ABSTRACT. This paper presents an analysis of the symbolic meanings implicit in an ostensibly empirical therapeutic system. The Shakers, a celibate communal religious order founded in New York State in the mid 1770s, were practitioners of botanic medicine, as were many other Americans in the nineteenth century. This study analyzes the therapeutic properties of the herbs they produced (such as diuretic, stimulant, narcotic, emetic, astringent), using a classification scheme based on the location of the botanical substance's effect vis-à-vis body boundaries and surfaces. The Shakers' beliefs about the therapeutic properties of their herbs are compared with similar analyses of the properties given by two contemporary nineteenth century New England proponents of herbal medicine, botanist Constantine Rafinesque and sectarian practitioner Samuel Thomson. The comparison shows systematic variation in emphasis given to herbs which regulate internal body processes, or act through the openings of the body or on its surface. In this context Shaker medicine can be characterized as quickening, internal, and purifying in its effects on body processes, effects which are highly consistent with Shaker religious beliefs in active, physical worship, selflessness and spiritual purification by confession.

This paper presents a symbolic analysis of an historical therapeutic system, the botanical remedies of the nineteenth century United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, better known as the Shakers. Although the Shakers were the earliest, largest, and most long-lived, many other religious and secular communal societies have existed in the United States since before the Revolutionary War (Nordhoff 1875), vivid manifestations of American perfectionism and utopianism. Such groups present obvious opportunities for the analysis of symbolizing activities because the moral content of their activities is so evident to observers and participants alike. In comparison with the larger society, communal groups deliberately make the relationship between the individual and the group problematic, constantly raising it for consideration (Kanter 1972). Communal societies present a sort of exemplar of self-conscious social construction. It is in such societies, where the group is small enough that the edges of social structure are visible, that ideas about what it is that maintains the group are consciously held, accessible, and articulable. Two differences in particular between communal societies and "the world" from which they stand apart have implications for their internal social structure: the higher level of self-sacrifice required for moral behavior, and the relative closedness of group membership.

In all of these respects, the Shakers represent an extreme position; in the reflectiveness given to social relations, in the absoluteness of the moral requirement of selflessness, and in the exclusiveness of membership, all of which are
intensified by their nearly complete isolation from "the world." An analysis of therapeutic response in such a social system could yield a valuable description of the symbolic content of medicine in situations where the identity of the individual is almost completely submerged in that of the group. The purposes of this paper are to develop and test a method for analyzing the symbolic and moral content of Shaker therapeutics.

The hypothesis for the study is that, although composed of the same elements, the Shaker therapeutic system was demonstrably different from its contemporary counterparts. Therapeutic responses symbolize the social relationships within which they take place. Mary Douglas (1966, 1970) has argued that, because illness represents a threat to the integrity of both the body and the society in which it is located, people who are worried about their purity at the social level (as the Shakers unquestionably were) will carry this worry through to their treatment of the impurities of the body. Thus the interpretive corollary of the study's hypothesis is that the characteristics of this therapeutic system were based on an implicit disease theory which treated the threat of illness to the body in very much the same way as the Shakers responded to threats (of both internal and external origin) to their carefully and deliberately constructed social order. I argue that the Shakers used their culture as a template to fashion a distinctive therapeutic response from the botanical resources available to them, adapting known therapeutic treatments to their own symbolic order.

The method consists of classifying the therapeutic properties of herbal remedies, as given by the Shakers, into categories which reflect these analogies between the surfaces, processes, and structures of the body and the surfaces, processes, and structures of society. If the Shakers did treat the body as an image of society, their therapeutic responses, or the way they sought to defend and protect the health of the body, should symbolize the social practices they used to defend and protect the health of their rather unique social world. This distribution of Shaker-attributed properties can then be compared with the properties of botanical remedies as they were given by some nineteenth-century contemporaries of the Shakers who were also exponents of botanical medicine: Samuel Thomson, leader of the sectarian Thomsonian movement, and botanist Constantine Rafinesque.

In general, botanic practice has been treated as a homogeneous entity. Nineteenth century observers of botanical medicine did not distinguish Shaker from Thomsonian practice. The two are frequently mentioned together, as in J.F.W. Johnston's Notes on North America (1851),

'Shaker Yarbs,' ... are celebrated all over the Union, and command an extensive sale. A medical system under the name of the Thomsonian, which requires no college learning, in its professors, and makes use of herbs only, has obtained a considerable hold in the country, and promotes the sale of their [the Shakers'] herbs (p. 265).