

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: WOMEN'S APOSTATE NARRATIVES AND THE FATE OF
 THE FAMILY IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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This thesis explores women's apostate narratives in antebellum America, focusing on best-selling literature castigating Shakers, Catholics, and Mormons. The narratives I analyze were also associated with mob activity against these religious communities. I argue that the narratives and their attendant mob activity did not function primarily as commentary against non-mainstream religious communities. Rather, they were fundamentally concerned with the fate of the patriarchal Protestant family. The texts depicted communities on the fringe of society, and their authorship was attributed to women who could not claim full rights as American citizens. In many ways these groups were relatively powerless, as were the female apostates who criticized them. In the antebellum period, however, these religious communities and the women who wrote against them became vehicles for profound commentary on the patriarchal family, an institution seen as central to maintaining social order and forging national identity in the newly United States.

WOMEN'S APOSTATE NARRATIVES AND THE FATE OF THE FAMILY IN
ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

by

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Introduction

In 1818, a mob of one hundred townspeople attacked the Shaker community outside Enfield, New Hampshire, rioting for nearly five days.¹ Led by Shaker apostate Mary Dyer and anti-Shaker agitator Eunice Chapman, the mob ransacked the orderly, prosperous village of celibate men and women, all of whom had renounced mainstream Protestantism in favor of communal life and celibacy. The mob, too, was orderly in its own way; its leaders had a specific goal in mind. Rather than wreaking random havoc, they hoped to be liberators. The mob rallied against the entrapment of Mary Dyer's and Eunice Chapman's children, who were reportedly being held within the confines of the Shaker village, and it was spurred on by the suspicion that young, defenseless female converts were also being held against their wills. The children, whom the Shakers considered members of their own community, were kept on village grounds against the wishes of their mothers, but not against the wishes of their fathers. James Chapman and Joseph Dyer had embraced the Shaker faith several years before, and both were full-fledged residents of the village. Like others in this community, the men had adopted the Shaker abhorrence of "the flesh" and had renounced the bonds of marriage. Joseph, however, was still legally married to Mary, and as such had legal control over both his wife and his children. Eunice had recently obtained a divorce from James, and while she had gained her autonomy, she did not have custody of her children.² Both Mary and

¹ Elizabeth A. De Wolfe, *Domestic Broils: Shakers, Antebellum Marriage, and the Narratives of Mary and Joseph Dyer* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010); Ilyon Woo, *The Great Divorce: A Nineteenth-Century Mother's Extraordinary Fight Against Her Husband, the Shakers, and Her Times* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010).

² De Wolfe, *Domestic Broils*, 10-12.

Eunice had also spent some time living in Shaker villages, and both women reported being locked away in secluded rooms while there, part of the Shakers' attempt to prevent them from seeing their children or speaking with their husbands. The two women had rallied the mob themselves, urging the townspeople to help them rescue their children from the Shakers.³

Another mob attack occurred in 1834, this time in Massachusetts. As with the Enfield incident, this attack was associated with themes of female entrapment and religious separation, although this mob was larger, rowdier, and more destructive than the one in Enfield. After two days of rioting, it had decimated the Catholic convent school situated on Mount Benedict, just outside of Charlestown, Massachusetts. The mob burned the convent to the ground and caused the retreat of the once-powerful Mother Superior to Canada.⁴ The twelve nuns, three female servants, and forty-seven girls who lived on Mount Benedict escaped from the violence unscathed, "liberated" by the exclusively male, Protestant, and primarily working-class rioters. Although they may have seen their actions as part of a heroic rescue, the rioters did not remove the pupils from the convent before destroying it. Rather, they lit the convent aflame while the young girls were still within the building.⁵ The schoolgirls' escape from the fire was largely successful because the attack was not much of a surprise; rumors had circulated widely in Charlestown that a mob would soon be descending on the convent. Knowing this, the girls were not caught unaware, and when the fire started they walked out of the

³ Elizabeth A. De Wolfe, "The Mob at Enfield" *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (2010): 80-86, 80.

⁴ Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Fire & Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (New York: The Free Press, 2000).

⁵ Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 138-139.

convent's back door and hid from the mobsters in a garden until they were escorted to a neighbor's home. The girls and the nuns then hitched rides to nearby Boston, where sympathetic Catholics took them in. As in Enfield, this mob was preceded by widespread rumors that at least one woman was being held by the religious community against her will, and some were suspicious that other women were being held involuntarily as well. The mob was specifically spurred on by tales of the "escaped nun," Sister Mary John, who had recently fled the convent and collapsed in delirium at a neighbor's home. While the men may have had additional motivations for carrying out the attack, newspapers throughout the northeast linked their actions to the entrapment of women and girls. The day after the attack the *Boston Morning Post* reported, "in consequence of this rumor [of entrapment], a great excitement was created in Charlestown, and open threats of burning down the Convent were uttered, but scarcely credited, till about 10 o'clock last night when a large mob gathered around the Institution."⁶ It was not only the safety of adult, Catholic nuns that raised concern – over thirty Protestant girls were also living at Mount Benedict, where they comprised two-thirds of the convent school pupils. Significantly, Sister Mary John had returned to the convent. While some thought this was by force, she stated that she returned of her own volition. And the pupils, mostly from upper-class Boston Unitarian families, had been sent to the convent school by their parents, who were eager for them to receive what was thought to be the best education available to young women.⁷

⁶ "By This Morning's Mail. Dreadful Conflagration. Office of the Boston Morning Post," *Eastern Argus* (Portland, ME), August 13, 1834.

⁷ Franchot, 151-152.

A decade later, outside the Mormon town of Nauvoo, Illinois, another mob was formed. This mob's attack ended in at least two fatalities, and it became a defining moment in the history of this American-born religion. Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, in prison for destroying the printing press of a newly established anti-Mormon newspaper, the *Nauvoo Expositor*, was attacked in his jail cell by large group of angry men. Both Joseph and his brother Hyrum were killed. Though outsiders had a growing list of objections to this nascent religious community, both Joseph's destruction of the press and the mob's murder of Joseph and Hyrum were linked to the recently exposed practice of Mormon polygamy.⁸ The destroyed printing press had published only one newspaper issue, on June 7, 1844; twenty days later the press was rendered inoperable. The newspaper was established by Mormon apostates who were unhappy with Smith's introduction of polygamy into the Mormon community, and in their publication, they asserted that helpless young women were being forced into plural marriages. Even already married women were not safe, and they warned readers that their own wives could fall victim to Mormon men's predations.⁹ The mob of nearly two hundred men, led by the publisher of the *Expositor*, William Law, descended upon the jail in what seemed an effort to quell Mormon political and marital prerogatives. Though the mob was surely also motivated by Smith's entrance into local and national politics, and by the formidable activities of the Mormon militia, the events leading up to Smith's death were explicitly connected to the *Expositor*, and thus to accusations of polygamy. Just as with the Enfield and Charlestown incidents, this mob's actions can be viewed as an attempt to liberate

⁸ John E. Hallwas and Roger D. Launius, *Cultures in Conflict: A Documentary History of the Mormon War in Illinois* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1995).

⁹ *Nauvoo Expositor* (Nauvoo, IL), June 7, 1844.

defenseless young women – in this case, from the decidedly un-Protestant grip of polygamous marriage.

The religious groups implicated in these mob incidents shared several common traits, as did the ways in which American society thought, wrote about, and interacted with these communities. The Shaker villages were composed exclusively of converts, due to the strict celibacy requirements to which members adhered; the Catholic convent in Charlestown was populated primarily by Protestant girls, and most of the nuns who resided there were converts to Catholicism; Mormon communities aggressively sought converts to bolster their numbers as they migrated west. Most converts to these three religions were drawn from mainstream Protestant sects. The membership of all three religions was predominantly, though not exclusively, white. These religions were also communal and were characterized by varying degrees of removal from broader society. Most distinctive of all their traits, however, was their rejection of the normative patriarchal family. That is, these religions rejected some or all of what characterized the ideal Protestant family: man's prerogative and authority over his wife and children, a nuclear structure, normative gender roles, and mainstream Protestant religious faith. None of these three groups abolished the concept of family all together; rather, each manipulated aspects central to mainstream marriage in the antebellum United States. They skewed or redefined familial rhetoric, gender roles, authority structure, and vows of loyalty.

The Apostate Narratives and Antebellum American Readers

There is one more striking similarity that united the Shakers, Catholics, and Mormons during the antebellum period: each of these religions was lambasted in the popular press by women. In pamphlets and books written for mainstream society, the religions were exposed and ridiculed by women who claimed to have intimate knowledge of these communities, and these texts were marketed and sold widely to American readers. Six works in particular stand out for their popularity and for their association with the mob attacks; these works form the basis of my study. Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer wrote two of the most popular anti-Shaker texts, Chapman's *An Account of the Conduct of the People Called Shakers* (1817) and *A Brief Statement of the Sufferings of Mary Dyer* (1818). The most popular anti-convent narratives of the nineteenth century were Rebecca Theresa Reed's *Six Months in a Convent* (1835) and Maria Monk's *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* (1836). Maria Ward's *Female Life Among the Mormons* (1855) and Mary Ettie V. Smith's *Fifteen Years' Residence with the Mormons* (1857) popularized the anti-Mormon women's apostate narrative.

Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer each described the inner workings of the Shaker villages in which they had resided, finding the greatest horror to be the Shakers' destruction and perversion of family life.¹⁰ Eunice's and Mary's accounts were intended to win both legislative and popular support for the women's campaigns to regain custody of their children. The works were popular: Mary Dyer's *Statement* was advertised almost thirty times in Massachusetts and New Hampshire newspapers in the year after its

¹⁰ Eunice Chapman, *An Account of the Conduct of the People Called Shakers: In the Case of Eunice Chapman and Her Children, Since He Husband Became Acquainted with that People, and Joined their Society* (Albany, NY: self-published, 1817); Mary Dyer, *A Brief Statement of the Sufferings of Mary Dyer, Occasioned by the Society Called Shakers, Written by Herself...* (Boston: William Spear, 1818), reprinted in Elizabeth A. De Wolfe, *Domestic Broils*.

publication. From 1817 to 1819, when Mary was most active in appealing to the state legislature, her case generated over sixty articles and reports in Massachusetts and New Hampshire newspapers, and it received coverage in newspapers in four other states.¹¹ Dyer also published her *Portraiture of Shakerism* a few years later, in which she collected testimonies supposedly written by both women and men whose lives had been ruined by the Shakers.¹² Eunice Chapman's publication was advertised at least twenty times during this same period, and her legislative appeal generated substantial newspaper coverage.¹³ The pamphlets, it can be inferred, were read widely and the women's cases were discussed heatedly in the press. Their cases came to a head in 1818, when the two women raised the Enfield mob in an effort to regain their children.

Similarly, two anti-Catholic books were published around the time of the Charlestown convent riot, were read widely, and were full of salacious details of gender perversion within the convent walls. The first was written by Rebecca Theresa Reed, a young Protestant woman who had renounced her faith to join the Mount Benedict community. She lived among the Mount Benedict Ursulines for a short time in the years preceding the riot. In 1835, she published a narrative recounting her experience. Though published just after the mob attack, Rebecca's *Six Months in a Convent* may have circulated widely in manuscript form before the convent's destruction, and it was

¹¹ I located these newspaper citations through Readex's Early American Newspapers database. It should be noted that these cases likely generated more press coverage; extensive searches using the names of all of the individuals involved and alternative search terms have not been performed. The narratives of Joseph Dyer and James Chapman, for example, also generated press coverage, indicating even more public interest in these cases. Unfortunately, I have not been able to establish the print runs of Eunice's and Mary's pamphlets, but based on the newspaper advertisements, articles, and reports, it can be assumed that they were indeed printed, distributed, and consumed by readers.

¹² Mary Dyer, *A Portraiture of Shakerism Exhibiting a General View of their Character and Conduct, from the First Appearance of Ann Lee in New-England, down to the Present Time, and Certified by Many Respectable Authorities* (Concord, NH: self-published, 1822).

¹³ The newspaper coverage of Eunice Chapman's case is discussed in greater detail later in this Introduction.

assumed by many contemporary observers to have been a catalyst for mob action.¹⁴ Like the anti-Shaker texts mentioned above, this work quickly captivated the public. Between 1835 and 1836, *Six Months in a Convent* and the Catholic response to it, *An Answer to Six Months in a Convent*, received over one hundred newspaper citations and advertisements across ten states. One Massachusetts article declared, “Miss Reed’s ‘Six Months in a Convent’ has had a sale run that is without a parallel in modern publishing among us.” It reported that over 25,000 copies of *Six Months* were in circulation, and that its printer had been forced to purchase another press to keep up with readers’ demands.¹⁵ The second work published just after the Charlestown mob was even more popular than Rebecca Reed’s. Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures*, a horrific account of a young convert’s time in a Canadian convent, was published in early 1836.¹⁶ Soon after, Maria Monk fled to the United States, where her story was republished and discussed at length in newspapers throughout the northeast.¹⁷ According to historian Jenny Franchot, *The Awful Disclosures* sold a total of 300,000 copies before 1860.¹⁸

Mormonism also generated several lengthy works by supposed former Mormon insiders, though in this case they were published only after the mob attack that led to the

¹⁴ Rebecca Theresa Reed, *Six Months in a Convent, or, The Narrative of Rebecca Theresa Reed: Who Was Under the Influence of the Roman Catholics about Two Years...* (Boston: Russell, Odiorne, & Co., 1835). In her published recollection of her time as a pupil at the convent, Louise Goddard Whitney explained that both the school and Charlestown were very familiar with Reed’s story before the mob attack; *Six Months*, however, was not formally published until after the riot, in 1835. Louise Goddard Whitney, *The Burning of the Convent* (Cambridge, MA: Welch, Bigelow, and Company, 1877).

¹⁵ “No, I Want to be a Nun,” *Farmer’s Gazette* (Barre, MA), April 24, 1835.

¹⁶ Maria Monk, *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk, as Exhibited in a Narrative of Her Sufferings During a Residence of Five Years as a Novice and Two Years as a Black Nun, in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal* (New York: Howe & Bates, 1836).

¹⁷ From 1836 to 1837, *The Awful Disclosures* was mentioned almost 30 times in New Hampshire papers, was mentioned several times in New York and Massachusetts newspapers, and received coverage in the newspapers of seven other states. As a figure of interest, Maria Monk also received attention in the news apart from explicit mentions of *The Awful Disclosures*; these mentions are not included in the above numbers.

¹⁸ Franchot, 154.

death of Joseph Smith. The writings themselves were not, therefore, blamed for inspiring mob violence, as the anti-Shaker and anti-convent publications were. Yet the themes on which these publications focused were the same themes cited as justification for Smith's killing. Polygamy and female entrapment were central to Maria Ward's *Female Life Among the Mormons: A Narrative of Many Years' Personal Experience* and to Mary Ettie V. Smith's *Fifteen Years' Residence with the Mormons*. According to her narrative, Maria, a young Protestant woman from New York, was tricked into joining a roving party of Mormons, led by the prophet Joseph Smith himself.¹⁹ Over the several years she remained with the Mormons she claimed she had witnessed the horrors of polygamy and the "perversions" it introduced into society. Unable to accept plural marriage, she finally fled back to Protestant civilization. Mary Ettie V. Smith also wrote that she was tricked into converting. While a Mormon, she was forced into several marriages by Joseph Smith's successor, Brigham Young.²⁰ When the prospect of capture and death no longer seemed worse than remaining in Mormon society, she ran away and returned to her native New York.

Maria Ward's work was published anonymously in 1855; Mary Ettie V. Smith's story, attributed to her but officially authored by Nelson Winch Green, was first published in 1857. Their works were concerned with the events leading up to and following the most significant mob attack in Mormon history. As with the attack that resulted in Smith's death, the horrors that they purported to expose were directly related

¹⁹ Maria Ward [attributed], *Female Life Among the Mormons: A Narrative of Many Years' Personal Experience, by the Wife of a Mormon Elder, Recently from Utah* (New York: J.C. Derby, 1855).

²⁰ Mary Ettie V. Smith, as told to Nelson Winch Green, *Fifteen Years' Residence with the Mormons: With the Startling Disclosures of the Mysteries of Polygamy, By a Sister of One of the High Priests* (Chicago: Phoenix Publishing, 1857, republished 1876).

to concerns over the restructuring of the American family – symbolized in this case by polygamy. As with the *Nauvoo Expositor*, the publication that led to Joseph Smith’s arrest and subsequent death, these women’s narratives were concerned primarily with polygamy and its attendant perversion of accepted family roles. Though these works were not as widely advertised in the popular press as the anti-Shaker and anti-convent narratives described above, they were among the first of the anti-Mormon exposés, helping to define the genre to the reading public. And the genre *was* popular: at least fifty works were published in the nineteenth century, and most took up the theme of polygamy. The majority were republished one or more times in order to meet readers’ demands.²¹

Newspaper advertisements, sales figures, court records, and popular commentary indicate that these anti-Shaker, anti-convent, and anti-Mormon narratives were part of the public discourse. So too were the legal cases and mob attacks that were associated with them. Of course, mob violence in antebellum America was hardly constrained to the three occurrences outlined above. Nor were these examples from Shaker, Catholic, and Mormon history even close to the largest, deadliest, or most infamous of nineteenth-century riots. However, just like the narratives, the cases and the resulting attacks did captivate the public. Eunice Chapman’s custody battle was covered in great detail in the press. During the years of her legislative campaign, 1817 to 1819, news of Eunice Chapman appeared almost one hundred times in New York state newspapers alone, and publications in thirteen other states plus the District of Columbia also reported details of her ordeal. During these same years, Mary Dyer’s campaign received extensive attention

²¹ Charles A. Cannon, “The Awesome Power of Sex: The Polemical Campaign Against Mormon Polygamy,” *Pacific Historical Review* 43, no. 1 (1974): 61-82, 63.

in the press in New Hampshire and Massachusetts; newspapers in five other states also reported on her dealings with the Shakers.²² Her campaign, which lasted much longer than Eunice Chapman's, continued to receive press coverage through the 1830s. Interestingly, the mob received no coverage in the major newspapers, perhaps because Enfield officials worked to keep the news from tarnishing the town's reputation, or because the situation abated without violence or significant destruction – and without the restitution of the children to their mothers. Unlike this comparatively tame mob, the Charlestown mob received much coverage in the press. From 1834 to 1835, newspapers from eleven states featured the story prominently, with Massachusetts and New Hampshire providing updates to readers with great frequency. In addition, newspapers across the country ran stories recounting the case of Rebecca Theresa Reed. After the publication of *The Awful Disclosures* in 1836, Maria Monk was also mentioned in connection with both the mob and with Rebecca Reed.²³ The Carthage mob, too, received significant attention, and the death of Mormon prophet Joseph Smith was reported in newspapers across the country. From 1844 to 1857 – the period between the attack and the publication of Maria Ward's and Mary Ettie Smith's works – Joseph

²² These figures reflect search results in Readex's Early American Newspapers database. Eunice Chapman's case was mentioned 91 times in New York newspapers, and it received considerable attention in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont, and was mentioned in ten other states. Mary Dyer's case was mentioned 36 times in Massachusetts and 31 times in New Hampshire, and was covered in newspapers in four other states.

²³ Rebecca Theresa Reed was generally cited in the context of her publication. *Six Months in a Convent* was the subject of both advertisements and editorial commentary. In 1835 alone, Reed and her work were cited 47 times in New Hampshire newspapers, 36 times in Massachusetts newspapers, 16 times in Rhode Island newspapers, and numerous times in Connecticut, South Carolina, and Alabama, and once in Ohio. Newspapers also carried news of Rebecca's death in 1838. From 1834 to 1835, Charlestown was mentioned in connection with the mob attack on the convent a total of 51 times in eleven states, not including all the mentions of the individuals involved in the case. In total, from 1836 to 1855, Maria Monk was mentioned in explicit connection with Charlestown three times; this does not reflect mentions of her publication. During this same period, Maria Monk and Rebecca Reed were referred to together in newspapers five times.

Smith's death was mentioned in explicit connection with the mob over one hundred times.²⁴ With the exception of the attack on the Enfield Shakers, these mobs were written about widely, and the incidents surrounding the attack on the Shakers received significant attention, likely informing the attitudes of the mob's participants. This coverage indicates that much of the antebellum reading public would have had some familiarity with these specific cases of anti-Shaker, anti-Catholic, and anti-Mormon activity.

The Believability of the Narratives and the Context of Communal Religions

But were the stories true, the authors credible? What is important for this study is not the accuracy of these women's accounts, but that contemporary readers *believed* – or at least claimed to believe – these works to be true. These narratives were marketed as exposés, and their introductions and prefaces championed the character of the authors and the veracity of their statements. For the purposes of this study, I am concerned with how the narratives were advertised, read, and discussed, and what this reveals about antebellum American society. I will not argue that the narratives were true; neither will I argue they were false. I accept them for how they were presented to and consumed by the public. There certainly were contemporary skeptics, yet the women's stories were marketed as factual, if bizarre, accounts of religious communities on the fringe of mainstream society, and many readers accepted the narratives at face value. (For examples of how the texts were marketed and discussed in newspapers, see Appendix, Figures 1-3.)

²⁴ The mob attack that killed Joseph and Hyrum Smith was subject to newspaper commentary for decades after the men's deaths. From 1844 to 1856 – from the time of the attack to the publication of the anti-polygamy narratives – the men's deaths were written about in explicit connection with the mob on Carthage jail 107 times. The geography of the newspaper coverage was also widespread.

Nevertheless, it is worth interrogating the narratives briefly, to better understand the context surrounding their publication and their readers. In some cases, such as Mary Dyer's and Eunice Chapman's, contemporary documents corroborate certain narrative elements. We know that the Dyers and the Chapmans were engaged in child custody battles, that their husbands joined the Shakers without first ending their marriages, and that Mary resided with the Shakers for two years while Eunice never did. Mary was unsuccessful in obtaining a divorce until 1830, and she never did regain custody of her children.²⁵ Eunice, on the other hand, was granted a legislative divorce in 1818 and her children were returned to her a year later.²⁶ What we do not know is if their stories accurately portray their relationships with their husbands and with the Shakers, and if the details surrounding the children's removal to the Shaker villages are correct. James Chapman, Joseph Dyer, and the Enfield Shakers all published rebuttals to the women's narratives, and the "facts" vary widely among these accounts.

We know that Rebecca Theresa Reed testified in court at the trial of several men suspected of playing leading roles in the Mount Benedict riots.²⁷ Newspapers reported on the trial, as well as the earlier escape of Sister Mary John and her subsequent return to the convent.²⁸ The Mother Superior herself confirmed that Reed had resided with the nuns for a short time, though the two women's written accounts differed significantly regarding the particulars of the arrangement. The Mother Superior's rebuttal to *Six Months in a Convent* refuted many of Reed's published claims, though the basic fact of

²⁵ De Wolfe, *Domestic Broils*, 24.

²⁶ De Wolfe, "The Mob at Enfield," 85.

²⁷ Franchot, 146.

²⁸ See, for example, *Haverhill/Essex Gazette* (Haverhill, MA), August 30, 1834.

their acquaintance was never disputed.²⁹ Few elements of Maria Monk's story, on the other hand, can be corroborated. She claimed to have been raped while residing at the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal; it has been suggested, however, that she was actually sent to a reformatory Magdalen Asylum and was dismissed when she became pregnant, possibly as a result of a liaison with a Protestant clergyman.³⁰ Monk's narrative reads more like a salacious gothic novel than a straightforward biographical account. Though the work may have been largely fabricated and written by anti-Catholics, "Maria Monk" was not simply an invented character. After the publication of *The Awful Disclosures* in 1836, Monk made her way to New York, where she was arrested for picking the pocket of a man in the "den" – or brothel – in which she worked.³¹ Historians have long considered Monk's narrative to be largely fictional.

Female Life Among the Mormons was first published anonymously, though its authorship was immediately attributed to its first-person narrator, Maria Ward. Some have suggested this was the pseudonym of Cornelia Ferris, wife of the Secretary of Utah Territory (and noted anti-Mormon) Benjamin G. Ferris. Benjamin G. Ferris and his wife were sent to Utah in 1852 but remained there only six months. When they returned to their native New York, they each published books, under their own names, that disparaged the Mormons. While recent studies have suggested that Cornelia Ferris may not have written *Female Life*, most historians agree that this work is more novel than autobiography. Little is known about Mary Ettie V. Smith, whose first-person narrative comprises *Fifteen Years' Residence with the Mormons*; even less is known about the

²⁹ Mary Ann Moffatt, *An Answer to Six Months in a Convent, Exposing its Falsehoods and Manifold Absurdities* (Boston: J.H. Eastburn, 1835).

³⁰ Franchot, 155.

³¹ Sandra Frink, "Women, the Family, and the Fate of the Nation in Anti-Catholic Narratives, 1830-1860," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 2 (2009): 237-264, 237.

book's credited author, Nelson Winch Green, to whom Smith supposedly related her story. Both Smith (née Coray) and Green were real people, and there is some indication that Coray did reside with the Mormons for some time.³² Like Ward's work, though, Smith's conforms to many conventions of nineteenth-century fiction, and is replete with melodrama, romance, and moral (and immoral) extremes. Both Ward and Smith claimed to have witnessed significant events in Mormon history, including the death of Joseph Smith and the early rule of Brigham Young, yet these retellings agree neither with each other nor with the accepted documentation of these events.

Taken together, these publications against the Shakers, Catholic convents, and Mormons present an intriguing glimpse into mainstream American society's relationship with nineteenth-century communal religions. The Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century saw the emergence of many communal religious experiments, most of which sought some degree of withdrawal "from the contamination of human wickedness."³³ Groups such as the pietist Harmony Society of Indiana, Frances Wright's integrationist Nashoba Commune of Tennessee, and John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida Perfectionists of New York all sought removal from mainstream society. They adhered to their own religious tenets, celebrated and sacralized community founders, and restructured the family unit – sometimes radically.³⁴ Mainstream society likely did not

³² In a letter to Nelson Winch Green from Norman Calkins, an early reader of the manuscript, Mary Ettie V. Smith was discussed in candid terms. Calkins believed Smith's story, but admitted that it may arouse suspicion in readers because it was so horrendous. Calkins also accepted that Smith had indeed lived with the Mormons, and indicated that she was a somewhat well known person. Norman Calkins to Nelson Winch Green, January 8, 1858. Correspondence held at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

³³ Raymond Lee Muncy, *Sex and Marriage in Utopian Communities, 19th Century America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), 4.

³⁴ Of the communal movements I have not chosen to analyze in depth, the Perfectionists are perhaps best known for their extreme counter-cultural approach to family life. Under Noyes's direction, they practiced "complex marriage," a non-monogamous system in which opposite-sex partnerships were formed and

agree with the ways in which members of these societies lived their lives. Yet however objectionable these communities may have been, they were not generally considered by outsiders to be cause for much concern. The Shakers, Catholics, and Mormons, however, were more than concerning – they were threatening. These three groups boasted many adherents, and were more visible to outsiders and interacted more with the surrounding community than did many, if not most, other communal societies. Nashoba, for example, was very small and short-lived, and the Oneida Perfectionists were relegated to one community. On the other hand, the Shakers boasted twenty-one communities by 1827; immigration of Catholics was increasing steadily throughout the antebellum period; and the population of the Mormon town of Nauvoo grew to 12,000 in the years before Smith's death.³⁵ But it was more than strong numbers that concerned the American public about these religions. As portrayals like the narratives I have detailed attest, the American public became convinced that they posed a significant threat to Protestant women. Through these women, they threatened the Protestant family; through the family, it was believed, they might even threaten the national character.

In the following chapters, I argue that these narratives did not function primarily as commentary against three religious communities that were outside the American mainstream. Rather, these female-authored anti-Shaker, anti-convent, and anti-Mormon

reformed, both during periods of sexual activity and in periods of abstinence, as enforced by Noyes. Though this system did lead to internal strife and challenges to Noyes's authority (both in court and outside of it), the Perfectionists did not, to my knowledge, arouse the contempt that the Shakers, Catholics, and Mormons did, and I know of no records of violent acts against the community, though authorities did attempt to arrest Noyes for his sexual practices. For more on Perfectionism, see Muncy, *Sex and Marriage in Utopian Communities, 19th Century America*.

³⁵ Steven Craig Harper, "'Dictated by Christ': Joseph Smith and the Politics of Revelation," *Journal of the Early Republic* 26, no. 2 (2006): 276-304, 296.

narratives were fundamentally concerned with the fate of the patriarchal Protestant family. The narratives offered a textual platform for experimentation with gender roles, sexual activity, marital relations, and family organization. The communities represented alternatives to American Protestant norms, and as such, they garnered enormous interest and generated significant unease. The themes articulated in these stories frame the Shakers, Catholics, and Mormons not only as threats to women, but as threats to all Americans precisely because they presented successful alternatives to nuclear, patriarchal family structures. In response, some outsiders took to vigilantism. By circumventing the law, these mobs also threatened the very community stability they claimed to protect. The narratives depicted communities on the fringe of society and were written by women who could not claim full citizenship rights. In many ways, the Shakers, Catholic religious orders, and Mormons were relatively powerless, as were the women who wrote about them. But in the narratives I examine, the religious communities became the site for profound commentary on gender roles. And the female authors of these tales, whether their stories were real or somewhat imagined, gave voice to Americans' ambiguity over what was seen as the heart of the country – the family.

Shakers, Catholics, and Mormons have been studied individually and in comparison to various communal and religious projects of the nineteenth century.³⁶ However, all three have not yet been juxtaposed, despite the strikingly similar themes that they introduce. Nor has the female-authored apostate literature they generated been

³⁶ See, for example, Wendy E. Chmielewski, Louis J. Kern, and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell, eds., *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993); and Stephen C. Taysom, *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds: Conflicting Visions, Contested Boundaries* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011).

viewed in a comparative context.³⁷ Elizabeth A. De Wolfe has worked extensively with anti-Shaker tales, producing an in-depth analysis of Mary Dyer's battle against her husband and the Shakers.³⁸ Ilyon Woo has written a popular biography of Eunice Chapman, though a serious historical study of her legislative appeals and her campaign against the Shakers is lacking.³⁹ Nancy Lusignan Schultz has explored the Charlestown riot in detail, and she has not ignored the role that Rebecca Theresa Reed played in the events surrounding the attack.⁴⁰ Anti-convent narratives, including those of Reed and Maria Monk, have been analyzed primarily as manifestations of nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism, though Sandra Frink has examined them in relation to family identity in a short article.⁴¹ Similarly, the narratives of Maria Ward and Mary Ettie V. Smith have been included in general inquiries into anti-Mormonism, particularly those concerning polygamy.⁴² Historians began exploring gender roles, marriage, and family organization within various communal religions in the 1970s and 1980s, and they have also examined women's lives within certain nineteenth-century religious communities. Some of these works, most notably those by Lawrence Foster and Louis J. Kern, have placed the alternative family structures of various communal religions within a comparative

³⁷ David Brion Davis perhaps comes the closest to attempting a comparative analysis of this controversial literature, though his short work is not at all concerned with the family and identity, instead focusing on the subversive qualities of anti-Catholic, anti-Mormon and, intriguingly, anti-Masonic narratives. David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (1960): 205-224.

³⁸ Elizabeth A. De Wolfe, *Shaking the Faith: Women, Family, and Mary Marshall Dyer's Anti-Shaker Campaign, 1815-1867* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).

³⁹ Woo, *The Great Divorce*.

⁴⁰ Schultz, *Fire & Roses*.

⁴¹ Frink, "Women, the Family, and the Fate of the Nation in Anti-Catholic Narratives, 1830-1860."

⁴² For example, see Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

context.⁴³ Taken together, these works provide a rich base of secondary source materials for this study, yet the existing literature also points to a need for more comparative analysis. In juxtaposing women's anti-Shaker, anti-convent, and anti-Mormon narratives, and in reframing these works as primarily commentary on the family and on gender roles, I hope to contribute a new perspective to scholarship on antebellum women, families, and religious communities.

My analysis focuses on three central themes of the antebellum American family: motherhood, matriarchy, and marriage. In chapter one, I examine the anti-Shaker narratives of Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer; the mob attack on the Enfield, New Hampshire Shaker community; and what these texts reveal about the anxiety surrounding early republican motherhood. Chapter two focuses on the anti-convent writings of Rebecca Theresa Reed and Maria Monk; the destruction of the Ursuline convent of Charlestown, Massachusetts; and women's authority and submission within the patriarchal family. Chapter three concerns the anti-Mormon publications of Maria Ward and Mary Ettie V. Smith; the fatal mob attack on Mormon prophet Joseph Smith; and the changing nature of antebellum marriage. I conclude by considering the broad implications of the fate of women's narratives concerning the Shakers, Catholics, and Mormons.

⁴³ Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias – the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

CHAPTER ONE

“WEEP for such unfortunate mothers!”: Motherhood and the Anti-Shaker

Narratives of Eunice Hawley Chapman and Mary Marshall Dyer¹

In the antebellum period, Shaker apostates published nearly two-dozen pamphlets, castigating their former religion and marketing the publications to those curious about the inner-workings of this fringe religion.² Non-Shakers wrote against the religion as well, publishing hundreds of anti-Shaker works in an effort to expose a community – and its associated practices – that they found profoundly unsettling.³ Eunice Hawley Chapman and Mary Marshall Dyer were leaders in this anti-Shaker movement, and they were the only women to publish their own accounts. As we have seen, their divorce and custody cases received significant coverage in the press, their publications were widely marketed, and their battles against the Shakers coalesced into a mob attack on their husbands’ community in Enfield, New Hampshire. Their narratives and the ensuing public debate, however, had surprisingly little to do with the particulars of the Shaker faith. Instead, their focus was on motherhood, and on the contested form it would take in the early republic. In this chapter, I present an overview of the narratives of Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer and contextualize them in relation to the mob attack the two women led on the Enfield Shaker community in 1818. I then analyze these texts and the attack as

¹ This exhortation comes from Eunice Chapman’s narrative. It is an appeal for male readers to feel sympathy for women who have had their children taken from them. Eunice Chapman, *An Account of the Conduct of the People Called Shakers: In the Case of Eunice Chapman and Her Children, Since He Husband Became Acquainted with that People, and Joined their Society*, (Albany, NY: self-published, 1817), 19.

² Elizabeth A. De Wolfe, *Domestic Broils: Shakers, Antebellum Marriage, and the Narratives of Mary and Joseph Dyer* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 16.

³ Susan McCully, “Oh I Love Mother, I Love Her Power: Shaker Spirit Possession and the Performance of Desire” *Theatre Survey* 35, no. 1 (1994): 88-99, 91.

commentary on motherhood in the 1810s and 1820s. (For images of Mary Dyer's and Eunice Chapman's texts, see Appendix, Figures 4 and 5.)

Eunice Hawley Chapman's *An Account of the Conduct of the People Called Shakers*

In the preface to the 1817 publication, *An Account of the Conduct of the People Called Shakers*, the author issued an apology. She wrote, "If the reader should observe any thing in the following statement, not becoming that meekness which ought to characterize my sex, I wish that reader to consider, it is written by a persecuted woman."⁴ The "persecuted woman" in question was the young mother Eunice Hawley Chapman. Her husband James had left his family to join the Shakers of Watervliet, New York, in 1812. He returned to Eunice briefly only to leave again, taking the couple's three young children with him. Eunice, unwilling to join a faith in which she did not believe, was effectively barred from caring for and even visiting her children. Her *Account* was part of her campaign to have her children returned to her.

Eunice's narrative was preceded by the report of a committee of New York state senators, which had been formed in 1816 to address Eunice's request for a divorce from James. The report presented an overview of the situation. Eunice and James married in New Durham, New York, in 1804. In 1809 the Shakers made their first visit to New Durham, making a deep impression on James. By 1812 James had abandoned Eunice and their children, with no financial support, to join the celibate Shaker community. He returned in 1814 and took the children with him to live among the Shakers, and a year later he declared that his marriage was "dissolved." As a Shaker, he now viewed

⁴ Eunice Chapman, iii.

marriage as sinful, and living as a married man was not allowed within his new community. James did not, however, seek to formally divorce Eunice. This may have been because he had little legal ability to do so. He had never accused Eunice of adultery, the only grounds on which a married person could seek divorce in New York.⁵ If formal divorce was not an option, James may have turned to newspaper advertisements as a means of “self-divorce,” which allowed him to publicly proclaim that he had severed ties with Eunice, and was thus no longer responsible for her care and maintenance.⁶ But he may also have had little motivation to divorce Eunice, for remaining married limited Eunice’s ability to subsist in the outside world. According to the committee, James published advertisements in two different newspapers “forbidding all persons from harboring the petitioner [Eunice Chapman] as his wife, and declaring that he would not be responsible for her support.”⁷ If James was indeed trying to punish Eunice for not joining the Shakers, or for being an inadequate wife, or for any number of reasons, keeping her in this state of limbo would have been a clever and effective way of doing so. To the state, she was married. It was difficult for her to claim abandonment, for her

⁵ Frank B. Gilbert, *The Law of Domestic Relations of the State of New York. Including Marriage, Divorce, Separation* (Albany, NY: Matthew Bender, 1898), 37-38. This document gives legal precedent for contemporary divorce laws in New York. Prior to 1787, courts had no jurisdiction over divorce, and the only method for obtaining one was through legislative appeal. After 1787, an act was passed that allowed courts to oversee divorce in cases involving adultery. At the time of the Chapman case, these were the only two options available. As adultery was not a factor in the Chapman case, Eunice could only seek a legislative, rather than a judicial, divorce.

⁶ Legal divorce was not an option for most couples, but this did not mean that the marriage bond was always viewed as eternal. As Clare A. Lyons has demonstrated, self-divorce – or the effective dissolution of a marriage, by way of advertisements placed in newspapers – increased in the northern United States in the years surrounding the Revolutionary War, and persisted into the early nineteenth century. Self-divorce was often justified by demonstrating spousal abandonment. James, and perhaps some of the reading public, may have viewed Eunice’s refusal to join the Shakers as form of abandonment. Eunice, on the other hand, sought to demonstrate to the legislature that it was she who was abandoned when James joined the Shakers. For more on self-divorce in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, see Clare A. Lyons, “Discipline, Sex and the Republican Self” in *Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, ed. Jane Kamensky and Edward G. Gray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, forthcoming).

⁷ Eunice Chapman, preface, iv-v.

husband had in fact invited her to live amongst the Shakers – which meant that, in a way, he was willing to provide for her.

As things stood, however, she was a woman alone. She had little access to money and shelter and no access at all to her children. The legislative committee was sympathetic to Eunice’s predicament and even saw James’s entry into the Shaker community as potential grounds for divorce. Yet the committee members were more worried about setting what they saw as a dangerous precedent. What if other men, wishing to sever ties with their wives, also joined the Shakers simply to be granted divorces? What might this do to the integrity of the American family? The committee also worried about impinging on religious freedom and fostering intolerance. A ruling in favor of Eunice, it suggested, might be interpreted as a ruling against *all* Shakers, not just against James. As the committee saw it, “It is even better to suffer some public inconvenience from granting indulgence to the wild vagaries of fanaticism, than to do any thing that should in the least degree impinge that great principle of religious toleration, the brightest gem in the institutions of this State.”⁸ Though Eunice would ultimately be successful in her effort to divorce James, at this time the state ruled against her petition for divorce.⁹

⁸ Eunice Chapman, vi.

⁹ Eunice’s petition for divorce was first presented to the New York Senate on February 20, 1816. The *Albany Gazette* reported in April of 1817 that the petition “attracted the attention of the public papers in most parts of the United States,” and that some newspapers had erroneously reported that Eunice’s bill had become law. Had it become law, it would not only have granted Eunice a divorce from James; it would also have voided the marriage of any New York resident who left mainstream society to join the Shakers. Though the bill passed in both houses upon its original introduction in 1816, the Council of Revision – the committee cited in Eunice’s publication – failed to approve it for the reasons state above. Eunice and her supporters, however, did not let her cause die, and the “Act for the relief of Eunice Chapman, and for other purposes” was formally made law on March 14, 1818. For more on the coverage of the petition in the press, see the *Albany Gazette* (Albany, NY), April 25, 1817. For the introduction of the petition to the New York Senate, see the *Journal of the Senate of the State of New-York at Their Thirty-Ninth Session* (Albany, NY: J. Buel, Printer to the State, 1816), 39-42. For a record of the final, successful passage of the bill into

Eunice's narrative followed the committee's report. In it, she depicted James as a man whose treatment of his family was corrupted by the Shakers. She claimed to have lived "in most cordial harmony" with James until he met the Shakers, who viewed marriage as carnal depravity and celibacy as the only path to virtue. Eunice, however, would not join, and she assumed that the couple's children would remain with her. James and the Shakers, however, had other plans, and they eventually took the children away from Eunice. Now with the Shakers, the children were told that their mother had abandoned them, "run off with another man, and would never come near them again."¹⁰ Eunice, in turn, was told that the children were not really hers. They were "God's children," and Eunice's earthly claim to them was baseless. The Shakers saw familial love as immoral and sought to "expel all affection for parent and child, husband and wife, and brother and sister."¹¹

Nevertheless, Eunice agreed to a trial period living with the Shakers, hoping it would enable her to see her children. She quickly found the religion to be at odds with her own beliefs, and particularly objected to its rejection of marriage for celibacy and single-sex group living.¹² Near the end of her trial stay, Eunice realized she would have no more access to her children, and she began to fear the Shakers had plans to entrap her.¹³ Realizing that residing with the Shakers would do nothing to help her cause – and in fact might result in her involuntary confinement – she left the community. She did not,

law, see *Laws of the State of New York, Passed at the Forty-First Session of the Legislature* (Albany, NY: J. Buel, Printer to the State, 1818), 38-39.

¹⁰ James, too, suggested his wife had been unfaithful. Both parties used accusations of martial infidelity to win readers over to their side. Eunice maintained that she was a faithful wife, and James insisted his celibacy was genuine. Eunice Chapman, 18.

¹¹ Eunice Chapman, 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

however, abandon her efforts to regain her children. According to both her narrative and the newspaper coverage of her ensuing battle with both her husband and the Shakers, Eunice became more vocal and aggressive in her efforts, drawing family, community, and the law into her campaign, though her initial efforts were unsuccessful.¹⁴ So Eunice sent a petition to the state senate requesting a divorce, a measure she explained was “an unpleasant task for me – *a woman alone; a stranger, exposed to censure!* to converse with gentlemen, and men in such dignified standing.”¹⁵ Although Eunice had her supporters, hers was a difficult battle, for “...some charitable people will say, that it will not do to disannul the marriage contract; and if a woman has married a tyrant, and he has deserted her, and gone to a place unknown, still she must be considered bound to him.”¹⁶

The legislature’s initial ruling against Eunice demonstrated the degree to which society venerated the institution of marriage, even when the marriage in question bore little resemblance to the dominant Protestant ideal. As she related the putative facts of her struggle against the Shakers, Eunice was careful to uphold the normative family. At the same time, her narrative was part of her larger effort to change the laws governing her marriage. Eunice represented herself carefully in her *Account*, striving to portray herself as a victim, and her actions as those of a distraught mother.

This was not the only version of the Chapman drama available to readers. James

¹⁴ Eunice wrote that she sent various family and legal representatives, all male, to the Shakers to try to retrieve her children. None was successful. Even a writ of habeas corpus, which Eunice said she was issued in April of 1815, failed to produce the children, and James had disappeared by then as well. Eunice wrote of this first writ of habeas corpus in her *Account*. But as her case only became well documented in the press after 1817, I was unable to find documentation of it in the available primary source material. In any case, Eunice did not request this first writ herself; a certain “Hon. Mr. Payne” did so. She would later petition the legislature and directly request another writ of habeas corpus – one that ultimately reunited her with her children.

¹⁵ Eunice Chapman, 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

published a response, *The Memorial of James Chapman* (1817), in an effort to defend both himself and the Shakers from his wife's apparently slanderous statements. His technique was to focus on clearing the Shakers of all blame by demonstrating that they were not against marriage, and that Eunice was not the good wife she claimed to have been. Instead of modeling virtuous behavior for her husband, she drove James away. His only option, as he saw it, was to join the kindly Shakers, who were willing to provide a refuge for him and his children.¹⁷ James explained that he was fulfilling his obligations as father and husband in the only way that he could, and that he was not in fact abandoning Eunice. James wrote that both he and the Shakers welcomed Eunice into the community, and that all had hoped she would maintain contact with the children. James wrote that her abuse to the Shakers was so extreme, however, that he and the children were forced into hiding, and the Shakers had no choice but to bar her from the community. When Eunice threatened to burn down the village if she did not get what she wanted, James decided that his wife must be stopped.¹⁸

Although the legislature at this time sided with James and the Shakers, denying Eunice both divorce and custody of her children, Eunice eventually prevailed. In 1818 she obtained a legislative divorce and a year later she regained custody of her children. Eunice did refrain from burning down the Shaker village as she fought for her children, but she did not leave the Shakers alone. She found help in agitating against the Shakers in Mary Dyer, another young mother who had lost her children to the community. Along with Eunice's publication, Mary Dyer's *A Brief Statement of the Sufferings of Mary Dyer*

¹⁷ James Chapman, *The Memorial of James Chapman, to the Respectable of the State of New York* (Albany, NY: self-published, 1817), 1-3.

¹⁸ James provided little detail on his wife's "abuse" of the Shakers, save for the one threat of arson. James Chapman, 7.

was linked to the 1818 mob attack on the Enfield, New Hampshire, Shaker village. Mary also vilified the Shakers, casting them as a threat to Protestant families and particularly to the Protestant mother.

Mary Marshall Dyer's *A Brief Statement of the Sufferings of Mary Dyer*

Mary Marshall and Joseph Dyer married in 1799. They “lived quietly together for eleven years, though there had been some disagreeables by my husband’s being unsteady, and given sometimes to intoxication.”¹⁹ Their small New Hampshire town had no clergyman to lead religious services and in 1810 the villagers finally brought in a minister to support the community. But instead of the Baptist minister they had desired, they instead got a man who brought only “Shaker books” with him. He quickly distributed this literature, then vanished, presumably to live among his celibate community. This was Mary and Joseph’s introduction to Shakerism. Joseph began to visit the Shakers regularly in 1811, often taking the skeptical Mary with him. She worried about the effect Shakerism would have on their marriage and she disagreed with the Shaker interpretation of Scripture. Joseph reassured her, however, that their family would not suffer if they converted. He vowed to support Mary and their children, and if either Mary or Joseph ever decided to leave the community they would split the children between them. With the cohesion of her family supposedly assured, Mary began to feel more positively towards the Shakers. The couple increasingly entertained thoughts of converting. By 1813, they were ready to join the Enfield, New Hampshire, Shaker community. At first, the two neophytes wavered in their level of commitment to the religion. One would

¹⁹ Mary Dyer, *A Brief Statement of the Sufferings of Mary Dyer, Occasioned by the Society Called Shakers, Written by Herself...* (Boston: William Spear, 1818), 31.

embrace the lifestyle while the other had doubts; then their resolve would switch. Eventually, Mary's children were taken from her and "redistributed" among the various Shaker households. As soon as she realized she could not be a Shaker and keep her family together, Mary began making plans to leave the community. After suffering both the sexual advances of a male Shaker and a significant illness, she began to think that she could not remain with the Shakers if she wanted to maintain both her spiritual and her physical health, so she announced her decision to leave. She requested to take with her what she and her husband had earlier agreed upon – two of their five children. To her horror, Joseph refused: "He said he had as good a right to take the care of any other woman as of me; that I was not his wife, and as for the children, they were none of his to give; that he should lose his union [with the Shakers] if he did."²⁰ Upon joining the Shakers, James had renounced those patriarchal duties that had required him to provide for and protect his wife and children. Yet he asserted his masculine prerogative in denying Mary access to his familial "property" – their children.

Mary escaped from Enfield with her youngest child, explaining it was "the only deceiving thing" she did while with the Shakers.²¹ Joseph promptly found her and brought her back to the community, where she was housed alone in a small – and as Mary reported, locked – room. Though she had not wanted to return, Mary quickly realized that the alternative meant living apart from her children and with no financial support. Joseph would occasionally visit Mary in her room, bringing with him his new friend and

²⁰ Ibid., 39.

²¹ Ibid., 40.

fellow Shaker James Chapman, Eunice's husband.²² Mary had heard of Eunice's plight and confronted James about it. She was startled when James insisted he had no family. Mary did not want to share in Eunice's fate, yet her situation looked no better. Like Eunice, Mary emphasized in her narrative that her husband had been a good man prior to meeting the Shakers. She wrote, "He was one of the best of husbands; and I verily believe he would still have treated me kindly had it not been for the Shakers." But then, upon meeting the Shakers, "My husband left me, and my troubles were such at this time, that I thought I must have lost my reason."²³ After a short period of confinement, the Shakers forcefully removed Mary from Enfield and from her children.

Mary's narrative ended with her ability to survive uncertain. Joseph would not support her financially or allow her access to her children. Like his friend James Chapman, he printed advertisements in newspapers to prevent Mary from receiving help. When she left the Shakers the first time, he published a "runaway wife" notice, forbidding anyone from assisting her, claiming that she had abandoned him by refusing his protection and support. He took out another advertisement after her final removal from the community, in which he publicly denounced Mary as a failed wife.²⁴ Joseph also responded to Mary's narrative with one of his own, publishing his *Compendious Narrative* in 1819. Mary had anticipated such a backlash. Her *Brief Statement* included testimonies from friends and family to prove her good character. She had also appended a note explaining her reason for making her story public. She did not wish to divorce Joseph; she simply wanted to care for her children, just as any honorable mother would.

²² Eunice's estranged husband had recently moved to the Enfield community, perhaps in an effort to evade his wife.

²³ Mary Dyer, *A Brief Statement*, 42.

²⁴ De Wolfe, *Domestic Broils*, 6, 8.

Unlike Eunice, she felt divorce was unchristian and unfeminine. Joseph even requested at one point that Mary divorce him, but she would not.²⁵ In her narrative, she painted a portrait of a woman trying desperately to fulfill her womanly duties, no matter what challenges came her way.

Joseph's own narrative presented a very different woman, one who had driven him out of the house. The Shakers provided a refuge for him and his children, he explained, and they were willing to help Mary when she was sick, even though she was already an apostate by then.²⁶ Joseph objected when she tried to leave the community with their children, because the children were happy and Mary was clearly unfit to care for them on her own.²⁷ Joseph ended his narrative with testimonies from two of the Dyer children, who wrote they were content living among the Shakers, and that they did not want to leave the community and live with their mother.²⁸ Through his writing, Joseph hoped to make clear that Mary's past failings as a wife and as a mother should preclude her from ever again realizing these roles.

The Mob Attack on the Enfield Shakers

Neither Mary nor Eunice could accept that she would never see her children again. As a result of their publications, and of their husbands' residence in the same Shaker village in Enfield, the women met. Many outside of Shakerism had read their stories, and knew of their accusations against the Shakers – of the supposed entrapment of children and of the temporary incarceration of the women; of perversion of family life

²⁵ Mary Dyer, *A Brief Statement*, 57.

²⁶ Joseph Dyer, *A Compendious Narrative Elucidating the Character, Disposition and Conduct of Mary Dyer...* (Concord, NH: self-published, 1819), 67-69.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

and of dubious celibacy; of female leadership and of denigration of the Bible.²⁹ There were rumors that other women and children had been entrapped, too. In her 1822 publication, *A Portraiture of Shakerism*, Mary Dyer capitalized on these rumors, publishing what she claimed were the testimonies of the numerous victims of Shakerism. The resulting book numbered several hundred pages and featured testimony from male and female apostates, from family members of those who had been coerced into joining the Shakers, and from the wives and children of men who had joined the Shakers and abandoned their family responsibilities.³⁰

Several years before the publication of the *Portraiture*, and shortly before Joseph issued his rebuttal to his wife's *Brief Statement*, Mary and Eunice had already created the perfect climate for mob action. Nearly one hundred people from Enfield and beyond gathered outside the Shaker village on the night of May 27, 1818. They were there to recover the missing children and to search the village for other potential victims, particularly young women being held against their wills. The crowd threatened to increase its number to five hundred, and to not leave until the children were found. The mob lasted for five full days.

The Shakers had not been immune from mob attacks in the past; as Elizabeth De

²⁹ De Wolfe, *Domestic Broils*, 9. De Wolfe writes of the Dyer case, "It was popular because it tapped into subjects that generated both curiosity and worry. The Shakers were still considered a somewhat mysterious sect, and descriptions of Shaker life and the disruption of the Dyer family raised alarm about a religion that challenged Protestantism, patriarchy, and the sanctity of the reproductive family."

³⁰ Some of these testimonies were well known, such as that of Daniel Rathbun, an outspoken Shaker apostate who was acquainted with Mother Ann Lee, the founder and prophet of Shakerism. Other testimonies were not. Many accounts mirrored Mary Dyer's own experiences and focused on the harm Shakerism brought on families in particular. One husband, whose family had been torn apart by the Shakers, lamented, "I wish there might be a law to protect wives and children against the power of the husband when he joins the Shakers." Establishing a law such as this was one of the main goals of the publication, and each story was intended to convince readers of its necessity. Mary Dyer, *A Portraiture of Shakerism Exhibiting a General View of their Character and Conduct, from the First Appearance of Ann Lee in New-England, down to the Present Time, and Certified by Many Respectable Authorities* (Concord, NH: self-published, 1822), 124.

Wolfe writes, in the years before the Dyer and Chapman narratives, "...the non-believing public had used mob activity in attempts to force Shakers to act more in line with perceived societal norms."³¹ Mother Ann Lee, the founder of Shakerism, had been stoned during an attack on a Shaker village in Ohio in 1810. The Enfield mob, however, was different: it was raised by Eunice and Mary, the two best-known Shaker detractors in the country, women whose narratives and family struggles had been written down, published, circulated, and reprinted. Eunice's and Mary's stories of struggle against the anti-family Shakers – whether all true, somewhat fabricated, or largely fictional – allowed readers to reaffirm their belief in the superiority of the Protestant, patriarchal family while contemplating other approaches to family life and sexual relations. The mob was evidence of the influence that these women's narratives had in society. It spoke to the centrality, as well as the fragility, of the patriarchal family in the national ethos.

One of the only firsthand accounts of the mob attack was written by a Shaker, perhaps as part of the legal proceedings in the aftermath of the events.³² In the account, Mary Dyer and Eunice Chapman were directly credited (or, in this case, blamed) for the mob. The women were said to have planned the attack, with the assistance of town officials and agitated residents. Their main goal was to regain custody of their children, but the Shakers received news of their plans in time for James and Joseph to hide the children before the mob descended. Eunice had by this time received her legislative divorce from James; Mary, however, was still legally bound to Joseph. The women had visited the Shaker community days earlier, and had again been denied custody of their

³¹ Elizabeth A. De Wolfe, "The Mob at Enfield" *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (2010): 80-86, 80-81.

³² *Ibid.*, 80.

children, though they were granted brief visits – the first for Eunice in two years. Together, Eunice and Mary then visited several local establishments to stir up anger against the Shakers and support for their cause. They were accompanied by Joseph Merrill, a local justice of the peace, who was at first enlisted by the Shakers as a mediator, but soon joined with Eunice and Mary in agitating the townspeople. As crowds began to form outside the Shaker village on the first day of the mob, Merrill gave an impassioned speech, in which he declared the Shakers' treatment of the women to be "contrary to the laws of God and man."³³ Mothers should be with their children, men should be with their wives, and families should be composed of husband, wife, and children. Anything else, he declared, was unnatural and unchristian.

Eunice, divorced, had more legal support than Mary, who would not obtain a divorce from Joseph until 1830. Both women had begun their campaigns by seeking custody of their children rather than divorces. Eunice pursued divorce when it became clear that she would never have access to her children as a married woman. Though the state of New York initially denied her petition, she was eventually granted a divorce, paving her way to gain custody of her children. Mary chose a different method, for many years avoiding the topic of divorce, perhaps in an effort to win sympathy from a family-centered public, or perhaps because of the differing nature of divorce law in her home state of New Hampshire. Whatever her reason was for remaining married, popular support alone did not succeed in recovering Mary's children.

The mob fired guns and ransacked the Shaker community, but did not destroy it,

³³ Ibid., 84.

and no lives were lost.³⁴ In the aftermath the mob was rebuked, James was arrested, and the Enfield Shakers were forced to adhere to the custody laws of the surrounding community. James was found to be holding his children illegally, but by this point they could not be located. James and the Shakers hid the children for another year, at which point Eunice produced another writ of habeas corpus and finally regained custody of her children. Although the New Hampshire legislature was sympathetic to Mary, she never did regain custody, and Joseph was found innocent of any legal wrongdoing. Mary moved closer to the community to be nearer to her children, all of whom remained Shakers into adulthood. Significantly, when Mary did finally obtain a divorce in 1830, her case resulted in a change in New Hampshire's divorce laws. As a result of her case, the New Hampshire legislature passed a law allowing divorce if one party, male or female, joined a sect that did not believe in marriage.³⁵ This law did nothing, however, to address the custody battles that such situations could provoke.

The Narratives as Commentary on Motherhood

Both Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer used their status as mothers to appeal to their readers and to the law. Indeed, their narratives were chiefly concerned with their efforts to maintain their maternal prerogatives. For Eunice, motherhood was possible without marriage; thus, she sought and attained a divorce and then successfully pursued custody of her children. Eunice was rewarded for privileging motherhood over marriage, which may seem surprising for a time in which divorce was difficult to obtain, and in which women were to be subservient to their husbands. But after Eunice submitted her

³⁴ Ibid., 83.

³⁵ For more on the outcome of the case, see De Wolfe, *Domestic Broils*, 24.

second petition to the state of New York, the legislature passed a law that rendered her husband – and others who had joined sects that did not recognize marriage – “civilly dead.” After the passage of this law in 1818, James could no longer exercise his rights as the patriarch of his family.³⁶ Mary, on the other hand, sought to maintain her marriage when she began her fight for her children, and although she eventually changed her tactics and obtained a divorce, she was never able to reclaim her children and regain her role as a mother. What did all this mean for motherhood in the antebellum world, and by extension, for the family?

In the early republican period, middle-class northern women like Mary Dyer and Eunice Chapman were expected to be wives and mothers.³⁷ The average age for women to marry during the Second Great Awakening was about 23 years old and even though the marriage age was on the rise in the north in the early 1800s, and there were more single adults than in the previous century, it was presumed that to be an adult woman was to be a married woman.³⁸ To be a married woman, in turn, more often than not meant being a mother. Accordingly, ideals of early nineteenth-century womanhood and motherhood were conflated. Middle-class women were not only mothers, of course. They were expected to maintain their households and perform or oversee housework,

³⁶ After the legislative committee first heard Eunice’s case, it wished to declare those who entered into communal societies like the Shakers “civilly dead.” Since these communities did not acknowledge the private property, marriage, and parenthood of adherents, the committee suggested that the state should not recognize these either. However, the committee could not initially enact such legislation. Upon appeal, Eunice’s case was reevaluated and James – if not all Shakers in the state of New York – was indeed declared “civilly dead.” For the committee’s initial report, see Eunice Chapman, iv-viii; for a detailed explanation of events, see Ilyon Woo, *The Great Divorce: A Nineteenth-Century Mother’s Extraordinary Fight Against Her Husband, the Shakers, and Her Times* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010), 180-194.

³⁷ Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 34.

³⁸ Nancy F. Cott, “Young Women in the Second Great Awakening in New England,” *Feminist Studies* 3, nos. 1-2 (1975): 15-29, 16.

many were involved in charity work, and some held paid employment. But in general, they were neither viewed nor valued as workers. Instead, it was motherhood that was considered a woman's chief contribution to society. Though women could not vote and were encouraged to avoid politics in favor of domestic and familial involvement, their service to society as "republican mothers" – an ideal characterized by self-sacrifice, civic humanism, and evangelical ardor – was given a political dimension. Mothers were responsible for rearing the future upstanding (male) citizens of the nation. Women were to serve their country not through political action, but through domesticity.³⁹ This role had not always been a given: for example, women were politically, if not militarily, involved in the Revolutionary War, and the climate surrounding these events suggested the possibility of greater rights for women in the wake of independence. The war, however, gave way not to equality, but to women's retreat from public political participation and a gendered notion of citizenship. As domestic politics fractured into ideological parties, it became clear that the young nation would not be unified in its political thought. Instead of contributing to this tension, women were to bridge it. By retreating from politics into the home, women could serve as mediators and as moral guideposts. So they became republican wives and mothers instead of politicians and voters.⁴⁰

Republican mothers were to contribute to their families and to society through both their husbands and their children. By modeling virtue at home and maintaining calm marital relations, the reasoning went, wives could guide their husbands toward

³⁹ Natasha Kristen Kraus, *A New Type of Womanhood: Discursive Politics and Social Change in Antebellum America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 114.

⁴⁰ Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 116, 181.

virtuous behavior in the public sphere.⁴¹ As they helped their husbands gain control over their passions, women were also to oversee the religious and moral development of their children. Men, of course, maintained ultimate control over their families, and were to serve as disciplinarians of their children, but they were to defer to their wives' superior ability to model moral behavior and to instill it in their children. Casting women as the defenders of morality was a marked difference from eighteenth-century thought, when men were in charge of ensuring their families' and their communities' moral behavior. But as definitions of gender changed, and as the post-Revolutionary period ushered in a new era of American individualism and self-interest, moral education moved from pluralistic community space to the individualized domestic sphere, where the republican mother was poised to take over. "By creating this new role for themselves," E. Anthony Rotundo writes, "women were filling a gap created by the nascent individualism of men."⁴² Instead of eliminating social hierarchies, then, the early republican period was reconfiguring them. The same can be said for patriarchy. The face of patriarchy changed during this time, with marriage reconceived as a companionable partnership forged upon affection and maybe even romantic love, but men nevertheless were expected to maintain their dominance, both social and legal, over their families. Men remained the patriarchs of their families, but women became the primary caretakers of their children.

Another factor that elevated the status of motherhood was a general decrease in the birthrate, which began in the later eighteenth century and continued throughout the nineteenth. This decline was predated by a greater emphasis on childhood as a stage of

⁴¹ Ibid., 110, 113.

⁴² E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 16-18.

life. The “romantic cult of childhood,” which arose during the Enlightenment, was in full-force by the mid-nineteenth century. The decline in birthrate may have helped raise the status of children within families and of childhood as a discrete stage of life, and it highlighted the importance of good mothering in nurturing and raising these children. A “qualitative” approach to childrearing had begun to take precedence over a more “quantitative” one, in which children had been viewed in terms of their potential economic contributions to the household.⁴³ This meant that children of the early republican middle class were to be nurtured and educated by their mothers from an early age so that they would grow up to be moral, productive American citizens. In many ways, then, the virtue of the nation’s future rested on mothers’ shoulders.

Mary Dyer and Eunice Chapman drew upon these notions of motherhood as they crafted their narratives, and they exploited society’s fear of maternal absence in family life. Their narratives allowed readers to contemplate what a motherless social system might mean for both children and society. If mothers were denied access to their children, who would be in charge of moral education? Neither Mary nor Eunice considered that their husbands would take on this responsibility. It was the Shakers who would fill this role, not the children’s fathers, for Shakerism precluded parental relations. Yet the Shakers preached celibacy, broke families apart, and demanded that children

⁴³ Daniel Scott Smith, “Parental Power and Marriage Patterns: An Analysis of Historical Trends in Hingham, Massachusetts,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 35, no. 3 (1973): 419-428. Smith’s analysis of family fertility in the nineteenth century was, and still is, an important contribution to historical studies of the family. While many historians had been working under the assumption of a diminishing birthrate in the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, Smith conducted a statistical analysis of one New England community, providing a demographic model that confirmed these assumptions. This case study, he suggested, can be considered illustrative of broader fertility trends in New England. Changes in the economy and in marriage age have both been cited as encouraging this decrease in birthrate. In the eighteenth century, as the economy shifted from home-based industry to wage labor outside the home, large families no longer provided a useful workforce, and instead could even be a financial liability. Marriage age was also on the rise, so couples began having children at an older age, and thus had fewer over their lifetimes. Both of these trends only intensified during the nineteenth century.

contribute their labor to the Shaker community. Mary wrote that the Shakers did not believe in childhood, that children must work instead of attend school, and that “the Shakers’ abuse to children is severe.”⁴⁴ Eunice explained that many women had their children “forced from their breasts by the savages [the Shakers].”⁴⁵ The Shakers, like other communal religious groups, did not conform to the accepted patriarchal family structure of the nineteenth century. While this alone may have been objectionable, the Shakers became truly threatening when their lifestyle appeared to be thrust upon mainstream society, rather than safely contained within the Shaker village. This intrusion into the outside world was seemingly concentrated on two families – the Dyers and the Chapmans – yet it nevertheless led to mob action. Both Eunice and Mary depicted themselves as innocent Protestant women, eager to fulfill the duties of marriage and motherhood. Though they tried to conform to expectations of both religion and gender, they insisted that Shakerism prevented them from doing so. Their narratives begged the question: if Shakerism could break apart two families, what prevented the sect from wreaking havoc more broadly? If patriarchal control was fragile in the Chapman and Dyer households, it might be in other families, too. And if the maternal prerogatives of Mary and Eunice could be so swiftly undermined, Protestant motherhood in general might be under attack.

In denying Mary and Eunice the opportunity to fulfill the requirements of motherhood, then, the Shakers were not only affecting the Dyer and the Chapman families. According to the women’s narratives, and likely to the mob that descended upon Enfield, the Shakers were doing much more than this. The Shakers were declaring

⁴⁴ Mary Dyer, *A Brief Statement*, 34.

⁴⁵ Eunice Chapman, 35.

that republican motherhood was unnecessary, that domesticity and the family did not have to function according to the normative ideals. Their husbands were complicit: instead of defending the unity of their families and the domestic prerogatives of their wives, James and Joseph had sought out the Shakers, converted, and brought their children to live in Shaker communities. In their narratives, they claimed to have done so in part because their wives had failed to fulfill their obligations as mothers. James explained why he was compelled to take his children to the Shakers in 1814. He had heard Eunice had “thrown the children upon the town, and that unless I took the charge of them, they [the townspeople] should be obliged to put them out.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Joseph insisted that Mary had no real concern for her children, despite her attempts to win them back from the Shakers. “I must conclude,” he wrote in his narrative, “that her great concern is spurious; for she has not performed the duty of a mother towards her children.”⁴⁷ By depicting their wives as bad mothers, Joseph and James sought to make their own actions regarding their children more understandable. In their narratives, the men suggested that Shakerism was the only way to cope with their dysfunctional marriages, that without dutiful wives and mothers, they were required to seek community support – and they found that support among the Shakers. James explained, “I knew it was my duty to support my children, and I was also willing . . . but to support her or my children in Durham, I found myself unable. . . . Accordingly I procured a waggon [sic] and brought them to Watervliet [the Shaker community].⁴⁸” If Eunice and Mary refused to live up to the standards society had set for mothers, then their families could not

⁴⁶ James Chapman, 2.

⁴⁷ Joseph Dyer, 90-91.

⁴⁸ James Chapman, 5.

function in a normative patriarchal sense. And if these women were intent to write about their problems, involving the state through legal petitions and the community through mob action, then the Shakers would have to be taken as a serious challenge to society at large.

Mary and Eunice published their narratives during a gradual shift in models of femininity, as the ideal of republican motherhood was morphing into that of “true womanhood.” Women had been more or less removed from formal politics as they pursued republican ideals through motherhood, but their involvement in social issues through charities and religious organizations increased during this time. Such involvement – the term “work” would not have been applied, as no wage labor was involved – was considered an appropriate outlet for feminine energy. As republican motherhood morphed into true womanhood, this organizational involvement increased, as did women’s association with the domestic realm. “True womanhood” was characterized by domesticity, religiosity, and organizational benevolence, allowing women to become increasingly public figures through their charity involvement.⁴⁹ In many ways, then, true women were simultaneously more domestic *and* more public than ever before.

In their writings, Mary and Eunice drew heavily on the ideals of republican motherhood. They sought to win support for their causes by reminding readers of how children ought to be raised – in a Protestant home under the care of their mothers. Mothers were to be supported, in turn, by their husbands, yet of course these women’s husbands were notably absent. They appealed to sentiment as they contrasted their own children’s experiences in Shaker villages with the experiences that children were

⁴⁹ Anne M. Boylan, *The Origins of Women’s Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 16.

supposed to have under the ideal conception of childhood. But they also relied, tacitly, on the nascent construction of true womanhood as they justified their engagement with the public. Eunice and Mary were not, of course, in the public eye because of the charities with which they were involved, or the women's organizations they were helping to run. They were, however, fighting for a cause. In the 1810s and 1820s it was becoming increasingly common to encounter women – including married women – who were agitating for support of some kind, usually on behalf of a benevolent organization.⁵⁰ Even so, Eunice wrote that she entered the public realm with considerable unease, and was apologetic for conversing “with gentlemen, and men in such dignified standing” while visiting the legislature.⁵¹ She was also sure to broaden her appeal beyond her own predicament by including the stories of other women whose children had been taken away by the Shakers, thus making her legislative appeal on behalf of a true cause, rather than just herself. For example, she cited the story of Catharine Bonnel, which closely paralleled her own. Catharine's husband left his wife and two children to join the Shakers, Catharine refusing on religious principles to join him. The husband placed advertisements in the newspaper, preventing the community from aiding the woman, and eventually took the children away from her and hid them within a Shaker community.⁵²

⁵⁰ Catherine Hickling Prescott, for example, joined the board of the Boston Female Asylum in 1813 and helped manage its daily functions for over thirty years. She did not neglect her domestic duties in favor of her charity work: She raised three children, looked after her husband, a prominent judge, and ran her household. In fact, she drew upon the organizational and leadership skills she cultivated in the domestic realm to inform the work she performed in her vocational life. Prescott was only one of many women who not only balanced their vocational lives with their domestic ones, but actually drew from experience with domesticity to inform their charitable involvement. For more on this topic, see Boylan, *The Origins of Women's Activism* (for more on Prescott in particular, see pages 53-54).

⁵¹ Eunice Chapman, 41.

⁵² Catharine Bonnel's case appears to have been included in Eunice's petition to the state legislature. Her affidavit was followed by an attestation by a justice of the peace of Essex County that the story was true. Eunice included similar statements from men to corroborate her own character and claims. While these

Mary used this technique to a far greater degree than Eunice, including several hundred pages of testimonies in her *Portraiture*. She introduced the *Portraiture* by explaining that “much has been said” about women who were abandoned by their husbands for the Shakers, and that what followed the introduction was a written record to substantiate these rumors.⁵³ Mary also included the testimonies of those who had been abandoned as children by parents who had joined the Shakers. Sarah Meacham, for example, was placed in the charge of a stranger when her parents left her for the Shakers, and this stranger severely abused Sarah and other orphaned children placed in her care.⁵⁴

As a republican mother and a burgeoning true woman, Mary Dyer crafted her public image as a woman who fought for all families harmed by the Shakers, not just her own. In this way, she tried to make her actions – which challenged the boundaries of the domestic realm – acceptable. Her results were mixed: the mob action in May of 1818 was confirmation of the primacy of motherhood within the patriarchal family, and of Mary’s legitimate claim to the rights this position afforded her. Yet the New Hampshire legislature, in denying her custody of her children, downplayed the larger Shaker threat to the patriarchal family. It also spoke to the tenuous importance of mothers in antebellum society. Mothers were in one sense all-important, in charge of the nation’s moral education. At the same time, they were limited in their ability to advocate for themselves or for their maternal responsibilities, as they did not yet possess full rights as citizens, and as patriarchal privilege still afforded men dominance over their wives and children. That

attestations helped establish general credibility, they also suggested that these women’s claims were more believable because they were corroborated by men. Eunice Chapman, 48.

⁵³ Mary Dyer, *A Portraiture of Shakerism*, xii-xii, 129.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

Eunice's case ended quite differently further illustrates the wife's precarious position in marriage, and the mother's ambiguous role within the family.

An Account of the Conduct of the People Called Shakers and A Brief Statement may have achieved different results, but they both championed women as supportive wives and sacrificing mothers within a patriarchal family structure. The ensuing mob violence did so, too: Eunice made the case that her husband had abandoned patriarchal Protestantism when he joined the Shakers, and that because of this he was unfit to raise his children. Accordingly, she won a divorce and custody of her children. Mary, on the other hand, championed the sanctity of marriage. She sought to regain her children, but she protected her marriage, and thus Joseph maintained his hold over her life and the lives of her children. Though both Mary Dyer and Eunice Chapman disparaged the Shakers, neither did so primarily through theological argument. The narratives were instead about motherhood, and they relied on the public's conflation of American identity with family identity in an effort to achieve their goals. If men refused to be patriarchal husbands, fathers, and community members, what might then happen to families? And if women were no longer in control of their children's moral education, what would happen to the integrity of the nation? Americans explored possible answers to these questions through Mary's and Eunice's narratives, leading them to mob action. Other possibilities were explored a little more than a decade later through two other women's narratives, both of which concerned life within Catholic convents. These narratives, which expressed anxiety over the family and over women's leadership, also led to mob action. Instead of threatening a community, however, this mob succeeded in destroying it.

CHAPTER TWO

“The Novices frequently trembled when approaching ‘the mother’”: Female Authority and the Anti-Convent Narratives of Rebecca Theresa Reed and Maria Monk¹

Anti-Catholicism was rampant in the 1830s. As Irish immigration increased in New England, so too did anti-Catholic sentiment, reaching its greatest intensity with the formation of the anti-immigrant (and particularly anti-Irish Catholic) Know-Nothing party in the 1850s.² Anti-Catholic texts during this period were numerous. According to one historian, a conservative overview of works published between 1800 and 1860 found over two hundred books, forty fictional pieces, forty-one histories, and numerous newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and other forms of anti-Catholic publications.³ Of the anti-Catholic texts that circulated in the antebellum period, those set in the convent were among the most popular. Though they voiced concerns about religion, I argue in this chapter that anti-convent texts spoke more particularly to anxieties about family and women as authority figures. Publications such as Mrs. Sherwood’s *The Nun* (1835), Lucinda Martin Larned’s *The American Nun* (1836), the anonymously authored exposé *The Escaped Nun* (1855, later attributed to Josephine M. Bunkley), and the narratives of Rebecca Theresa Reed and Maria Monk all claimed to offer insight into the inner-

¹ This quote, taking from Reed’s narrative, alludes to the tyranny with which the Mother Superior ran her convent. Nuns, novices, and students were to subject themselves entirely to her will, and even then could not escape her frequent and cruel punishments. Rebecca Theresa Reed, *Six Months in a Convent, or, The Narrative of Rebecca Theresa Reed: Who Was Under the Influence of the Roman Catholics about Two Years...* (Boston: Russell, Odiorne, & Co., 1835), 70.

² Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), xx.

³ *Ibid.*, 106.

workings of convents, and especially into the intricacies of women's authority and subordination within these institutions.⁴ The most popular of these publications was Rebecca Theresa Reed's, selling a reported 200,000 copies in all, and Maria Monk's, which sold nearly 300,000 copies before 1860.⁵ This chapter outlines the narratives of Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk, and demonstrates the ways in which they interacted with the burning of the Mount Benedict Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, in 1834. I then analyze the publications as commentary on women's authority and female leadership outside the convent. (For images of the texts of Rebecca Theresa Reed and Maria Monk, see Appendix, Figures 6-7).

The introduction to Rebecca Theresa Reed's *Six Months in a Convent*, published in 1835, explained the importance of the narrative. "It is not a question of creeds and sects," the anonymous writer surmised, "but it is a grave question [of] how the future ornaments to our most refined society, the future accomplished mothers of American citizens, shall be educated."⁶ This unnamed author of this introduction assumed that the young girls educated at the Mount Benedict convent school in Charlestown, Massachusetts, would grow up to be mothers. But why would this be the natural assumption of the students at a convent school? The teachers were all professed nuns, women who had taken vows of chastity and renounced motherhood in favor of Catholic vocation. Might the students wish to emulate their teachers and join the convent as

⁴ Mrs. (Mary Martha) Sherwood, *The Nun* (Princeton, NJ: M. Baker, 1835); Lucinda Martin Larned, *The American Nun; or, the Effects of Romance* (Boston: Otis, 1836); Josephine M. Bunkley [attributed], *The Escaped Nun or, Disclosures of Convent Life and the Confessions of a Sister of Charity* (New York: Dewitt and Davenport, 1855).

⁵ As recorded in Franchot, 145 and Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Fire & Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 132.

⁶ Reed, 6-7.

novices and then nuns, answerable to a mother superior instead of a husband? Not necessarily, particularly if the students were Protestant, as two-thirds of the Mount Benedict pupils were.⁷ Elite girls' schools – academies that often went well beyond the curriculum and expectations of “finishing” schools – had emerged in the colonies before the American Revolution. By the early nineteenth century, education was increasingly seen as a necessary tool in preparing young girls to become upstanding American wives and mothers.⁸ Girls' schools, however, were few in number and many were short-lived. Convent schools, though also few in number, fit into this growing need for female educational institutions. They carried a pedigree of old Europe to the United States, and while some of their students were Catholic, many came from wealthy Protestant families.⁹ The majority of the students at Mount Benedict, for example, were Protestant, and many were the daughters of Boston's elite Unitarian men and women.¹⁰

Convent schools were appealing to some, but to others they posed a threat. As the quote from the introduction to *Six Months in a Convent* suggests, some worried that the schools not only would produce young women unprepared for the challenges of motherhood, but that they would also form young women who might choose to forgo completely both motherhood and Protestantism in emulation of their teachers. Convent schools exposed girls throughout their formative years to life removed from marriage and family duties, and many Protestants saw this as profoundly unsettling. Convent schools were run by women in positions of considerable authority; as we will see, these mothers superior were controversial figures, for they did not fit into the dominant ideal of

⁷ Franchot, 138.

⁸ Dale M. Bauer and Philip Gould, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 22.

⁹ Schultz, 80.

¹⁰ Franchot, 138.

subservient, domestic womanhood. While a few other religious sects allowed women to fill leadership positions in the antebellum period (such as the Shakers and some branches of Quakerism), it was women alone who ran nearly all aspects of daily life within the convent. Additionally, these leaders were caretakers and teachers, and thus were in positions to greatly influence their young charges – nearly thirty of whom were Protestants. Both Rebecca Theresa Reed and Maria Monk capitalized on these fears as they recounted what they claimed to have been their experiences as Protestant girls living among nuns. The resulting best-selling publications, Rebecca’s *Six Months in a Convent* and Maria’s *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, were embroiled in one of the most notable mob attacks of the 1830s, which led to the permanent destruction of the Mount Benedict convent. Rebecca resided in this convent from August 1831 to February 1832. She formally published her account after the riots, in 1835, though it may have circulated in manuscript form prior to the attacks. Louisa Whitney, who was a pupil at Mount Benedict at the time of the attack, remembered that her convent friends were all familiar with it, and that she participated in “various disputes held among the girls about that notorious book, ‘Six Months in a Convent,’ and the character of its author.”¹¹ Maria Monk’s condemnation of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal was also published after the events in Charlestown, in 1836. Yet both women’s narratives drew upon the frenzy that surrounded the mob attack, and the two were often mentioned alongside each other in newspaper articles. In 1836, at the height of their popularity, the narratives were even

¹¹ Louise Goddard Whitney, *The Burning of the Convent* (Cambridge, MA: Welch, Bigelow, and Company, 1877), 69.

published together in one volume.¹² Both of these publications presented significant challenges to patriarchal Protestantism as they simultaneously asserted its primacy.

Rebecca Theresa Reed's *Six Months in a Convent*

Rebecca's story, which purportedly detailed her short period of residence at the Mount Benedict Ursuline convent in Massachusetts, was certainly anti-Catholic. She exposed the convent's practices of confession, penance, catechism, and asceticism as extreme and abusive, more reminiscent of the old world than of the new. Rebecca's story capitalized on and contributed to this anti-Catholic sentiment. But it was what she revealed about women's role in society, and about women's authority in particular, that made it such popular reading. It was also the convent narrative that was most associated by her contemporaries with the infamous mob attack on the Mount Benedict convent. As we will see, Rebecca's publication became enmeshed in the debate surrounding the causes and justifications for the mob's actions in Charlestown, with Rebecca herself serving as a witness at the ensuing trials of the rioters, even though she had left the convent a full two years before the attack.

According to her first-person account, Rebecca Theresa Reed first became interested in Catholicism in 1826, when she was thirteen years old and passed by the Mount Benedict convent on her daily walk to school. When she voiced her interest her family objected, but after her mother died and her sisters moved away to live with a relative in Boston – when there was no longer a maternal influence in her home –

¹² Newspapers in six states ran articles that linked the two women and their publications to each other, and at least one published volume was released featuring the stories together. Maria Monk and Rebecca Theresa Reed, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk... to Which Is Added, the Nun, or, Six Months' Residence in a Convent* (London: W. Nicholson & Sons, 1836).

Rebecca decided to join the school.¹³ At the age of seventeen, she defied her father's wishes and secured admission as a charity boarder. She was expected to work rather than study, and to become a novice (and eventually nun) rather than to live with the other girls as a pupil. When the impressionable Rebecca voiced concerns about her father forbidding her to join, the Mother Superior "intimated that I ought to make any sacrifice, if necessary, to adopt the religion of the cross; repeating the words of our savior, 'He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me,' &c."¹⁴ Concern for family, the Mother Superior explained, detracted from one's devotion to Christ. But to allay her fears – or to coerce Rebecca into joining – the Mother Superior promised that the Bishop and a man named "Mr. R." would visit her father and explain the situation to him. With all the relevant information, she was told, her father would be sure to agree that she should reside at the convent, and Rebecca did soon receive word of his consent, by way of the Superior. Only months later did she discover that the men never made the visit, that her father's consent was never obtained, and that she was in effect tricked into entering the convent. Far from giving his approval, she realized later that he "wished me to have nothing to do with that institution."¹⁵

In addition to this chicanery, several people connected to the convent made great efforts to persuade Rebecca to join. Various Catholic men, including the Bishop, began to show great interest in her, visiting her in private, asking after her inner thoughts, and bringing her devotional gifts. Taking advantage of Rebecca's youth and her desire to

¹³ Rebecca's motherlessness did not receive a great deal of attention in her text, but it is suggested that Rebecca's misguided entry into the convent was only possible with this removal of female influence and maternal authority. Reed, 52-53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁵ It is unclear why her father did not look for her and retrieve her at this point, but according to Reed he did not. She did not remark upon this as being strange, nor did she blame him for failing to save her from the Catholics before it was too late. Reed, 68.

please, they assumed a quasi-parental authority over her and perhaps a sexually suspect interest in her. Rebecca, motherless, was also susceptible to the advice of older women. The supposedly Episcopalian “Mrs. G.” advised her, as both a mother and a Protestant, to join the convent. (Again, it was only much later that Rebecca found out the “truth” about Mrs. G. – she was Catholic.)¹⁶ So Rebecca took up residence at Mount Benedict. She was quickly re-baptized as a Catholic and renamed, becoming Sister Mary Agnes Teresa. Soon after her arrival, however, the erstwhile Rebecca began noticing the Mother Superior’s harsh treatment of the nuns, including ascetic punishments for unknown transgressions. Rebecca quickly learned that the nun’s vow of obedience required subjection not only to God and to the clergy, but to the Mother Superior as well. This the Mother Superior abused, punishing novices often and severely, while the Superior lived “sumptuously,” especially indulging in elaborate meals.¹⁷

Rebecca also learned of the various afflictions plaguing the convent’s residents. Tuberculosis was particularly rampant, and Rebecca met several nuns who were either sick with or dying from this disease. She also suggested that “poor health” was often used to explain a nun’s prolonged absence from her duties, and that this sometimes actually meant that the nun was being confined involuntarily. Rebecca herself was made ill when forced by the Superior to take emetics and spend days in an unheated infirmary “recovering.”¹⁸ After only a few weeks in the convent, she decided that she could not remain there her whole life, a sentiment she naively conveyed to a priest during

¹⁶ Ibid., 70.

¹⁷ Ibid., 78-80.

¹⁸ Ibid., 99.

confession. Rebecca learned later that the priest was regularly feeding the Mother Superior with the information provided to him during confession.¹⁹

Rebecca's narrative was punctuated with explicit commentary on family and on sexual perversion. She recorded the Bishop's musings on marriage: "None but he that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: but he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife."²⁰ She also hinted again at the Bishop's perverted, voyeuristic sexuality: "He said I must tell him instantly all the wicked thoughts that had disturbed my mind, and asked me various improper questions, the meaning of which I did not *then* understand, and which I decline mentioning," presumably because it would have been improper and unfeminine for her to do so in print.²¹ When it was found out through confession that Rebecca was helping a fellow nun plan her escape, she was placed in solitary confinement, and her already-meager rations were cut drastically.²² As a result, Rebecca's health, already compromised by the emetic, deteriorated further.

Though her situation was bad, Rebecca soon learned that a more horrifying fate awaited her: she was to be shipped off to an unknown convent in Canada. The Bishop and Mother Superior had begun to fear that Rebecca would expose the inner-workings of the convent to the public. The best method for preventing this was to send her to a place

¹⁹ Ibid., 123.

²⁰ Ibid., 116-117.

²¹ Ibid., 140. Protestants often described celibacy as unnatural, and many thought that it inevitably led to sexual depravity rather than sexual continence. This theme, only hinted at in Rebecca's writing, was developed to a spectacular degree in Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures*. Shaker celibacy was also a subject of great speculation, as suggested in the narratives of both Mary Dyer and Eunice Chapman, which cast their husbands' abstinence as dubious at best. For more on Protestant views on celibacy, see Philip Ingram, "Protestant Patriarchy and the Catholic Priesthood in Nineteenth Century England," *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 4 (1991): 783-797.

²² Reed, 147-149.

where she had no friends or family.²³ She overheard the Mother Superior explain to the Bishop, “It would not do for the Protestants to get hold of those things and make another ‘fuss,’” suggesting that the convent had been exposed before. Rebecca realized that she would have little chance of ever re-entering mainstream Protestant society if she allowed herself to be taken even further away from her family. With lifelong confinement looming ahead of her, Rebecca decided to make her escape.²⁴ After fleeing the convent, she took refuge in a nearby Protestant home. There, she saw her reflection for the first time in many months, and was shocked by how pale and emaciated she had become. Rebecca had to move along quickly; she figured that the convent’s dogs – conveniently trained in tracking – would soon find her. So she sought refuge at the home of Mrs. G., the Episcopalian who had encouraged her six months before to join the enter Mount Benedict. Rebecca still believed Mrs. G. to be a friend, and a Protestant one at that, but the woman responded by contacting the Mother Superior.²⁵ Mrs. G., who was really a Catholic, urged Rebecca to return to the convent, but Rebecca resisted all attempts to woo, then coerce, her to return. She also resisted returning to her father’s home. She explained that she could not face her father looking so unwell, writing, “I did not wish to grieve him with a knowledge of what had taken place.” Yet after a priest visited her at Mrs. G.’s, and “affected considerable contempt for my aged parent, and ridiculed many

²³ The Ursulines had a long-standing presence in Quebec. In was, in fact, in Montreal that Mother Superior St. George – Mount Benedict’s Mother Superior – converted to Catholicism and took her vows; other Charlestown nuns had begun their convent life there as well. In Rebecca’s narrative, however, the Ursuline convent in Canada symbolized more than just isolation. It also suggested cultural and linguistic foreignness (in its connection to French language and culture), entrenched Catholicism, a threat to the United States’ northern border, and even captivity (drawing on tropes of both the anti-convent movement and captivity narratives of the previous century, many of which took place in French colonial territory). Rebecca’s readers would not have been unfamiliar with these connections, making the threat of Rebecca’s removal to Canada seem all the more horrifying.

²⁴ Curiously, Rebecca did not record her method of escape in her narrative.

²⁵ Reed, 180.

things which he said he had heard of my father,” she decided to return to him.²⁶ Rebecca had a final meeting with one of the convent’s priests, during which she condemned the convent for deceiving her and vowed to never attend a Catholic service.

Back under the jurisdiction of her proper patriarch – her father – Rebecca wrote an account of her six-month stay in the convent. She later claimed to have shared it with only her new Protestant minister and her close friends before she officially published it in 1835, after the destruction of Mount Benedict. Her story, as we have seen, may have been well known before its publication, circulating in manuscript and by word of mouth. According to Louisa Whitney, the student who had lived at the convent at the time of the attack, “allusions were made to a young girl who had written a lying book” by the Mother Superior.²⁷ And in the legal proceedings that followed the attack, Rebecca was called forth as a witness, though she never claimed to have any particular knowledge of the mob’s actions.²⁸ The anti-convent movement was seemingly at its height, but it would grow even stronger a year later with the publication of another work that exposed the convent’s threat to the Protestant family.

²⁶ Ibid., 181-184.

²⁷ Whitney, 14.

²⁸ Rebecca’s testimony was used to establish the character of Mother Superior St. George’s convent. She was asked nothing of the attack or of the events leading up to it. Rather, her examination focused on whether or not the nuns were required to prostrate themselves in front of the Bishop. Revealing this practice was presumably to establish the convent as an ascetic, and possibly physically abusive, institution. This in turn was to help justify the rioters’ attack on the convent – what they sought to represent as an effort to liberate the convents’ inmates, women and girls living under the rule of Mother Superior St. George. For an account of the trial and of Rebecca Reed’s testimony, see Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, *The Trial of John R. Buzzell, the Leader of the Convent Rioters for Arson and Burglary* (Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Metcalf, 1834), 56.

Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures*

Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures*, published in 1836, capitalized on both the Mount Benedict mob and the popularity of *Six Months in a Convent*. It was even more widely read than its predecessor: Rebecca's narrative sold 10,000 copies in its first week of publication, and 200,000 overall; Maria Monk's sold nearly 300,000 copies between its publication and the beginning of the Civil War.²⁹ Though her story took place in Canada, it was immediately republished and distributed widely in the United States. Maria moved to New York soon after its initial publication and remained there until her death. Today, *The Awful Disclosures* is often included in the canon of nineteenth-century American women's writing, so closely is it associated with the history of women in the United States.³⁰ One reason for this success was its commentary upon women's place within the normative family, a subject that particularly resonated with Protestant Americans.

Maria Monk wrote that though she was raised a Protestant, she had scant religious instruction at home and rarely attended church. As a young girl, Maria attended the local convent school run by the Sisters of Charity, where she "began by degrees to look upon a nun as the happiest of women, and a Convent as the most peaceful, holy, and delightful place of abode. It is true, some pains were taken to impress such views upon me."³¹ Despite this positive outlook on conventual life, she also heard tales of its darker aspects. For example, rumors of murdered converts circulated, such as that of "La Belle Marie,"

²⁹ Franchot, 145, 154; Schultz, 132.

³⁰ An analysis of *The Awful Disclosures* is included, for example, in these two publications: Bauer and Gould, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing*; and Paul C. Gutjahr, ed., *Popular American Literature of the 19th Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³¹ Maria Monk, *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk, as Exhibited in a Narrative of Her Sufferings During a Residence of Five Years as a Novice and Two Years as a Black Nun, in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal* (New York: Howe & Bates, 1836), 16.

who was killed by a priest when she refused to give in to his sexual demands. And while at school, Maria quickly became wary of confession. Like Rebecca, she was confronted with prying, sexually charged questions from the priests who served as the convent's confessors. Also like Rebecca, Maria could not provide much detail on the matter, "because it is impossible to do without saying things both shameful and demoralizing."³² At the end of her time at the school, however, she had already resolved to become a nun, a misguided decision that she later attributed to her inadequate Protestant religious training at home. After completing her schooling, she entered the Hotel Dieu Nunnery as a novice. Novices, low in the convent's hierarchy, had access to only a small portion of the building, and were required to perform submissive tasks such as clipping the Mother Superior's nails or cutting her hair. Confession at the Hotel Dieu functioned much as it did at her former school, with supposedly celibate priests asking intimate questions of the novices.³³ Maria remained in the convent for five years, during which time she witnessed some troubling incidents, such as when a little girl was gagged with a leather strap for some minor indiscretion. Maria eventually found herself suffering terrible treatment at the hands of one particular nun, although Maria wrote nothing of the details of the abuse. Maria's response was to flee the convent.

Once outside the Hotel Dieu, Maria found employment as a teacher and married, though she quickly discovered her husband was of sufficiently "bad character" to lead her to seek readmission to the Hotel Dieu. She did not explain anything more about her

³² Ibid., 21.

³³ Ibid., 32.

marriage or her motives for returning.³⁴ She was accepted back into the convent when she offered the nuns payment as a bribe or a sort of dowry, this time as a full-fledged nun. She was required to take her vows while standing in a customized coffin, engraved with her new name, St. Eustace. (The coffin, she explained, would then be stored in an outhouse, ready to function as her eternal grave upon her death – an unsubtle hint that life would not be easy, or long, for the nuns of the Hotel Dieu.) After taking her vows, Maria discovered increasingly horrifying things about the Hotel Dieu. Nuns were imprisoned in the cellar; Maria’s vocational duties were to include “criminal intercourse” with priests; infants born of such unions were routinely baptized and then murdered.³⁵ Maria wrote that between eighteen and twenty infants were killed during her residence at the Hotel Dieu, including her own child, born of an involuntary union with a priest.³⁶ The penances nuns were forced to perform were extreme, and many nuns simply “disappeared” over the years. Even one particularly abusive Mother Superior, a woman described as “bold and masculine . . . cruel and cold-blooded,” vanished, presumably because she had tried to assume too much power over the presiding Bishop. The Superior’s replacement was a woman who was afraid of the dark. Maria insinuated that this new Superior was like a mentally incompetent child, a puppet leader to support the convent’s abusive priests.³⁷

³⁴ It is somewhat unclear what function Maria’s brief marriage was intended to serve in the text. Perhaps it was merely relaying a personal detail of Maria’s life, or perhaps it suggested that even a bad marriage was preferable to convent life or other alternatives to the normative family structure. Given attitudes towards men’s responsibilities within marriage in the 1830s, it may also have demonstrated the necessity of benevolent patriarchy within marriage – and the potential dangers if a man failed to meet his responsibilities. Monk, 36-37.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 47-49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 156-157.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

Finally unable to take any more, Maria escaped to safety and eventually published her *Awful Disclosures*. One New York newspaper reported that “if a true narrative, and there is strong internal evidence of its being so, throws ‘Six Months in a Convent’ very far in to the shade.”³⁸

The Mob’s Destruction of the Mount Benedict Convent

Rebecca Reed’s portrayal of the Mount Benedict convent may not have been wholly accurate. Her residence there (for four months, not the eponymous six) was confirmed, however, by the Mother Superior, who quickly published *An Answer to Six Months in a Convent, Exposing its Falsehoods and Manifold Absurdities* in 1835.³⁹ Maria Monk’s connection to the Hotel Dieu was never so authenticated. In a response to *The Awful Disclosures*, New York newspaper editor William L. Stone conducted an investigation of the convents of Montreal. He was impressed by the order, intention, and simplicity of the nuns’ lives and found no evidence of depravity or abuse. As he inspected the Hotel Dieu he learned that Maria Monk had never resided there. According to Stone, she had instead been an inmate at a Canadian Magdalen Asylum, a reformatory for wayward girls and prostitutes run by Catholic nuns. Curiously, Stone reported that the asylum had been “dissolved” the week before his visit, yet he did not investigate the situation. Perhaps he no longer had an interest in Maria’s claims now that he viewed her as a lying, fallen woman.⁴⁰ Whether the conditions of the Magdalen Asylum corresponded with Maria’s story in any way can only be a matter of speculation. Stone

³⁸ “Miscellany: Awful Disclosures, by Maria Monk,” *The Mercury* (New York, NY), January 21, 1836.

³⁹ Mary Ann Moffatt, *An Answer to Six Months in a Convent, Exposing its Falsehoods and Manifold Absurdities* (Boston: J.H. Eastburn, 1835).

⁴⁰ William L. Stone, *Maria Monk and the Hotel Dieu, Being an Account of a Visit to the Convents of Montreal and Refutation of the “Awful Disclosures”* (New York: Howe & Bates, 1836), 10-15.

did note, however, that Maria's description of the physical space of the Hotel Dieu was inaccurate, and that her description more closely resembled the asylum.⁴¹

Maria's narrative, though more salacious and perhaps less reliable than Rebecca's, was nevertheless intended to function much like *Six Months in a Convent*. As historian Jenny Franchot explains, the narrative was "intended to bolster the claims of middle-class domesticity (and benefit from the success of Rebecca Reed's convent narrative)." It was also "meant to be read somewhere ambiguously outside but near the sacred precinct of the home."⁴² The timing of *The Awful Disclosures*, published on the heels of both the mob attack and Reed's narrative, certainly increased readership. These events combined to stoke fears that cloistered life was luring young Protestant women away from domesticity and patriarchal control. The mob attack on Mount Benedict saw these fears come to a head. It was for young women like Maria Monk and Rebecca Theresa Reed that the crowd supposedly descended upon the convent outside of Charlestown, Massachusetts, in August of 1834. While Rebecca's and Maria's narratives were published only after the attack, they impacted public sentiment surrounding the legal proceedings. Given the result of the trial – only one man was convicted, and this was soon overturned – the publications may certainly have affected the outcome as well.

Rebecca was not the only woman to have fled the Charlestown convent amidst controversy and commentary. One July 28, 1834, a few weeks before the convent attack, Sister Mary John, née Elizabeth Harrison, left Mount Benedict and sought refuge in the nearby Protestant home of Edward Cutter. The incident was widely reported in the newspapers in August, after the convent's destruction, yet handbills and rumor had made

⁴¹ Ibid., 27.

⁴² Franchot, 154.

the story well-known in the weeks preceding the attack.⁴³ Cutter described the young woman in the *Boston Evening Transcript* as “considerably agitated,” explaining that she had refused to see the Bishop when he inquired after her.⁴⁴ Yet only days after her escape she was back at the convent, where a doctor diagnosed her with “hysterics.” The Mother Superior suggested that this condition might have been brought on by her heavy workload as the convent music teacher (giving fourteen lessons a day) or by an underlying mental condition.⁴⁵ On August 8, 1834, an article titled “Mysterious” appeared in the local *Mercantile Journal*, conflating the escapes of Rebecca Theresa Reed and Elizabeth Harrison.⁴⁶ “With its publication,” historian Nancy Lusignan Schultz writes, “the identification of Harrison with Rebecca was complete, setting in motion an unstoppable wave of pent-up animosity.”⁴⁷

In the weeks that followed the escape, a group of men, including Edward Cutter, visited Mount Benedict, demanding to see Harrison and to inspect the convent, for rumors of her entrapment were growing. The Mother Superior initially refused, and the men began to issue threats of mob action. When the Superior finally relented, Harrison appeared and insisted she was happy to be back among the nuns – that she had returned by choice, that she had not been in her right mind when she fled, and that she had lived contentedly as a nun for twelve years. Despite her insistence to the contrary, many who heard about her ordeal believed she had been forcefully returned to Mount Benedict.⁴⁸ Rumors of an impending mob attack continued to circulate. Curiously, both the convent

⁴³ Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, 48.

⁴⁴ “Burning of the Charlestown Convent,” *Boston Evening Transcript* (Boston, MA), August 12, 1834.

⁴⁵ Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, 12.

⁴⁶ “Mysterious,” *Mercantile Journal* (Boston, MA), August 8, 1834.

⁴⁷ Schultz, 159.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 154-159.

leaders and the parents of the Protestant girls who attended the convent school were reportedly unfazed.⁴⁹ When the father of convent pupil Louisa Whitney, for example, was warned that an attack on Mount Benedict was imminent, he laughed off such speculation. He did not hesitate to return his daughter to the convent after her weekend at home. The convent was attacked shortly after Louisa arrived back at school.⁵⁰ On the evening of August 11, a group of about sixty men stormed the convent. They threatened the Mother Superior, ransacked the convent's considerable goods, and finally set the building aflame. They were accompanied by nearly two thousand onlookers. The twelve nuns, three servants, and forty-seven students all fled to safety, though no one did anything to quell the mob or to stop the fire, including the fire department that was called to the scene.⁵¹ The men returned the following day to further destroy the building and grounds. Many Charlestown and Boston residents condemned the attack; many others supported it. The identities of the mob leaders were well known, as the men made no secret of their involvement. Yet just twelve people were indicted. Only one – a young boy, likely a scapegoat – was found guilty during the ensuing trials. Those involved defended their actions as “chivalric, for they were bent on the rescue of imprisoned maidens and refrained from setting fire to the convent, according to the trial testimony, ‘till they were satisfied there was no woman in the house.’”⁵²

Much of the trial centered not on the mob's actions, but on the character of Mary Anne Ursula Moffatt, otherwise known as Mother Superior St. George, and on the ways in which she managed her convent. A convert from Protestantism, St. George

⁴⁹ Ibid., 171.

⁵⁰ Whitney, 54.

⁵¹ Franchot, 138.

⁵² Ibid., 140.

represented an extreme deviation from Protestant femininity, domesticity, and the patriarchal family. Though St. George did not face legal action, the trial ended as a victory for the rioters and as a public condemnation of the Mother Superior and her all-female institution. Rebecca Reed's testimony against her former Mother Superior helped secure this condemnation, and Maria Monk's ensuing publication renewed fears of the convent's threat against Protestant women and their families. Rebecca's *Six Months in a Convent*, Maria's *Awful Disclosures*, and the trial of the Mount Benedict attackers worked together to expose the perils of female authority and the matriarchal institution.

The Narratives as Commentary on Women's Authority and Matriarchy

The chief concern of the anti-Shaker narratives of the 1810s was motherhood and its role within the patriarchal family and by extension, its role within American society. The narratives of Rebecca Theresa Reed and Maria Monk, on the other hand, betrayed significant anxiety over female leadership within the convents, and by extension anxiety over women's authority (or lack of it) within the Protestant family. Specifically, these narratives expressed uneasiness with women as community leaders, and with women of authority requiring women without it to submit to their orders. The convent functioned as an alternative family structure, complete with a "mother" (the Mother Superior) and "sisters" (professed nuns and novices). Though "fathers" (priests and bishops) did make appearances in the convent, there was little room for men in this alternative family arrangement. At its core, the conventual community was both a matriarchy and a sorority. The mother superior, bishops and priests, and God exercised patriarchal authority over the nuns, with the mother superior assuming daily leadership duties. This

clearly left no room for Protestant men. The conventual system could ascribe significant power to women who distinguished themselves within the order, power that most women would never be able to attain in the outside world. So too could the convent require women's utter submission. Indeed, novices were required to take a vow of obedience before taking the veil. This duality, wherein the convent could both ascribe power and suppress it, sat uncomfortably next to the framework of the antebellum family.

Within the mainstream family, women were often expected to sacrifice their autonomy to their husbands. In marriage, for example, women were still to assume the role of *feme covert*.⁵³ The doctrine of coverture, a relic of English common law, meant that upon marriage, a woman's legal identity was subsumed into her husband's. A married couple became one person under the law – the husband. This meant that women could not hold property, borrow money, or protect their own earnings, though they could be held accountable for the debts their husbands accrued. Coverture made the lives of married women who had been abandoned, like Mary Dyer and Eunice Chapman, especially difficult. With no property of their own and little recourse to their husbands' finances, such women could easily slip into destitution. At the same time, married women were considered of utmost importance to their families and to the antebellum social system. They were to raise children to become ethically sound adults and they were to guide their husbands into living moral lives. They were to be half of a companionate marriage, a union that was to be convivial if not coequal. The ideal of antebellum womanhood was contradictory, declaring married women to be legal non-

⁵³ Literally, *feme covert* meant "covered woman." Once married, women were figuratively "covered" by their husbands. A relic of English common law, coverture meant that married couples were viewed as one body before the law. This body was the man's. The property of a *feme sole*, or single woman, was turned over to her husband upon marriage.

entities yet also upholding them as vital to the integrity of the family and the purity of the nation. In a way, the convent was simply another setting for competing models of womanhood, mirroring the inconsistencies of the prevailing gender system. The narratives of Rebecca and Maria exposed the absurdity and the danger of this dualism within the convent, though they ignored its presence in the outside world. Convent life, of course, presented additional complexities for those entrenched in patriarchal Protestantism. Within the convent, women performed a range of gender roles, and they did so without the assistance of men. Women could assume “masculine” roles of authority and power, just as they could adhere to “feminine” ideals of submissiveness and domesticity. Maria and Rebecca were intent on demonstrating that this system, so different from the normative American family yet in many ways reflecting it, could not function. The public reacted to these narratives by condemning Catholic convents. A small proportion of the public took this condemnation further, destroying the convent at Mount Benedict in an effort to eliminate the challenges it posed to the antebellum gender system. Through this, they could avoid contemplating similarly unsettling gender contradictions within the Protestant family itself. These contradictions became more acute as women’s status within the family continued to change.

No legislation symbolized these contradictions more than the Married Women’s Property Acts of the 1830s and 1840s. Though neither Maria nor Rebecca held property, and Rebecca certainly never married, these acts contributed to and were a result of the same anxiety that produced and exacerbated the anti-convent movement. The first Married Women’s Property Act was passed in 1835 in Arkansas, the same year that the alleged Mount Benedict attackers were tried and acquitted. Similar acts were soon

passed throughout the South, spreading to the northern states in the 1840s. While these acts did allow married women to own property, they may have been more focused on strengthening families in general than on promoting the status of wives in particular.⁵⁴ In the South these acts were designed to protect families facing economic crisis. For example, if a husband was in debt, creditors could take away his property. Under the Married Women's Property Acts, however, some of a family's property, if owned by the wife, could be safeguarded. In the North the Married Women's Property Acts helped keep a daughter's inheritance from falling out of her own family's lineage and into her husband's.⁵⁵ Regardless of the intention behind these laws, however, they did ascribe more rights to married women, making women's subordination to their husbands less absolute. Legal recourse to property and inheritance, even if limited, meant married women might be moving away from complete dependency. Other aspects of the gender system were changing as well, threatening to propel women towards self-sufficiency and authority and away from the male-governed Protestant family.

The ideal of true womanhood was firmly established by the time the first Married Women's Property Acts were passed, giving women greater opportunity to occupy themselves outside of the domestic realm. In the 1830s and 1840s, women were publicly agitating on behalf of various causes, charities, and organizations, from poor relief and religious missions to more controversial causes, such as the growing abolition movement. This involvement was increasingly incompatible with the republican motherhood of the

⁵⁴ See, for example the work of Kathleen S. Sullivan, who suggests that women's rights agitators were not focused on achieving *equity* for women, but rather *equality*. The Married Women's Property Acts sought to change married women's situations from within the system of coverture. To Sullivan, rights activists would instead work to overthrow coverture all together. However, these activists did not start their campaign in earnest until the 1840s. Kathleen S. Sullivan, *Constitutional Context: Women and Rights Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

early nineteenth century, yet if not taken too far was acceptable according to the framework of true womanhood.⁵⁶ Women's benevolent activities were seen as worthy of public attention, bringing one aspect of women's lives out of the home and into society. Perhaps not surprisingly, it was as women's groups were first emerging from behind closed doors that the sequestered, secretive convent became the subject of national debate. For women's changing role to be acceptable, men needed to have some control over it. And in order to have control, they needed to see what it was that women's organizations were doing. Though many men may not have cared about the particulars of the charity or the cause women were representing, the public aspect of women's engagement gave men the option to monitor and to intervene. Women's lives within the convent, on the other hand, could not be seen. This meant that men could do very little to control them.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the height of the anti-convent movement, women were gaining new legal rights within marriage. Organizational and charity involvement allowed them to assume new responsibilities, and some women were acquiring leadership experience. Women were still publicly lauded for their efforts as mothers, and children's moral education was now entrusted almost entirely to women rather than to men. All this made it clear that women's status within and beyond the family was changing. The Catholic convent offered women a similar opportunity to embrace new roles. In particular, convent life had the potential to elevate talented women to positions of leadership, with responsibilities and authority to match. Convents created a family-like environment, using familial language, enacting social hierarchies, and instituting

⁵⁶ Boylan, 16.

communal living. Yet such “families” differed significantly from normative Protestant ones. The narratives of Maria and Rebecca allowed readers to explore the consequences of new and potentially unsettling roles for women in a confined setting that was both similar to and different from the outside world. In sequestering women’s authority in this way, the narratives assured readers that the situation for women outside of the convent was still within their control. The narratives also served as a warning: if this control was loosened too much, Protestant women could easily be lured away from acceptable feminine behavior. And from there, they could be seduced, tricked, or forced into renouncing both Protestantism and the patriarchal family altogether.

This was the fate of the central characters in both *Six Months in a Convent* and *The Awful Disclosures*. Rebecca Theresa Reed was from a Protestant family, but had recently lost her mother to death and her older sisters to relocation. She certainly mentioned her father in her narrative but he did not play a prominent role. Though his daughter never criticized him, his inability to keep Rebecca from the convent or to rescue her once she made her way there suggested that he had failed as the patriarch of his family, and that he had especially failed to maintain control over his daughter. Perhaps this was because of his wife’s untimely death; Rebecca no longer had a mother to guide her, and her father no longer had a wife to model proper moral behavior for him, making it difficult for him to fulfill his paternal role. Within her family, Rebecca assumed authority over her father as she defied his wishes. Within the convent, she assumed a submissive role as she subjected herself to Mother Superior St. George’s abuses.

The Mount Benedict Mother Superior, for her part, symbolized one of the worst outcomes for Protestant girls gone astray. Mother Superior St. George was born Mary

Anne Moffatt to a Protestant family in Quebec. Much like Maria Monk, Mary Anne was sent to a convent school as a girl. She converted to Catholicism around age seventeen. A year later she took her vows, became a nun, and assumed the name of St. George.⁵⁷ In 1827 she was sent to the United States to establish and run the Mount Benedict convent. St. George had been lured as far away from the Protestant family as many could imagine was possible. She gave up her religion, her family, her name, and her procreative powers. Yet more alarming, perhaps, was what she had gained – authority and power. Rebecca depicted St. George as conniving, avaricious, and power-hungry. The Mother Superior flattered Rebecca when she first joined the convent to win her over to submission. When that failed, she abused the young girl. According to Rebecca, the Superior ate large, succulent meals while the convent pupils ate crusts of bread. St. George meted out humiliating punishments, making those who erred in their catechism kneel before her and make the sign of the cross on the floor with their tongues. In the press and in Rebecca's narrative, the Mother Superior's behavior was treated as proof that if the social controls of the Protestant antebellum family were removed, and if patriarchal authority was undermined, society would collapse. Though St. George ran Mount Benedict successfully for eight years, the convent's spectacular demise demonstrated that women's unchecked authority – in the home, in public, or in the convent – was detrimental to society.

The trial of the men involved in the convent's destruction was telling. The Mother Superior was summoned to testify in court, but she was asked relatively little about the night of the attack. Instead, she was questioned about how she ran her convent

⁵⁷ Schultz, 22.

and how she required the nuns to demonstrate their religiosity.⁵⁸ St. George's authority was on trial, and though she faced no legal consequences for what she had done, the controversy ensured that Mount Benedict would not be rebuilt. She attempted, for a time, to run a new school for young girls completely on her own. Her Bishop, who was unwilling to support the defiant woman in the face of public condemnation, withdrew official Church support from her activities.⁵⁹ Her new school quickly failed. Mother Superior St. George eventually complied with the Bishop's orders to return to Canada and to live as a regular nun, not as a superior. In stripping St. George of her authority, he hoped to make her innocuous. Curiously, Rebecca Theresa Reed was summoned to testify at the trial as well. She had resided at the convent nearly two years before the attack and had no direct involvement in the mob. Yet her testimony was considered vital, for she was asked to comment on the Mother Superior's alleged abuses of power.⁶⁰ The trial was more important for establishing proper motives for the attackers, in order to excuse what they did, rather than to punish them for it. In the end, the admitted ringleaders of the mob attack were found not guilty. The one person who did not escape sentencing was a seventeen-year-old boy, Marvin Marcy, who had been caught burning books in the Bishop's residence during the attack. It is unclear why his actions were more condemnable than those of the other men; maybe the book-burning was especially objectionable, or perhaps Marcy simply functioned as a convenient scapegoat. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, but after a few months of service the governor pardoned

⁵⁸ Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, 15-17.

⁵⁹ Schultz, 242.

⁶⁰ Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, 55.

him.⁶¹ In the end, these Protestant patriarchs were absolved, and the matriarch St. George was condemned. Women's authority, not men's destructiveness, was on trial.

Maria Monk's publication never resulted in a legal battle and the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal was never sacked. Perhaps because of this, the Mother Superior of the Hotel Dieu did not publish a response to Maria's narrative. According to the investigative journalist William L. Stone, the Mother Superior had heard of but never read *The Awful Disclosures*. Though Maria's Mother Superior never faced the public reckoning that St. George did, matriarchal authority was nevertheless on trial in Maria's narrative, and Maria's derision of female authority built on Rebecca's. Where Rebecca connected women's absolute authority with physical abuse, Maria connected it to sexual depravity. St. George never lost control of her convent until its destruction, symbolizing her tyranny. The women who ran the Hotel Dieu while Maria was there – she writes of two Mother Superiors – failed to maintain control. They showed that female authority figures would never work because women had no ability to lead. Placing women in roles of authority allowed corrupt men to take control, as the lascivious priests did at the Hotel Dieu. Maria wrote of two nuns who were imprisoned in the convent's cellar for “refusing to obey the Superior, Bishop, and Priests.”⁶² When Maria's first Mother Superior suddenly vanished, readers could only presume that she had met a fate similar to the nuns. She had somehow failed in her role as the puppet leader of the Hotel Dieu. Perhaps she had become too “bold and masculine... cruel and cold-blooded” to continue

⁶¹ “Marvin Marcy,” *Salem Gazette* (Salem, MA), October 13, 1835.

⁶² Monk, 139.

to allow the priests to rule through her.⁶³ In contrast, her successor was childlike, afraid of the dark, and likely much easier for corrupt men to manipulate.

Maria's narrative was a warning against conversion, but it was also a warning against investing women with power over others. Rebecca had shown that authority could make a woman tyrannical. Only a year later, Maria voiced a new worry about women's authority: that women were simply not capable of it. Investing women with power was not really possible. Attempting to do so was in fact dangerous, as it would give immoral men greater ability to seize control. Maria's own mother provided additional proof that matriarchy would not work. As a single mother, she could not maintain control of her daughter, who was easily lured away from Protestantism and into the convent. In the home as in the convent, women could not be trusted to assume positions of power.

Young, unmarried antebellum women like Rebecca Reed were in a nebulous category. By Andrew Jackson's election to the presidency in 1829, all white male citizens had gained voting rights. The voting age, twenty-one, marked a transition from youth to independence, regardless of a man's marital status. Women, on the other hand, were to transition from youth to marriage – from one state of dependency to another – with as brief an intermediary stage as possible. No voting age or other rite of passage would designate the start of a woman's independent adulthood, for she was not to have one. This did not necessarily mean that women were to be married young (indeed, they often married in their mid-twenties in this period). But it did mean that women were to go straight from living under the authority of their parents to living under the authority of

⁶³ Ibid., 183.

their husbands.⁶⁴ The decision to forgo marriage for an alternative lifestyle, such as cloistered Catholicism, made women's dependency status unclear. Certainly, entering an order on the lowest level of the conventual hierarchy, taking vows of obedience, and promising submission to the Catholic Church did not make a woman particularly free to exercise her own will. In *choosing* this option, though, women were declaring independence from the patriarchal family. In a way, women like Rebecca and Maria were asserting authority by refusing to move on to life's next stage of dependence – marriage. Submission to a Mother Superior may have meant that a young novice had little autonomy, let alone authority, within the convent. But a young novice was also refusing submission to a husband. While this might not have given such women any real authority over men, it did allow them to contradict the established gender hierarchy, thereby undermining men's authority over women. This, too, threatened the stability of the mainstream Protestant family, and of women's roles within it.

The anti-convent movement strengthened as marriage dynamics evolved and as women assumed greater responsibility within benevolent societies, which took them outside the home. As much a part of public discourse that convent life became in antebellum America (indeed, the “escaped nun” trope continued throughout the nineteenth century), it peaked in the 1830s with the narratives of Rebecca and Maria, and with the Mount Benedict mob attack. Anti-convent sentiment gave way to fear of another religion and of another alternative to patriarchal Protestantism in the 1840s and

⁶⁴ Corinne T. Field, “‘Are Women . . . All Minors?': Woman's Rights and the Politics of Aging in the Antebellum United States,” *Journal of Women's History* 12, no. 4 (2001): 113-137, 117.

the 1850s. This great threat to family identity was an American-born religion, one that rejected the celibacy of the Shakers and the matriarchy of the convents for a very different reinterpretation of family structure. This threat was Mormonism.

CHAPTER THREE

“Wives may be multiplied like garments”: Marriage and the Anti-Mormon

Narratives of Maria Ward and Mary Ettie V. Smith¹

Anti-Mormon sentiment was high in the years following founder Joseph Smith's death in 1844, after the editors of the *Nauvoo Expositor* revealed Smith's secret sanctioning of polygamy. Smith's successor as prophet, Brigham Young, publicly admitted to the Mormon practice of polygamy in 1852, and it was only a matter of time before anti-polygamy publications entered the mainstream media. Anti-Mormon, anti-polygamy publications took many forms, from magazine articles and cartoons to novels and personal narratives. As with the anti-Shaker and anti-convent apostate literature discussed in chapters one and two, the anti-Mormon narratives of the 1850s focused less on religious tenets and more on Mormonism's unconventional marital practices and its reinterpretation of normative family structure. As such, they provide greater insight into contemporary attitudes toward marriage than they do into Mormonism itself. Nearly fifty anti-polygamy books were published in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some were marketed as novels and some as historical documentation, but the best known were the apostate exposés. Maria Ward's *Female Life Among the Mormons*, perhaps the first publication in this genre, sold a reported 40,000 copies in only a few weeks after its publication. Mary Ettie V. Smith's *Fifteen Years' Residence with the Mormons* was published just two years after this, and while sales figures are not available, it surely

¹ Maria Ward [attributed], *Female Life Among the Mormons: A Narrative of Many Years' Personal Experience, by the Wife of a Mormon Elder, Recently from Utah* (New York: J.C. Derby, 1855), 312.

capitalized on Ward's success.² Both publications were primarily concerned with polygamy and its relationship to Protestant marriage. In this chapter I present an overview of these two narratives in relation to the mob attack on the Carthage jail and Joseph Smith's death. I then analyze these stories and anti-Mormon sentiment as commentary on mainstream, patriarchal marriage. (For images of these anti-polygamy texts, see Appendix, Figures 8-9.)

Maria Ward's *Female Life Among the Mormons*

Female Life Among the Mormons: A Narrative of Many Years' Personal Experience was published in 1855, just over ten years after the attack on the Carthage jail that ended in Joseph Smith's death. It was among the first in a long line of supposed Mormon women's apostate narratives. Its anonymous author, revealed in the narrative to be a woman named Maria Ward, claimed to have witnessed the tumultuous events of the 1840s when she converted from Protestantism and joined the Mormons in their migration west. Like the single issue of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, the publication was chiefly concerned with plural marriage. Though historians have considered this work, like Maria Monk's, to be largely fictional, it was presented as a truthful first-person account to its readers. As one suspicious contemporary reviewer stated, "It has generally been advertised, reprinted and read as veritable history. We do not doubt that 100,000 people have read it, believing not only that it was written as history, but that it was really such."³

While there may have been skeptics, there were also many believers, and the book was

² For a discussion of the corpus of nineteenth-century anti-Mormon literature, see Charles A. Cannon, "The Awesome Power of Sex: The Polemical Campaign Against Mormon Polygamy," *Pacific Historical Review* 43, no. 1 (1974): 61-82, especially pages 72-74.

³ "Review of *Female Life among the Mormons: A Narrative of Many Years Personal Experience*," *Northern Islander* (St. James, MI), February 14, 1856.

consistently presented as fact rather than fiction. Certainly, its commentary upon family and gender revealed real concerns, even if its author's experiences are now considered to be primarily fictitious.

According to the narrative, Maria Ward was raised a Protestant in New York. She wrote that she had a good life there but eventually “encountered some enemies” and decided to leave her unnamed town to visit relatives in Albany. On her train journey there, she met a handsome middle-aged man, and the two began chatting. The conversation soon turned to Mormonism. Maria had recently heard several stories of women who had deserted their families and their faith to join Mormon communities, behavior that she found abhorrent. But the stranger defended Mormon conversion efforts on the grounds that spiritual devotion was more important than earthly affection. He explained that such actions were justified, “For he that loveth father, or mother, or husband, or wife, more than me, is not worthy of me.”⁴ Though Maria did not agree, she began to feel an inexplicable attraction to the man – something she later attributed to his manipulative and unnatural “magnetic influence.”

When the train broke journey at an inn, the stranger used his “magnetism” to distract Maria into missing her connection, stranding her at the inn station for several days. Normally, Maria wrote, such a situation would have made her panic, but instead she found herself further drawn to the stranger, and was unable to feel alarmed. She soon discovered he was a Mormon leader named Mr. Ward, travelling with a party of fellow Mormons that included the prophet, Joseph Smith. Maria consented to stay with the

⁴ Interestingly, Mr. Ward used the same defense of spiritual love over familial love as did the Mother Superior St. George in her discussion with Rebecca – a passage from the book of Matthew. Though Mormonism and Catholicism were seen to pervert normative family structure in different ways – polygamy for one, celibacy for the other – they used the same logic (and Biblical citation) to justify their alternative family structures. Ward, 11.

Mormons in a hotel by the tracks – she had little choice given her predicament – and she joined in their religious activities that evening, despite the skepticism she had voiced earlier. The next day, she gave Mr. Ward a letter to post to her family, explaining her delay, but by the end of the week she had heard nothing back from them. She assumed herself friendless and forgotten. When Mr. Ward somewhat surprisingly proposed marriage at the end of their week together, she accepted without hesitation, though she was unwilling to convert. Instead of taking the next train, she continued on with the group of traveling Mormons.

Now a wife, Maria traveled west with the Mormons, away from Protestant civilization and, as she soon discovered, away from patriarchal authority as she had known it growing up in New York. Mormon prophet Joseph Smith was supposedly among the party, yet he rather curiously did not figure prominently in Maria's account of the group's migration. Rather, it was a woman named Mrs. Bradish who was the de facto leader of the group. Mrs. Bradish was to Maria the symbol of misguided independence, functioning in some ways as the Mormons' authoritative – and corrupt – “Mother Superior.” She introduced Maria to the concept of polygamy. Maria was continuously shocked that the men of the group willingly subjected themselves to Mrs. Bradish's tyranny, which she saw as an indication of Mormonism's extreme corruption of gender roles – and of the men's preoccupation with pursuing additional wives. Polygamy, Maria wrote, distracted men from their patriarchal duties and allowed Mrs. Bradish to assume control by doling out plural wives to the eager men. Instead of upholding traditional marriage, Mrs. Bradish enabled men to give in to sexual vice by acting as a sort of Mormon “madam,” and she was particularly encouraging of plural marriage.

Throughout her journey, Maria encountered many objectionable aspects of her husband's religion, but it was plural marriage that she condemned most vehemently. Maria wrote that she witnessed the events leading up to Joseph Smith's death, which she attributed almost entirely to outrage over polygamy,⁵ explaining that a mob of men attacked the Mormon community, imprisoned many of his male supporters, and killed Smith.⁶ Many of the rioters were angry that their own wives had been lured away from them, and they were looking to exact their revenge.

Mr. Ward remained monogamous throughout Maria's time with him. She learned, however, that he had nevertheless been corrupted by polygamy. Not long before she fled the community, Maria discovered Mr. Ward was part of a group of Mormon leaders responsible for "disposing" of (that is, killing) polygamy's detractors, including disaffected first wives and couples preferring monogamy to polygamy.⁷ When Maria was found listening in on the group as they plotted to kill more anti-polygamists, she realized her own life was in danger, and she found a way to flee the community, eventually making her way back to New York. It was only then that she discovered that her marriage had been based entirely on deceit. Mr. Ward had never mailed the letter she wrote to her family from the train station outside Albany, making Maria believe that her

⁵ Maria's account of Joseph Smith's death differed from the one that was widely reported. He was not in prison in Carthage and there was no mention of the *Nauvoo Expositor*. The method of his death (by mob attack) and the motivation for his murder (polygamy) were nevertheless similar to what was reported in the standard accounts.

⁶ This erroneous account of Smith's death further suggests that Ward's narrative was largely, if not wholly, fictional. Ward, 135-140.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 425.

family had abandoned her. Had her faith in the Protestant family not been manipulated, she explained, she would never have agreed to join the Mormons.⁸

Finally, after reintegrating into society, Maria decided to write about her experiences. Her work would serve as a warning to young women about the dangers of abandoning family, faith, and normative marriage. Her message was not so much that Mormonism was a threat, but that Protestant women were vulnerable and that the integrity of accepted gender roles and the stability of the patriarchal family were at risk.⁹ Of course, Maria's work, and Maria herself, may have been entirely fabricated. As with Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures*, most historians today see this narrative as fictional; unlike *The Awful Disclosures*, however, even the identity of the work's narrator is now widely doubted.¹⁰ Maria Ward's book – whether entirely fabricated or based in part on women's actual experiences – resonated with anxious readers as it exposed the fragility of Protestant womanhood and the ease with which religiously-sanctioned marriage could be corrupted – and not by secular forces, but by (non-mainstream) religion itself. Other

⁸ Trickery and seduction were techniques commonly attributed to Mormon men in anti-Mormon literature. Young women were considered particularly susceptible to conversion during the Second Great Awakening, in part due to the charismatic nature of many of these religions – a charisma that was depicted by detractors as fundamentally dishonest. It was convenient to blame a young woman's apostasy from Protestantism on the unscrupulous practices of the Mormons (or, as we have seen, on the Shakers or the Catholics). This helped frame these conversions as misguided, rather than genuine dismissals of the Protestant faith. For more on these gendered trends, see Nancy F. Cott, "Young Women in the Second Great Awakening in New England," *Feminist Studies* 3, nos. 1-2 (1975): 15-29.

⁹ Ward, 449.

¹⁰ *Female Life Among the Mormons* was attributed on the title page of its first edition to "the wife of a Mormon elder, recently from Utah." The text itself reveals the first-person narrator to be Maria Ward, but historians have suggested the book was actually written by Elizabeth Cornelia Ferris, the wife of a government official in Utah territory, who published in her own name another anti-Mormon work, *The Mormons at Home* (1856). Unlike *Female Life*, this book was not an apostate narrative, and Ferris did not claim to have insider knowledge of the Mormon faith – only that she had lived in Utah during her husband's government tenure. One recent interdisciplinary study, using computational linguistics and comparative textual analysis, concluded that Ferris could not have been the author of *Female Life*. Its true authorship, meanwhile, remains unknown. For more on this study's findings, see David L. Hoover and Shervin Hess, "An Exercise in Non-ideal authorship Attribution: The Mysterious Maria Ward," *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 24, no. 4 (2009): 467-489.

narratives purporting to expose the horrors of polygamy followed the publication of *Female Life Among the Mormons*, including Mary Ettie V. Smith's account of the abuses she suffered as a plural wife. Though focusing on Mormon polygamy, this narrative had even more to say about normative Protestant marriage.

Mary Ettie V. Smith's *Fifteen Years' Residence with the Mormons*

In 1856, another Mormon apostate narrative was published. This first-person account was supposedly that of a young woman named Mary Ettie V. Smith, who dictated her story to writer Nelson Winch Green. Like Maria Ward's narrative, Mary Ettie Smith's dealt with the time leading up to and surrounding the death of the prophet Joseph Smith (to whom she was not related).¹¹ The resulting book, *Fifteen Years' Residence with the Mormons, with Startling Disclosures of the Mysteries of Polygamy*, detailed her family's conversion to Mormonism after her father's death during Mary Ettie's girlhood. Like Maria Ward, Mary Ettie was from a Protestant family in New York. When her father died, Mary's vulnerable mother fell prey to an act of "mesmerism," wherein a Mormon elder supposedly cured her of her hearing loss. Seeking guidance and protection in the wake of her husband's death, the mother and her seven children were inspired by this to convert, and they joined the Mormons in their journey west. They settled for a time in Nauvoo, Illinois, under the leadership of Joseph Smith, of whom the young Mary Ettie was terrified. The prophet had begun taking multiple wives, many of them very young, and had expressed an interest in Mary Ettie. Desperate to avoid polygamy and marriage to a much older man, she quickly married a

¹¹ No relation between Mary Ettie V. Smith and Joseph Smith was ever suggested in the narrative, though the narrator's surname would not have been overlooked by readers, and may have helped boost sales.

young man, Wallace, who had not yet taken any wives.¹² Of her marriage, Mary Ettie wrote, “Although I had married to escape a worse fate, from a sort of necessity, I was very happy, for soon I learned to love my husband, and we should have lived pleasantly, and did, until the spiritual wifeism afterwards stepped between us with its blighting curse.”¹³

Mary Ettie was still living in Nauvoo with Wallace at the time of Joseph Smith’s death. According to her account, Joseph had sent several Mormon men away on religious missions. When they returned they discovered that Joseph had taken their wives as his own. Incensed by these brazen and perverse actions, the men founded a newspaper “to expose his alleged vicious teachings and practices.” In response, Joseph had a revelation that required him to destroy the press on which the paper was printed.¹⁴ Afterward, Joseph and his brother fled, but they were soon caught and imprisoned in Carthage, Illinois, where a mob stormed the jail and killed the two men. Mary Ettie then witnessed the rise and rule of Brigham Young, who intensified the practice of polygamy. Mary Ettie’s narrative detailed all of the corruption she witnessed in her adopted community, yet to her the greatest sin of all was the Mormon perversion of marriage. When the group set out west from Nauvoo (and further away from the civilizing influence of Protestantism), Wallace fell prey to polygamy and began to pursue his own niece. Of this Mary Ettie wrote, “My readers will understand that it is not an uncommon thing for Mormons to marry their nieces, and even their half sisters. For instance, it often happens

¹² Mary Ettie V. Smith, as told to Nelson Winch Green, *Fifteen Years’ Residence with the Mormons: With the Startling Disclosures of the Mysteries of Polygamy, By a Sister of One of the High Priests* (Chicago: Phoenix Publishing, 1857, republished 1876), 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

that when a man has several wives, their children, having a common father, will intermarry.”¹⁵ According to Mary Ettie, polygamy went so far as to sanction incest.

Many other dreadful events occurred, including the death of Mary Ettie’s baby and a subsequent miscarriage, Wallace’s acquisition of a second wife, and the death of Mary Ettie’s siblings. Wallace became increasingly corrupt and immoral as he fell deeper into the practice of polygamy, and he eventually moved away from Mary Ettie with his new wife. When she heard that Wallace had died during a cholera outbreak, Mary Ettie hoped she might be free from Mormonism. She even found herself a kind and protective Protestant suitor, Mr. Smith. Unfortunately, Brigham Young intervened, forcing Mary Ettie to remain in the community and take another Mormon husband.¹⁶ Through a complicated polygamous loophole, she was also able to marry Mr. Smith, who had disguised himself as a Mormon in an effort to save Mary Ettie.¹⁷ When Mr. Smith left Mary Ettie to prepare for her escape, Brigham Young discovered the couple’s deceitful plans, and he voided Mary Ettie’s marriage in punishment. Mr. Smith never returned to rescue Mary Ettie; she suspected that Brigham Young had had him killed, but she never discovered the details of his disappearance. Mary Ettie grieved for Mr. Smtih, considering him to be her true husband as well as her Protestant protector.

Unable to tolerate life among he Mormons any longer, Mary Ettie devised an escape plan. As soon as she left Utah, she renounced Mormonism and began to search for Mr. Smith, whom she hoped was still alive. She never found him. She remained troubled by the abuse she suffered during her many years as a Mormon, and though she

¹⁵ Ibid., 61.

¹⁶ Ibid., 192.

¹⁷ According to Mary Ettie’s explanation, Mormon women could also have multiple husbands. They could only be married, or “sealed,” “for time” (that is, eternity) to one man, but could be the secondary wife of more than one man.

gave up the religion, it was difficult for her to embrace any other faith. Unlike Maria Ward, Mary Ettie had been a Mormon since girlhood. Without the guidance of a strong Protestant patriarch such as Mr. Smith, Mary Ettie faced an unclear path towards redemption. The first step towards her reintegration into society was sharing her history with writer Nelson Wench Green, who “listened with astonishment to her extraordinary story.” Green spent much time “weighing, sifting and comparing her statements.” When he was “convinced by this investigation of its entire truthfulness,” he agreed to record Mary Ettie’s narration. Together, they said, they hoped to aid women still oppressed by Mormonism.¹⁸ Green also sought to affirm the superiority of normative Protestant marriage by demonstrating that other approaches were not only misguided, but were in fact dangerous to both women and broader society.

Of her former religion, Mary Ettie wrote, “Perhaps the saddest feature of Mormonism as regards its own victims, should be looked for in the influence it necessarily has upon women. It is impossible to convey a clear idea of the absolute slavery of our sex under Mormon influence.”¹⁹ Though she certainly vilified Mormonism, her narrative ignored other aspects of the religion to focus almost exclusively on the horrors of polygamy and the threat it posed to Protestant women and their families. Whether her story was true or not, the threat to the Protestant family that Mary Ettie articulated was not considered a trivial matter. The fatal mob attack upon the Carthage jail a decade earlier had illustrated just how much marriage mattered to antebellum Americans, and just how fearful they were of alternative approaches to family life.

¹⁸ Mary Ettie V. Smith, ix.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 264-265.

The Mob Attack on the Carthage Jail and the Death of Prophet Joseph Smith

As we have seen, Joseph Smith, the founder and central prophet of Mormonism, was killed in a mob attack in 1844. The prophet and his brother Hyrum, wanted men, had given themselves over to the authorities and were subsequently incarcerated in Carthage, Illinois. The mob met little resistance from the Carthage jailers as they stormed the building and shot the entrapped brothers. The violence was an expression of anger over Smith's political ambitions, his disregard for legal authority, and his recently exposed revelation that God had ordered him, and other Mormon men, to take multiple wives. The political threat that Joseph Smith posed should certainly not be dismissed. As mayor of Nauvoo, he had taken on both religious and political leadership and was extremely active in suppressing dissent. He also had presidential ambitions and a growing, devoted religious following. Though the political threat that Joseph Smith and his religion posed was an important factor, it was outcry over deviant Mormon sexual practices that most shaped the series of events that led to the mob attack.²⁰ The events leading up to his death were centered on his espousal of polygamy, rather than on his growing political power. This does not mean, of course, that the mob was unconcerned with his political ambitions. Rather, it shows that plural marriage was the issue that most united and galvanized anti-Mormons. Joseph Smith's ambition may have been objectionable, but it was hard to pinpoint as a clear-cut offense. Polygamy, on the other hand, so violated nineteenth-century sexual and familial norms that it "created a level of alienation

²⁰ Historian Marvin S. Hill, for example, considers fear over Joseph Smith's potential political ascent to be a central aspect of the mob attack. In outlining the events leading up to the attack, however, Hill focuses almost exclusively on the role anti-polygamy played in uniting various anti-Mormon factions. Marvin S. Hill, "Carthage Conspiracy Reconsidered: A Second Look at the Murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 97, no. 2 (2004): 107-134, 110.

impossible to bridge,” according to historians Martha Sonntag Bradley and Mary Brown Firmage Woodward.²¹

Smith had tried to keep Mormon polygamy a secret from the outside world. He succeeded for a period of time, but as rumors spread he chose to announce his revelation formally in 1843.²² On June 7, 1844, a group of disaffected former Mormons, who cited plural marriage as a reason for their apostasy, published the first and only issue of the *Nauvoo Expositor*. This newspaper focused on Smith’s endorsement of polygamy and warned male readers that even their own wives – women married to presumably respectable patriarchs – were not safe from the predation of lascivious Mormons. Smith responded to the publication by ordering a group of his followers to destroy the printing press that produced the *Expositor*. It was for this destruction that Joseph and his brother Hyrum were imprisoned, though Joseph faced further charges of adultery. The men would not go to trial for their crimes; instead they faced vigilante justice. William Law, the publisher of the short-lived *Expositor*, led nearly two hundred men in an attack on the Carthage jail. Both Joseph and Hyrum were quickly shot in the ensuing mob.²³

The works of Maria Ward and Mary Ettie Smith were not implicated in the Carthage attack. In their narratives, both women claimed to have witnessed the events preceding Joseph Smith’s death, though they both reported very different versions of the incident. In this way, Maria Ward and Mary Ettie V. Smith’s publications were unlike

²¹ Martha Sonntag Bradley and Mary Brown Firmage Woodward, *4 Zinas: A Story of Mothers and Daughters on the Mormon Frontier* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2000), 123.

²² An earlier revelation of Smith’s suggests he was considering, if not practicing, polygamy as early as 1831. The practice of plural marriage, he explained, was to link Mormon men with the patriarchs of the Old Testament. See Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias – the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 135.

²³ Hill, 107.

the narratives of Mary Dyer and Eunice Chapman, which presaged the mob attack on the Enfield Shaker community, and they were different from those of Rebecca Theresa Reed and Maria Monk, whose accounts were enmeshed in the publicity surrounding the mob's destruction of the Mount Benedict convent. Nevertheless, the polygamy described in these women's narratives *was* considered central to the Carthage mob. Including accounts of Joseph Smith's death in their publications served to enhance the urgency of the women's claims. In capturing the horrors of polygamy in their writings, they called forth the same fear and anger that surrounded the mob attack. In the ten years since Joseph Smith's death, Mormonism had not diminished, and neither had popular anti-Mormonism. Mormons had, however, retreated geographically after the mob attack, moving deeper into the frontier to escape both persecution and legal constraints on their practices. Similarly, polygamy did not dwindle after the events of 1844. Rather, the opposite occurred. In the relative isolation of Utah, and under the leadership of Smith's successor, Brigham Young, the Mormons became *more* open about their practice of polygamy.²⁴ Young himself was widely known to have married prodigiously; by the time of the Mexican-American War, he had forty-four wives who ranged in age from sixteen to sixty-nine. By the time of his death, the number had grown to fifty-five.²⁵

The Mormons, now primarily in Utah, were nevertheless still perceived as a threat, and as Maria and Mary Ettie's narratives reveal, the danger the Mormons posed was to the very structure of marriage. Fear of Mormonism escalated when Utah embarked on a campaign for statehood after the Mexican-American War. Statehood would mean the

²⁴ Bruce Burgett, "On the Mormon Question: Race, Sex, and Polygamy in the 1850s and the 1990s," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 75-102, 75.

²⁵ Bradley and Woodward, 154

reintegration of Mormons – and their beliefs and practices – into American society. The fear was that this in turn would allow Mormonism’s sexual deviancy to undermine the American ideal of the patriarchal Protestant family. After the war ended in 1848, Utah was in fact annexed to the United States, though there was such widespread opposition to its statehood that it was not admitted to the Union until 1896. The narratives of Maria and Mary Ettie helped fuel this opposition: in focusing on Mormonism’s negative impact on marriage, and in centering their stories on the death of Joseph Smith, these writings renewed the sentiments that led to mob violence in 1844. Though they were anti-Mormon, the narratives were not primarily concerned with suppressing the religion through theological commentary, or with the particulars of denying Utah statehood. They were focused, rather, on marriage.

The Narratives as Commentary on Marriage

In these narratives, polygamy was condemned in a very particular way. It was depicted as a violation of women’s rights and freedoms, an extreme corruption of the ideal of companionate marriage. Though the increasing visibility of women’s organizations from the 1830s through the 1850s did not revolutionize gender roles, it did present an image of women that contrasted with the purely domestic. Drawing upon this widening conception of womanhood, the anti-Mormon narratives expressed outrage over Mormonism’s supposed unwillingness to recognize women as potential public actors with at least some degree of autonomy. Polygamy was cast as an extreme version of domesticity, one that made American society in the 1840s and 1850s uncomfortable in light of women’s broadening roles. Though women were still to act within a

predominantly domestic framework, the response to anti-Mormon literature showed that Americans were struggling with the notion that women should be defined only as wives who were completely relegated to the home. And though the claims these narratives made were often outrageous – at one point, for example, Mary Ettie found herself abandoned by her husband, clutching her sick, dying baby to her chest while hiding in the rafters of her home, fending off a pack of wolves – we must not dismiss them.²⁶ Rather, we must interrogate the cultural context that gave rise to them, made them bestsellers, and labeled them as fact rather than fiction. These anti-polygamy works emerged amidst a burgeoning women’s rights movement, one spurred on by women’s increasing involvement in charity and organizational activities as well as their greater visibility as public figures. The texts were published during the lead-up to the Civil War, when debates on slavery led to greater examination of various types of unfreedom, and for some, to a more expansive definition of the concept of bondage. The anti-polygamy movement also emerged out of intense anti-Catholicism, leading to direct comparisons of Mormon leadership to the Roman papacy, and furthering their connection with other apostate narratives, such as those of Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk. It is these concepts that allow us to understand the rabid anti-polygamy of Maria Ward’s and Mary Ettie Smith’s narratives.

In between Joseph Smith’s death in 1844 and the publication of the apostate narratives in the 1850s, the women’s rights movement had emerged on the national level. At the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, women gathered to draft the Declaration of Sentiments, an unabashed demand for women’s equality and a clear announcement that

²⁶ Mary Ettie V. Smith, 71.

patriarchal rule might, in fact, be mutable. Finally, the women's rights movement had become widely visible.²⁷ Many women's rights activists had either been involved with or taken cues from the growing abolitionist movement, and the rhetoric of anti-slavery campaigns influenced the women's rights discourse. Abolitionists had long associated slavery with "barbarism" in an effort to demonstrate its connection to an uncivilized, foreign past.²⁸ Similarly, women's rights activists evoked barbarism as they agitated against the laws of coverture. New York, the home state of both Maria Ward and Mary Ettie Smith, passed the first of its Married Women's Property Acts in 1848, the same year as the Seneca Falls convention. This successful passage followed a failed attempt in 1837 by New York City judge Thomas Herttell, who introduced a women's property bill to the New York State Assembly. He argued it was an improvement upon "barbaric" English common law, of which he saw coverture as a legacy.²⁹ As we have seen, coverture meant that upon marriage, a woman's identity would be legally subsumed under her husband's, thus making it difficult to impossible for her to own property, incur debts, and control money – even if she earned her own wages. In connecting coverture to barbarity, Herttell hoped to demonstrate that coverture was backward and foreign, completely inappropriate for the American wife and her enlightened, benevolently inclined patriarchal husband. This argument failed in the 1830s, but the property law passed less than a decade later, perhaps reflecting national legal and social trends. For

²⁷ Carol Lasser and Stacey Robertson, *Antebellum Women: Private, Public, Partisan* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 171.

²⁸ Perhaps the best-known connection of slavery with barbarism occurred in 1860, when Senator Charles Sumner from Massachusetts gave a speech entitled "The Barbarism of Slavery" to the U.S. Senate in consideration of Kansas' admission to the Union as a free state. In this speech, he equated slavery with barbarism and freedom with civilization. Women's rights advocates would use similar rhetoric as they opposed legal and societal restrictions placed on women.

²⁹ Kathleen S. Sullivan, *Constitutional Context: Women and Rights Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 79.

some, coverture was an uncomfortable, and somewhat contradictory, component of the marriage ideal of the 1840s.

The barbarism of slavery was further equated with oppressive marriage through polygamy. In 1856, delegates at the first Republican National Convention called for the abolition of both slavery and polygamy within the territories, institutions they dubbed “those twin relics of barbarism.”³⁰ Polygamy was mostly relegated to Utah, while slavery was of course practiced much more widely, and oppressed many more people. Why did the new Republicans place polygamy on the same level as slavery, and why was its “barbarism” seen as threatening to more than just Mormon women? And why, in an age when marriage was hardly a coequal union, and when both married and single women’s rights were far more limited than men’s, was polygamy so condemned?

Maria Ward and Mary Ettie demonstrated that polygamy was an institution that prevented men from acting as appropriate patriarchs. Both women suggested that if men were encouraged to abandon monogamous marriage, and if the church or the state gave them the freedom to do so, men would gladly take on multiple wives, often abandoning one in favor of another and thereby failing to act as a dutiful husband. In addition, the reverence for a central male prophet – first Joseph Smith, then Brigham Young – threatened the authority and power of ordinary men, both within their broader communities and within their families.³¹ The men behind the *Nauvoo Expositor* and the mob attack on the Carthage jail were reasserting their masculine prerogative, first by exposing Smith in the press, then by physically destroying him. Mormon marriage

³⁰ Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 55; Sullivan, 79.

³¹ Bradley and Woodward, 125.

certainly did not strip husbands of all their power within the family; indeed, polygamy's detractors argued that plural marriage led men to become tyrannical within their households. Yet the structure of the religion required *all* adherents to submit themselves to one central patriarch, much like Catholics were to submit to the pope in Rome. Thus, anti-Mormons asserted that Joseph Smith and Brigham Young were establishing a Mormon Rome in North America, one that was intent on disenfranchising and emasculating American men in the process. As one Protestant minister suggested, Brigham Young "out-popes the Roman."³²

Mary Ettie Smith and Maria Ward implicitly suggested a link between Mormonism and Catholicism by publishing works very similar to the well-known genre of the anti-convent narrative, popularized by Maria Monk and Rebecca Reed in the 1830s. Maria Ward acknowledged this explicitly as well, writing, "The church government of the Mormons resembles that of the Catholic hierarchy, in many respects. Smith, while he lived, was pope."³³ In modeling their stories on anti-convent exposés, and particularly in conforming to the risqué nature of *The Awful Disclosures*, the apostates portrayed Mormonism as both foreign and familiar. The Shakers had been connected to Catholicism, too, in the 1810s, primarily due to their practice of celibacy and ritualized confession.³⁴ And of course, the anti-Catholic narratives drew upon many of the tropes established in the works of Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer, particularly

³² Statement attributed to the Reverend Josiah Strong in David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (1960): 205-224, 207. Of the connection between Mormons and Catholics David Brion Davis writes, "as imagined enemies, they merged into a nearly common stereotype." These stereotypes, in turn, "were seen to embody those traits that were precise antitheses of American ideals."

³³ Ward, 99.

³⁴ Jean M. Humez, ed., *Mother's First-Born Daughters: Early Shaker Writings and Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), xvi.

female entrapment and dubious chastity. The narratives of Mary Ettie and Maria Ward cast Mormonism as “other.” Though American-born, Mormonism’s authority structure was presented as more in line with the Old World than with the New. And in drawing connections to Catholicism, these women were attempting to familiarize Mormonism by moving it into an established category of cultural threat. Just as Shakerism and Catholicism were depicted as religious movements that perverted the family, so too was Mormonism, and it was seen as doing so through marriage itself.

Mormonism threatened to expose the fragility of patriarchal Protestant marriage just as the women’s movement thrust demands for equality of the sexes into the national spotlight. Though the women’s rights movement was in a nascent stage, it forced ordinary Americans to reconsider women’s potential both at home and in the public sphere. As Seneca Falls organizer Elizabeth Cady Stanton observed in 1850, “... you seldom take up a paper that has not something about woman; but the tone is changing – ridicule is giving way to reason. Our papers begin to see that this is not a subject for mirth, but one for serious consideration.”³⁵ The first National Woman’s Rights Convention was held in Worcester, Massachusetts, in the 1850s, and meetings were held regularly until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. As the movement grew, women increasingly seized opportunities to act publicly and politically. Similarly, their status and role within marriage had been steadily evolving throughout the first half of the century. Marriage laws and idealized gender roles did not necessarily keep up with these changes, but they *were* being challenged. Challenging divorce laws was a contentious but oft-discussed theme at the National Woman’s Rights Conventions. While many

³⁵ Quoted in Sally McMillen, *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women’s Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 104.

rights reformers adamantly opposed divorce, others saw it as a necessary option for women who sought escape from abusive, and especially drunkard, husbands.³⁶ Liberalizing divorce laws, proliferating Married Women's Property Acts, and outspoken women's rights reformers – all of these could have been interpreted as legitimate threats to patriarchal marriage. And while these topics did receive considerable national attention, only polygamy, though relegated almost entirely to the Mormon community, was subject to *increased* legislative censure.³⁷ Polygamy allowed ambivalent Americans an opportunity to direct their criticisms and their fears outward instead of inward. A small minority of Americans practiced this deviant form of marriage and sexual relations, but it was far easier to condemn what was practiced by a group of outsiders than it was to critically examine normative patriarchal marriage. To do that would have required an acknowledgment of current and impending change from within Protestant marriage.

When Maria Ward and Mary Ettie Smith wrote of their desperation to escape polygamy, and of their eventual success in leaving Mormonism, they confirmed that young American women really did want to be the wives of Protestant patriarchs. Though they had both strayed into the alluring world of the Mormons, their core identity as Protestant women allowed them to recognize their errors, flee the community, and reintegrate into mainstream society. These stories declared that marriage and family may be threatened, but that monogamous, companionate marriage would eventually prevail.

³⁶ Elizabeth Cady Stanton was divorce's most outspoken proponent. She suggested that it was women's duty to divorce drunkard husbands in particular, so as not to bring damaged children in the world. Though Stanton's views were considered extreme, she was careful to show how divorce would benefit the whole family, rather than just the woman. McMillen, 119; Elizabeth B. Clark, "Matrimonial Bonds: Slavery and Divorce in Nineteenth-Century America," *Law and History Review* 8, no. 1: 25-54, 29-30.

³⁷ Mormon polygamists sought constitutional protection for what they considered to be a matter of religious freedom. They faced overwhelming opposition, and by 1890 they gave up their constitutional argument, generally preferring to practice plural marriage quietly in the hope of evading legal prosecution. Gordon, 219.

Polygamy might have to be violently suppressed, but Protestant men had shown their mettle in the attack that killed Joseph and Hyrum Smith at Carthage jail.

Unlike anti-Shakerism and the anti-convent movement, the uproar over Mormonism did not give way to another form of apostate literature. Rather, female-authored anti-Mormon exposés were published through the second half of the nineteenth century, and polygamy remained a source of both consternation and curiosity among the American public. The issues articulated in the antebellum apostate narratives were not resolved by the anti-Mormon publications of the 1850s. The outbreak of war in 1861, however, required yet another redefinition of family and of patriarchy, one that would be characterized by flexibility and was born of necessity. The Civil War broke families apart and required a renegotiation of gender roles and of divisions of labor, introducing profound new challenges as well as new possibilities. This renegotiation of the family and of patriarchy went beyond the alternatives imagined in the antebellum apostate narratives. But in the period of identity formation that interceded the American Revolution and the Civil War, these works had a distinct relevance. This was reflected in the wide readership of these narratives, in the very particular themes they shared and highlighted – and in the mob attacks these themes inspired.

Conclusion

Shaker villages, Catholic convents, and Mormon communities were in some ways fulfilling a necessary role in antebellum America. These and other communal religions provided ambivalent Americans with alternatives to normative family life and its attendant gender roles, not to mention belief systems that sometimes varied greatly from those of the dominant Protestant sects. Religious diversity blossomed during the Second Great Awakening, giving rise to a variety of experimental communal religions, and reintroducing zealous adherence to more established faiths. Of the variety of religious expression during the antebellum period, however, it was the Shakers, the Catholics, and the Mormons that generated the most fervent backlash in the popular press. The works of Mary Dyer, Maria Monk, and Maria Ward were not only bestsellers within the apostate narrative genre, they were simply bestsellers, advertised in newspapers alongside other popular works. It was not that these religions rejected the patriarchal Protestant family any more than did some other communal societies. Indeed, some of the societies that arose in the antebellum United States were truly radical, such as the free love, integrationist Nashoba Commune and the Oneida Community, which instilled a system of rotating, multigenerational marriage among its adherents. While mainstream society likely found these practices shocking and objectionable, the communities posed little threat to the integrity of patriarchal Protestant marriage. These communities were outside of society, secluded in remote and contained spaces. They generated no widespread fear of female captivity, no worry about women exercising authority, and no concern that

women were not allowed to function as proper wives and mothers. No mobs arose to quell the threat they seemed to pose to Protestant women and families.

The Shakers, female Catholic orders, and Mormons *did* generate all of these fears. Though these groups also practiced a type of seclusion, living together in communities rather than among non-adherents, they were on the fringes of society, but never fully outside of it. In their earliest days, Shakers opened their services to non-Shakers, allowing outsiders to view how a celibate community looked and acted. The Shakers sold goods to the surrounding towns and they ventured out of their villages to seek new converts.¹ The convent at Charlestown was similarly situated. It was set off from the surrounding community, positioned atop Mount Benedict. It had been built, however, by laborers from Charlestown, some of whom continued to work the convent's grounds and provide other services to the nuns and the pupils. Rebecca Theresa Reed reported that before she joined the Ursulines, she and her friends passed by the convent daily as they walked to school, and she could occasionally glimpse a nun going about her daily routine. The convent was visible though separated, and served as a constant reminder that the lives of the women and girls living within its walls were very different from those living outside of them. Significantly, the convent was also built within sight of Bunker Hill. As a symbol of both Old World religion and a rejection of Protestant values, the convent's proximity to an important Revolutionary War battle site may have proven particularly galling.² And the Mormons, like the Shakers, actively sought to convert Protestants; it is not surprising that Maria Ward began her relationship with Mormonism not at a religious

¹ Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 215.

² Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Fire & Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 142.

revival, but on what should have been neutral territory, a train. Though the Mormons settled in Utah Territory after Joseph Smith's death, they soon began a campaign for statehood that suggested they would not be content in their isolation.

This "fringe" element is what set these religions apart from other experimentations with communal living, and it is what established them as potential threats to the broader American public. Adherents were willing to engage with outsiders just enough to make very apparent what they had rejected from mainstream society: the nuclear, patriarchal family. At a time when women's roles as mothers, wives, and charity organizers were being renegotiated, Shakers, Catholics, and Mormons allowed mainstream American society a glimpse into alternative ways for women to live in relation to men and to families. The Shakers showed that women did not have to be mothers; the Catholics showed that women could assume roles of responsibility and authority; and the Mormons showed that a wife did not have to be her husband's only helpmeet. Shaker women could live alongside men, but they would govern coequally with them, rather than marry them. The Catholics created a world in which the only patriarchs required were the Bishop, the Pope, and God. The Mormons presented a version of marriage that little resembled what the patriarchs of Protestantism had been trained to take on. When these communities are viewed not merely as religions, but as groups that offered very real lifestyle alternatives for women, the popularity of apostate narratives begins to make sense, for it took women's apostate narratives to articulate these threats to the public. It also took these narratives to allow for greater discussion on the role of patriarchy within the American family – to suggest that it was tenuous, that

renegotiated patriarchies would have to emerge to contend with the changes taking place within marriage, motherhood, and women's roles outside domesticity.

The chronology of the apostate narratives reflects these concerns. In the 1810s, the discussion centered on motherhood. The custody cases of Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer presented a challenge to the prerogatives of both mothers and fathers. The resulting anti-Shaker narratives were presented as a defense of normative marriage. Both Eunice and Mary insisted repeatedly that their husbands were not really to blame; it was Shakerism that corrupted them. They portrayed themselves as devoted wives and mothers, women who found themselves in situations that prevented them from fulfilling society's expectations of them. Their narratives were constructed to show that even in their misery and their abandonment, these women were unwilling to criticize their husbands. This was, I suggest, a calculated move, one that was intended to win them public support because they had not strayed too far from ideals of womanhood – to show that their campaign was not an effort to circumvent male authority, but was instead an effort to fulfill their roles as mothers. The mob that Eunice and Mary rallied in 1818 pitted mainstream Americans against the Shakers, but it also pitted women's changing approach to motherhood and marriage against patriarchal prerogative. Eunice and Mary achieved different outcomes in their cases: Eunice obtained a divorce by 1818, and received custody of her children a year later, while Mary was not granted a divorce until 1830, and never regained custody of her children. These different outcomes, I believe, reflect a nascent ambivalence toward both patriarchy and women's roles within the family.

By the 1830s anti-Shakerism had abated, and anti-Catholicism took its place. The stories of Rebecca Theresa Reed and Maria Monk were swept up in the aftermath of the mob's destruction of the Mount Benedict convent, and their narratives came to symbolize the danger inherent in women's communities. Though the mob's actions were widely condemned in the popular press, the convent's Mother Superior was nevertheless vilified. Rebecca's narrative, published just after the attack, helped demonize Mother Superior St. George, and Maria's narrative elaborated on the depravity that the convent could foster. The outcome of the mob's trial, in which none of the men arrested for the attack was convicted, may be interpreted as a victory over the convent, and over women as authority figures more generally. Yet women's activities outside the domestic realm – as charity leaders and organizers – were more acceptable than ever before. Again, the outcome showed ambivalence toward gender roles and the family.

The anti-Mormonism that flourished in the 1850s, in the wake of Joseph Smith's death, betrayed Americans' worry over marriage. In establishing polygamy as a danger to women's moral and spiritual wellbeing, anti-Mormon narratives made its alternative – monogamous patriarchal marriage – into a definite good for women. The narratives of Maria Ward and Mary Ettie V. Smith demonstrated an extreme form of patriarchy, one in which men cast aside individual women's wellbeing in favor of plural marriage and absolute authority over a host of wives. By the 1850s, an ideal was emerging in which women could exercise a public role in addition to a private one, and in which marriage was built upon some form of respect, if not equality. In vilifying polygamy Maria and Mary Ettie were clearly stating that extreme patriarchy would not do, that women could not be expected to agree to such inequality. But they were also deflecting criticism from

mainstream Protestant marriage. This form of marriage was the preferable alternative to the version of patriarchy presented in the apostate narratives. The anti-Mormon narratives allowed for some discussion of alternatives to patriarchal Protestant marriage, but they stopped short of interrogating the dominant family structure. In this way the narratives did reaffirm normative, monogamous marriage. At the same time, however, they also demonstrated that the extreme subjugation of women within marriage could only end in disaster. Again, these narratives conveyed ambivalence toward the family, though this ambivalence may not have been apparent on the surface of the texts.

What, in the end, do these apostate narratives teach us? As I have argued, these narratives were not primarily about religion. They were about family and gender, change and continuity. They described a way for Americans to question patriarchy, just as they provided a means of affirming it. The anti-Shaker, anti-convent, and anti-Mormon apostate narratives show us that women's roles within the family and outside of it were changing, and that women's writings provided a way for the public to express their anxieties and articulate their ambivalence. These apostate narratives demonstrate that for antebellum Americans, the primacy of the patriarchal Protestant family was far from secure.

Appendix

MYSTERIES OF SHAKERISM
DEVELOPED.--Will be published, by
WILLIAM S. SPEAR, and ready for delive-
ry, at the Gazette Counting Room, this day
at 10 o'clock, A. M.—A Brief Statement of
the Sufferings of **MARY DYER**, occasioned
by the Shakers. Written by herself. To
which is added Affidavits and Certificates ;—
Also a Declaration from their own publica-
tion. Price 25 cents single—\$2 per dozen.
July 20 eoptf

Figure 1: Advertisement for Mary Dyer's *A Brief Statement of the Sufferings of Mary Dyer*. From the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, October 13, 1818.

The editor of the N. H. Observer has volunteered a highly wrought eulogism upon Maria Monk and her "Awful Disclosures." He deems the truth of her stories incontrovertible, and thinks that if, by any possibility, her character is bad, she is not the less worthy of credit, because she owes her infamy to the licentiousness of Catholic priests. Wonder if the worthy gentleman believes the moon is made of green cheese?

Figure 2: Statement from the editor of the *New Hampshire Observer* regarding Maria Monk's *The Awful Disclosures*. May 30, 1836.

Nods and becks, and wreathed smiles
FEMALE LIFE AMONG THE MORMONS: J. C.
Derby & Co., New York, 1855.
We have here what purports to be an account of the life of a Mormon's wife, in the original settlement at Nauvoo; the journey to the Salt Lake; the habits, belief, and character of the Mormons, and of their leaders. The narrative bears internal evidence of being genuine, and is quite interesting, from the nature of its subject. The history of the rise and progress of Mormonism, though little known, is as wild and romantic as any novel, and this book contains the best account of it we have ever seen. It can be found at the bookstore of Mr. B. W. Sanborn.

Figure 3: Advertisement for Maria Ward's *Female Life Among the Mormons*. From the *New Hampshire Patriot*, July 25, 1855.

Benjamin Brown
AN

ACCOUNT OF THE CONDUCT OF THE

SHAKERS,

In the case of

EUNICE CHAPMAN & HER CHILDREN

~~~~~  
WRITTEN BY HERSELF.  
~~~~~

ALSO,

**A REFUTATION OF THE SHAKERS' RE-
MONSTRANCE TO THE PROCEED-
INGS OF THE LEGISLATURE
OF NEW-YORK, IN
1817,
BY THOMAS BROWN.**

TO WHICH ARE ADDED,

**THE DEPOSITION OF MARY DYER,
Who petitioned the Legislature of the state of
New-Hampshire, for relief in a similar case.**

ALSO,

**DEPOSITIONS OF OTHERS WHO HAVE BEEN
MEMBERS OF THE SHAKER SOCIETY.**

ALSO;

***The proceedings of the Legislature of the State of
New-York, in the case of Eunice Chapman.***

~~~~~  
**PRINTED BY VAN VLEET & CAMRON,  
LEBANON, OHIO.  
1818.**

Figure 4: An edition of Eunice Chapman's *narrative*, published along with several other anti-Shaker texts, including a version of Mary Dyer's narrative (1818).

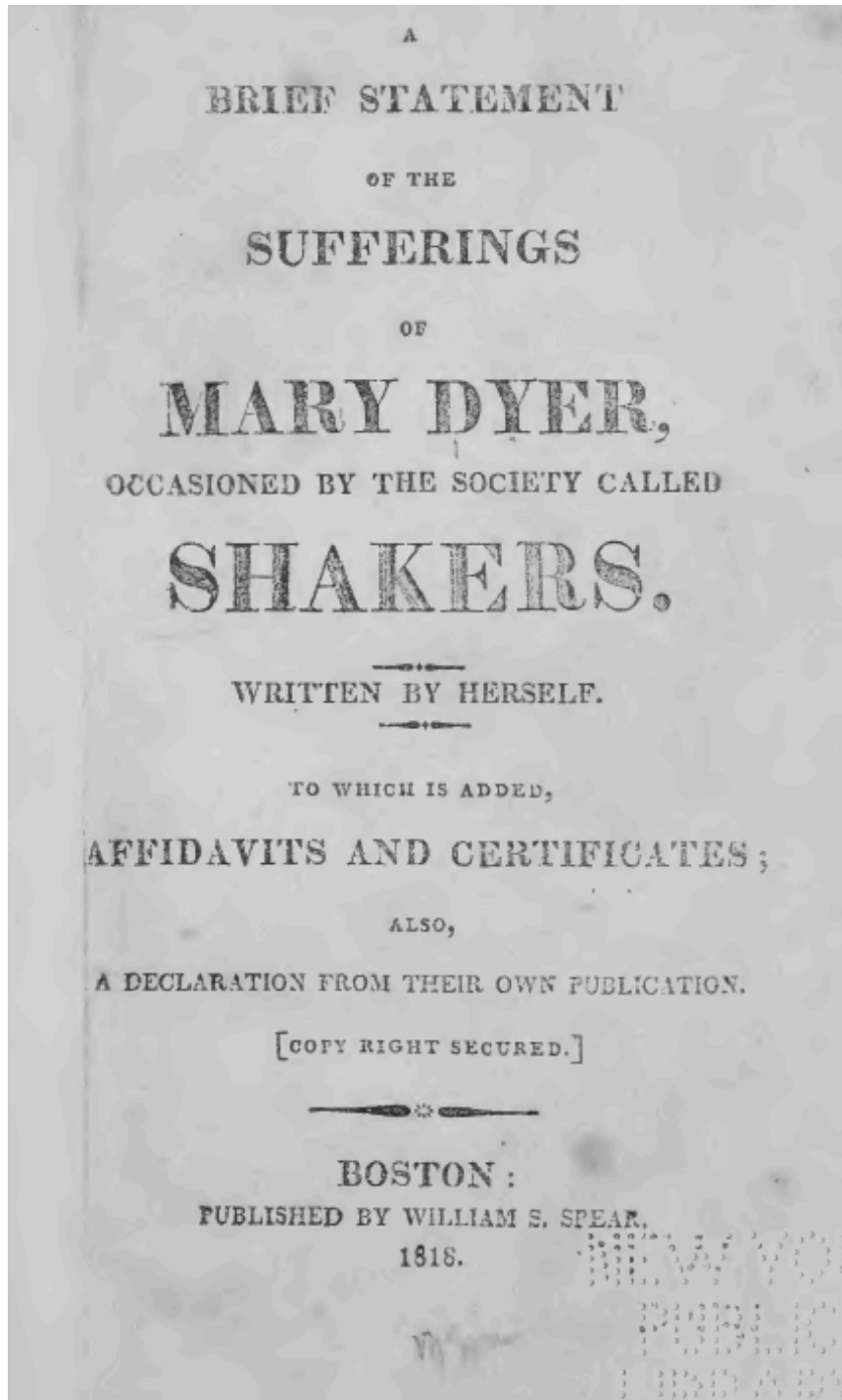


Figure 5: Title page of Mary Dyer's *A Brief Statement of the Sufferings of Mary Dyer* (1818).

SIX MONTHS IN A CONVENT,

OR, THE NARRATIVE OF

REBECCA THERESA REED,

WHO WAS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLICS ABOUT TWO YEARS, AND AN INMATE OF THE URSULINE CONVENT

ON

Mount Benedict, Charlestown, Mass.,

NEARLY SIX MONTHS, IN THE YEARS 1831-2.

---

WITH SOME PRELIMINARY SUGGESTIONS BY  
THE COMMITTEE OF PUBLICATION.

---

BOSTON :

RUSSELL, ODIORNE & METCALF;

NEW-YORK, LEAVITT, LORD AND CO. ; PHILADELPHIA, WILLIAM  
MARSHALL AND CO. ; CINCINNATI, C. P. BARNES; AND ALL  
THE PRINCIPAL BOOKSELLERS IN THE U. STATES.

1835.

MN

Figure 6: Title page of Rebecca Theresa Reed's *Six Months in a Convent* (1835).

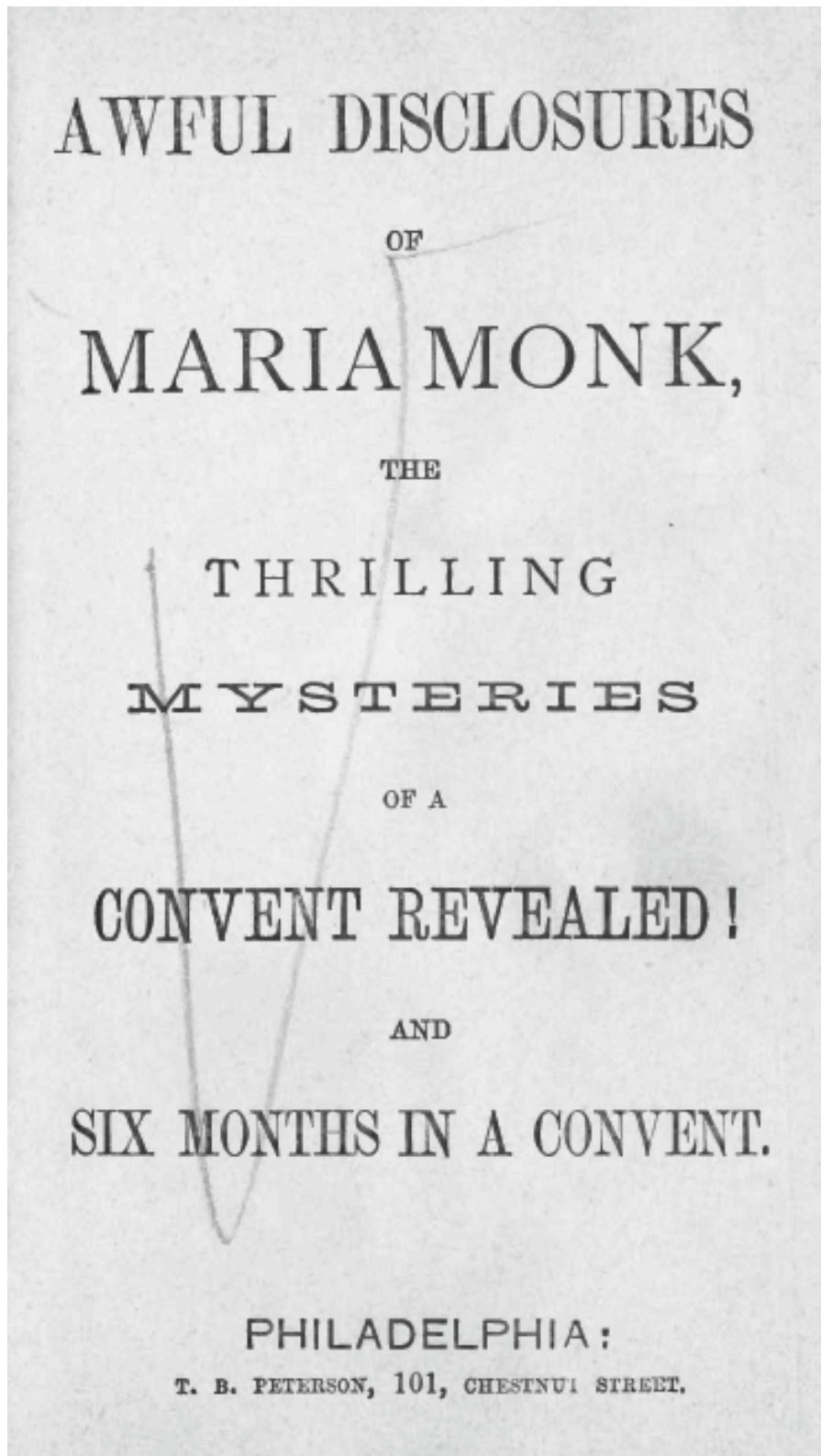


Figure 7: Title page of one version of Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures* (1836).

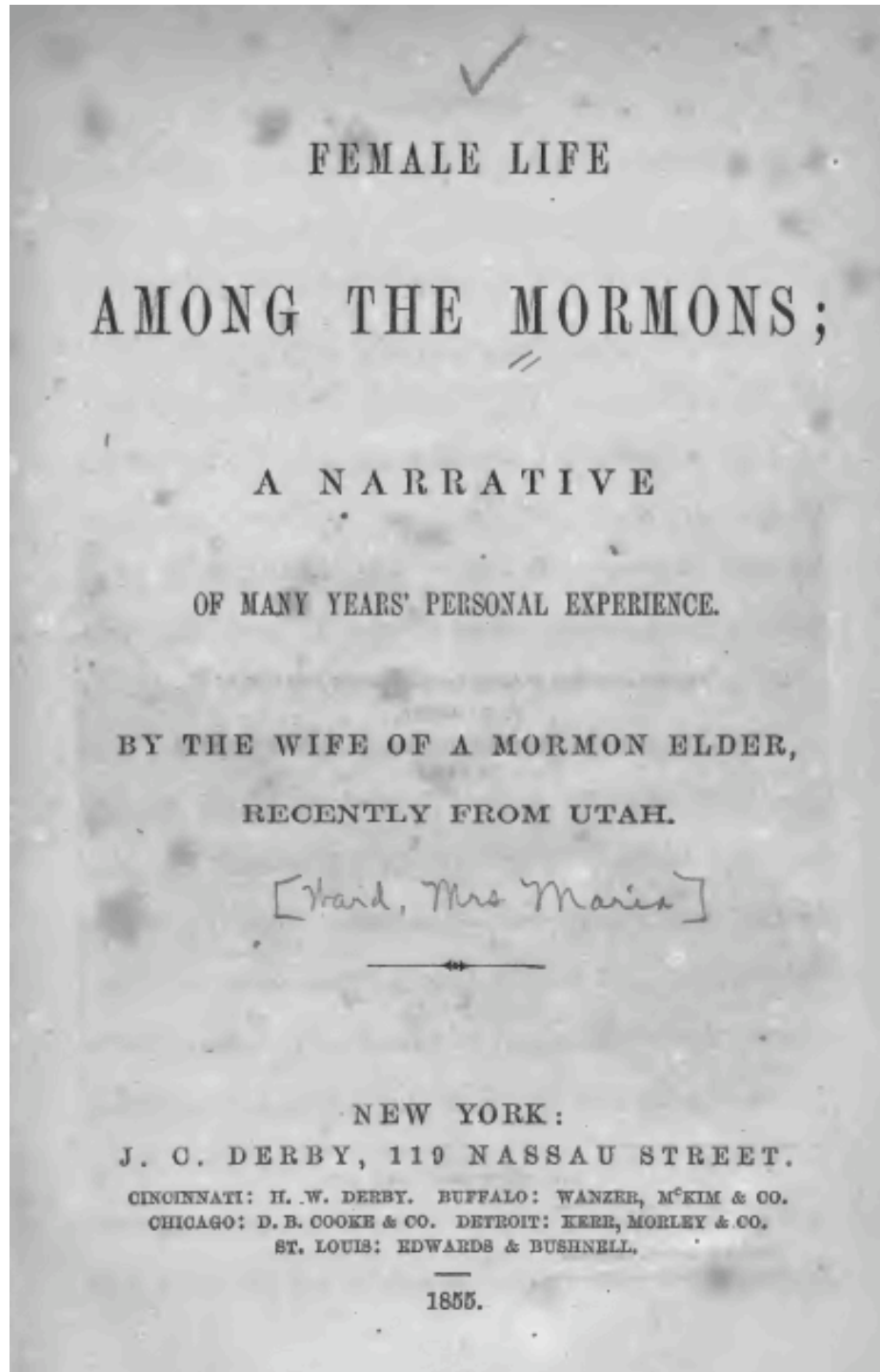


Figure 8: Title page to *Female Life Among the Mormons*. Notice the written-in attribution to “Mrs. Maria Ward.”

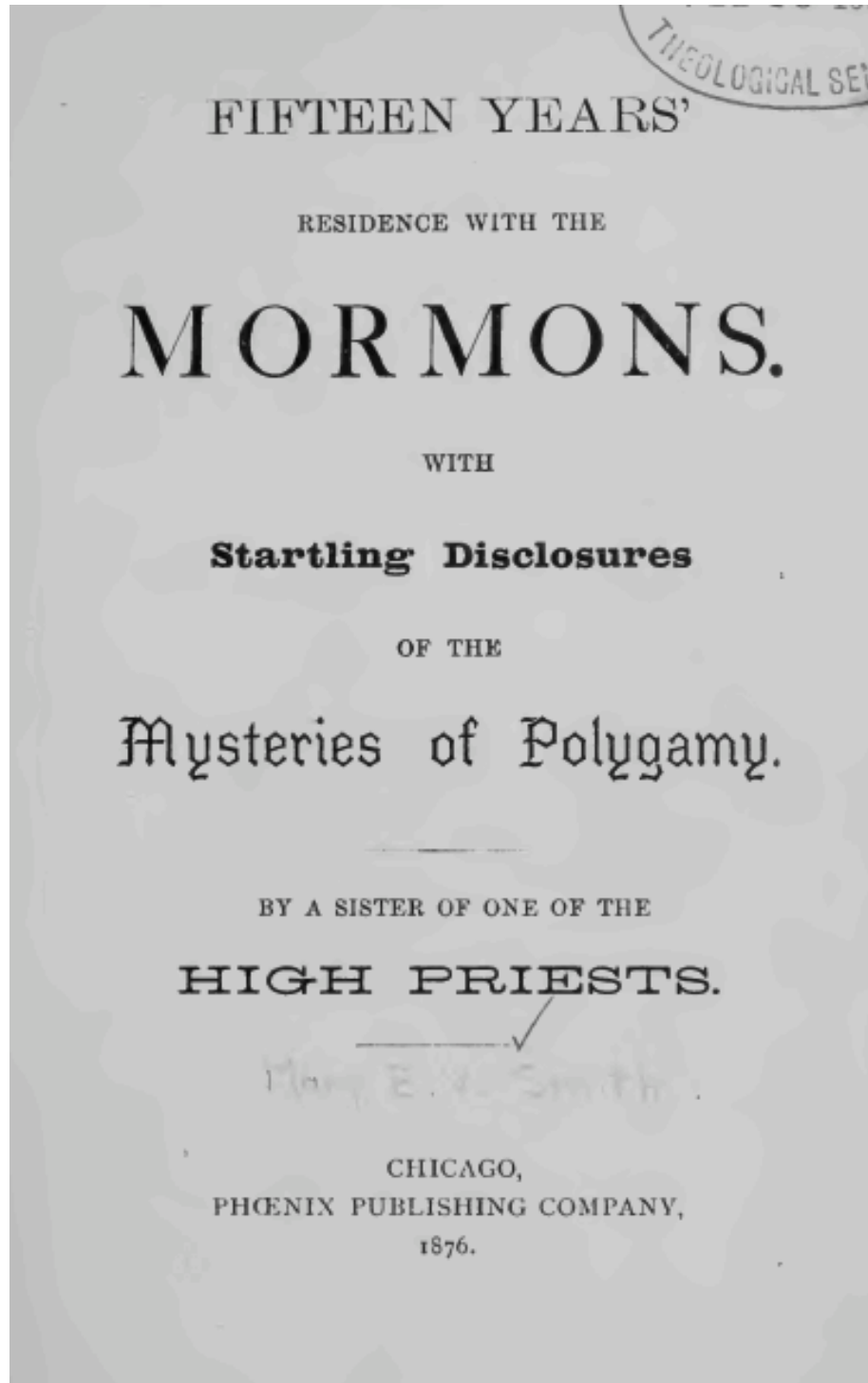


Figure 9: Title page of an 1876 republishing of *Fifteen Years' Residence with the Mormons*. "Mary E.V. Smith" is written in as the author.



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