

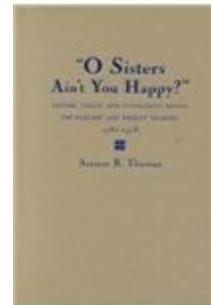
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Suzanne R. Thurman. *"O Sisters Ain't You Happy": Gender, Family, and Community among the Harvard and Shirley Shakers, 1781-1918*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002. 262 S. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-2906-1.

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New Directions in Shaker Women's and Gender History

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Suzanne R. Thurman's excellent book on the Harvard and Shirley Shakers makes valuable contributions to the history of communal societies and the study of gender and religion in early America. Thurman, who teaches history at the University of Alabama, Huntsville, traces the history of both communities from Ann Lee's initial missionary tour to New England in 1781 through the dissolution of the Harvard and Shirley villages in the early twentieth century. Thurman's examination of how ideas about community influenced the construction of gender and "how those ideas created an environment that fostered the empowerment of women" furthers the continuing debates among Shaker scholars regarding the experiences and status of female members (p. 9). Although Thurman effectively engages in the major scholarly debates among Shaker historians, her provocative insights into family and community as well as the construction of gender produces a valuable work for a wide audience of scholars inside and outside the area of communal studies.

Thurman's scholarly analysis of the Harvard and Shirley villages provides a much-needed local history of the Shakers and a close analysis of community formation, development, and, ultimately, dissolution. From the gathering and establishment of each village to the decline and end of both communities over a century later, Thurman emphasizes the Harvard and Shirley Shakers' attempts to put their religious ideals into practice. Ideas of

community, family, and gender played crucial roles in the central struggle of the societies at Harvard and Shirley: the creation and preservation of a strict sectarian identity with accommodation to worldly practices.

In her discussion of the transformation from clusters of converts to the establishment of Harvard and Shirley in the 1780s and 1790s, Thurman provides a helpful social and economic history of early members. (The appendices also include detailed information and population statistics for the original members of both villages.) The emphasis on industry, frugality, and moderation from Harvard and Shirley's earliest years, Thurman argues, represented continuity with Believers' pre-conversion lives in New England and the tenets of early Shakerism established by Ann Lee. Without overlooking the important communal and sectarian dimensions of early Shakerism, Thurman demonstrates that ideas and practices established at Harvard and Shirley also reflected patterns of rural interdependence and broader cultural trends such as the Great Awakening.

The 1790s-1810s represented an important period of growth and organization for the Shakers. Despite several incidents of apostasy, these years also coincided with a period of social and economic stability for the two villages (p. 45). With the establishment of the seed and herb industries, the Harvard and Shirley Shakers also developed closer ties to the outside world. The leadership of Hannah Kendall (Mother Hannah) and Eleazer Rand strongly influenced Harvard and Shirley during their for-

mative years. Although both Kendall and Rand played important roles in “forging the bonds of community at Harvard and Shirley,” Kendall provided a crucial model for female leadership and strongly influenced the establishment of viable economies at Harvard and Shirley (p. 53). Thurman focuses on Mother Hannah’s leadership as an important model of the “androgynous ideal” or the notion that Believers personified both male and female characteristics. “Shaker theology and notions of androgyny,” exemplified in Mother Hannah’s spiritual and temporal leadership affected all Believers “but the sisters were most dramatically affected” (p. 54). Kendall often acted as a “man” in terms of her economic role and position of leadership, especially after Rand’s death in 1808 (p. 61). Unlike the examples of male opposition to Lucy Wright, who led the society for twenty-five years, the Harvard and Shirley Shakers never challenged Mother Hannah’s authority. The androgynous ideal and celibacy applied to all Believers and “allowed men and women to move beyond expected roles and empowered them to develop other sides of their personality” (p. 5).

After Kendall’s death in 1816, the Harvard and Shirley Shakers struggled with the arrival of new leaders and members as well as their growing dependence on the world for economic stability. Despite the efforts of some leaders to maintain strict separation from the world, the 1820s and 1830s represented a crucial turning point as the Harvard and Shirley Shakers increased their acceptance of practices and people from the outside world. Thurman depicts the adoption of worldly reform (i.e. Thomsonianism and Grahamism) as a sign of greater openness to the world as well as reinforcement of Shaker ideas about health, recognition of women as medical practitioners, and resistance to non-Shaker doctors. The Harvard and Shirley Shakers, and the society at-large, also experienced a crucial period of revivalism known as the Era of Manifestations beginning in 1837.

Thurman’s analysis of the Era of Manifestations, also known as “Mother Ann’s Work,” challenges previous depictions of the revival by scholars such as Marjorie Procter-Smith, Jean M. Humez, Lawrence Foster, and Marsha Mihok as merely an attempt by young women in less powerful families to gain power in the community.[1] Instead, Thurman shows the variety of Believers at Harvard and Shirley men and women, young and old, lay members and community leaders who played active roles as spiritual mediums or “instruments” from the beginning. Shaker sisters, Thurman argues, “benefited the most from the Era of Manifestations” from the use of female imagery and the “public role of women as instru-

ments” that reinforced the ideal of androgyny established with Ann Lee and Hannah Kendall (p. 114). The revival and declining numbers of male members also encouraged women’s increased participation in business and economic matters. This intense period of internal conflict and spiritual renewal prompted the Harvard and Shirley Shakers towards an even greater commitment to proselytizing, involvement in worldly reforms such as women’s rights and spiritualism, and friendships and economic ties with nonbelievers.

Thurman’s attention to language and close analysis of the construction of gender builds on recent scholarship by historians such as Catherine A. Brekus, Amanda Porterfield, and Susan Juster that enrich our understanding of women’s religious experiences and contributions in early America.[2] In particular, Thurman’s nuanced analysis of gender and work in the Harvard and Shaker villages offers a compelling critique of the notion that sexual division of labor among the Shakers merely replicated the nineteenth-century model of “separate spheres” and reinforced gender inequality.[3] Instead, Thurman argues, “the rural nature of their work, their positive view of physical labor, their emphasis on skilled work, their views on gender, and the conflation of the public and private spheres in their community” made women’s work highly valued in Shaker society (p. 67). She persuasively demonstrates that the women’s work at Harvard and Shirley was often less monotonous and isolating than non-Shaker rural women due to the practice of labor rotation, communal work, and use of technology (pp. 72-73). Finally, in contrast to previous work on gender by scholars such as Karen Nickless and Pamela Nickless, Thurman also demonstrates that the sisters at Harvard and Shirley made significant visible economic and spiritual contributions as financial donors, trustees, skilled laborers, elders, hymn writers, physicians, spiritual instruments, cooks, agricultural workers, and saleswomen.[4]

Although the society historically maintained connections to the outside world, the Harvard and Shirley Shakers could no longer find a successful balance between sectarian separatism and worldly connections by the late nineteenth century. The business enterprises at both villages thrived during the 1840s and 1850s, but prosperity came at the cost of becoming financially dependent on the outside world. The collapse of the Shaker family, intensified by internal conflict, declining membership, and ongoing financial problems, led to the dissolution of these communities in the early twentieth century. The “family” at Harvard and Shirley which Thurman de-

picts as the center of Shaker life could no longer survive with the lack of male Believers, the closing of the Harvard school for children, the influx of new membership from other villages, and the deaths of old members (p. 162). As a result, Shirley disbanded in 1908 and Harvard a decade later.

Thurman concludes that the Harvard and Shirley sisters were “happy,” or at the very least “content,” in their lives as Shakers (p. 10). Throughout the book, she demonstrates how the sisters “took on positions of responsibility, made choices about their bodies and their lifestyles, and were empowered by Shaker religious practices” (p. 178). Female empowerment in these communities, she persuasively argues, originated in a combination of ideas and practices. The androgynous ideal and the practice of gendered spirituality at Harvard and Shirley villages, however, provided both sisters and brothers with a complex identity that prompted the exploration of new models for religion, community, family, and health. Although Thurman’s arguments would have benefited from a clearer discussion of how her local study of these two villages revises our understanding of Shakerism as a whole, she provides an excellent model for exploring questions of gender, family, and spirituality in nineteenth-century America.

Notes:

[1]. See Marjorie Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship: A Feminist Analysis of the Uses*

of Religious Symbolism (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985); Jean M. Humez, ed., *Mother’s First-Born Daughters: Early Shaker Writings on Women and Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 43-56; and Marsha Mihok, “Women in the Authority Structure of Shakerism: A Study of Social Conflict and Social Change” (Ph.D. diss., Drew Univ., 1989).

[2]. Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Amanda Porterfield, *Female Piety in Colonial New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[3]. See Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship*; Humez, *Mother’s First-Born Daughters*; Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia*, 17-42; and Louis Kern, *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.

[4]. See Karen K. Nickless and Pamela J. Nickless, “Trustees, Deacons, and Deaconesses: The Temporal Role of the Shaker Sisters 1820-1890,” *Communal Societies*, 7 (1987): 16-24.

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