# "Oh What Good Pure Love": Sexuality and Motherhood in *The Gift of Sarah Barker*

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Christianity has long been regarded as viewing sexuality and motherhood as, on some level, deeply incompatible. Mary, mother of Jesus, is doubly desexualized, conceiving her holy son without prior sexual intercourse, and herself the product of an immaculate conception. As Lawrence Osborne writes in *The Poisoned Embrace: A Brief History of Sexual Pessimism*: "Virginity was so delicate a problem that it propelled the theological mind to new heights of theoretical brilliance. Basil of Caesarea founded the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception—an ingenious stroke which made Mary not only a virgin, but a super-virgin, one untainted even at her own birth by the contaminating secretions of love" (34).

The sect of the Shakers went one step further in treating both sexuality and worldly motherhood as suspect: the Shakers lived celibate lives and also renounced all biologically based affinities, and indeed all close personal relationships of any kind. In his study of familial relationships in nineteenth century religious communities, Lawrence Foster writes of the Shakers, "Close personal relationships between any individuals, male or female, were systematically and effectively broken up in order to raise the loyalty of all individuals to the larger group, which was seen as standing in the place of God" (18-19). Both sexual intercourse and close family attachments were "carnal" propensities to be renounced in order to achieve salvation (Foster 20). This created a remarkably egalitarian, if also repressive, community, with no hierarchical gender structure: "the depth of religious commitment they sought was impossible unless men and women could be freed from the inevitable distractions associated with sexual relations and the nuclear family" (Foster 37). As Jane Yolen explains in her forward to *The Gift of Sarah Barker*, mothers (generally widows) who joined a Shaker community with their young children become thereafter "sisters" to their own offspring, under the protection and guidance of one woman who was non-biological "mother" to the whole community, instantiating the mother love of the Shakers' founder, Sister Ann, who viewed herself as the chaste "bride of Christ."

St. Paul's writings on the superiority of celibacy to marriage (framed by his anticipation of an imminent Second Coming) provide Biblical warrant for the Shaker commitment to the renunciation of all sexuality. "I wish that all were as I myself am," (that is to say, celibate), St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, encouraging marriage only as a grudging concession to the weakness of the flesh (1 Corinthians 7:1-7). But L. William Countryman, in *Dirt, Greed and Sex*, notes that "Although Paul regarded celibacy as in some sense preferable, he also regarded it as a *charisma* (gift) from God, given only to certain individuals . . . If a person's sexual drive, then, is too strong to permit celibacy, that only means that his or her gifts lie elsewhere" (199). St. Paul is clear in his reminder that "each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind" (1 Corinthians 7:8). This Pauline vocabulary of seeking our own distinctive gifts is echoed in the well-known Shaker hymn or dance song "Simple Gifts," with its opening lines: '"Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free, 'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be." What, then, is the gift of Sarah Barker?

In *The Gift of Sarah Barker*, Jane Yolen's first young-adult novel, published in 1981, Sarah and Abel are two teenagers in the fictional Shaker community of New Vale, Massachusetts, who find themselves drawn to each other through forbidden sexual attraction. The novel highlights the way in which the Shakers' insistence on absolute separation between men and women heightens Sarah and Abel's mutual sexual yearnings. Abel's first glimpse of Sarah's bare feet, followed by his discovery of her abandoned shoes and stockings ("*Her* shoes. *Her* stockings"), believably produces a "burning . . . between his legs" (23). Each encounter between Sarah and Abel is charged with a tingling eroticism beyond anything that could be produced by an explicit sex scene. The novel succeeds both as a Romeo-and-Juliet love story (with a happy ending denied Shakespeare's pair) and as a fascinating historical portrait of one of the most unusual of America's spiritually based utopian communities. Yolen vividly depicts the Shaker routines of hard, rural labor and sacred order and simplicity, interspersed with the ecstatic, almost orgasmic dancing that gave the sect its name. The members of Yolen's Shaker community are plausibly diverse: wise and loving Mother Jean, smug and self-righteous Father James, "simple" Brother John, ornery but big-hearted Brother Joshua, rapturous Sister Mary, jealous and catty Sister Ann. Yolen leads the reader to understand how such a seemingly bizarre religion, with no natural, biological way of producing new members, could have endured for over a century.

The most memorable character in the book is neither Sarah nor Abel, but Sister Agatha, Sarah's worldly mother who is now her harshly punitive "sister." As Sarah's sexual feelings for Abel are awakened, so are her earliest childhood memories of being a beloved child of a worldly mother and father. Yolen's portrait of Sister Agatha is complex, even ambiguous, the heart of the novel, for Sarah's "gift" proves to be, as we shall see, the very gift that eluded her mother.

At some points during the novel, Agatha is represented as a mother who repudiated sex after intense, sexually based guilt from the death of three of her babies, viewing herself as having been punished for the sin of committing the sexual act by the death of all but one of the children conceived through that act. Agatha thinks, "Sarah was Satan's daughter, born of carnality. Her father communicated his lust to everything he touched. But God had punished her with dead babies. Until she acknowledged His revelation and ran away from the devil" (123). It was after the death of the fourth baby (three dead before Sarah and one after) that Agatha told Sarah that both baby and father were dead and took Sarah away with her to begin a new life at New Vale (62). On this reading of Agatha, her often cruel punishments of Sarah are intended to stamp out any emergent sexuality in her daughter and save her from the death and damnation that follow sexual sin: Sarah "must not be led down that same path. Already Sarah was of the age when Agatha had been taken. Corrupted. Used. Worn. But here at New Vale they had both been given another start, a chance to become angels. To live uncorruptible lives" (40). Agatha vows that she will "beat the sensualist out of Sarah for her own good, that they might both be saved" (40).

The text offers evidence that Agatha did, and arguably does, love Sarah. Sarah's childhood memories are of being held close by her mother and crooned a lullaby, "I will guard thee, I will guide thee" (106). Agatha continues to accept opportunities during "shaking" worship sessions to hold and embrace her daughter: "Sarah was always sure to set herself twirling faster and faster in Sabbath meetings so that she might crash into Sister Agatha and hold her clingingly, crying all the while, 'Love, love, love.' For then Sister Agatha, weeping and

sobbing and shaking, would hold her, too, and whisper into Sarah's ears alone, 'Love, love, love'" (7).

But in the climactic scene of the novel, when Sarah confronts her mother publicly, pleading for recognition of the prior bond between them, Agatha gives quite a different account of her worldly marriage, portraying herself as not sexually victimized, but as sexually insatiable. She confesses that after some initial horror at the impurity of sex, "I liked it. Dear Mother, I *enjoyed* it. I waited for him to come to our marriage bed each night. I became more insatiable than Satan. And he laughed when I conceived a child. Said it would give him some rest" (126). Agatha goes on to make the appalling revelation that the "One and two and three dead [babies]" that came before Sarah were not mourned: "I wanted none of them. Just him. And when they died, I was glad of it. *Glad*" (127-28). In this ultimate repudiation of motherhood, she welcomes the death of her children so that she can devote herself more totally to her sexually obsessive relationship with her husband.

At the conclusion of her shocking confession, she tells Sarah, "You wrenched yourself out of my swollen body in dirt and blood. And you were little and ugly and wizened, and I prayed to God that you would die, too" (128). But when Sarah does not die, she then becomes a rival for the husband's affections: "you lived and grew and looked like me before he took me. And he played with you and loved *you* and I was forgotten" (128). The death of the fifth and final baby apparently is what triggers Agatha's spiritual revelation; it is when she sees her "new little baby dead at my side" (128) that she abandons her husband, Abraham, and takes young Sarah with her to join the Shaker spiritual community. On this reading, Agatha actually hates Sarah, born of Satan, imp of Satan, heir of Satan. Agatha's self-revulsion and self-loathing become transmuted into revulsion toward and loathing of her daughter. Just as she mortifies her own flesh (one sister reports, "Why, I could tell you things she does in our room, things she does to herself when she thinks I do not notice" (82), so she rains blows upon Sarah, shouting, "You are the *most* sinful, unnatural child born of woman. And *this* for the sin of being born into the world!" (20). When Sarah tries to reach out to her mother for forgiveness, Agatha slaps her savagely, crying out, "You are none of mine! . . . Nor ever were. I reject you. I renounce you. Get behind me, Satan" (83).

On either reading of Agatha, sexuality and motherhood are diametrically opposed to each other, and both are linked with death: the actual death of four of Agatha's babies, and the wished-for death of the fifth. On the first reading, however, Agatha repudiates sex because it compromises motherhood, leading to the punitive loss of her babies. On the second reading, she repudiates motherhood because it interferes with her relentless pursuit of sex. After the pivotal scene at the Shaker meeting, Agatha hangs herself and is found dead by Abel in the barn: the final death caused by the irreconcilable conflict between sexuality and motherhood.

Sarah must become the figure for whom both sexuality and motherhood are possible, and she does. The last thing Sarah and Abel hear as they leave the community, expelled from its earthly Eden, is the joyful announcement by "innocent" Brother John that the cow Apostle is about to have her long-awaited calf. Thus, they are ushered out to their new life on a note of birth in all its messy, disorderly naturalness. Death is followed by birth in any community where sex remains a possibility. Sarah locates her birth father and marries Abel; the two become

lifelong, loving partners and parents. Sarah lives until age 91, and so, for her, sexuality does not lead inescapably to early death but to long and abundant life. Together she and Abel produce five children and nineteen grandchildren. Significantly, both Sarah and Agatha give birth to five children, but whereas four of Agatha's die, all of Sarah's live to bury her and erect her tombstone, on which is written: "SARAH BARKER CHURCH, Loving daughter, beloved wife and mother." Her gifts, they say, were "love, loyalty, and laughter."

As readers, we can see that, even more so, the gift of Sarah Barker was to be able to be both lover and mother, both sexual being and giver and liver of life: a gift that remains considerably attractive to most of us.

Works Cited

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