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Daniel Pierce Thompson and “The Shaker Lovers”: Portraying the Shakers in Fiction and on the Stage

By Brian L. Bixby and Jill Mudgett

When Vermont author D. P. Thompson’s short story “The Shaker Lovers” was first published in the periodical *The New World* in 1841, it joined a growing body of literature on American Shaker communities. However, Thompson’s story was unusual in three ways. First, it was the product of a man whose upbringing and opinions gave him a unique perspective on the Shakers. Second, it was a fictional literary treatment of the Shakers, of which there had been very few up to that date. And last, Thompson’s story was destined to be turned into a stage play, albeit one with a somewhat different set of messages than in the original story.

Daniel Pierce Thompson

Thompson (1795–1868) was a lawyer, author, historian, and collector of tales. Born in Massachusetts, he moved to Vermont as a child. After struggling for an education, Thompson trained to be a lawyer. As with many lawyers before and since, Thompson became involved with politics. While he began in the Democratic Party, his abolitionist views led him into the Liberty Party, and then into the Republican Party. He rose to be registrar of probate at the Washington County court in Montpelier, and later became secretary of the senate and eventually Vermont’s secretary of state.

Despite his law career and employment in state government, Thompson’s first love was literature. He closely followed trends in the emerging field of American literature and was keenly interested in making a place for himself within that field. Like many antebellum Americans with literary ambitions, Thompson hoped to contribute to a genre that the nation could proudly embrace for its uniquely American style. Thompson’s models included the regional writings of John Neal, the popular regional periodical *Yankee*, and such well-known writers as



Portrait of D. P. Thompson by T. W. Wood, c. 1855.
(Courtesy of Vermont Historical Society)

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. What Thompson liked best about Neal's New England literature was its "truly American" quality: not content simply to copy the style and subject matter of European literature, Neal had attempted something fresh, a literary style that, in its regional focus, seemed to Thompson to be authentically American. Like so many other

Americans concerned over the literary and broader cultural reputation of America, Thompson longed to see the United States achieve the "literary independence which has lingered quite too long behind our political independence." And like many of his contemporaries, Thompson hoped that the originality and importance of American literature would garner the respect of the European literati.¹

Thompson was particularly fond of James Fenimore Cooper and modeled most of his historical fiction on both Cooper and Walter Scott. As a genuine fan of historical fiction and an aspiring author who could only dream of achieving the level of success that Cooper enjoyed, Thompson defended the genre of fiction in general, writing to his less enthusiastic cousin that should he ever attain fame to equal that of Cooper he supposed his cousin "will not consider I shall gain any of the right character ... since I believe you do not approve of either the writing or reading of this kind of composition."²

Although Thompson never earned a living from his fiction and considered writing to be an avocation, by the 1841 publication of "The Shaker Lovers," his work had found a national as well as regional audience, and many readers of *The New World* likely recognized the D. P. Thompson byline of the story. Thompson's first taste of literary success had come in 1835 when the short story "May Martin; or, the Money Diggers" won the literary prize from the Boston periodical *New England Galaxy*. Four years later, Thompson published what remains his best-known work: the historical fiction *The Green Mountain Boys* (1839).

Writing about the Shakers, 1780–1841

Thanks to their early leaders, unique theology, and development of a communal lifestyle, the Shakers generated a great deal of literature from the beginning of their American expansion in 1780. Most of the early literature fell into three categories: polemical literature, newspaper accounts, and accounts in travelogue books.³

The polemical literature offered the first extensive depictions of the Shakers and their beliefs. The Shakers tended to gain believers in regions of significant religious revivalism. In such areas, the older established faiths and upstart sects energetically contended with each other, each viewing their competitors as leading people to false beliefs and, likely, damnation. Religious groups published cheap pamphlets and books to spread the word as they saw it, and to denounce the misguided faith of other denominations.⁴

The earliest polemical work on the Shakers was Valentine Rathbun's *An Account of the Matter, Form, and Manners of a New and Strange Religion*, published in 1781. Rathbun was a Shaker apostate; that is, he had joined the Shakers and then rejected them. His pamphlet was an attack on Shaker theology and practices. While Rathbun had many criticisms of the Shakers, three in particular were to be repeated by later writers. First, Rathbun criticized Shaker celibacy as unnatural and unbiblical. Second, he criticized the Shakers for revealing their religious beliefs only gradually, indeed of hiding some beliefs until people had been drawn into their communities. Third, he asserted that in demanding confession and complete obedience to the elders, Shakerism showed a despotism akin to Catholicism.⁵

The Shakers initially had been reluctant to set their beliefs down in writing, so it was not until 1790, after several more attacks had been published, that they responded with a statement of their own faith. Thereafter, the polemical literature follows a set pattern. A Shaker critic, often another apostate, would publish an attack. The Shakers would belatedly respond, months or years later.⁶

It is difficult to judge who won most of these exchanges. They certainly heightened interest in the Shakers. The Shaker-published *Testimony*, the theological work often called the "Shaker Bible," and the *Testimonies*, assembling various accounts of the historical founding of the Shaker faith, eventually became the works most commonly used by the Shakers to spread their faith. On the other side, Rathbun's pamphlet continued to serve as a source for most subsequent attacks on the Shakers. Thomas Brown's *Account*, a detailed narrative of his spiritual journey into and out of the Shakers, was often cited as the most objective apostate account prior to the 1840s.⁷

Not to be ignored were the works of two women, Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer. Both women had husbands who joined the Shakers and took their children with them, away from their mothers. In their efforts to retrieve their children from the Shakers, both women published extensive attacks on the Shakers, engaged in legislative lobbying against them, and even raised a mob to invade the Shaker village in Enfield, New Hampshire. Chapman, who succeeded in retrieving her children, was in the limelight for only a few years, while Mary Dyer, who was not successful, kept publishing anti-Shaker tracts for over three decades. Thanks to their activities, and to others, the Shakers acquired, among their enemies, a reputation for taking and keeping children in servitude.⁸

Newspaper and travelogue accounts tended to be more descriptive of Shaker practices than Shaker theology. In particular, accounts concentrated on the Sunday public worship open to visitors, particularly Shaker dancing. Most accounts, when they offered an opinion about Shaker theology and practices, were generally hostile to the Shakers, with the unnatural requirement of celibacy being the most common criticism. However, over time, as the Shakers became better established, visitors began noticing the careful order, the clean and sound buildings, and the Shakers' success at agriculture and manufacturing within their villages. Accounts began to grudgingly acknowledge that the Shakers had some redeeming traits, even while still condemning them generally.⁹

Among the travelers who described their visits to the Shakers was Thompson's model author, James Fenimore Cooper. Cooper was already famous for the Leatherstocking series of novels when he published his travelogue of the United States, *Notions of the Americans*, in 1828. This wide-ranging description of American life and customs included an account of Cooper's visits to the Shaker communities of Hancock, Massachusetts, and New Lebanon and Watervliet in New York. Cooper acknowledged the neatness and order of the Shaker villages, but could not justify what he viewed as the fanaticism of Shaker religious faith. To Cooper, whose Episcopalianism was part of his character as a gentleman, Shakerism was one of the "fanatical sects" transplanted to America by latter-day emigrants from Europe. Cooper was relieved to think that Shakerism had nothing to do with authentic American culture and was further comforted by his belief that Shaker communities were sparsely populated and destined to die out. Still, Shakerism had flourished in America; American Shaker villages were populated by native-born converts to the faith, and the disapproving Cooper was left to draw conclusions about the low intelligence of those fellow Americans, reasoning that "none but the most ignorant, and, perhaps, the weakest-minded men, can join such a sect from motives of conscience." Cooper noted seeing several black Shakers during his visit, and interpreted their participation in the faith as clear, visual evidence of the intellectual inferiority of sect members.¹⁰

Cooper's notions about the Shakers were fairly typical of newspaper and travelogue accounts. His literary prominence meant his ideas had wide circulation. Writers famous in other fields, such as Timothy Bigelow (politics) or Horace Greeley (journalism), also helped propagate such views even more widely.¹¹

While there was a considerable body of travel accounts about the Shakers, including Cooper's, few American writers had tried to portray them in fiction before Thompson's "The Shaker Lovers" in 1841. Cooper himself was never to do so. But all three authors who did shared a Massachusetts birth with Thompson, and made their names writing about the American scene.

Catharine Maria Sedgwick (1789–1867) had just begun a successful career as a writer when she published *Redwood* in 1824; her most famous novel, *Hope Leslie*, was still three years in the future. *Redwood* has a strong didactic purpose: to demonstrate that true religion, morality, and happiness go hand-in-hand, while unbelief leads to immorality and sadness. Much of the novel turns on how a shallow woman, whose education in religion and morality has been faulty, obtains and tries to use secret information about her half-sister for her own purposes, only to be frustrated at the end.¹²

The Shakers are part of a secondary plot in the story, designed to demonstrate that unnatural and fanatical faith is almost as bad as unbelief. Sedgwick echoes the travel accounts of the period in praising the cleanliness and agricultural fruitfulness of Shaker communities, while citing the pale complexions of the Shakers as one piece of evidence that they have cut themselves off from natural feelings. Shaker fanaticism allows Elder Reuben Harrington to use his position and his tongue to chastise the failings of others while hiding greed and lust in his own heart. Harrington tries to secretly abduct a young Shaker girl as his bride and abscond with money not his own, but as with every other guilty secret in this novel, he is ultimately exposed and frustrated in his designs. Harrington is the first wicked elder in Shaker fiction, while his prey, Emily, is the first young, innocent, would-be female victim. They would not be the last.¹³

Like Sedgwick, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) was in the early part of his career when he wrote about the Shakers. Also like her, Hawthorne visited the Shakers several times. Indeed, during one of his earliest visits, he apparently considered joining them.¹⁴ Later, however, his opinion of the Shakers soured, and it is that later attitude that pervades his two short stories in which Shakers figure. In "The Canterbury Pilgrims" (1833), Hawthorne depicts people seeking to enter a Shaker village as bereft of hope due to disappointments in life. The ironically titled "The Shaker Bridal" (1837) centers on a woman who gave up the chance for earthly happiness to join her would-be lover in the Shakers, and who dies when she sees that her loss will be permanent. (Hawthorne, incidentally, echoed Cooper in "The Shaker Bridal," declaring that "members are generally

below the ordinary standard of intelligence.")¹⁵

The only other writer to treat the Shakers before Thompson was Caroline Lee Hentz (1800–1856). While her novel *The Planter's Northern Bride*, published in 1854 as a pro-slavery response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, would thereafter link her name with the South, she had been born in Massachusetts, and had been friends with Stowe in Cincinnati in the 1830s. She may have encountered the Shakers while living in either of the latter two places. Her 1839 story, "The Shaker Girl," echoes a few plot elements and characters in *Redwood*. The titular heroine is another young innocent would-be victim. She falls victim to the machinations of another woman, ultimately her sister-in-law, only to triumph in the end. And the secret of her identity serves as a minor plot twist, but it is so obvious that it provides little suspense. Hentz, like the previous authors, characterizes the Shakers as so bloodless as to appear to be "resuscitated bodies, with the motions of life, but without the living soul."¹⁶

All three of these authors used the idea of a romance involving one or more Shakers as a central plot element in their stories, ironically in "The Shaker Bridal." The Shaker doctrine and practice of celibacy gave them the opportunity to explore the matrimonial conventions of their time. Notably, these stories are as much against "arranged" marriages as they are against celibacy; only romantic love is seen as the proper basis for marriage. Hawthorne, perhaps the most realistic of these writers, recognized in "The Canterbury Pilgrims" that even romantic love could fail to secure happiness, but that observation was exceptional. Hence it is no surprise that, for all they may praise the Shakers as good farmers, the authors ultimately offer a negative view of the Shakers.¹⁷

Thompson and the story "The Shaker Lovers"

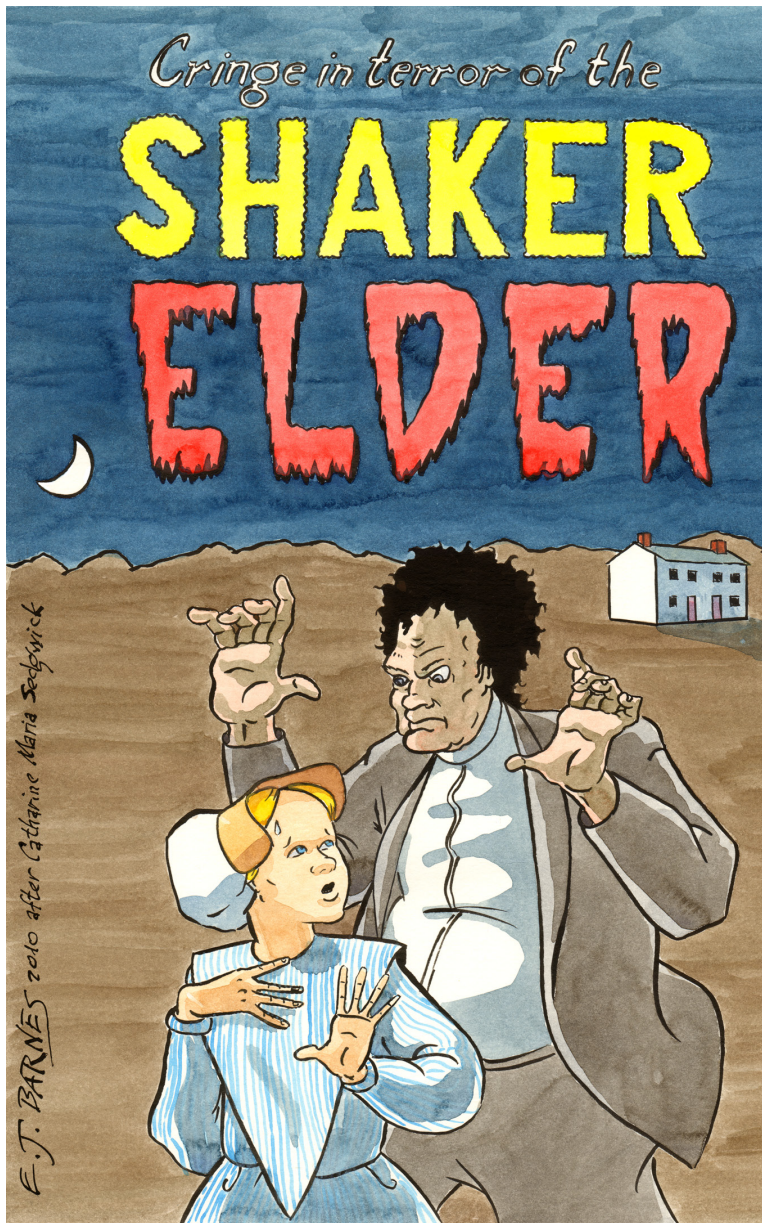
"The Shaker Lovers" tells the story of the young lovers Seth and Martha and the setbacks they faced in their effort to leave—or more specifically, to escape—the fictionalized Shaker community of Canterbury, New Hampshire. They are beset by the evil Elder Higgins, who harbors designs on Martha, conceals Seth's inheritance, and apparently kills him. But Seth proves to be a resourceful fellow, escaping Elder Higgins, reclaiming his inheritance, and rescuing Martha with the help of a friend. The story concludes with Seth and Martha a happy and prosperous couple of many years' standing.

Thompson's debts to the existing Shaker literature are obvious. At the simplest level, his choice of Canterbury for his setting and Martha for his female protagonist's name is a direct borrowing from Hawthorne's "The Canterbury Pilgrims."¹⁸ The evil Elder Higgins is as much motivated by greed and lust as Sedgwick's Elder Reuben Harrington. And the innocent Martha is a bit more spirited than Sedgwick's Emily and Hentz's "Shaker Girl," but not by much. Like all of the authors mentioned, Thompson acknowledged Shaker cleanliness and productivity, while condemning Shaker theology, celibacy in particular.

Again, like the other authors mentioned, Thompson's dislike of Shaker religion and culture likely reflected his own background and religious bias. Thompson had been on the "cheerless path of celibacy" until 1831, when, at the then-advanced age of thirty-five, he married. Subsequently, Thompson was among the converts to Congregationalism when the revivalist Jedediah Burchard preached in Montpelier in 1835. Congregationalists had opposed the theology of the Shakers and other "New Light" sects such as the Free-Will Baptists and the Universalists for their antinomianism and rejection of Calvinism. Thompson's own rejection of his previous celibacy and his faith both put him at odds with the Shakers.¹⁹

There's no evidence of whether Thompson actually visited the Shakers. Those who thought he did not visit them, point out that Thompson erred in thinking that a Shaker elder would have authority over a female member; female members were accountable to eldresses. But that error had been made before by Sedgwick in *Redwood*, and Sedgwick definitely visited the Shakers. And it is a plausible error for someone in a male-dominated society to make. But Thompson, unlike previous authors, demonstrated some acquaintance with the literature written by Shaker apostates. Thompson depicts the Shaker elders as indulging in luxuries not permitted the regular members, an accusation common to apostate literature.²⁰

Thompson, however, did not simply copy from the Shaker fiction, travelogues, and apostate writings of his contemporaries; he took issue with aspects of Shakerism not stressed by other writers. Thompson criticized the Shakers for the restrictions their faith and practice put on the minds and bodies of their members. In particular, Thompson criticized the Shakers for their stifling of intellectual inquiry, through poor education, restricted reading, limited access to the world outside Shaker settlements, and a



Sedgwick's Elder Reuben Harrington in *Redwood* resembles Elder Higgins in Thompson's "The Shaker Lovers."

(Picture © 2010 E. J. Barnes; used with permission)

demand of blind obedience on the judgment of the elders. This set him even apart from such noted writers as Cooper and Hawthorne, who had condemned the Shakers for low intelligence. Intelligence, Thompson implies, is not the issue; education and free thought are!²¹

This was not the first time that Thompson had taken issue with unthinking allegiance to authority, particularly when that authority rested with groups that he deemed secretive, exclusive, or intellectually inferior. Not long before the publication of "The Shaker Lovers," Thompson had been at the forefront of Vermont's strong opposition to the Masonic order. His 1835 satire, *The Adventures of Timothy Peacock, Esquire; or, Freemasonry Practically Illustrated*, critiqued the Masons on grounds common to the anti-Masonic literature of the era, including the group's secrecy, its negative effect on the family, and its demand for complete allegiance among the ranks. The Masons in Thompson's satire are guilty of all of that and something more: they are dim-witted. Thompson's Masons are naïve young men from the country who bumble their way through a series of misadventures, all the while remaining proud of their insider knowledge and looking down on anyone who is not a Mason. Thompson saves his strongest critique for the unthinking quality of young Masons eager to make it in society yet unable to see their own grave intellectual shortcomings or the faulty logic and reasoning offered by their Masonic elders. Although he later expressed regret for the harsh tone of that satire, he retained a lifelong disdain for people unwilling to actively think about and ask questions of their world.²²

Thompson's personal reservations about the lack of intellectual inquiry within Shakerism left him unwilling to believe that people would freely choose to join the sect. The hero Seth doesn't freely join: an uncaring uncle sent him there. His love Martha didn't freely join: her parents joined, and unnaturally abandoned her to the Shaker community. Thompson describes Shaker women, especially, as people defeated by Shaker communal living, both their personal appearance and internal character suggesting nothing of the free will associated with choice. Aside from the heroine, Martha, Shaker women wore plain clothing that matched their "drooping forms, plain features, and passive, unmeaning looks."²³ Thompson does show one person interested in joining the Shakers. But that person is a (pretended) half-wit, whom the Shakers believe they can manipulate. Apparently only half-wits would want to be Shakers.

Notably, Thompson's character Seth is the first positively portrayed protagonist in Shaker fiction who seeks intellectual growth.²⁴ Unlike *any*

previous character, his quarrel with the Shakers is as much intellectual as it is sexual. And unlike any other character, Seth solves his problems by using his brains. He plans his departure from the Shakers. He escapes from Elder Higgins by intelligently using the resources at hand. And he devises a plan to remove Martha from the Shaker village without fear of pursuit.

Books figure prominently in Seth's intellectual growth. Seth is already a young adult by the time he is sent to the Shakers, and it is not long before he rejects the "dull monotony" of life there. In time, Seth "began to think for himself, and became desirous of acquiring information." Seth befriends young men like himself who come to the Shaker community on business, and it is from the books those non-Shakers loan him that he comes to be a "confirmed disbeliever in the creed." Significantly, Seth then loans Martha a book (we later learn that it was a Bible), and the need to return it provides the young lovers another excuse to interact and further their relationship. Given Thompson's own thoughts about both the anti-intellectualism and false religiosity of the Shakers, the role of the Bible in aiding Seth and Martha's eventual escape can be read as more than a minor plot element.²⁵

Thompson found the Shakers guilty of controlling their believers both intellectually and physically, and he continued his fictional story of Seth and Martha by highlighting the ways in which Shakers were known to have physically restrained attempted runaways. To Thompson, such restraint was akin to enslavement and he chose the loaded language of slavery to underscore this point. As Seth and Martha meet clandestinely under the trystic tree, where they mutually profess their love and begin to plot their escape, Seth confides, "I can no longer endure to be a slave—a slave to those who would fetter and degrade both the body and the mind."²⁶ By the time he wrote "The Shaker Lovers," Thompson was actively involved in Vermont anti-slavery efforts; however questionable the comparison between Shakerism and American slavery, Thompson found Shaker culture distasteful enough to justify the use of the powerful contemporary rhetoric of enslavement. It was a critique of Shakerism that he would revisit later in his career.

Johnson and the play *The Shaker Lovers*

Samuel D. Johnson (1813–1863) is an obscure figure—ironic since his reputation was made on the stage. He was a supporting actor in comedies, with a particular turn for comic eccentrics, such as the clown-mechanic Snug in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*.²⁷

He turned to writing in the late 1840s. At the time, popular melodramas dominated the American stage. The most common sources for their plots were adaptations of the works of British and American story writers. As yet, no major American playwright had emerged, so “American plays, such as they were, came largely from hack journalists, actors, and theatrical handymen—and amateurs.”²⁸ Johnson might fit under several of those categories. His plays are sentimental comedies, in which virtue triumphs over vice, which usually means true love overcomes all obstacles and is rewarded in the end. The plays inevitably turn on some missing piece of information that is revealed in the last scene and brings the play to a happy conclusion. There is usually a prominently featured secondary character, eccentric but helpful, who assists the hero to his goal and who is inevitably played by Samuel D. Johnson himself. One assumes he wrote to his strengths, such as they were. His plays were frequently on the New York stage in the 1850s, and toured as far as Boston and Charleston.²⁹

The Shaker Lovers may have been the first play he ever wrote that was performed on stage. Thompson’s original story must have looked like a gift horse to Johnson when it was republished in 1848. Young lovers triumph over an evil man: Johnson’s favorite plot, almost his only plot.³⁰ There was only one problem: no helpful eccentric secondary character. But that was not a problem for Johnson, who merely wrote one in. In actuality he wrote *two* such characters in.

The revamped plot of the 1849 play *The Shaker Lovers* is almost the same as Thompson’s original story, to the point that Johnson lifted some of the dialogue directly. Yet Johnson glories in sharp contrasts, and makes Elder Higgins even more evil than he is in the original story. *This* Elder Higgins is stealing from the Shakers, and claims that it was Martha herself who murdered her lover. And Martha’s lover, who is called William in the play, is a more spirited lad than Thompson’s Seth, and thus presumably worthier. Seth is willing to defend himself against Elder Higgins’s attack. William is more than willing—he threatens to strike first!³¹

Johnson made two major changes to the play. First, he introduces two middle-aged Shaker lovers, Tabitha Bruce and Adoram Snubb, the latter played by the talented Samuel D. Johnson. They are the comic relief *and* the social commentary. The young lovers express their feelings, but it is Snubb who explains that people are meant to love and marry. It is also Snubb who gets all the verbal digs at Elder Higgins, noting that when Higgins is supposed to “speak all he knoweth” that “that will not take him

long."³²

Second, in the process of stripping Thompson's tale down to a one-act play and adding his middle-aged lovers, Johnson radically alters the meaning of the story. While the Shakers are depicted unfavorably in both cases, Thompson emphasizes the "slavery" of their members, while Johnson emphasizes the unnaturalness of celibacy. He may have done that because he thought the criticism of celibacy would be more popular. Or it may have been a consequence of his formulaic plotting.

Actually, in condensing the story, Johnson also mishandled the plot element of Seth's inheritance. It looks like he meant Snubb to reveal a lost letter in the final act, but substituted William's accusation of embezzlement instead.³³

No matter which way it was written, "The Shaker Lovers" was never a major work for either of its authors. The short story was reprinted repeatedly in collections of Thompson's short stories, but it was never the lead story. *The Shaker Lovers* never had the success of some of Johnson's later plays. *Brian O'Linn*, *In and Out of Place*, *The Fireman*, and *Our Gal* all had between five and ten performances in New York alone. Only three performances are recorded for *The Shaker Lovers*, and none of those was in New York.

Whether due to Thompson's story or Johnson's adaptation, the idea of a romantic Shaker couple became a staple of subsequent literature. It even entered into the apostate literature, appearing in Hervey Elkins's *Fifteen Years in the Senior Order of Shakers*. While Elkins's account is closely based on his own experience, he may well have chosen to mention such an episode, which did not happen to him, in order to increase the appeal of his memoir.³⁴

Thompson's other Shaker story: *The Honest Lawyer*

Thompson was at work on a new novel at the time of his death in 1868. Titled *The Honest Lawyer*, or; *The Fair Castaway*, it told the story of a young New England lawyer. The incomplete manuscript, which was not published until 1929, includes twelve completed chapters and a summary for the entire novel as Thompson envisioned it.³⁵ Although the novel was really concerned with the character of the young lawyer, it included a crucial early scene set among New England Shakers.

As he had done in "The Shaker Lovers," Thompson set his fictional tale in the New Hampshire Shaker community at Canterbury. And as with

Thompson's earlier "Shaker Lovers," *The Honest Lawyer* depicted a Shaker culture in which the seemingly wholesome virtues of the sect constituted a superficial veneer that masked more sinister motives. But whereas the main characters in "The Shaker Lovers" had suffered from the lack of physical and intellectual freedom and the enforced celibacy of Shaker living, the heroine of the Shaker community in *The Honest Lawyer* was a little orphan girl who suffered from the absence of genuine familial affection within the Shaker "family." Instead of living with loving parents, Alice was held against her will in what Thompson described as the emotionally sterile and artificial environment of the Shaker community in a situation that rendered her not entirely unlike a child slave. Little Alice longed for a mother and father of her own and felt entitled to membership in a nuclear family. Because she was a spirited and outgoing child who had not become resigned to Shaker rules (she was silent only when the Shakers were within earshot), Alice struck up a conversation when farmer Wakeley stopped by the Shaker community on business. The good farmer was charmed by the young girl and surprised to see her alone on the road outside the Shaker community later that day. Although he did not approve of the Shakers, Wakeley disapproved of Alice's intention to run away and urged her to go back, to which she responded "I shan't go back, unless they tie and force me back, and then I shall run away again." Wakeley relented to the girl's plea to come home with him (she claimed to "have no father or mother in the world as I know of — nobody to love me or care for me"), and he and his wife quickly agreed to love her as their own child, not only because they had bonded with her, but because "so great [was] their repugnance at the thought of seeing one so beautiful and promising doomed to the strange, ungenial, half slave life."³⁶

Thompson, who had earlier put his own antislavery principles to use as editor of the abolitionist newspaper *Green Mountain Freeman*, was at work on *The Honest Lawyer* during the years immediately following the Civil War and, as with his earlier "The Shaker Lovers," he chose to describe Alice's confinement in the language of enslavement. Had the novel been completed and published prior to his death, his readers undoubtedly would have noticed the similarity between the popular trope of the runaway slave and Alice's escape from the Shaker community. When the Shaker elders stopped at the Wakeley farm the following day, the confrontation between Alice's new foster family and her Shaker family played out in the language of human trafficking and ownership, as the Shakers claimed their entitlement

to Alice's body, arguing that "the girl belongs to us and we must have her back" and later "she belongs to us. She was given to us." Wakeley won in the end (he was appointed Alice's legal guardian) and Alice was rewarded with the family she wanted. Membership in a family released Alice from bondage and represented for Thompson a clear victory of good over evil. Thompson's Shakers had willfully denied young Alice the experience of parental love in a way that made their informal guardianship of the girl a form of bondage, an especially egregious crime.³⁷

Farm families like the Wakeleys were central to Thompson's vision of an idyllic New England that was proudly rooted in its past and focused on a thriving and dynamic future. Thompson was cautiously optimistic that Vermonters of his lifetime would reject the opportunities offered by westward expansion as well as the values of rural refinement in favor of sensible lives rooted by the landscape, by education, and by what he viewed as the traditions of the region. The presence of several Shaker villages throughout the region, with their organization based on celibate communities instead of farm families, must have seemed an especially strong threat to Thompson's vision of New England as a model for others to follow. In offering the story of the fictional Shaker child Alice, Thompson was arguing that she was enslaved not only because she was physically held against her will, but because she was confined in a space void of familial warmth and affection.

Rural domesticity as an antidote to the dangers of Shakerism was a consistent theme throughout Thompson's Shaker-themed fiction. The narrator of "The Shaker Lovers" is revealed in the final scene of the story when the reader learns that Seth has been recounting his own life with the Shakers. The happiness and fruitfulness of Seth's post-Shaker life serves both as a counterpoint to his former Shaker existence and as a model of rural life that Thompson saw as both traditional and central to his vision for the future. Seth and Martha, contentedly settled on a prospering farm with their children, have chosen to remain in the neighborhood, living in close proximity to their old Shaker community but embracing family and community in decidedly non-Shaker ways. The farm couple is welcoming to visitors and remains close to the man who aided in their escape all those years ago, himself now a successful lawyer and model citizen of the neighborhood.³⁸ With their warm sociability, their intimate knowledge of the region's past history, and their investment in its future, the fictional Seth and Martha serve as the antithesis of the Shakers as Thompson saw them

and as models for the kind of New Englanders Thompson hoped would carry the region through the trials of the antebellum decades, beyond the Shakers, and safely into a happy and prosperous future.

Notes

1. Daniel Pierce Thompson to Josiah Pierce, Montpelier Letters, [MS 127], Vermont Historical Society, Barre, July 20, 1829. On Thompson's interest in American literature, see [D. P. Thompson], "Unpublished Lecture on American Romances, Abridged and Edited," in John E. Flitcroft, *The Novelist of Vermont: A Biographical and Critical Study of Daniel Pierce Thompson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), pp. 309-15. Thompson's first reference to Neal appeared in a letter dated September 4, 1828; references to Neal and *Yankee* appeared from that date through July 20, 1829.
2. Quoted in D.P.T. to J.P., Montpelier Letters, November 2, 1839.
3. For a broad overview, see Brian L. Bixby, "Seeking Shakers: Two Centuries of Visitors to Shaker Villages" (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 2010), chap. 3.
4. Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).
5. Valentine Rathbun, *An Account of the Matter, Form, and Manners of a New and Strange Religion: Taught and propagated by a Number of Europeans, living in a Place called Nisqueunia, in the State of New-York* (Providence: Bennett Wheeler, 1781).
6. Elizabeth A. De Wolfe describes the recurring sequence in *Shaking the Faith: Women, Family, and Mary Marshall Dyer's Anti-Shaker Campaign, 1815-1867* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
7. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 54-55, 68-85.
8. De Wolfe, *Shaking the Faith*; 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).
9. Accounts recognizing Shaker neatness and order appeared as early as 1794; see Bixby, "Seeking Shakers," pp. 74-80.
10. [James Fenimore Cooper], *Notions of the Americans: Picked up by a Travelling Bachelor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), letter 31. Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) discusses how Cooper created his identity as a gentleman.
11. Bixby, "Seeking Shakers," pp. 77-80, 90, 92-93.
12. [Catharine Maria Sedgwick], *Redwood; A Tale*; author's revised edition; complete in one volume (New York: George P. Putnam, 1850).
13. Ibid. Chapters 15 and 18 offer the most favorable images of a Shaker village and its fare. The abusive Shaker elder turned up in the apostate literature as well; see William J. Haskett, *Shakerism Unmasked* (Pittsfield, 1828), chap. 4 for an example.
14. Sedgwick, *Redwood*, pp. x, xiii-xv; Flo Morse documents Hawthorne's visits in *The*

- Shakers and the World's People* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1987), pp. 191-95.
15. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales*, 2 vols., New ed. (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865), vol. 2, pp. 81-88, 297-310. Sedgwick, *Redwood*, pp. 272-74, had earlier featured as a minor character an individual who had retired to a Shaker village as a refuge from earthy disappointments.
16. Mrs. Caroline Lee Hentz, *Love After Marriage; and Other Stories of the Heart* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson & Brothers, 1870), pp. 104-26; quotation on p. 106.
17. Sedgwick was stung by criticism from the Shakers about *Redwood*, so much that she wrote a new introduction defending the story's depiction of the Shakers. Sedgwick, *Redwood*, pp. xiii-xv.
18. It could be argued that, living in Vermont, Thompson's choice of nearby Canterbury, New Hampshire was natural. Still, the Shaker community at Enfield, New Hampshire was much closer to Vermont, and drew many of its members from that state.
19. Celibacy quotation from D.P.T. letter to J.P., Montpelier Letters, July 1, 1832. Thompson's description of the Burchard revival is in another letter to J.P., dated June 17, 1835. On Congregational opposition to the Shakers, see Bixby, "Seeking Shakers," chap. 3. Thompson had not been overly religious prior to his marriage, and the conversion, which he described in heartfelt terms, likely pleased his wife.
20. Chapter 3 of "The Shaker Lovers" opens with a description of the different fare provided Shaker leaders and regular members. On apostate literature in general, see De Wolfe, *Shaking the Faith*. Dyer, perhaps the most active apostate, lived near the Enfield, New Hampshire, Shaker community, only a few miles from Vermont.
21. Chapter 2 of "The Shaker Lovers" is a striking indictment of the Shakers on just these grounds. On Cooper, see above. Haskett's *Shakerism Unmasked* also criticizes the Shakers for keeping their followers ignorant, but in his work this is but one charge among many, and by no means the most important. For example, Haskett spends more pages using Shaker hymns as evidence that the Shakers worship Ann Lee as equivalent to Jesus.
22. On anti-Masonry generally, see Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), especially chap. 7 on Vermont. Daniel P. Thompson, *The Adventures of Timothy Peacock, Esquire; or, Freemasonry Practically Illustrated* (Middlebury: Knapp and Jewett, 1835). For other Thompson comments on the Masons, see D.P.T. to J. P., Montpelier Letters, September 27, 1823, and June 16, 1829. According to Flitcroft, Thompson later regretted his harsh depiction of the Masons, a sentiment at which he hinted in the preface to his novel.
23. [Daniel P. Thompson], *May Martin and Other Tales of the Green Mountains*, rev. ed. (Boston: Benjamin B. Mussey and Company, 1852), p. 261.
24. Sedgwick's Mr. Redwood is also intellectually active, but his activity is portrayed in a negative light, leading to unbelief.
25. Quotations from Thompson, *May Martin*, pp. 264, 265.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
27. Johnson does not appear in any of the standard biographical dictionaries. This biography is based on what has been ascertained about his career on the stage. For Johnson's portrayal of Snug in 1856, see Eugene Tompkins, *The History of the Boston Theater, 1854-1901* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1908), p. 44.

28. Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), pp. 227-28.
29. This assessment is based on reading Brian O'Linn, *In and Out of Place, The Fireman* (called *The New York Fireman* when performed in New York City), *Our Gal*, and *The Shaker Lovers*. Copies of *Blanche Marion*, *Kilt Carson*, or *Steps to Ruin*, three other plays Johnson is known to have written, were not available for review. That both Sedgwick's *Redwood* and Hentz's "The Shaker Girl" also turn on similar contrivances indicates how common they were in antebellum literature, or, for that matter, 1970s TV "movies of the week."
30. *In and Out of Place* is the notable exception; it was specifically written as a *tour de force* (or perhaps a *tour de farce*) for a character actress.
31. The text and performance history for *The Shaker Lovers* can be found in *The Minor Drama* (New York: Samuel French, 1857), vol. 32.
32. *Shaker Lovers*, p. 8.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 10.
34. For an example of another young Shaker couple, see Kate Douglas Wiggin, *Susanna and Sue* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909); Hervey Elkins, *Fifteen Years in the Senior Order of Shakers: A Narration of Facts, Concerning that Singular People* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth Press, 1853), pp. 104-24. Unlike Thompson's lovers, Elkins's lovers are never joined in matrimony.
35. Flitcroft, *The Novelist of Vermont*, pp. 163-299.
36. *Ibid.*, quotations from pp. 184, 185.
37. *Ibid.*, quotations from pp. 187, 189.
38. The absence of this final scene from Johnson's play is symptomatic of Johnson's indifference to many of Thompson's themes.