disrespect… Let your conduct set them an example both of religion and morality; and above all things, avoid the practice of running in debt."[14]

[12] Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood,* 5.
[13] Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America,* 27.
[14] "Advice to a Young Lady on her Marriage," *Weekly Visitor, or Ladies' Miscellany (1802-1806),* 28 Apr. 1804, 2, 82 *American Periodicals*, pg. 236.

Women were required to work round the clock to serve their families, and they were always expected to do so with a smile on their face. Producing and raising children was a requirement of any wife, regardless of whether they wanted to or not, and there was no stopping even after a difficult delivery or the death of a child, as there was no contraception used to prevent future pregnancies.

A poor choice of husband, too, could be a dangerous mistake. The wrong man could be emotionally or materially stingy, unappreciative, or emotionally or physically abusive; yet, in a system where women have few rights, there was little a wife could do to change her situation for the better.[15] Married women, for example, were not legally exempted from mild physical chastisement or marital rape.[16] As Theriot explained, motherhood and marriage did not provide a "position of strength as far as the law was concerned, and in fact, the entire empire of the mother was within the jurisdiction of the fathers."[17] The unfortunate truth was that women were expected to be perfect wives, but men were not held the same standards as husbands. As one man wrote, "The simple truth is that most men neither expect, nor desire nor intend to be agreeable after marriage in the same way which commended them to acceptance during courtship."[18] There was no law to force husbands to love or to treat their wives with kindness, and in truth there was no

[15] Nancy Cott does reveal that during this period, divorce was possible, and even available to wives as the same terms as men within the New England states, but that being said, divorce rates were low and courts granting women divorce were rare. See *The Bonds of Womanhood,* 5.

[16] In fact, the "rule of thumb" was often allowed during this period, which by law, allowed husbands to beat their wives into submission with any object as long as it was no wider than the width of their thumb.

[17] Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America,* 33-34.

[18]

law to keep them from harming their wives emotionally or physically. Such abuse was for many women, just part of the job as a wife and mother.

One married woman reported during the nineteenth century that women were "sent into the world for 'trial and suffering,'" explaining that once married, "the best years of her existence were marked but by sorrow, and by sacrifice."[19] This woman was not alone in her assessment. "Calm endurance of trials and pain" and "constant suffering without complaint" were often words used to describe the essential characteristics of good mothering and domesticity in advice literature of popular women's magazines that flourished during this period. Women spoke, "'moans', 'fears,' 'wasting,' 'grief,' and 'sorrow,' in reference to their lives as mothers and wives.

Knowing that these descriptions were widely circulated, it is no wonder that many single women were apprehensive of marriage. For many, the role of wife seemed daunting and impossible, leaving eligible women feeling insecure and overwhelmed at the idea of marriage. The writer, philanthropist, and teacher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote of her own uncertainty in a letter to her friend Georgiana May Skyes after she was engaged. "My dear," she wrote, "you are engaged, and pledged in a year or two to encounter a similar fate, and do you wish to know how you shall feel? Well, my dear, I have been dreading and reading the time, and lying awake all last week wondering how I should live through this overwhelming crisis." The night before her wedding, Harriet Beecher Stowe does not speak of joy or excitement, rather of anxious anticipation and

[19] Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America,* 27.

fear of her future situation. When her wedding day arrived she wrote, "I feel *nothing at all*." [20]

Harriet Wadsworth Winslow , a lady from Norwich, Connecticut, also felt daunted by her engagement before she married at the age of 22. She wrote in her diary in 1819,

> "The feelings which engrossed me previous to, and at the time of [my] marriage cannot be described… I was cheerful, and I hope grateful; at the same time, when I considered how much meekness and patience a husband would need to bear with my infirmities, I could almost have said, 'Lord, save him from this trial.'"[21]

Susan Mansfield Huntington too wrote of her own fear of accepting such a position in a letter to her sister-in-law, in which she writes, "Flattering as the prospect [of marriage before me is], I cannot contemplate the responsibility of the station in which I am paced…and the arduous duties resulting from it" She explained that she felt as if she would "sink under the weight of the responsibility which now [rested] upon [her]."[22] Her

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[20] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Letter from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Georgiana May Sykes*, 06 Jan. 1836, in *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*. Fields, Annie. (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1897), pp. 406.
[21] Harriet Wadsworth Lathrop Winslow, 1796-1833, Diary of Harriet Wadsworth Winslow, January, 1819, in *Memoir of Mrs. Harriet L. Winslow, Thirteen Years a Member of the American Mission in Ceylon.* (New York, NY: American Tract Society, 1840), pp. 134-135.
[22] Letter from Susan Mansfield Huntington, May 30, 1809, in *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Susan Huntington, of Boston, Mass., Consisting Principally of Extracts from her Journal and Letters: with the Sermon Occasioned by her Death, 2d ed.* Wisner, Benjamin B. Boston, (MA: Cocker & Brewster, 1826), pp. 392.

fear was so great it physically shook her. She wrote Before officially becoming the wife of a clergyman wrote, “When I reflect on the responsibility of this situation, I tremble.”[23]

More often than not, however, women were not just scared of the responsibilities of the future role as wife and mother, but also scared that they would fail to accomplish them. Given the strict and plentiful responsibilities of a wife, many women felt unprepared or unworthy of the station. One article explains that when a marriage is a disappointment to its members, the fault should land on the shoulders of the wife. It explains that, “if the husband is indifferent, silent, fault-finding, bored, addicted to his club, it is almost certainly because the house is unattractive, the dinners uninviting, or the mistress dull.”[24] Some women, understanding that they would be solely responsible for the wellbeing of their families, felt unworthy of the position of “wife,” or felt they could not live up to the expectations.

One historian has coined the phrase, “marriage trauma,” to describe these emotions and fears generated by the pressures that northern, domestic ideology imposed on single women in the early nineteenth century. Twenty-six year old, Mary Holyoke Pearson suffered from this malady. She wrote to her fiancée frequently about her feelings of unworthiness, about how she felt she “could not make [her future husband] happy,” and thus felt unworthy of his affection. Closer to her actual wedding day, Mary admits that she considered marriage “a very troublesome sort of business” continuing on to say how she “greatly [felt her] incapacity for a situation which affords much room for usefulness.” Insecurity and fear of marriage plagued Mary and her fiancée’s, Ephraim,

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[23] Letter from Susan Mansfield Huntington, pg. 392.
[24]

courtship from the beginning, but despite her efforts to show her uneasiness concerning marriage, the two still married in January of 1814.[25]

Some women also felt apprehensive about marriage, not just in thinking of their own future, but in the future of their family. Single women were often integral components of their families. They took care of siblings, worked for extra wages, and even cared for sick parents. Harriet Low Hillard, a diarist from Salem, Massachusetts, revealed the tension young women often faced when choosing to begin their adult lives despite their familial responsibility when she wrote to a friend, "I should think you would be tired of courting, and yet I know not how mother would do without you!"[26]

It was of much concern to young women what affect their absence would have on the running of their family's household. Clearly feeling a similar way, Mary Morton Dexter, a teacher, wrote a letter to her parents in 1812 to thank them for their kindness and support throughout her life, but also to apologize for leaving them. "I now leave you to act in a another sphere, and though I leave you in declining health and years, I hope you will never fail to receive necessary tenderness and attention. The thought of leaving you is indeed painful, but I hope I have not violated my duty to you in forming my present connection." She ends by claiming that should she never see them again in this

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[26] Harriet Low Hillard, 1809-1877, Letter from Harriet Low Hillard, March, 1831, in *My Mother's Journal: A Young Lady's Diary of Five Years Spent in Manila, Macao and the Cape of Good Hope from 1829-1834,* Katherine Hillard, ed.. (Boston, MA: George H. Ellis, 1900), pp. 87.

life, that she will see them in “another world at the right hand of our judge to spend an eternity.”[27]

Despite the many accounts we have detailing the apprehension women felt before marriage, studies reveal that on average, ninety percent of the female population chose to marry during this period. This can be hard to fathom given the type of institution the women were entering into, but we have to remember that this was not necessarily a “choice” for these women. Antebellum society in the north raised middle-class women to marry; it was all they were trained to do, and it was often the safest option financially and politically. Marriage and motherhood was the expectation, and rejecting this role faced a different set of challenges, not the least of which was public ridicule. As one male writer exclaimed that any women seeking toe scape the constant care of her children and husband was “unnatural,” for “’she who can wish to throw off such cares must be capable of any wickedness.’”[28]

Those that were bold enough to seek out an alternative would only find one within this society -- to remain single – and this had its own set of challenges and dangers. A single woman would always suffer from an undeniable economic dependence on her male relatives, unless married. Spinsters had very few options for ways to support themselves independently. Jobs were hard to come by because middle class women were not prepared with the skills needed to enter the emerging capitalist economy. In the early year of the nineteenth century, the New England textile manufactories would employ middle-class women in the task of spinning, but by the 1840s, mill work was consider too

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[27] Mary Morton Dexter, 1785-1822, “Letter from Mary Morton Dexter, 1812,” in *Memoirs and Letters of Mrs. Mary Dexter, Late Consort of Rev. Elijah Dexter*, Torrey, William T. ed., (Plymouth, MA: A. Danforth, 1823), 260.
[28] Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America,*19.

hard and dirty, and "only women who had no other option worked in mills."[29] Catherine Kelly informs us that options were no better in rural towns of New England. These towns had smaller populations than city centers during this period, thus the job opportunities were fewer. This made it incredibly difficult for rural women to secure wage work that was reliable and respectable. They might find a job as a teacher in an elementary school or a dame school, but these were hard to come by. Additionally, there was little access to volunteer work in these areas simply because there was less of a demand for philanthropy than in more urban areas, which was essential for sustaining their reputations. If a single woman was lucky enough to secure a job in these areas, it often forced them to move away and abandon their families and communities, once again forcing women to chose between marriage in a town near their families or independence in an unknown place without a solid support system. If they could not acquire work, single would remain dependent on their male kin or charity. Regardless, even if they could acquire work, female wages were so low that they could not sustain a middle-class life, and would dip down lower in the social pyramid.

If the economic difficulty were not enough of a reason to avoid spinsterhood, social ridicule of such women was likely to scare single women away from a single lifestyle. Emma Hart Willard, a teacher and a crusader for female education who would go on to found the Emma Willard School, spoke of one woman, a "queer spinster of no certain age" that she met at a party in 1831, revealing of how "some say she is crazy… that she lives very cheap, in a place not much better than a garret, without attendants or protection… that she remains a great annoyance to [her hosts], the La Fayettes." After

[29] Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth Century America,* 27.

such gossip about the spinster, Ms. Willard agreed with "what a burr she is," and ultimately decided that she did "not care to have her cling to me."[30] Association with such a hated creature would likely have discredited Emma Willard's character as well.

Harriet Low Hillard explains that spinsters would often stay home, working or reading because "the idea of a spinster walking out alone is an enormity [they] never could be supposed guilty of."[31] Frustrated by the social restrictions placed on her as a spinster, Hillard continued, "I cannot enumerate the thousand little ways in which we [spinsters] are compelled to surrender our own wills to those of other people."[32] Although some may have found freedom in solitude, other spinsters likely found their lives just as restrictive or unpleasant as their married peers. This helps to explain why Harriet Low Hillard spoke fearfully in her diary of becoming a "model for the heretofore despised class of old maids,"[33]

This all being said, it is clearly why many women chose to marry during the nineteenth century. Although marriage was certainly difficult, it was not only expected, but also often safer than the alternative: spinsterhood. On the other hand, Lee Chamber-Schiller notes in her study of single women in the nineteenth century that 7.3 percent of women born between 1835 and 1838, and 8.1 percent of women born between 1845 and 1849 were spinsters. By 1870 and the 1880s, eleven percent of women remained spinsters, the highest percentage in American History at that point.[34] The growing

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[30] Emma Hart Willard, 1787-1870, Diary of Emma Hart Willard, January, 1831, in *Journal and Letters from France and Great Britain.* (Troy, NY: N. Tuttle, Printer, 1833), pp. 157.
[31] Diary of Harriet Low Hillard, August 22, 1834
[32] Diary of Harriet Low Hillard, August 22, 1834
[33] Diary of Harriet Low Hillard, January, 1833
[34] Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America,* 27.

numbers of women who chose to remain single reflected a growing public critique of the oppression that accompanied marriage and motherhood, as well as a growing desire for independence among women. Clearly, women were beginning to take a risk if it meant they could have a more autonomous lifestyle.

Chapter Two

A Perfectionist Alternative: The Female Experience among the Oneida Community

In many ways, the Oneida Community offered Americans, particularly women, an interesting and appealing alternative to normative culture of the nineteenth century. Yet, in the history of Utopian Societies of the nineteenth century, few have received such criticism as the Oneida Community. Although the Oneida Communists believed their purpose was first and foremost a religious one, today they are most often remembered and often condemned for their "radical" social theory and community structure rather than their religious fervor. Of course it is easy today, to look back on the history of the Oneida Community with a modern perspective and critique the community for its strange, "cult-like" practices; however, if we consider the community in the context of the time in which it existed, its negative connation nearly falls away. This is not to say that the community was faultless; it did have many problems, including incest and an entirely patriarchal governance. That being said, its negatives were balanced by many positive qualities and practices that are often overlooked with our modern mindset. Perfectionistic in focus, John Humphrey Noyes and his followers hoped to create an experimental community founded on the principles of equality and balance.[35] Although

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[35] Perfectionism was John Humphrey Noyes' religious ideology. The Community's founder and leader, John Humphrey Noyes, believed that the second coming of Christ had already occurred in the year 70AD, and thus that it was possible to recreate the perfection of Jesus' millennial kingdom on earth. The object was to "replicate the heavenly state" among his community: a society devoid of sin. Noyes thought of heaven as "a place where private ownership of things and people was unknown."[35] In this way, Noyes' Perfectionism motivated his strives to fix many of the problems he saw in the normative society within his "Perfect" Community, including those he recognized amidst traditional gender relations in their repercussions for women.

radically different than the normative society, the Oneida theological foundations gave way to a social structure committed to sexual experimentation, cooperative child care, and a system of shared property; all of which worked together to provide Oneida followers, particularly women, a revolutionary lifestyle as compared to the normative society.

At the root of the Oneida Community ethic is the basic principle of sharing, which the members applied to every facet of their lives, from food and chores, to sexual partners and children. Sharing was their ethos, and unsurprisingly, it was considered shocking and disgraceful to many more conservative or traditional members of the normative society. Outsiders frequently criticized the community, seeing their beliefs and controversial sexual practices to be, among many things, a direct attack on individual liberties and traditional values like marriage and accepted and defined gender roles.

William Hepworth Dixon, an English historian who visited and researched many of the most notorious Utopian societies during the early and mid-nineteenth century, published his book, *New America,* in 1867, with the intention of exposing the "truth" about many of these contentious communities, including the Mormons, the Oneida Community, and the Shakers, to the wider public. When describing the Oneida Communists, Dixon explained,

> "They have restored, as they say, the Divine Government of the world; they have put the two sexes on an equal-footing; they have declared marriage a fraud and property theft; they have abolished for themselves all human laws; they have formally renounced their allegiance to the United States.[36]

[36] William Hepworth Dixon, *New America*, (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1867), 208-9.

Although clearly William Dixon meant this to be a critical revelation about the practices and beliefs of the Oneida Community, which Dixon himself was fundamentally opposed to the and saw as something to be critiqued rather than encouraged, if one looks past his judgmental tone, the quote actually reveals many of the most beneficial elements of the Community. The Oneida Community believed in equal rights and autonomy, especially for women. As Anthony Wonderley, curator of the Oneida Community Mansion House, wrote, The Oneida Community was "sincere in their goal to correct the injustice of [commonly accepted] gender relations."[37] Thus, although today, many judge Oneida as an oppressive and patriarchal society, in fact, many of its founding principles were created in the hopes of liberating women, and at a time when such a goal, as Dixon's quote suggests, was seen as outrageous and fundamentally un-American.

Noyes' personal history motivated this passion for creating gender equality and female liberation in his utopian society. Although born into a family with a rather impressive lineage and social standing, John Humphrey Noyes childhood was not always one of ease and comfort.[38] His father, despite his position as a prominent Congressman, was also a notorious alcoholic. John Noyes Sr.'s drinking became such a problem that in 1837, a petition was submitted by neighbors to local officials in Putney Vermont on behalf of the Noyes children, asking the committee to require Congressman Noyes to

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[37] Anthony Wonderley, "Oneida Community Gender Relations – In Context and Over Time," *American Communal Societies Quarterly,* 7 (Jan 2013): 15.

[38] His mother, Polly Hayes Noyes, was the daughter of Rutherford Hayes, a prominent businessman and the grandfather of Rutherford B. Hayes, the nineteenth president of the United States, while his father was a Dartmouth educated Politian, who served as a Congressman for the House of Representatives from 1815 to 1817. See Constance Noyes Robertson's, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography, 1851-1876*, 1-2.

abandon his drinking "in order to avoid publicly disgracing [his] family."[39] Feeling neglected and essentially abandoned by his frequently drunk or traveling father, John Humphrey Noyes recognized that his father was "a man who his devout mother could not, or at least should not, have respected."[40] Yet, he understood that according to the nature of society, his mother was trapped in a disappointing marriage, eternally bound to a disrespectful and disgraceful man with no way out.

Noyes' empathy for the plight of women only grew after witnessing firsthand the struggles and sorrows of his own wife, Harriet Holton, as she went through childbirth. Within the first six years of their marriage, four of Harriet's five children were stillborn. It was not until 1841 that Harriet gave birth to their only living son, Theodore. Not surprisingly, Harriet struggled emotionally, feeling both grief for her lost children and also shame for her inability to provide children for her husband. What Noyes' realized, however, was that her situation was not singular, and that unfortunately the nature of the normative society ensured that "suffering was the natural lot of women," a sentiment that, "John Noyes could not accept."[41]

Realizing that his society asked single women to forfeit any independence they had and placed undue pressures on them that they often could not bear emotionally or physically, John Humphrey Noyes suggested an alternative in his Oneida Community, wherein single women were afforded the opportunity to retain their autonomy and rid

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[39] Louis Kern, "Introduction: The Perfect Love of God: John Humphrey Noyes, Founder of the Oneida Community," in *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias – The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 210.
[40] Kern, *An Ordered Love,* 211-212.
[41] Constance Noyes Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography, 1851-1876*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970), 9.

themselves of the burdens associated with marriage and motherhood. Although Oneida's perfectionists, "understood that their way of life flew in the face of gender segregation in the outside world," it was precisely for that reason that the community became an appealing alternative to the norm, particularly to many women of the nineteenth century who longed for equality and a better way of life. Thus, if we consider the diaries and autobiographies of a few of the female members of the Oneida Community, it is perhaps unsurprising that their words are not stirred by hate or resentment which might be expected from members of an oppressive or corrupted community, but rather by admiration and appreciation for their experience in the Community.

Consider this passage as noted in the Community's *Circular*, in April of 1857, recollecting the response to one male member's question to the female communists[42]:

> "One conscientious brother wished to know whether women had their full rights [at Oneida]… He wanted to know if any of the women felt themselves limited or oppressed, or in any way deprived of their natural rights. His inquiry was met with a hearty negative from the party addressed… they said they felt no oppression, but help in every way from the men, and that they saw no distinction of privilege in the Community; women enjoy all the advantages for personal improvement and expansion that men do"[43]

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[42] It is important to question, however, whether The *Circular* and other Oneida publications were more like propaganda or more honest, or perhaps a mixture of both. It is likely that because these publications were written by the community and distributed throughout the outside world, that there was some element of bias that affected the validity of these claims. The Community was trying to present itself as a perfect world to the outside community, and thus, they may have skewed their articles to indicate this to their readers.

[43] Wonderley, "Oneida Community Gender Relations," 15.

Women at Oneida felt that they were living in a more equal and accepting culture than that of the normative nineteenth century society. But why did they feel this way? In what ways did this society provide women independence and autonomy not found in the outside world? What inspired such gratitude? What made Oneida so appealing? How did John Humphrey Noyes help to "transform the domestic environment" and "redefine the ideal of gender relations?"[44]

In many ways it was just as simple as emphasizing gender equality by encouraging the participation of women in all aspects of community life, not just those of a domestic nature. As Noyes once said in 1853, "'We will do the fair thing by [women]. We will try to understand and appreciate [them] and remove the torment and encumbrances between [the women] and the men. We will make room for [women] and [they] shall have all the chance [they] want. Before God, we give [them their] free papers.'"[45] In the normative society, men refused to look on women as equals, but in the Oneida Community, women were free to express their own tastes and feelings and explore educational and vocational opportunities they never had before.

The most forthright way for them to do this was through the Community policy of "mutual criticism," wherein women had the right to publically critique their fellow communists of either sex, or to call out any aspect of the Community with which they found fault, at their general meetings. These criticisms could be as simple, and arguably frivolous, as "critiquing" a fellow society member for their use of "irritating baby talk," or as important as asking for more workers in the kitchens or factories. Women were

[44] Wonderley, "Oneida Community Gender Relations," 1.
[45] Wonderley, "Oneida Community Gender Relations ," 14.

encouraged to speak out, speak their minds, and attempt to affect change rather than sit silently and accept the wills and wishes of their husbands or male relatives.[46]

Women were also free to explore new types of work outside of the domestic sphere, as men in the Community were now actively taking on traditionally feminine tasks like cooking, waiting on tables, house-cleaning and other housework. Laundry, for example, was considered the most arduous of house chores, and yet the community assigned fifteen women and fifteen *men* to complete the weekly washing, drying, ironing, and folding of the clothing.[47] With men now working alongside the Community women in the domestic realm, Oneida women were free to explore their interests and take on some of the more "masculine" tasks. For example, two women were appointed as the "Express Agency," in which they were required "to run a horse and carriage for light errands daily to the Oneida depot," in order to, as John Humphrey Noyes put it, "extend the women's sphere."[48] Additionally, Oneida was one of the first groups to grant full equality in manufactory and management positions to women. It was not uncommon to see women working on the farms and in the factories completing heavy, difficult labor alongside the men.[49] A letter written by a New Arrival revealed: "I see here, women employed as bookkeepers, business correspondents, packers and shippers, and managers of large manufacturing establishments. The policy of the community is leading more and

[46] For more information about mutual criticism, see Murray Levine and Barbara Benedict Bunker's *Mutual Criticism.*
[47] Wonderley, "Oneida Community Gender Relations, " 15.
[48] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 295.
[49] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 22-23.

more in the direction of this enlargement of women's avocations. They have a taste for it, and it makes them happy, as well as doubly useful."[50]

This dedication to liberating women from the isolation of domestic work, Wonderley suggests, was likely inspired by the ideas of Fourierism, which had swept the country in the 1840s. The key principle of the Fourierism movement was that humans acted according to inborn talents and traits called "passions." If one group of people had the correct mix and number of passions, should this group then live together in one big house or "phalanstery," (which the Oneida Community did in their Mansion House where all members lived) the result would automatically achieve utopia. Applying the ideas of Fourierism to work, wherein men and women were put to all types of work, therefore, ensured that "work would be enjoyable and everything would get done because people were doing what they were meant to do."[51]

Yet, women were not just encouraged to try new types of work outside of the home they were also encouraged to educate themselves beyond the normal primary school education that was provided for women in the normative society. The education of women was consistently a prominent point of discussion in the Community. There was always an emphasis on adult education. Every member, regardless of age, was required to commit him or herself to constant improvement; thus, it was not enough to be educated as

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[50] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 301-2.

Wonderley in his article "Oneida Community Gender Relations," also describes the community's practice of "Bees," or organized Community wide work sections where men, women, and children came together, worked with one another, to complete large tasks, regardless of whether they were seen as traditionally masculine or feminine. This too was revolutionary, as the normative society restricted men to the public sphere and women to the domestic sphere, dividing the sexes and preventing their interaction during or collaboration on work.

[51] Wonderley, "Oneida Community Gender Relations," 10.

a child, adults were encouraged to continue learning by taking classes within the community. "Classes in a dozen subjects were formed," Constance Noyes reveals in her *Oneida Autobiography*, and as early as 1853 middle-aged men and *women* were "studying English grammar, German, and French." Night classes were provided in the Community that allowed for all willing members to participate after all their tasks were done for the day. By 1855, Constance Noyes revealed, "Greek and French languages, mathematics, and grammar," were the classes that were "in vogue after super, varied occasionally by a 'writing bee.'" Women were even readings such advanced texts as "Malthus, Plato, and Greek history and literature."[52]

It was universally accepted among the Oneida members that "girls should be encouraged to study everything boy should," and thus by 1866, there was even a formal discussion of a Community University, in which "girls should have all the advantages of boys," learning everything from swimming to sciences and cultivating a "taste for solid reading." Unfortunately, the university never materialized, either due to lack of funds or lack of time; yet, Community education, and particularly *female* education, remained a grand ambition of the Community, next only to spiritual improvement.[53]

It is no wonder, given the exceptional emphasis on female inclusion, equality, and improvement that even the critical William Dixon in his *New America* admitted to his readers that "the style of living at Oneida Creek gives a good deal of power to women, much beyond what they enjoy under law," noting that "the ladies [of Oneida] all seem busy, brisk, content; and those to who I have spoken on this all say they are very happy in

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[52] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 23, 295.
[53] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 23, 295.

their lot."[54] For this reason, in a period when women outside the Community were beginning for the first time to focus on the subject of Women's Rights, the women of the community "wished it to be understood that they had already dealt with the matter [of female equality] to their own satisfaction."

There was equality and betterment for women even in the way in which Oneida women dressed. It was commonly noted that the women of the Community chose to dress in a tunic that fell to the knee with a pair of loose trousers worn underneath. With short hair parted down the middle, no corsets or crinolines, and pants worn underneath their gowns, the Onedia women seemed to look and dress quite strangely as compared to the outside world, but in many ways their new garb simply represented the freedom and equality they felt while in their Community. As one woman wrote, "The women say they are far more free and comfortable in this dress than in long gowns; the men think that it improves their looks; and some insist that it is entirely more modest than the common dress."[55] In nearly every way, women seemed to feel far less oppressed in their Community than in the normative society; although, this was quite contrary to the opinions of many others, who criticized the Community as being an oppressive, patriarchal society.

Perhaps the Oneida Community practice that fostered the most criticism in the normative society of the nineteenth century was their practice of "Complex Marriage." Many believed this program to be something akin to the polygamous structure of the Mormon's in the West and, therefore, equally deplorable; however, the program "advocated neither a plurality of wives nor a community of wives, but a *nullity* of

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[54] Dixon, *New America*, 240-1.
[55] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 297.

wives."[56] Essentiall,y the practice of Complex Marriage required community members to "enter into the holy ordinance of group matrimony or pantogamy, in which celibacy and monogamy were discouraged, and 'free love' was virtually obligatory."[57] Although many chastised them for this "free love" policy, the Oneida Community members continued their system of Complex Marriage until they disbanded in 1881.

For the Oneidians, monogamy was considered a selfish practice, in which a husband claimed a wife as property whose use was exclusive to her owner. As William Dixon explained in *New America,* "Another general principle well understood in the Communities, is that it is not desirable for two persons to become exclusively attached to each other – to worship or idolize each other – however popular this experience may be with sentimental people. They regard exclusive idolatrous attachment as unhealthy and pernicious where it may exist."[58] The exclusive, idolatrous bonds of monogamous marriage, therefore, violated the principles of the Oneida Community, in that it actively contradicted their ethos of sharing. If their ultimate goal were to build a community on the foundation of loving and sharing with all, monogamous marriage would prevent the achievement of God's will.

This system, unlike what the normative society may have believed, did not originate to satisfy lustful urges or simply to be contrarian and reject the practices of the "imperfect" normative society. Like all of his decisions, Noyes' insisted that Complex Marriage was founded in perfectionist ideology. As he explained, '"When the will of God is done on Earth as it is in Heaven, there will be no marriage. Exclusiveness, jealousy,

[56] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 297.
[57] Wonderley, "Oneida Community Gender Relations," 10.
[58] Dixon*, New America*, 239.

quarrelling have no place in the marriage supper of the Lamb. God has placed a partition between man and women during the apostasy for good reason: this partition will be broken down in the resurrection for equally good reason.'"[59] Therefore, the Oneida Communists in practicing Complex Marriage were free from the "exclusiveness, idolatry, [and] purely selfish love" involved in monogamous marriage, and in so practicing the system they advocated would achieve the same state of free love and communal marriage found in Heaven.[60]

Outsiders, of course, disliked the polyandrous relationships of the Oneida, claiming them to be an abominable attack on tradition and nature; however, these outsiders likely took more offense to the sexual practices of the Community, rather than their marital practices, or lack thereof. In a monogamous marriage it is understood that the husband may sleep with his wife; therefore, in a system of Complex Marriage, wherein all members are married to one another, there is the opportunity for any husband and wife to sleep with one another.[61] Understandably, this relation of the sexes aggravated and disgusted the more traditional, conservative society outside the Community; John Humphrey Noyes, however, argued, "It is a blunder to say either that a

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[59] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 6-7.
[60] Dixon, *New America*, 239.
[61] Of course, all of these sexual relationships remained heterosexual, because "communication between male and female is more perfect than between persons of the same sex," according to John Humphrey Noyes. It is important to note this, for although the system of Complex Marriage as organized and practiced within the Oneida Community may well have provided opportunities for female sexual exploration and pleasure, it was still not radical enough to promote or accept homosexual relations. In that way, while Oneida did offer new opportunities for single women of this period, it was still an unwelcome place for lesbian women of the era. See Anthony Wonderley's article, ""Oneida Community Gender Relations – In Context and Over Time," 5.

man can only love once in his life, or that he can only love one object at one time."[62] Men and women, he believed '"Find universally that their susceptibility to love is not burnt out by one honeymoon, or satisfied by one love. On the contrary, the secret history of the human heart will bear out the assertion that it is capable of loving any number of times, and any number of persons; and that the more it loves, the more it can love. [That] is the law of nature.'"[63] With this mindset, the Oneida Communists insisted that their hearts should be kept free to love all that were true and worthy in God's eyes.[64] Many might have seen this as a masculine attempt to satisfy their lusts and dominate women, however, this system was not nearly as patriarchal or merely sexual as it might appear from the outside.

When Noyes originated this system of Complex Marriage, he argued there were two separate functions for sexual intercourse: the social, or what he referred to as "the amative," and the propagative. In his view, "the mere social act of sexual intercourse was healthy and joyful:" natural because God created maleness and femaleness to fit with one another in perfect harmony, and pleasurable because it was believed that the "spirit of God "passed" between the sexually conjoined," and, therefore, those who were sexually enjoined came closure to God through their sexual act.[65] In this way, sex for pleasure was natural and encouraged among the Oneida Community; it was only the propagative act that rendered sexual intercourse "insalubrious and destructive."

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[62] Dixon, *New America*, 236.
[63] Dixon, *New America*, 236.
[64] Dixon, *New America*, 239..
[65] Wonderley, "Oneida Community Gender Relations," 8.

In order to preserve the enjoyable and healthy aspect of sexual intercourse, Noyes developed the practice of "male continence."[66] Otherwise known in the Community as *coitus reservatus*, male continence was a type of contraception in which the male sexual partner was prohibited from achieving orgasm and ejaculating during sexual intercourse. It was an extreme practice of self-control, yet it was instituted in order to prevent accidental propagation during sexual intimacy and to promote the amative sexual intimacy within the Complex Marriage system of the Community that Onedia believed was fundamental to personal religious growth. Male continence "was pleasurable because couples practicing male continence 'could enjoy the highest bliss of sexual fellowships for any length of time, and from day to day, without satiety or exhaustion,'" and most importantly without risking unwanted consequences.[67] As Noyes explained, "[Male continence] leads to the greatest happiness in love and the greatest good to all."[68]

This practice was particularly helpful for women. For the first time, sexual intercourse was promoted as an act of pleasure and intimacy, rather than a necessary act for procreation that all wives were obliged to perform. The attention was no longer focused solely on male pleasure; in fact, it was averted from male pleasure as male climax was discouraged in this system. Suddenly, women were "encouraged to have orgasms… because they could physiologically do so without entailing propagative consequences."[69] An emphasis on female sexual pleasure was revolutionary for the time, and likely very well received by the female participants of the Oneida experiment. Furthermore, sex was not seen as a requirement or obligation; many Community

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[66] Kern, *An Ordered Love*, 224.
[67] Wonderly, "Oneida Community Gender Relations," 30.
[68] Dixon, *New America*, 240.
[69] Kern, *An Ordered Love,* 224.

members were reported to have remained celibate, if not their entire time at the Community, then at least for a part of it.[70] Noyes was apt to say that in his society, "'We teach [husbands and wives] the law of love,'" and thus, all actions were done in the name of communal love.[71] Sex within the system of Complex Marriage, therefore, liberated women two fold. Sex within this social construct became an act of love and gratification between two consenting individuals that emphasized female pleasure, rather than one of obligation or necessity on the part of a wife serving her husband. Furthermore, the practice of male continence protected women in a new way, for they were no longer "troubled with involuntary propagation," but could *chose* to enter into motherhood or reject motherhood altogether.[72] Because of male continence, pregnancy became a choice not a requirement for women.

Of course, there have been many objections to such a system, both in the nineteenth century and today. Many take objection to the fact that this system led to incest or what we would consider today to be statutory rape, and unfortunately in some cases these assumptions hold true. Tirzah Miller Herrick, for example, spoke of multiple sexual encounters she shared with both her uncle and her cousins within her memoir of her life among the Oneida Community.[73] Additionally, it was a well-known practice at Oneida that the virgins of the Community would be initiated into sexual intercourse by an older member of the Community who was considered more experienced, more spiritual, and more practiced in the "art" of male continence. In critiquing the Community and their

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70 Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 21-22.
71 Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 15.
72 Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 15.
73 Tirzah Miller Herrick, *Desire and Duty at Oneida: Tirzah Miller's Intimate Memoir*, ed. Robert S. Fogarty (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000).

sexual practices, Marilyn Klee-Hartzell reveals that it was John Humphrey Noyes who personally initiated every female virgin "shortly after her first menses," thus, typically around the age of twelve. Thereafter, until around the age of twenty-five, Klee-Hartzell continues, these newly initiated women would have sexual relations exclusively with older Community men, "'who had learned the practice of 'male-continence.'"[74]

These virgins, as Klee-Hartzell continues on to explain, knew little to nothing about sexual intercourse, or the sexual arrangements of their adult Community, having been shielded from such information in the Children's House where they lived.[75] Having previously had no instruction in sexual education or reproduction, these virgins would briefly consult an older female of the Community for "counsel," who believed it was their duty to teach the younger members about sex and Complex marriage so that these virgins could better experience the benefits of such systems and practices. As Miss B., one of these sexual mentors, once said, "We are all brothers and sisters, and the wiser ones lead the less wise through 'Ascending Fellowship' into love."[76] Thus, just as some

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[74] Marilyn Klee-Hartzell, "Family Love, True Womanliness, Motherhood, and the Socialization of Girls in the Oneida Community, 1848-1880," in *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States,* ed. Wendy E. Chmieleqski et al. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 197.

This was the only source I came across in my research that suggested this data. Even within the memoirs that I read of the women in the Community, it appears that they had sexual encounters with younger members of the community long before the age of twenty-five, and none of them mention being required to sleep solely with there leader at any point during their lives at Oneida. Thus, I question how valid Klee-Hartzell's argument is, especially considering such a practice would foster the type of special and idolatrous relationships between the women of Oneida and their leader that the Community was so strongly opposed to.

[75] The children were always kept in a separate section of the Communal house, and by 1870, had entire wing build exclusively for the children to live in called the Children's House.

[76] Klee-Hartzell, "Family Love, True Womanliness, Motherhood, and the Socialization of Girls in the Oneida Community, 1848-1880," 197.

older members of the community would lead the younger physically into love, some mentors would help them ascend mentally into understanding love, sex, and complex marriage as well.

Of course, as Klee-Hartzell had argued, because these virgins had previously remained "quite uninformed about sex," such a practice of "sexual initiation" could be described as taking advantage or corrupting young men and women for the sexual benefit of their elders.[77] From a modern perspective this system can often only be seen as a formalized system of statutory rape and child abuse, and such a claim would not be without merit. However, among the Oneida Community, such a practice seemed beneficial for all parties. The inexperienced and anxious were learning from someone more experienced and experiencing such an intimate act with someone they knew well. This may actually have been a comforting alternative to those young women and men who may well have been anxious for their first time or generally uncomfortable with or unknowledgeable about the idea of sex. It certainly was for Tirzah Miller Herrick, who spoke of her relations with John Humphrey Noyes, as well as with older members of the Community, as comforting and enlightening. She writes of her relationship with him as only positive, and never describes feeling uncomfortable or manipulated by him or the Oneida system more widely.[78]

The Oneidas, therefore, supported and justified their sexual practices, explaining, "it is not desirable for two inexperienced and unspiritual persons to rush into fellowship with each other… it is far better for both to associate with persons of mature character

[77] Klee-Hartzell, "Family Love, True Womanliness, Motherhood, and the Socialization of Girls in the Oneida Community, 1848-1880," 196.
[78] Tirzah Miller Herrick, *Desire and Duty at Oneida*

and sound sense."[79] Such a system of the older teaching the younger, the Community believed, ensured that virgins were taught about sexual intercourse from someone experienced, kind, and willing to teach. Furthermore, from approximately the age of twelve to twenty-five, young men in the Community had sex exclusively with post-menopausal women in order to master "male continence" without the risk of accidental ejaculation and impregnation, teaching these men the importance of self-control in the sexual act. Moreover such a practice emphasized that sex in the Community was first and foremost seen as a pleasurable experience for *both* parties, rather than a risky experience for one and a pleasurable experience for the other.

The Oneida Community also introduced the idea of a third-party intermediary in order to further protect the men and women involved in sexual relations within their system of Complex Marriage. It was a founding principle that "men in their approaches to women [would] incite personal interviews through the intervention of a third party," often the leader Noyes. Not only did a third party allow for the suggested pairing to be, in some way, put under the inspection of the Community in order to prevent frequent and inappropriately exclusive attachment between two members,[80] but it also allowed women to decline proposals without embarrassment or restraint. The Community stood against disagreeable social approaches, and insisted, "no person shall be obliged to receive, at any time, or under any circumstances, the attention or those who they do not like."[81] This third party system, therefore, also provided power to women to decide whom they would

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[79] Dixon, *New America*, 238.

[80] As explained above, special or monogamous relationships between two members of the society were seen as violating the Oneida sharing ethos, and therefore, were seen as detrimental to the success of creating a perfect community on earth.

[81] Dixon, *New America*, 239.

be intimate with, when, and how often, for they were free to reject the advances of a male lover within a safe and understanding process.[82]

The sexual practices of the Oneida Community not only ensure that women had more control over their bodies, their partners, and their pleasure, but also gave way to a new societal value system that reinterpreted traditional ideas about children and motherhood. Male Continence, as mentioned before, essentially acted as an early form of birth control, nearly one hundred years before birth control was widely accepted socially or religiously throughout the world, because there was less of a risk of accidental insemination during sexual intercourse.[83] Therefore, with the practice of Male Continence came a new system of procreation that provided women the power to "choose when and with whom to conceive," and thus "random and involuntary propagation [could] cease."[84]

By 1870, John Humphrey Noyes established the first (and only successful) systematic practice of eugenics in America (with fifty-eight children born in the system between 1870 and the close of the Oneida Community ten years later), which the Oneidians referred to as "Stirpiculture," to further ensure that only those who wanted to become parents, and who were worthy and able of becoming parents, would be the ones to produce children in the Community. Such a system would hopefully protect women from continuous failed pregnancies or childbirth complications by essentially mating

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[82] Of course, while this system could function to empower and protect women, it could also be used to exploit them. Because the Oneida leader, John Humphrey Noyes, was more often than not the third party reviewing these invitations and advances, one could argue that this put even more power into the hands of Noyes. Noyes was now able to determine and manipulate who would be sexually intimate with others based on his own opinions and wishes. Yet, we must remember that even having some say in the frequency of sexual intercourse and the power to chose a partner was revolutionary for women during this period.

[83] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 9.

[84] Wonderley, "Oneida Community Gender Relations," 8.

them with partners with which they could successfully procreate, and furthermore, stirpiculture would safeguard the future generations from social or religious imperfection.

Those couples who wished to become parents and thought themselves of the correct and perfect nature, would "submit applications for reproduction to a governing agency" within the Community. Almost all requests were approved, and "if an application were disapproved, the Committee would always interest itself in an attempt to find a combination agreeable to those concerned which it would approve thereafter."[85] Thus, only those who wanted to have children would apply to have children, taking the pressure of those who did not wish to participate, while still offering the opportunity to those who longed for the experience.[86] The Community voted unanimously to initiate the reproductive program, and some ninety young men and women volunteered themselves as soldiers in the cause of scientific propagation.[87]

How the Community approached raising their children was also revolutionary in that the process took some pressure off new mothers and also offered the opportunity for other Community women to participate in motherhood without necessarily giving birth to their own children. John Humphrey Noyes stated multiple times that within the system of Complex Marriage all members were bound to one another, and thus "the whole group

[85] Wonderley, "Oneida Community Gender Relations," 8.

[86] Of course today, this system of eugenics is distasteful. In terms of female liberty, many argue that this system was equally as oppressive for women than those who lived in the normative society. Yes, these women were no longer required to have children, forced to have sex, or shamed when they could not conceive or carry a child to term; however, it did put many women in an awkward position. Either, women who wanted to have children were not guaranteed that they would be able to, or even with a partner of their choosing necessarily.

[87] Wonderley, "Oneida Community Gender Relations," 8.

held themselves responsible for every child born to the group."[88] Within this system of child rearing, the women of the Oneida Community were asked to extend their ethos of sharing and universal love and break down traditional family systems; these women were required to "enlarge their feelings of love and loyalty from a small family unit to include several hundred family members."[89]

This practice, in addition to reinforcing the concept of communal love and living, also prevented idolatrous, possessive relationships; much like Complex Marriage did for monogamous relationships. "Philoprogenitiveness," or the excessive love of one's biological children, was often warned against, and even punished, in the Community for it not only interfered in the Community's practices, but also distracted and prevented women from loving God wholeheartedly and above all else. As Mary E. Cragin, a particularly devoted follower and lover of John Humphrey Noyes wrote, philoprogenitiveness kept women's hearts "in a bleeding state, to the weakening of our whole character." She continued on to suggest that much as a tree requires pruning to grow vigorously, "so might God take away children from mothers who were blinded by the passions of philoprogenitiveness."[90] To prevent philoprogenitiveness, therefore, the Community had a system in which mothers were prohibited from exclusively raising their children after the first year of their life. In place of the biological mother, volunteers from the Community would work in a Community Nursery to care for and raise the children

[88] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 21-22.
[89] Klee-Hartzell, "Family Love, True Womanliness, Motherhood, and the Socialization of Girls in the Oneida Community, 1848-1880," 183.
[90] Klee-Hartzell, "Family Love, True Womanliness, Motherhood, and the Socialization of Girls in the Oneida Community, 1848-1880," 185.

through adolescence, at which point the biological mother could once again take a more prominent role in the lives of their children. As Constance Noyes Robertson explains,

From the beginning Community children, either Community-born or those brought in by parents who joined from the outside, were cared for all together in a children's department under the supervision of selected nurses and teachers. Their own parents were freely allowed to see them, but the responsibility for their care was taken by the appointed guardians, and their mothers were able to continue whatever work they had previously undertaken.[91]

Although many might disapprove of this system, questioning how its practice might affect the biological mothers or burden the other female members of the Community to raise children that were not biologically their own, from memoirs and Community letters and newspaper articles, it becomes clear that this system was popular among the women of Oneida. For example, Constance Noyes Robertson revealed in her memoir, "the fashion is growing to favor among the mothers and women here of loving and especially caring for children other than their own. The plan works well, and is enlarging and communizing the hearts of those who enter into it."[92] Harriet Worden, who also wrote of her experience as a child born and raised in the Community, wrote,

> "The women who served as 'mothers' and attendants of the children found the business not a burden but a pleasure. At first the real mothers experienced considerable distress in giving up their little ones to the care of others, but a new sphere of existence opened to them, and they now found time for other pursuits, [and] the improvement in the behavior and general condition of their children was of greater value than the luxury of a sickly maternal tenderness"[93]

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[91] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 22.
[92] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 303.
[93] Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 14.

Of course, those questioning the success of this system will emphasize the "considerable distress" of the new mothers after their forced separation. Marlyn Klee-Hartzell did just this in her article, "Family Love, True Womanliness, Motherhood, and the Socialization of Girls in the Onedia Community, 1848-1880." She argued that many of the women in Oneida had immense difficulty sharing their children with their community and "in dealing with feelings of special love for their children."[94] She questioned the validity of statements made by women in the Community expressing their approval of the system, arguing that they were likely pressured to state their approval or brainwashed to think such a practice was ultimately for the best. In Hartzell's research, memoirs of both Corinna Ackley Noyes and Pierrepont Noyes, two individuals who were born and raised within the Oneida Community, reveal that their own mothers experienced significant turmoil in surrendering them to the Children's Ward. For example, in Corina's memoir *Days of My Youth*, she reveals that her mother was often punished for her "mother-sprit." Corinna recounts one particularly "painful and lasting memory" from her youth in which she "caught a glimpse of her [mother, Alice,] passing through a hallway near the children's house, and rushed after her, screaming." Likely because she knew that the pair would be punished with another week of forced separation for encouraging philoporgenitiveness, Corina's mother stepped quickly into a nearby room to avoid

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[94] Particularly after they became physically and emotionally attached to their newborns during the first year of their lives, when the young mothers would intimately and independently care for their newborns, watching over them constantly. As Hartzell argues, "The abrupt change from their around-the-clock personal care of their children to their relinquishment to the Children's House probably caused a serious dislocation in the mothers' emotions and daily routines." See *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*, 185 (in text) & 190 (in footnote).

contact with her daughter; however, Corinna was too young to recognize the motivations for her mother's shift and was unaware of the consequences of her own actions, and thus "rushed after her, [flinging herself upon her mother], clutching her around the knees, crying and begging her not to leave until some Children's House mother, hearing the commotion, came and carried [her] away." (Days of My Youth, 50)

Hartzell argues that accounts like Corinna's contradict the public references made by Community mothers stating their approval for the system, most especially one made by Alice Ackley, Corinna's mother, in the Oneida Circular published June 23, 1873, in which she admitted that she then realized, "as [she had] not before, that the old way of each mother's caring exclusively for her own child, begets selfishness and idolatry in many ways tends to degrade women." Alice continues on to explain that the "new system [of communal child rearing] works well in every respect," explain how the child care affords her the opportunity to join not only in "public work, but in self-improvement and 'going-home' to God every day." She felt that the practice released her from constant 'anxiety and worry less [her daughter, Corinna] should be sick."[95] As this quote was clearly contrary to Alice's actual experience according to Corinna's memoir, Hartzell argues that many women lied about their endorsement of communal child rearing for the sake of public perception of the Community. Yet, only two children of the overall 193 children reared by the Community, Corinna and Pierrepoint, provided testament contradicting the public sentiment (no other children provided memoirs on the subject).[96] Are two contradictory accounts from the children's perspective really enough evidence to

[95] *Oneida Circular,* June 23, 1873

[96] Klee-Hartzell, "Family Love, True Womanliness, Motherhood, and the Socialization of Girls in the Oneida Community, 1848-1880," 190.

disprove public approval of the system and deem all favorable statements mere propaganda.

Positive memories of Oneida by both children and mothers clearly predominate. Multiple women wrote of their approval of the system, including Augusta E. Hamilton, who explained that not only were the children benefited by the practice of Communal child rearing, but the "mothers too [were] ennobled by the thought that [they bared their] [sic] children, not for [themselves alone], but for the good of the church [and the Oneida Community as a whole.]." One woman, S.B.C., who at first "struggled hard and long" against philoprogenitiveness towards her firstborn, explained that with time she realized that it was "wicked to appropriate any of God's gifts" and that "the propensity of women to have pets and worship them, seems barbarous to me now. It belittles her, distracts from her charms, her power of usefulness, and above all is an abuse to God." Although evidence both for and against this sytems clearly exists, the majority of the evidence indicates that most women of the community saw and appreciated how the system offered new opportunities – for the volunteers, the opportunity to raise and work with children without having to actually produce their own children; for the mothers, the opportunity to continue pursuing educational and vocational interests without feeling trapped in the rearing of their children; and for the children, the opportunity to know and likely love more adult members of their community.

Such a system of childrearing was helpful for all those involved. The young mothers were able to have children and participate in their children's lives, but could still commit themselves to their own wants and interests without fear of being labeled selfish or abandoning their children. Quite the contrary they could guarantee that through the

Community system of cooperative work, the women of the community could work together to raise the children, therefore, lightening each individual woman's workload. For example, Corinna's mother was a gifted singer, and had she not been forced to give up her child, she may never have had the opportunity to further her musical education or singing career. Forfeiting sole custody of her child kept her from forfeiting her own ambitions and talent.[97]

Thus, in general, the Oneida Community through its ideology and practices, helped to provide a more autonomous and empowering lifestyle for its female members. Complex marriage and male continence allowed women to control their bodies and sexual encounters and also focus on their own sexual pleasure rather than their partners. Male continence and Stirpiculture allowed women to chose motherhood, and communal childcare allowed them to raise children without forfeiting their own interests and time. Even small things like wearing pants and the practice of mutual criticism freed women

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[97] Clearly, for Corinna the separation between herself and her own mother was a difficult situation to comprehend in youth, as she said, "[Alice] must have slept with me at night during my first year, as was the Community custom, but I was too young to have kept in mind more than an indistinct of deep attachment which persisted though later years, when she was being disciplined for her "mother-spirit" and we were often kept apart for a week or two at a time." The forced separation something that Corinna questioned into adulthood. When her Grandmother became "the outstanding person in my world," as Corinna wrote, she often question "Why she should have taken my mother's place" but she "never inquired [as] it was doubtless owing to a rule of the Central Committee which must have feared the growth of an undue 'mother spirit' if I was left too much in my mother's care." Corina generally missed her mother and resented her mother's absence in her childhood, as she admitted, "I regret that memory has not recorded more about my mother in those childish days." Therefore, although I do not believe that Corinna's account is evidence that mother's altogether disliked the system of communal child rearing, Corrina's account does reveal that, at least for one child, the system was not as pleasing as it may have been for the young mothers of the Communitee. Thus, it would be interesting to explore how this aspect, as well as the other practice of the Community, may have negatively affected or been negatively received by the children of the Community. See Corinna Ackley Noyes' memoir *Days of My Youth,* 38 and 50.

physically and mentally. Thus, although there were certain flaws within the Oneida Community, because of the numerous ways that it benefited the female experience, single women searching for a more autonomous lifestyle likely found the Community to be an appealing alternative to the normative society.

Chapter Three
Celibacy for Equality? An Analysis of Gender Relations among the Shakers

The "United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing," often referred to more simply as the "Shakers," that has received the most attention from historians when researching gender relations in Utopian communities. The first communal experiment in American history, founded in the late eighteenth century by their leader Ann Lee, the Shakers practiced a radical lifestyle most often remembered for its strict emphasis on, and adherence to, a celibate lifestyle. Many have celebrated the Society as "the first religious community with a feminist theology and a commitment to woman's equality."[98] Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, praised the Society of Believers, referring to the Shakers as "'the only female-led religion that developed a consistent system of equal empowerment of women."[99] But even during their heyday, visitors to the various Shaker villages were concerned with the treatment of Shaker women, often critiquing their oppressive lifestyle and noting their pale, white, and sickly complexion and weakened bodies.[100] Many attested to the "toxic" confinement of the female Shakers indoors, that many agreed was far more oppressive and restricting than the experience of women in the normative society. Critics believed that it was due to these restrictions that the female

[98] Karen K. Nickless and Pamela J. Nickless, "Sexual Equality and Economic Authority: The Shaker Experience, 1784-1900" in *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States,* ed. Wendy E. Chmieleqski et al. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 119.
[99] Lawrence Foster, "Celibacy and Feminism: The Shakers and Equality for Women" in *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiements of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons,* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 18.
[100] Glendyne R. Wergland, ed., *Visiting the Shakers: 1850-1899,* (Clinton: Richard W. Couper Press, 2010), 5.

Shakers "tended to look less healthy and happy than male shakers."[101] Abigail Alcott was one of these skeptical visitors, who concluded in her diary after visiting the Shakers in 1843, "there is servitude [here], I have no doubt. There is a fat sleek comfortable look about the men, and among the women there is a stiff awkward reserve that belongs to neither sublime resignation nor divine hope."[102] Evaluations such as these, along with certain personal testimonies of the Shakers, particularly of those Shaker men and women who left the Shaker communities after finding the experience displeasing and oppressive, have fueled a recent historical debate about the existence of gender equality among the Shakers.

Priscilla J. Brewer suggests in her article "'Tho' of the Weaker Sex': A Reassessment of Gender Equality among the Shakers," that the Shaker experience is open to interpretation, arguing that although some elements of equality may have existed, the Shakers never intended to "create a social system in which men and women were politically or economically equal."[103] Brewer questions the validity of claims that the society was wholeheartedly committed to gender equality, suggesting that in light of Shaker Community's interest in protecting traditional gender traits and spheres, the gender equality we celebrate Shakers for observing throughout their history never actually existed. In fact, Brewer suggests that although women may have been attracted to the community because of the power of its female leader, the "position of Shaker women deteriorated after Lee's death in 1784," and not until well into the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, nearly one-hundred years after the Community's

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[101] Foster, "Celibacy and Feminism," 19.
[102] D'Ann Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia: The Shaker Experiment in Sexual Equality Reappraised – 1810 to 1860," *The New England Quarterly* 51 (Mar., 1978): 36.
[103] Nickless and Nickless, "Sexual Equality and Economic Authority," 133.

founding -- when the male to female population ratio began to plummet – were Shaker women able to approach the economic, political, and social equality that many celebrate today.[104] Karen K. Nickless and Pamela J. Nickless also suggested that Shaker sexual equality did not evolve until late into the Society's history. Unlike Brewer, however, these two historians believe that the Shaker's acquired a "woman's rights ideology" when converts from other utopian movements of the period began to join the Shakers and influence the Society's practices and beliefs in the last decades of the nineteenth century.[105]

Yet, as convincing as these arguments might be, my own historical analysis as well as the research of other historians suggests that both arguments have their flaws. Although these arguments both suggest that it is not until the late nineteenth century that

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[104] Nickless and Nickless, "Sexual Equality and Economic Authority," 133.

[105105] Nickless and Nickless, "Sexual Equality and Economic Authority," 191.

The argument made by Karen and Pamela Nickless may actually have some validity, as ideas from various communities were certainly traveling to one another, often integrating themselves into another Community's ideology, or altering the original ideology in some way; however, the influx of ideas from other religious communities was not new to the Shakers by the nineteenth century. Rosemary Ruether explains in, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History,* that various religious schools influenced the the Shakers and their religious practices and beliefs from as far back as their founding in the mid-eighteenth century. For instance, the Camisards, a radical group of French Calvinists, spread the tenants of their religious tradition -- spirit possession and millennialist expectation and gathering -- to the English when they fled to England to escape persecution in the 1700s. As these practices began to spread throughout England, the traditions were incorporated into the Shaker ideology. The Philadelphians, another prominent religious group in England, also influenced the Shaker ideology. The Philadelphians were strongly influenced by the German mystical theosophist, Jacob Boehme, who preached that God was a dual-gendered figurehead. The dual-gendered diety was then adopted by the Shakers, as I will discuss later on in this chapter. These examples serve to show that how Shakers, from their origins, were influenced by other religious Communities and ideologies. The ideas of these alternative religious groups, like the Philadelphians and the Camisards helped shape the Shaker Community and its feminist theology long before they ever migrated to the United States. See Women and Redemption: A Theological History by Rosemary Radford Ruether.

women saw the effects of a feminist theology in the Shaker community. Studies reveal, however, that at its peak in the mid-nineteenth century the Shaker Community had over six-thousand members, the overwhelming majority of which were female. In fact, throughout its history the society was consistently comprised of a predominantly female population, among all age groups, but particularly within the twenty to forty-five age groups, the ages when women would have begun to marry and start families in the normative society.[106] Although this majority does not necessarily confirm that women were joining because of the Society's alluring feminist ideology, it is not entirely an implausible suggestion. With such high numbers of female converts, it would be hard to believe that the Shaker Community was not appealing, in some way, to women. Certainly, religious salvation was part of the appeal of the Shakers, but all Utopian societies promised salvation to their loyal followers; therefore, there must have been an additional element of the Shaker ideology that allured such a large population of women to join its Community.[107] This is where we must recognize that although contradictory arguments made by historians like Brewer are certainly compelling, the type of gender equality advocated for by the society's founder, Ann Lee, and the practices of the community provided a certain level of protection and equality that was revolutionary for

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[106] It is important to mention, however, that it was not until the mid-nineteenth century, that we see such great majorities of women among the Shaker population, with population rations as large as five to one. Originally the Shaker communities were comprised of populations that were often formed by families who converted together. Entire family units – parents, children, siblings, in-laws, or cousins – would join at one time, bringing both male and female relatives with them. Although, later on, there is increasing evidence of women joining on their own or without male kin. See Sisters in the Faith, page 47.

[107] Keep in mind that at its peak, Oneida only had a little over three-hundred members, whereas, as I mentioned before, the Shakers had nearly twenty times that number, the majority of which were female.

the era and likely very attractive to women searching for a different, more autonomous lifestyle than offered in the normative society. In fact, we know this to be the case, as Shaker publications such as histories written by the Shaker Sisters Anna White and Leila S. Taylor, stressed that "the Shaker concern for sexual equality [was] a key part of the effort to attract new members, and numerous capable women did choose to make religious careers with the Shakers [because of it]."[108]

In order to completely understand the principles of the Shaker faith, one must first understand the motivations of its leader, Ann Lee. Although Ann Lee is credited with being the Shaker's leader, in actuality, the Shakers were founded in 1747 by James and Jane Wardley, who decided to branch off from a group of Quakers in their native England. The Wardley's, unlike their Quaker brethren who has begun to distance themselves from frenetic spiritual expression, embraced more volatile forms of spirit possession and social confrontation in their communal worship and created a small millennialist sect of "shaking Quakers" near Manchester, England in the mid-eighteenth century.[109] It was not until 1758 that a twenty-two-year-old, illiterate mill worker named Ann Lee came to join their religious sect. Originally attracted by their worship style and perfectionist ideology, Ann Lee quickly grew attached to the Shakers. She helped to transform and refine their practices to create the religious community we are familiar with today. By 1774, the Shakers had come to accept Ann Lee as their leader. Inspired by her strong leadership and religious zeal, members followed her to America, a journey she

[108] Foster, "Celibacy and Feminism," 18.
[109] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History (New Vectors in the Study of Religion and Theology)*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 122.

believed had been prophesized in one of her many mystical visions of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ann Lee, or Mother Ann as her followers commonly referred to her, came to shape the Shaker ideology into a distinctive religion, something much more than simply "Shaking Quakers," a term used to describe their original worship style and from which their name derives.[110] The Shakers theology emerged from a number of Ann Lee's revelations regarding the fall of Adam and Eve and the concept of original sin. At its core, the society's leaders preached two fundamental tenants. Firstly, that the Christian God was a dual gendered deity, represented on earth by both a male godhead, represented by Jesus of Nazarath, and a female godhead, which the Shakers believed took the form of their leader Ann Lee. The opening hymn in the Shaker hymnal first published in 1812 sets forth the Shaker view of God as both male and female: "This fast creation was not made\ without the fruitful mother's aid," referencing how God exhibited his female half, "the mother," when creating the world. Other hymns refer to their view of a bianary god as well, and even today Shakers refer to their father/mother God in worship.[111]

This tenant became particularly influential in terms of gender relations in the community as early Shakers balanced the interests of men and women in their communities..[112] Thus, although they did believe both genders to be distinct and that there was an "innate sexual division that characterized the universe" that was impossible

[110] In fact the "shaking" possessions and ecstatic behavior during worship for which the Shakers had earned their name was actually abandoned relatively early in the community's history, replaced with a more formalized and regimented system of dancing and singing in worship.

[111] Glendyne R. Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith: Shaker Women and Equality of the Sexes,* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 43-44.

[112] Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith*, 43-44.

to transcend, the Shakers wholeheartedly believed that neither sex was superior to the other, rather that they coexisted and worked in conjunction with one another to create a perfect, unified whole. Lawrence Foster reveals in his book, *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons,* that although the Shakers recognized that the female sex was different from the male sex, they argued that they were equally important and essential to the perfection of the world, for if their God was dual in nature, than the world itself, which He created in His image, must also be dual in nature, "embodying a complementary and equal expression of male and female elements" to mimic His perfection.[113] Their belief in a dual-gendered deity was a way to rationalize the natural division of the sexes, but it also motivated their dedication to gender equality. For example, it inspired, arguably for the first time in American history, a political structure with equal representation for both male and female members of the community in order to mimic the natural order of the world, which the Shakers believed must be dual-gendered, balanced, and equal like God.[114]

Secondly, and possibly most importantly in terms of the Shaker social structure, was their rejection of sexual intercourse. Although others accepted sex as a natural part of human life, both for pleasure and procreation, Louis Kern, author of the book, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias,* explains the for the Shakers, "The indulgence of the sexual appetite was the original sin and literally the head

[113] Foster, "Celibacy and Feminism," 18.
[114] This political structure will be examined more fully later in the chapter.

of all subsequent ones … It was the "'ultimate form of selfishness, a totally asocial and anarchistic force.'"[115] As the Shakers explained,

> The nature of the fallen man… is selfish being wholly bent of selfish fratifications. His desires are selfish; because they are directed solely to objects which tend to gratify his selfishness. His love is selfish; because it is confined to those who indulge and please his selfishness. In short the gratification of self is the great object of all his pursuits.[116]

Indulging in human desires of lust and sex, therefore, was considered the ultimate form of selfishness, "a drug with addicting properties" thus, as radical, evangelical reformers, the Shakers attempted to rid the world of sin and achieve perfection on Earth through the control of their passions.[117] Only when their members surrendered "all carnal propensities – including sexual intercourse and close family attachments – and devoting one self wholly to the worship of God within a supportive communal setting" did the Shakers believe that perfection and salvation could ultimately be achieved.[118] Thus, the Shakers adhered to a strictly enforced practice of celibacy.

Of course, this tenent was likely also influenced by Ann Lee not only by her religious fervor, but also from her personal history. Historians have revealed that Ann Lee had struggled with the concept of sexual intercourse early on in her life, "apparently [having] deep feelings of guilt and shame about her sexuality almost from her first

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[115] Louis Kern, "'Flesh Is the Forbidden Fruit': The Theological Background and Its Relationship to Sexual Ideology" in *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias – The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community,* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 77-78.
[116] Kern, "Flesh Is the Forbidden Fruit,'" 77-78.
[117] Kern, "'Flesh Is the Forbidden Fruit,'" 79.
[118] Foster, "Celibacy and Feminism," 20.

awareness of the functioning of the reproductive process."[119] In fact, she was so sure of the act's impurity that she "often admonished her mother against it," risking physical punishment from her father who "threatened and actually attempted to whip her" so fiercely after she rebuked her mother for engaging in sexual acts, that Ann Lee actually threw herself into her mother's arms, crying out for mercy, to escape her father's blows.[120] With time, her anxiety about sex and marriage only grew, peaking when she reached marital age. She often begged her parents to allow her to remain single to escape the "loathsome" act of sex. Louis Kern even revealed, "Prior to her [ultimate] marriage, [Ann Lee] experienced a series of visions that deeply impressed her with the 'odiousness of sex, especially the impure and indecent nature of sexual coition *for mere gratification*.'"[121] Fearing child birth particularly, Ann Lee recounted that when thinking of the inevitability of pregnancy, her mind was so full of anguish that a "bloody sweat pressed through the pores of her skin, tears lowed down her cheeks until the skin cleaved off and she wrung her hands until the blood gushed from under her nails."[122] Of course, this was likely hyperbolic, but it does impress upon her listeners the extent to which her anxiety consumed and tortured her mind.

Yet, despite her strong aversion and many pleas against marriage, she ultimately relented to her parents' wishes and married in 1753 to a young blacksmith named Abraham Standley. Yet, her views against sexual intercourse would only grow more

[119] Louis Kern, "Introduction: Parousia in Toad Lane: Ann Lee, Founder of the Shakers" in *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias – The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community,* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 71-72.
[120] Kern, "Introduction: Parousia in Toad Lane," 71-72.
[121] Kern, "Introduction: Parousia in Toad Lane," 72.
Emphasis in the original.
[122] Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia," 28.

ardent with time; in fact, it was Lee's marriage that convinced her to reject sexual intercourse altogether, having been wholly dissatisfied with her sexual experience, particularly after facing multiple difficult pregnancies. She underwent eight pregnancies, four of which ended in stillbirths, and with none living beyond infancy, the most fortunate living until the age of six.[123] Not surprisingly, these losses left Ann Lee grief stricken and emotionally broken. As she revealed in one discussion of her child bearing experience,

> "'Then I found my soul plunged into the depths of hell … In this state I had to overcome the power of death, and travel out by great struggles, and the most severe sufferings, that I might be enabled to bring souls from thence, into the resurrection from the dead works'"[124]

Such a traumatic marital experience only emboldened her passionate aversion to sex and marriage. Louis Kern describes her anguish, revealing how Lee often spoke of lying awake at night calling to God for redemption, or avoiding her bed altogether, as she said, "as if it 'were made of embers.'" Such a sleepless, anxiety-ridden existence took a physical toll on Ann Lee as well, allowing her naturally robust form to wither away. She became weak and emaciated.[125] It was not long before her emotional and physical

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[123] Kern, "Introduction: Parousia in Toad Lane," 72.

There is some discrepancy among historians in recounting Ann Lee's biography, particularly in terms of her difficult pregnancies. While Kern provided the details above, others have suggested that she only had four or six pregnancies rather than eight; however, all agree that regardless of the number of pregnancies, they all took a strong emotional toll on Ann Lee and only strengthened her already negative views of sexual intercourse.

[124] Kern, "Introduction: Parousia in Toad Lane," 72.

[125] Kern, "Introduction: Parousia in Toad Lane," 73.

condition prompted Lee to officially declare that she could no longer participate in a "normal" marital relationship with her husband, adamantly refusing to engage any longer in a sexual relationship with him.[126] Although she was "'willing to take the most tender care of him'" in sickness and health, Kern explains that she eventually refused all sexual overtures. Thus, in 1770, nearly five years after his "enforced" sainthood among the Shakers, Abraham Standley ran off with a prostitute, whom he later married in 1775, permanently breaking any ties with his wife.[127] Although this too was likely an emotional period for Ann Lee, she took the break from her husband as an opportunity to devote herself entirely to the Shaker faith. She had no hesitation, therefore, to lead a small band of the faithful to the American colonies in the summer of 1774 after being inspired by one of her many visions to move her community to the safety and freedom of the colonies. It was here that she and her followers could officially practice their celibate lifestyle and radical religious practices without retribution.

Understanding Ann Lee's personal history, it is not surprising that she advocated for a celibate lifestyle. She concluded that "as long as women engaged in sexual relations, their lives would be punctuated by physical pain and the threat of imminent death."[128] Therefore, Ann Lee likely promoted a celibate Shaker lifestyle in order to protect other women from experiencing similar types of hardships that she had experienced in her own marriage. As Lawrence Foster explains, the Shaker practice of celibacy offered a

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[126] Ann Lee cannot take total credit, however, for the Shakers' fundamental interest in the female experience. Under Jane and James Wardley women also played a substantial role, and some members remained celibate because of personal inclination;,however, neither equality nor celibacy became a formal component the group's fundamental beliefs until Ann Lee took over and moved the group to America. See Foster's, "Celibacy and Feminism," 20.

[127] Kern, "Introduction: Parousia in Toad Lane," 73.

[128] Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia," 28.

religious safe haven to nineteenth-century women, breaking down conventional "patterns of interaction between men and women" and "[removing] the burden of childbearing and [freeing] women for full participation in the religious system."[129]

Zipporah Cory, for instance, found the celibate Community appealing, having grown up watching her mother's continuous abuse at the hands of her father. She joined the Shakers hoping that a celibate lifestyle would protect her from "replicating her mother's victimization as a wife."[130] Eleanor Hayes Wright also joined the Shakers because of their alluring celibate lifestyle, fleeing her husband's home to find safety and freedom among the Shakers. She explained that after marrying her husband, "she 'never had a day's health or happiness,'" because "his 'sensual and selfish nature' inspired repugnance rather than love."[131] The Shakers provided a safe and loving community that she could escape to. The system was so contradictory to her previous experience, that once she joined the Society, "nothing could induce her to return to her husband."[132]

Celibacy, as Glendyne R. Wergland explains, "combined an evangelical alliance with God to what may be women's oldest source of power: their control of sexuality and

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[129] Foster, "Celibacy and Feminism," 18, 27.

Of course, historically, societies committed to celibacy are not unheard of; the urge to adopt celibate practice as a means of self-purification and devotion to the worship of God has always had deep roots in the Christian tradition. However, what was revolutionary about the Shaker's celibate community was that their commitment was born out of a concern for the treatment and experience of women. Early Christian hermits, on the other hand, who went off to live by themselves in the desert often viewed women as temptresses and sought to escape them so that they could recover the purity of Adam before Eve tempted him to eat the forbidden fruit. Thus, their celibate impulse was not associated with a parallel concern for equality for women; such a parallel concern is singular to the Shaker religion. See Foster's, "Celibacy and Feminism," 21.

[130] Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith*, 53.

[131] Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith*, 54.

[132] Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith*, 54.

reproduction." Women were empowered by their choice to remain abstinent, and found comfort in knowing that their religion supported the decision. Outside of Shakerism, the possibility of moderating the unequal power relations that were nurtured by the institution of marriage within a patriarchal society could only be found in a life of singledom, a risky and often lonely existence. Shakerism, however, eliminated marriage and reduced masculine authority, at once providing women authority over their own bodies and lives, and still offering a safe and supportive family.[133] For women stuck in loveless or abusive relationships, or wishing to avoid marriage altogether, this system must have been very appealing.

Based on population statistics alone, we can assume that this element of the Shaker ideology was a popular recruiting tactic. Although women remained in the majority of the population across age groups throughout the history of the Shakers, most were in the twenty to forty-five age group, the main years for women to marry and bear and raise children during this era. In this age group there were twice as many women as men. [134] D'Ann Campbell explains that "the significant female bulge in the child-rearing group would argue that the Shaker colonies were a haven for women who preferred

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[133] Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith*, 53-54.

[134] Sometimes the ratio of women to men was 3:1 or 5:1 in certain Shaker villages. This disparity remained across geographical location as well. Women in the heavy childbearing and childrearing age class making up 65% of the population of the Shaker settlement in Watervliet, New York and 62% of the population in Logan County, Kentucky. See D'Ann Campbell's, "Women's Life in Utopia," 28. Campbell calculated these statistics and ratios using data calculated from an analysis of nine Shaker communities using the 1810, 1830, and 1850 manuscript censuses. The 5:1 ratio, was really only seen later in Shaker history, when men began to leave the Shakers or die off among their population.

celibacy to traditional marriage and its concomitant dangers to their own lives and to their possible offspring."[135]

It could be argued, based on these statistics, that Ann Lee's intention of creating a safe haven for women was achieved. Women, particularly of the marrying age group, found a refuge among the Shakers making an escape from marriage possible.. It was not just an escape from the pressures of marriage and sexual intercourse that made the Shakers so appealing for single women of the nineteenth century. Personal accounts reveal that some women came to escape abusive relationships and homes, to relieve the financial burden they were placing on their families as single women, or to escape the judgment of the outside world. A visitor once summed up the female attraction to the Shakers very well when he said,

> Where a wife and children have drunk the cup of suffering, a union with this family [Shakers] will secure an ample and luxurious support. Where the widow has been left destitute, with the little ones crying for food, it is easy to conceive the motives which *might* bring her to such a society. Where the wife has been the victim of the vices and follies of a profligate husband, it is not difficult to imagine the reasons that would lead her to the peaceful dwellings of these people.[136]

Total acceptance and forgiveness was a compelling factor in joining the Shakers. Thankful Barce, for example, came to the Shakers unmarried and pregnant in 1779 and found only acceptance and support among her new community, finally finding a safe

[135] Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia," 29-30.
[136] Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith*, 48.

home for herself and her son that she was unable to find in the outside world.[137] Sarah Barkers also came to find peace among the Shakers. Having felt "troubled in the mind" her entire childhood, often getting into trouble and misbehaving, fearing death "'lest [she] go to Hell,'" Sarah ultimately came to the Shakers, confessed her sins, and felt a "'release of her soul'" for the first time. She wrote of the experience, "'If salvation could have been obtained from drunkards and harlots, I might have found it before I ever saw Mother [Ann]. For I saw enough of them in the world, & I knew what lives they lived,'" continuing on to praise her new home and the graciousness of her leader Ann Lee.[138]

The Shaker practice of confession, a process during which new converts confessed all of their sins to Shaker elders (of the same sex) before officially joining the society, may well have been an appealing and empowering process for women in and of itself. Multiple women, including Sarah Barkers, testified to the feeling of release and acceptance that accompanied their confession. Phebe Chase, for example, who had been growing uneasy knowing her Congregationalist community viewed her as a good and worthy Christian when she was growing in pride and arrogance and "inclining more and more towards evil," did not "find deliverance until she confessed her sins to the Shakers."[139] Zeruah Moseley also found relief in confessing her sins to the Shakers. After marrying Rufus Clark at the age of 22, her conscience continued to bother her; she reported how she 'felt the nature of sin still growing stronger and stronger' insider her." With time, and the pressures of caring for three children, which she had in the five years following her marriage in 1775, her "'trouble and distress of mind'" only became worse.

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[137] Wergland, *Sisters of the Faith,* 44.
[138] Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith,* 45.
[139] Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith,* 45.

Although she does not admit this directly, because it was only after marriage and childbearing that Zeruah experienced such distress, her troubles may have stemmed from her insecurities as a mother and wife, or from the pressures placed on her in such a position. It was only when she met the Shakers, that Zeruah finally found some relief. She recalled, "'I felt myself as in the presence of God and saw my wicked life open before men as a book.'" Finally, able to admit to her sinful thoughts and desires, Zeruah found much needed peace of mind. She remained a Shaker for the rest of her life with no regrets.[140] Stories such as these show that Shaker Confession provided women a safe, nonjudgmental outlet, an opportunity to address their anxieties and secrets and then begin a new life among the Shaker Community in an honest and pure state. Furthermore, it offered the Shaker leadership an opportunity to "guide and shape the character of individuals and the whole society."[141]

Economic hardship was another factor that was particularly motivating for women in joining the community. Women during this period were tied to their family for economic support; when that kin died off or abandoned their female family members, women were left with few options, particularly in rural areas where respectable jobs for women were particularly hard to come by. The Shakers offered an alternative for these women.[142] As one Shaker women, Lucy Brown, was told before joining the Society, "'it

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[140] Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith*, 45.
[141] Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith,* 44.
[142] Of course, it was not just women who joined for economic support. During times of economic hardship nationwide, the populations among the Shakers blossomed, as men, women, and families would join for food, shelter, and warmth. In 1816, for example, which is often referred to as "The Year Without a Summer," because the ground froze even during the first week of June and July, hundreds of people traveled to the closest Shaker community desperate because food crops could not mature under such cold conditions and the resulting quazi-famine was disastrous. During this time the various

was those who were poor and had no home or parents that joined the Shakers.'"[143] Although we know that there were many reasons for women to join the community, finding financial security was certainly an alluring element. The young widower Olive Blake, for example, could not settle her deceased husband's debts and was desperate to find aid for herself and her two daughters; thus, in 1819 she took her daughters Rhoda and Hannah to the Shakers knowing that the three would find economic relief and also kindness from their new Shaker community.[144] Polly Lawrence, whose father died young, was also taken to the Shakers along with her siblings, for her dying mother who was "'often embarrassed for means of support,'" told her children that they would find continual love and support among their new Shaker family.[145]

All this considered, it is important to point out as Lawrence Foster does in his examination of the Shakers, that although the community offered a different lifestyle for women, in some ways the Shakers did conform to traditional gender norms in their practices. Despite their radical views on sexual relationships, "they firmly maintained that sexual distinctions remained both on earth and in heaven." Such difference could hardly be done away with, "for even God was composed of a union of male and female attributes – even God a fusion of complementary opposites."[146] This belief, therefore, encouraged the Shakers to completely separate the sexes in their tasks, in accordance with the same gender binary that existed in the normative society. Women, therefore,

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Shaker communities of the North East increased by 40 percent. From 1810-1820 the population at Watervliet grew more than 50 percent, New Lebanon grew more than 20 percent, and the Hancock village grew more than 70 percent. See Glendyne Wergland's *Sisters of the Faith*, 49.

[143] Wergland, *Sisters of the Faith*, 49.

[144] Wergland, *Sisters of the Faith*, 50.

[145] Wergland, *Sisters of the Faith,* 49.

[146] Foster, "Celibacy and Feminism," 33.

were typically confined to the domestic sphere, completing traditionally "feminine" work like cooking, sewing, weaving and manufacturing cloth, cleaning, and washing, while men remained in the more public sphere, completely traditionally masculine tasks "in the fields, shops, and similar areas [of heavy labor]" like blacksmithing, farming, taning, etc.[147]

D'Ann Campbell suggests that the division of labor had less to do with adhering to traditional gender norms, and more to do with efficiency. Thus, although Shaker women, for the most part, were performing jobs within the communal household while men remained outside, these jobs were often rotated or shifted among community members and between genders depending on the needs of the community first and foremost.[148] For example, Campbell mentions that "Men did the heavy work in the domestic quarters, and undertook duties usually assigned to women such as picking fruit or carding wool during rain weather or odd times before meals," even though these may have been seen as feminine tasks in the normative society, because it was more efficient, and therefore beneficial to the overall wellbeing and success of the Community. [149] This is just one example of evidence suggesting that the Shakers on the whole "were more concerned with getting the work done than with worrying about which jobs were reserved for men and which were for women."[150]

Furthermore, critics of the Shakers like to play up the oppressiveness of such district separation of the sexes in the community; however, even the degree to which the

[147] Foster, "Celibacy and Feminism," 19, 32-33.
[148] Of course, Lawrence Foster does point out that although both sexes changed their primary work routinely, Shaker men were able to do far more varied and interesting work than their female sisters. 19
[149] Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia," 26-27.
[150] Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia," 26.

sexes remained separated is questionable. Many might think that the sexes never interacted; they had separate staircases for the women and men, separate eating times, separate areas for each gender in the meeting hall for worship, etc. Campbell reveals, however, that religious festivals and nightly gathers were attended by both sexes, and often traveling between various Shaker villages was mixed, particularly for longer journeys that required coaches. She notes that one Shaker woman even described how "'after breakfast, Brother Rufus came to see [her];'" mentioning how "'he was very free, and talked about the brethren and sisters at Harvard."[151] Of course, D'Ann Campbell is very open in her discussion of such accounts that she does not mean to imply that comingling was constant or commonplace among the Community, but rather she publishes such information in the hopes of breaking down the stereotypical image of a strictly divided Shaker community which endures throughout time. "Male and female friendship," she argues, "were integral parts of the Shaker community," contrary to popular perceptions.[152]

It is also important to reiterate that although the Community was generally divided by gender, the Shakers firmly adhered to a "separate but equal philosophy," in that "work done by either sex was not ranked as superior or more important than the other." For the Shakers, gender equality for women did not necessarily require assigning them traditionally male tasks. The Shakers did not have to prove their belief in gender equality by assigning women tasks like blacksmithing and carpentry; women were already understood to be equal to men by all Shakers, and therefore, their tasks were deemed equally important and skilled as any traditionally masculine task. Therefore,

[151] Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia," 32.
[152] Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia," 32.

although women were typically confined to the domestic sphere, as they would have been in the normative society, the Shaker system differed immensely from the structure of the normative society for the very reason that women and their jobs were see as just as important and equal to those of the men.[153] In fact, D'Ann Campbell suggests in her article, " Women's Life in Utopia: The Shaker Experiment in Sexual Equality Reappraised," that allowing women to "perform the tasks for which they had been trained or were best equipped physically to do" was a way of allowing women to excel and show their prominence and influence in the Community's economy and structure.[154] Therefore, this may have been reason enough for women to come to the Shakers. Whereas in the normative society, women were viewed as '"oversized children,'" doing mindless tasks that required the guidance or approval of their male kin or husbands, among the Shakers women and their work were considered equal to their male counterparts. Any sort of feelings of "superiority and possessiveness by men and submissiveness by women" were not just overcome in the community, but believed to be essential in achieving perfection on earth and ultimate salvation in the afterlife.[155]

The separation of the sexes likely stems more from the Shaker belief that "it was dangerous for men and women to work in close proximity," than some need to adhere to traditional gender norms. The Shakers believed that forbidding sexual relations was "essential to the integrity of their creed." Because close proximity between the sexes

[153] This is a modern, feminist construct that cannot be used as a standard to judge their level of gender equality. At the time, the normative society did not view women as equal to men in any capacity; thus, the very fact that women were fundamentally valued and seen as equals mentally and physically among the male community members was revolutionary in terms of female equality.

[154] Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia," 27.

[155] Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia," 27.

might foster personal relationships between two Shakers of the opposite sex, such relationships might tempt the members to break what were essentially contracts that required them to remain celibate.[156] Any cross-sex contacts of this sort were deemed "contrary to order" and were seen as potentially threatening to the Shaker commitment to celibacy. This is why when Charles Nordhoff, a visitor to a Shaker village, inquired about whether a Shaker woman could, if she desired, become a blacksmith, the Shaker elder Frederick Evans replied, "No, because this would bring men and women into relations which we do not think wise."[157] The Shakers insisted on their separate but equal system to ensure productivity, equality, but also an assurance of celibacy.

Of course, there was one aspect of the community where women, possibly for the first time, were entering a traditionally masculine realm: governance. As mentioned briefly before, the Shaker's dual-gendered God helped to justify a system of governance wherein both male and female representatives worked together to carry out both Gods work and the wishes of the Shakers. Such was the ideal of Ann Lee, whose own leadership was likely empowering, both individually and collectively, and inspiring for her female followers. Ann Lee was an interesting leader in that she exemplified many of the traditionally valued "feminine" qualities, often described by her followers and the

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[156] My research reveals that upon joining the Shakers, after members have completed their confession, members would sign a legally binding contract. Part of this contract formalized the participants agreement to adhere to the Shaker lifestyles and principles, including celibacy, although my research did not reveal the consequences of breaking this element of the contract. Signing the contract was also particularly important because members legally forfeited any personal, property rights upon joining the community, and thus anything that was once personally owned was donated to the Shaker community upon joining the society, at which point it became community property for communal use. This presented its own set of problems, particularly when members left and wanted what had once been their property to be returned, including their own children.

[157] Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia," 33.

community at large as "warm and loving;" yet, at the same time, Ann Lee exemplified masculine qualities as well, particularly in her leadership style as a "capable, articulate, and dynamic woman," whose speeches were so convincing that men and women lined up to join her Community. These were not necessarily qualities typically associated with women during this period, and yet her bold, outspoken nature and leadership style was impressive, and likely truly inspirational to her female "children" in the community.

Although there was a tendency immediately following Ann Lee's death for the community's leadership to drift back towards a system of male governance, there was a revitalization of the gender equality ethic when Lee's later successors, Joseph Meacham and Lucy Wright, took power.[158] As Glendyne Wergland explains, both leaders were dedicated to gender equality, and "consolidated the position of women as co-equals in the society which provided continuing female role models as spiritual and temporal authorities."[159] Such a system was, Wergland continues to explain, in "sharp contrast to

[158] This revitalization of a gender-equality dedication has frequently been contested by historians, who argue that following Ann Lee's death there was a constant attempt for masculine dominance in the governance of the community. Karen and Pamela Nickless, for example, note in their article, "Sexual Equality and Economic Authority: The Shaker Experience, 1784-1900," that John Meacham often questioned a woman's ability to head a church, and was only silenced after Ann Lee herself reprimanded him, reminding him that much like a wife must take charge of her family after her husband dies, so must She take charge of the Shaker religion in the absence of her male counterpart, Jesus Christ. These historians then move on to suggest that Meacham only worked alongside Lucy Wright in a dual governance because it was "necessary to the smooth functioning of a celibate community." They suggest that Lucy Wright and her successors were much more of figureheads than an actual leaders. As Karen and Pamela Nickless suggest, "[Shaker] women ran their own departments, but [Shaker] men oversaw the entire community," so that Meacham and his fellow male leaders would make decisions, while Wright would simply pass along that information to the segregated sisters of the community, therefore providing a system of governance that would not interfere with the Shaker's strict division of the sexes. See Nickless and Nickless, "Sexual Equality and Economic Authority."

[159] Wergland, *Shakers in the Faith,* 44.

their world's example," in which women, particularly young women, were the "least powerful free adults in American society."[160] Meecham firmly believed that "women must be encouraged to participate fully in the life of the church-community;" thus, he quickly devised a system of dual governance, a system in which for every male leader there was an equal leader of the opposite sex.[161]Supreme authority was vested in a head ministry located in New Lebanon, New York, typically run by four administrators, with two members of each sex represented. The head figure of this ministry, however, held the majority of the power, "tempered only by the sentiments of the membership, to appoint or replace the other three members, and with them all the leadership of the various Shaker communities."[162] Yet, at various points in the history of the Shakers, members of both sexes filled this position. There were also a variety of lower-level political positions, all of which had representatives of both genders. With this structure, men and women both had a say in the Shaker Community and its hierarchical political structure. In her article, D'Ann Campbell reveals that "Elders and Eldressess oversaw spiritual affairs on local levels, Deacons and Deaconesses guarded temporal concerns, and a board of Trustee [comprised of members of both sexes] managed the finances."[163] Such a system helped to ensure that "all Shakers were consulted concerning major changes of policy."[164]

Of course based on their separate but equal structure, these positions were distinguished based on a member's spiritual development, not their sex. Many have pointed this out as a means of critiquing the system, for otherwise the female majority

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[160] Wergland, *Shakers in the Faith,* 44.
[161] Foster, "Celibacy and Feminism," 29.
[162] Foster, "Celibacy and Feminism," 30.
[163] Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia," 25.
[164] Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia," 25.

would have dictated a majority of female leaders. That being said, this was the first time that any political system in the United States was allowing women to have an equal voice alongside men. Furthermore, these women were seen as valuable leaders whose opinions and suggestions were equally important and powerful as any mans. Women's potential for spiritual authority was legitimatized by Ann Lee's leadership, and because of her legacy, Shaker women who proved themselves to be spiritually powerful could have great influence within their Shaker Community. This was evidenced during the "Era of Manifestations," a period of spiritual revivalism among the Shakers led by a group of young women who experienced spiritual revelations from the late Mother Ann Lee. After experiencing their visions, the girls would share the messages or "spiritual gifts" to the wider Shaker Community, facilitating communication between the community and their lost prophet and also spurred new development of a waning religion.[165] These supernatural visions, referred to as "Mother Ann's Work," gave women great religious authority in the various Shaker villages. It is perhaps not surprising then that among the forty-four sisters' testimonies that Glendyne Wergland sampled for her research, "sixteen [reported having] a vision or prophetic or visionary dream, or [described being] overcome by the power of God."[166]

As Wergland aptly suggested in her consideration of Mother Ann's Work, religious visions, whether they were real or not, provided women the opportunity to gain some power, because for those who could not gain power by other means, a closer

[165] These visions came to the group of young girls in the early 1830s, at a time when conversion rates were dropping among the Shakers. The supernatural experiences of the girls helped to reinvigorate the Shaker Spirit which then encouraged new converts.
[166] Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith*, 46.

alliance with an all-powerful god was palliative and powerful in such a religious community. Wergland then continues on to explain that this visionary experience was only one way for women to gain power among the Shakers. She suggests that "by institutionalizing equality of the sexes, including a God who was both female and male, and giving women power and authority equivalent to that of men," the Shakers provided a shield against female powerlessness that was evident in the normative society. Certainly the Shakers had flaws like any other society during the nineteenth century, but considering the many ways in which the Shakers offered women opportunities for autonomy and equality as explained in this chapter, it becomes more clear why women like Jemima Bracket would declare "'I have found peace and comfort which all the world cannot give nor take away,'" after joining the Shakers.[167]

[167] Wergland, *Sisters in the Faith*, 53.

Conclusion

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, over one hundred Utopian communities were established in the United States, nearly seventy of which were communistic societies founded as conscious alternatives to the socioeconomic structure of the normative society in Antebellum America.[168] These utopian societies of the early republic worked to create an ideal world, and central to many of these social experiments was a recasting of traditional, increasingly oppressive gender roles. Such was the case among the Oneida Community and the Shakers, which I analyze in depth within the final chapters of this thesis. Single women of the nineteenth century who were looking for a more autonomous lifestyle, one that they could not necessarily find in monogamous marriage or spinsterhood in the middle-class North, were attracted to the revolutionary and radical systems of these two Utopian societies, which provided the freedom and safety they sought.

In Chapter 1, I outline the gender conventions these women left behind. The normative society of the nineteenth century was limiting and restrictive for single women. They were expected to marry, but marriage fostered a physically and emotionally exhausting lifestyle with little to know authority or control over their existence or ability to change their situation or expectations. The most obvious alternative to this was to remain single, yet a single life could be just as challenging and sometimes dangerous. Thus, after exploring these options, I conclude that single women may have viewed the

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[168] Louis Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias – The Shakers, The Mormons, and the Oneida Community,* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 3.

utopian societies as a positive alternative to the bleak options that the normative society offered them.

In Chapter 2, I then examine the Oneida community, which was created by John Humphrey Noyes in the early nineteenth century as a Perfectionist experiment. Contrary to prevalent critical ideas about Oneida, I conclude that through its more controversial practices like mutual criticism, complex marriage, male continence, and communal child rearing, the Oneida Community offered nineteenth-century women a revolutionary socioeconomic system, wherein they could escape the bonds of marriage, explore their sexuality, develop knowledge and intellectual interests, escape or embrace motherhood and still remain autonomous.

I continue on in Chapter 3 to examine the Shakers, which was created by the leader Ann Lee, after her own painful experience with marriage and motherhood, with the intention of providing a safe haven for women who wished to avoid marriage and sex. Through their practice of celibacy and because of their dedication to gender equality, I conclude, the Shakers created a accepting and empowering community that provided women safety as well as opportunities for success and influence.

Therefore, in the end my research contradicts the many critics of Utopian societies who paint them as crazy, cult-like communities that oppressed and manipulated their followers, particularly their female members. After researching both the Shakers and the Oneida Community, it is evident that the foundations of both of these Utopian communities were based in the desire to alter the normative structure of Antebellum society, especially in respect to the gender norms and the canon of female domesticity. Their leaders, Ann Lee and John Humphrey Noyes respectively, intended to create a

more perfect world among their respective societies, wherein women could find freedom and safety that they could not obtain in marriage or as spinsters. Whether it be through the Shaker's equal representation in governance or the Oneida Communities sexually liberating system of Complex Marriage, both of these Utopian Societies offered appealing alternatives to single women of the nineteen century who were looking for a more autonomous and supportive lifestyle than was offered to them in the normative society. Understanding this helps to explain the motivations of women who joined these communities during the Antebellum period, and furthermore, helps to modify and clarify the inaccurate public perception of these "radical" groups.

Appendix

The purpose of this thesis was to contextualize two utopian societies that have, I believe, received unwarranted or overly harsh criticism, particularly from feminist movements, concerning their treatment of women. Yet, the argument I have made concerning the gender relations of the utopian societies opens up the possibility for future research. Therefore, in closing, I would like to suggest three directions for further historical investigations and analysis that could build upon the analysis of gender relations in the nineteenth century, especially within these utopian societies, that I have provided with this thesis.

Firstly, it would be interesting to research some of the other Utopian communities that blossomed during the Antebellum period and consider the similarities or differences they share with the Shakers or the Oneida Community. As I mention in my conclusion, there were *many* Utopian societies that existed during the nineteenth century, not just the two that are considered in this thesis. The Mormons, for example, had thousands of members during the nineteenth century, and would be an interesting Utopian society to consider in the future, for they have arguably received the harshest critique by contemporary historians in relation to their controversial practice of polygamy. That being said, polygamy as a system is not radically different from the polyandry practiced among the Oneidas; thus, it would be interesting to see if in researching the Mormon's, one could build upon the argument that radical sexual practices like polygamy among the Mormons or polyandry among the Oneidas offered women an appealing alternative to the normative society of the nineteenth century.

The short-lived Hopedale Community of Massachusetts would also be interesting to research for they practiced a religion called "practical Christianity" that fundamentally required equal women's rights. This community, therefore, might provide an interesting comparison to the Shakers and the Oneida Community, for example, whose founders also called for gender equality, in questioning which community best achieved a gender equal community.

Secondly, it would be interesting to consider the motivations for why women *left* these Utopian societies to return to the normative society. Although this thesis chooses to focus on the motivations of single women in joining Utopian societies, it would be interesting to consider those women who felt that they had made a mistake in associating with these groups. After leaving, some women felt so resentful of their experience that they dedicated their lived to convincing other women to avoid such communities, exposing the "truths" of these communities and vehemently opposing them. Although I did not find this to be the case of those that left the Oneida Community over the course of my research, I did find many Shakers who made careers out of their experience upon leaving the community, traveling the country preaching their anti-Shaker cause and publishing books and apostate pamphlets to further spread their anti-Communist ideas.

Mary Marshall Dyer, for example, was the voice for an anti-shaker movement in New Hampshire in the early nineteenth century after she seceded from the Enfield Shakers in 1815, leaving her husband and five children behind. Although Mary Dyer had willingly joined the Shakers for the chance to preach and an "opportunity to move away

from the relentless work and isolation of Stewartstown, New Hampshire"[169] where she was from, Mary Dyer, like many other Shaker apostates, spoke publicly of how she had suffered under their strict religious practices and witnessed the terrible separation of her family. Apostate literature was not limited to the Shakers; there were many Mormon women who upon leaving their Community in Utah, dedicated their life to spreading an anti-Mormon sentiment throughout the country. Perhaps the most famous of these Mormon apostates was Ann Eliza Young, who published a scathing, anti-Mormon memoir, *Wife No. 19* or *The Story of a Life in Bondage, Being a Complete Expose of Mormonism and Revealing the Sorrows, Sacrifices and Sufferings of Women in Polygamy,* and toured the country preaching her anti-Mormon cause.

Clearly not all women felt their lives were better among these Utopian communities, with some having such a visceral reaction to their experience that they felt they needed to return to the normative society they had abandoned. Their perspectives and literature, therefore, are important to consider in order to understand more fully what the female experience was among these radical societies. Furthermore, it would be interesting to consider why some community experiences gave way to such angry apostate literature when others did not. Why was there such a strong anti-Mormon and anti-Shaker movement lead by their previous followers, and not a strong anti-Oneida movement, when the Oneida Community lost members as well? Researching these cases, therefore, might build upon what I have already suggested about the female experience in various Utopian Communities.

[169] Elizabeth A. De Wolfe, *Shaking the Faith: Women, Family, and Mary Marshall Dyer's Anti-Shaker Campaign. 1815-1867*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmilian, 2004), 6.

Lastly, it would also be interesting to consider why *men* might join these communities, although it may not help to further the goal of this particular thesis. If our examination of the normative society exposes a patriarchal society, why would men then chose to leave this system where they have all the power and control to join a community whose foundations hope to diffuse or subjugate this power and authority by equalizing the genders?

All three of these research topics would help to advance the argument I have already laid out in this thesis, and ultimately help to better contextualize the utopian societies of the nineteenth century and the gender relations that existed within them.