



**O Sisters Ain't You Happy?: Gender, Family, and
Community Among the Harvard and Shirley
Shakers, 1781-1918 (Women and Gender in
Religion)**

Suzanne Thurman

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Drawing on archival material from Shaker members, observers, and apostates, noted historian Suzanne R. Thurman offers a scholarly yet eminently readable study of life in two of the oldest, most prominent American Shaker villages: the Harvard and Shirley communities of Massachusetts. Even as she delves into the complex fabric of Shaker social life, Thurman challenges traditional perceptions of gender roles within the community. Shaker spiritual and social ethics, she points out, strongly favored women. Celibacy and an androgynous theology, for instance, allowed androgynous social roles to evolve. Another key factor was the lively arena of nineteenth-century reformers and intellectuals in nearby Boston. With admirable detail, Thurman documents the relationship that grew between these forward thinkers and the Believers. Their influence, she argues, enlightened Shaker consciousness and empowered their women of Harvard and Shirley with opportunities denied them in the world at large. The author also explores links, particularly economic, between Shakers and the greater American society. Treating Harvard and Shirley Believers as an idiosyncratic part of the nation rather than a fringe group, Thurman sheds new light on their constant struggle to be in the world but not of it.

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