

Introduction

Religious rhetoric's strengths rarely lie in its ability to be logical, linear, and pragmatic. Instead, religious rhetoric tends to enhance emotional states of passion, ecstasy, and joy. As such, studying religious expression can grant us insight into a culture's emotional life and help us understand emotional depths running under the discourse of everyday life. Religious speech is often aimed at creating what Ernest Bormann has called "rhetorical visions"--rhetoric that provides an organized and energizing worldview for its listeners. A rhetorical vision helps rhetors "make sense out of what prior to that time may have been a confusing state of affairs and. . . do so in common with others who share the fantasy" (9). This paper explores one example of a rhetorical vision that served as an attempt to make sense of a "confusing state of affairs" for one American community in the 1800s.

In August of 1837, a group of young women in a secluded American religious community called the Shakers were suddenly seized with religious visions. They trembled, whirled in convulsive circles, and fell into faints. They sang strange, spontaneous songs and spoke of seeing angels and walking in spiritual realms. All who saw them were amazed.

Within weeks, the same phenomenon had spread to almost all of the Shaker communities in America. As more people experienced what came to be called "Mother Ann's Work" (after the founder of the Shakers), the experience became even more dramatic, and the Shaker communities were energized with the vividness and creativity of the movement. Shakers composed thousands of songs, poems, and drawing inspired by the spirits, and Shaker religious meetings now featured spirit possessions, visits by angels, and ecstatic dancing and singing.

How did these dramatic events come about? How did they affect the communities at the time? And what were the long-term effects of this upsurge of fervent enthusiasm? These questions can only be answered by looking at the history of the Shaker religious movement, then examining how the time of "Mother Ann's Work" may have grown from the societal pressures of the time. This paper uses the specific Shaker community at Sabbathday Lake (SDL), Maine to trace the rise and fall of "Mother Ann's Work." The SDL community, one of the youngest, poorest, and most remote of the Shaker communities, had a somewhat anomalous experience during the time of "Mother Ann's Work." However, as the last active Shaker community, the most extensive records and primary materials are accessible there. The story of "Mother Ann's Work" at Sabbathday Lake, while not entirely typical, serves as an illuminating and fascinating exploration into the power of a rhetorical

vision to shake a community.

The Shakers

Officially known as the United Society of Believers in the Second Coming of Christ, the Shakers were given their name by hostile crowds in England, their country of origin. Members of the group would tremble, shake, and whirl uncontrollably when worshipping, prophesying and testifying while doing so. In the 1770s, a woman named Ann Lee, a member of the group, was imprisoned for her unorthodox worship. While in prison, she received a transcendent vision of heaven and Christ, and left her imprisonment declaring herself the female counterpart to Christ. Transfigured by her experience, she exhorted her group to eschew sex and marriage in favor of a heavenly union with Christ.

Lee's charismatic leadership energized the Shakers. Shaker theology evolved gradually over the next few decades, but eventually came to embrace a few key concepts. These included the renunciation of marriage at the heart of Lee's original vision, the ideal of equality and balance of the sexes (Shakers believed in a fourfold Divinity with a male and female Godhead and balanced male and female Messiahs in Christ and Ann Lee), the acceptance of Christ's second coming within one's heart at one's conversion, and the attempt to live a life as simple and unadorned as possible.

By the time these tenets were solidified, however, the Shakers had left England for America. Hoping to escape religious persecution, in 1774 they crossed the Atlantic and eventually settled in Niskeyuna, New York. In the wake of religious revivals in early America, their numbers swelled. At the height of their expansion, the Shakers had nineteen communities across the eastern United States.

Long before this point, however, Ann Lee died young, weakened physically by repeated beatings at the hands of angry mobs. Fortunately for the Shakers, among her followers were Joseph Meacham and Lucy Wright, who became co-leaders of the faith through the late 1700s. Both were stellar organizers, and Meacham especially was responsible for codifying the Shaker theology. Ann Lee's ecstatic, inspiration-based religion became an ordered, deliberate way of life. The random whirling and jerking of worship Meacham shifted to elaborate patterned dances, and the very individual revelations that were the basis of the faith were balanced with a clear external code of rules of conduct as a Shaker. Under Meacham and Wright's leadership, the Shakers also withdrew from "the World," and began to live in groups separated from non-Believers. These changes made it possible for the Shakers to thrive as an organized community. However, they also set in motion a tension between ecstatic individualism and ordered hierarchy that has remained at the heart of the Shaker

religion through its history.

"Mother Ann's Work"

By the 1830s, the United Society of Believers was near its zenith, with nearly six thousand members in eighteen communities. The early 1800s had seen a major expansion westward, with large numbers of new members joining in Ohio and Kentucky. There were also large numbers of young people in the order; as a celibate religion, the Shakers took in orphans and foundlings from the surrounding communities, giving them a choice of whether to join or not when they were 16 (for boys) or 14 (for girls) (Andrews 277).

The ecstatic and inspired aspect of Shaker religion had never entirely disappeared, and there were often small, localized visionary experiences among the Shakers. However, the phenomenon that became known as "Mother Ann's Work" was vastly larger in scope and intensity, involving nearly every community in highly visionary and intense experiences. Beginning in 1837, when a group of young women in one community experienced visions of angels and were overcome by whirling and shaking, the phenomenon spread through the Shaker communities. At first the experiences were limited mainly to the young, but within a couple of years the older and more established members of the community were also involved.

The experiences of "Mother Ann's Work" were extraordinary. Possessed people saw visions of intense sensory detail, and were often told by angels or spirits of the dead to give gifts from the spirit realm to their Shaker brothers and sisters. Surviving from this time are many small pieces of paper, often illustrated, that detail these lavish gifts:

fruits and flowers of all kinds; diamonds of charity,' chrysolites, emeralds, sapphires, and other precious stones; golden censers, bowls, and chains; gold boxes filled with various treasure; cakes of love and 'sweet-scented manna on shining plates,;' silver cups 'filled with the pure love of Christ and Mother,;' plates of wisdom, baskets of simplicity, balls of promise, belts of wisdom, bands of brightness and robes of meekness; heavenly doves; leaves from the tree of life; rods of correction or comfort; sharp swords, breastplates of truth, shining armor, and so on. (Andrews 157).

Nearly countless new songs, dances, and rituals were introduced to Shaker worship at this time. In the early 1840s all communities were given new spiritual names and encouraged to find a "holy hill" on their grounds on which to conduct special outdoors ceremonies. Angels and spirits visited Shaker worship at this time, giving gifts and advice—sometimes comforting, sometimes chastening. The spirits of famous personages such as Mary Magdalene, Christopher Columbus, Napoleon, and Queen Elizabeth (Foster 185) and the spirits of Native

Americans, Chinese, and Africans also appeared. Shakers possessed by the spirits of these people behaved as if they were the spirit until taught the Shaker theology and converted to the Shaker religion.

In short, during the time of "Mother Ann's Work," the Shaker communities were transformed into bustling, rich, exciting sites of activity for the people involved in the phenomenon.

Driving Tensions

It is no coincidence that "Mother Ann's Work" began in every community with young people, especially women. Diane Sasson's analysis of the Harvard Shaker community during this time points out that two-thirds of the Harvard mediums were under 15 years old (49), a pattern that seems to have been common across communities. Most of these young people had been raised in the Shaker community and were reaching the key turning point in their lives: would they stay in the secure but austere and isolated religious order, or would they venture out into the pleasures and perils of the relatively unknown world? Whether divinely inspired or created from within, the mediums' experiences probably served a rhetorical purpose. By creating a sort of "virtual world" of rich and sensuous but entirely spiritual rewards, the phenomenon gave a reason to stay in the community. The Shakers may have seemed ascetic and severe on the surface, but those who participated in "Mother Ann's Work" pictured a joyous, fulfilling inner life.

However, there were tensions in addition to those within the early mediums' hearts. "Mother Ann's Work" appeared very quickly and apparently spontaneously among the young people in nearly every community as the news of the phenomenon spread. The ecstatic and individually inspired visions harkened back to the earliest days of the religion. The chaotic nature of these experiences, however, did not necessarily mesh well with the more ordered, hierarchical structure of the religion put into place after Ann Lee's death.

The mediums most in touch with spirits and angels continued to be the young and relatively powerless in the communities for about eight months. In April 1838, the first member of the Church Order (as opposed to the Gathering Order for still-uncommitted young people), experienced visions. Philemon Stewart became the first person among the established ranks of the Shakers to become a medium, and from that point on the path of "Mother Ann's Work" was shifted.

Edward Deming Andrews, author of the first definitive history of the Shakers, briefly describes the first visions and inspirations of the young people of the community, then turns to Stewart's experiences:

Finally, on a Sabbath afternoon in the early Spring of 1838, the 'work' opened when Philemon Stewart, a member of the Church Order, came into meeting so agitated he needed the support of two brethren, and delivered the first direct communication from Jesus and Mother Ann. . . Stewart was the first, and probably the most prominent of the Shaker 'instruments.' (153)

One wonders, if the work "finally" opened on this day, what had been happening for the last eight months, as young women were seeing angels and singing inspired songs. The difference is that the first eight months were a spontaneous, grassroots experience at the fringes of Shaker life. After Stewart's vision, the Shaker leadership's idea of a religious revival would come into increasing conflict with rhetoric put forward by the original mediums.

The rhetoric of the beginning of "Mother Ann's Work" was highly visual, metaphorical, and sensual. Much of the focus was on friends giving each other spirit gifts and drawings. After Stewart's vision, the Shaker leadership appointed official mediums at most communities. Tellingly, very few of the original mediums became officially sanctioned mediums. The rhetoric from the leadership-chosen mediums was strikingly different as well. Highly didactic and prescriptive, it focused on driving out sin and backsliding among the communities. For example, in Philemon Stewart's spirit-inspired revision of the Shaker code, "everything imaginable is regulated, and in the greatest detail. Communal life is made as uniformistic as possible (for example, all clothing the same color) and all activities are prescribed in such a way as to guarantee identical practice from one community to the next" (Whitson 20). In short, the official mediums encouraged a hierarchical and ordered attitude toward the religious experience rather than the more individual and ecstatic experiences of the early mediums.

The original rhetorical stance of the movement did not disappear entirely, and the more successful aspects of the organized period of "Mother Ann's Work" combined the highly sensory rhetoric of the beginning with the group focus of the later movement. For example, the leadership encouraged each community to find a "Holy Hill" upon which to conduct outdoor ceremonies that included a great deal of spiritualized imagery. The spirit gifts, drawings, and songs continued to be encouraged. However, it appears clear that the Shaker leaders were trying to channel the creative energy of the time into more approved and pro-establishment practices. Sometimes these efforts were creative and graceful; sometimes they probably seemed simply heavy-handed.

As the leadership attempted to focus "Mother Ann's Work" in ways they approved of, sometimes the practices became openly disruptive to the community. Perhaps the original mediums were resentful of the diminishment of their power, or perhaps the young and fringe

members of Shaker life found the official ceremonies unsatisfying. Whatever the reason, in the early to mid 1840s the leadership's ability to use the movement in pro-social ways sometimes broke down dramatically. In her memoirs of life at Sabbathday Lake, Aurelia Mace recalled the difficulty posed by having "Indian" spirits appear in the midst of worship:

[The] orchard was given to the Indian Spirits for their home. In the first of their coming to this place they were quite rude, and made so much disturbance that they had to be expelled from the meetings, were not allowed to enter the door-yard nor the Fountain Ground for many years. (April 24-25)

Other Shaker communities seem to have had more success at "taming" their Indian spirits and convincing the mediums possessed by them to not misbehave, but it was clearly a troubling point for many places.

A more serious problem was the occasional blatant misuse of power by a medium for personal ends. The most severe case was one in which an established leader of the community was falsely denounced by a jealous medium and expelled from the community at the age of 69 with "only his clothes and his printing press" (Morse 43). When the medium's duplicity was discovered, he was reinstated, but died soon after. There is some evidence that people suspected Philemon Stewart of using his visions for his own advancement as well (Brewer 162). In cases such as these and in the actions of the "savage Indians" one can see the friction between an individualistic grassroots movement and the leadership's attempt to control and use it in pro-community ways.

The documents available at the Sabbathday Lake Shaker community in Maine reveal these tensions playing out in one small community. The phenomenon was slow in catching on at SDL: there is only one recorded vision in the archives for 1839, none for 1840, and only six for 1841. Almost certainly there were visions that remained unrecorded, but at a time when spirit drawings and written gifts abounded in most other communities, SDL remained relatively untouched. SDL's Brother Arnold Hadd argues that the leadership of SDL was reluctant to embrace the phenomenon, and a letter in 1845 from the Canterbury NH community (the regional authority) to the New Lebanon headquarters confirms the continued recalcitrance of the Maine community. "Unbelief in the present manifestation is too prevalent" at SDL, it noted. "Even their former Elder Brother James Pote seems to have very little if any faith in the present work" (cited in Brewer, 131). However, in 1842, after a visit from the national leaders, a group of young women began to experience the vivid visions characteristic of "Mother Ann's Work."

Although the SDL leadership appointed official mediums, the vast majority of visions continued to be had by the original group of young women; their names appear over and

over on records of meetings and on descriptions of visions. The visions start off temperate, urging members of the community to cherish each other. However, over the course of four years the language becomes more and more castigating and extreme: by late 1845 a medium was informing a gathering of the "utter destruction that would follow the filthy and disorderly" among the Shakers ("A Brief Account," Dec 25 1845).

The SDL leadership seemed torn between the pressure from above in the form of the national leadership and the pressure from below in the form of the vocal and active young mediums. A letter to the national headquarters in March 1846 refers to now being a "peculiarly trying and critical time with us" (March 5 1846). Their attempts to reconcile the energy of the young women and the desires of the national leadership to use that energy for pro-social ends came to a crisis later that month, as revealed by a curious document in the SDL archives.

Loosely hand-bound in blue paper, the document is a collection of testimonies, mainly from the young women who have been credited with the bulk of the visions in the years before. All of them follow roughly the same form: the women assert that their visions have been of God and not mortals and profess their love of and obedience to the SDL lead. Some of the testimonies hint at coercion: "With a degree of pleasure I am induced to comply with the request of our blessed Mother Ann at this time," was the ambivalent writing of Abigail Mace. Others sounded more chastened, like 15-year-old Lydia Mace, who wrote "Beloved Elders I do not feel ashamed of my precious faith but as I am very young and not used to composing I feel ashamed of my manner of writing do be so kind as to excuse the same. From your little Lydia."

From the date of this document, the visions at SDL cease almost entirely. There is one more vivid and even angry vision from a week later; then, excepting a few poems over the course of six years, they stop completely. "Mother Ann's Work" at Sabbathday Lake was over.

Conclusion

The exact circumstances behind the power struggle at SDL can never be determined, but the documents evoke a clash between a very individualistic, inspired form of rhetoric and the more established communitarian, pragmatic rhetoric of the long-term Shaker organization. Both styles of rhetoric have come and gone in Shaker history, but at the time of "Mother Ann's Work" the pressures on the Shaker community from within and without were reflected in the confrontation between the two.

At the time few in the Shaker community could have been fully aware of it, but the

1830s and 40s were the beginning of the decline for the United Society of Believers. The increasing urbanization of American life made it more and more difficult for agrarian communities to remain self-supporting. In addition, the urban shift in American society made city life more appealing and feasible to young Shakers, and the apostasy rate climbed steadily from the 1830s. Although the ferment of excitement caused by "Mother Ann's Work" might have re-energized the Shaker community in the short run, in the long run its rhetorical power was no match for the pressures exerted by the changing world around them. Indeed, Priscilla Brewer suggests in Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives, that many Shakers found the spiritualism of the time actively offputting and chose to leave the community (134-135).

There is some evidence, however, that "Mother Ann's Work" did succeed in solidifying the commitment of the young people most centrally involved in it. Of the sixteen young women who were the main spirit mediums at SDL, birth and death records reveal that seven of them remained Shakers all their life and eight left the faith (one woman's fate remained unrecorded). At a time when only ten percent of young people raised as Shakers chose to stay in the community (Brewer 148), these numbers suggest there was a positive relationship, at least at SDL, between involvement in "Mother Ann's Work" and a commitment to the faith in the long run.

In an even larger sense, the continued existence of the Shaker faith today, even in its small numbers, speaks to a level of rhetorical success for their rhetorical vision. No other Christian millennialist, utopian sect has ever achieved either the size of membership the Shakers had at their height, or the span of influence they have continued to have. Their unfinished story reflects the power of the Shakers' knife-edged balance between ecstatic and pragmatic rhetoric.

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