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“THE SECOND DESCENT OF THE SPIRIT OF LIFE FROM GOD”: THE ASSUMPTION OF JEMIMA WILKINSON

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Although it was the "11th Hour," a "sifting time," when the Spirit assumed the body of Jemima Wilkinson (1776), what opened out from the psychosocial ruptures effected in Jemima and her community by the just emerging industrial economy was, as Jemima's visionary visitants proclaimed, "room, room, room." Jemima Wilkinson, the first American-born female utopian leader, was raised up by the Spirit during what Barbara Epstein has called the "female revivals" which occurred in New England's upland hill country between the First and Second Great Awakenings (65). Having fallen ill with "Columbus fever" (i.e., typhus), Jemima passed through a veritable death and resurrection experience, yielding her body to serve as the dwelling place for the "Second descent of the Spirit of Life from God"--by name, the "Publick Universal Friend." As the "Universal Friend of Mankind" or, variously, the "All Friend," this embodied, incarnate "universal" Spirit not only prohibited private ownership of the land, but also insisted on a public, political universality. During the Revolutionary War, the Friend pushed through warlines, visiting and giving medical care to soldiers from all sides. Having preached "Have We Not All One Father?," the Friend accompanied the Indian Nations to the signing of the Pickering Treat in 1791 and again to the Council of the 6 Nations at Canandaigua in western NY in 1794 (Henricks & Potter 162-3). The Friend's rejection of mastery led not only to active support of the manumission of slaves, but to the insistence that women "obey . . . God rather than men."¹

Neither "the servitude of slaves" nor the privileging of the sons, but a Society of Friends: for those who were counting the days--for those who were "in time"--these times were indisputably urgent; however, for those who, like Jemima, had left time time and been assumed by the Spirit, the sepulchral wrinkle in time had unfolded into Joachim of Fiore's trinitarian "third age." In this historical age, Spirit dwelt as Friend among "friends" (Cf. Keller 108). Among friends, the energy of millennialism moved with open arms so as to prevent closures--or, perhaps even more to the point, enclosures. Spirit worked to collapse hostilities, refusing to take sides--even as it came up against the prevailing notions of a primal binary gender division.

¹For quotes from Jemima Wilkinson, see the Wilkinson papers, a microfilm collection owned by Cornell University Collection of Regional History, Ithaca, NY; 1951.

The Assumption of the Spirit and its Manifest Incarnation:

Named for one of Job's daughters, Jemima Wilkinson was born on November 29, 1752, in Cumberland, Rhode Island.² She grew up as the eighth of 12 children, the child of Quaker farmers. Her mother--worn out by childbearing, it was said--died shortly after the birth of the 12th of her children within a 25 year span, just as Jemima entered puberty.³ Tradition reports that Jemima was in the audience of George Whitefield as he rode the last wave of the Great Awakening through the New England states around 1770. In 1774 Jemima converted during a New Lights revival in Cumberland. By October 1776 her spiritual crisis was coupled with illness, though after 6 days she made a sudden recovery. The following Sunday after worship she preached her first sermon under the tree outside the meeting house.

"At first she was content to preach, but by 1780 she began to separate in practice and doctrine from her Quaker upbringing . . . Her followers called themselves the Society of United Friends and began to keep their own records."⁴ Ranging ever wider from home, her preaching trips led to the establishment of meetinghouses first in South Kingston, R.I., at the home of Judge Potter and later in New Milford, CT. Eventually, her caravan of followers--usually 12, all riding two by two behind her spirited horse equipped with its stunning white leather and blue velvet saddle--made its way to Philadelphia and Worcester, PA. From those first preaching ventures when she was accompanied by her father, then replaced at her side by Judge Potter, and finally sending out women from among the intimate "Sisterhood" on their own missions, the Universal Friend grew in serene self-confidence over her 14 years on the preaching circuit, having by this time spoken before audiences including political elites as well as foreign diplomats.

Though even her self-professed "most sympathetic" biographer, Herbert A. Wisbey, Jr., suggests that she was not a "conscious fraud," but was rather "captivated by an unfeigned obsession" which "left [her] under the influence of megalomania until she finally 'left time' 43 years later,"⁵ historically the Friend gathered into her affiliative society some of that day's leading political, intellectual and economic elite. To the astonishment of many, notes one biographer, "(n)ot merely the ignorant and the easily excited became her followers..."⁶ Historian Alice Felt Tyler echoed this observation: "Converts were many and not all from the poor and oppressed."⁷ (This was in striking contrast, of course, to membership among the Radical sects during the English Civil Wars and to membership among the contemporaneous Shakers.)

²Alden Whitman, American Reformers. Ed. by H.W. Wilson. Page 882.

³Notable American Women, Vol. 3. (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard, 1971) 609.

⁴Ruth Upson, "New Jerusalem and the Public Universal Friend(Jemima Wilkinson)," in New York Folklore Quarterly, Vol. XI(1955), p. 25.

⁵Herbert A. Wisbey, Jr. Pioneer Prophetess: Jemima Wilkinson, the Publick Universal Friend (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), pages 132, 23, and 14 respectively.

⁶National Cyclopedia of American Biography, Vol. 8, p. 81.

⁷Alice Felt Tyler. Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History to 1800 (Minneapolis, 1944), p. 117.

Yet while the Universal Friend--as a potent, political figure of speech, if you will--helped some become articulate, among them a significant circle of intellectual, wealthy, if also widowed and/or singled women, many others were left to wag their tongues. No matter how cumbersome the construction of the sentence, the Spirit of Life incarnated in the body of Jemima was consistently and irrevocably "The Friend"--"neither male nor female," as St. Paul had stated in the letter to the Galatians. Consequently, among members of the Society all third person pronouns were eradicated, the referential placeholder being simply that of "friend." Further, this pronoun/ced gender deconstruction was somatically performed by the Friend--along with perhaps 5-6 other women--as a "both-and." That is, in terms of clothing, the Universal Friend gender-blended: petticoats peeked out from under the apparently Whitefieldian-inspired male clerics; while the Friend claimed the male prerogative of uncovered head, yet the Friend flaunted a wardrobe of women's bright scarfs. While "no woman in that day was considered properly dressed without her cap,"⁸ the Friend's long, dark curly hair, freshly washed each day, fell loose around the shoulders. Even the Friend's voice was said to have a "masculine-feminine" quality (Cf. Wisbey 26, from "Lang Syne"). It was the Friend's disaffected follower become biographer David Hudson who believed himself, upon the Friend's death, to have finally intuited the socio-naturalist politics behind this particular incarnation of the Spirit of Life. The intensity of millennial time, Hudson observed,

gave [the Friend] an exalted opinion of the superiority of her own sex, and of their peculiar fitness to govern, and it is not improbable but in process of time, she reasoned herself into the belief that in some unlucky moment the order of nature had been reversed, that the empire of man was a mere assumption of power, obtained by force and fraud, and that under her happy auspices the fair sex were to be restored to those rights and dignities of which they had been thus despoiled.⁹

If time was running out, as the "too archangels" had been so bold as to announce in the moment of Jemima's assumption, we might rather say that it was the space of women's lives which was shrinking: Women were losing direct involvement in economic production as industrialization and commercial capitalism were replacing agrarian structures. Simultaneously, family ties were being stretched over ever broader geographic and economic terrain. The distinctly "female anxiety" which resulted was worked out not in economic terms, as Mary Ryan notes, "but rather in the language and central ideological structure of their time, that is, in an essentially religious mode of thought" (65)--including, to be sure, through the everyday immediacy of supernatural discourse, i.e., dreams, intimations, visions, etc. Given women's concern about the degeneration of social relations, the Friend responded by striving neither for public popularity nor publicity through print (as did the men of the Second Awakening), but wove her translocal network with the patient exercise of face-to-face intimacy: "Every one of The Friend's loyal followers not only knew her, but knew her well" (Tibbets 421-2).

After fourteen years of preaching, of patiently weaving together this intimate network, the

⁸Wisbey 24-25.

⁹Hudson 166.

Friend's determination for "a peaceable habitation for me and my friends to dwell somewhere" grew into plans for "a township . . . where none but friends hold any title or possession there . . . upon any other terms than that of being true friends."¹⁰ The Friend's utopian settlement plan promised women a sense of community, which "women seem to have valued . . . more highly than men," according to Epstein (31); stirred dreams of a cooperative, generationally-enduring, subsistence economy; and evoked hopes for the freedom to practice greater moral purity. After several exploratory excursions, James Parker led 25 persons to the west bank of Seneca Lake in 1788. In 1790 the Friend moved her residence to New Jerusalem, which by this time had been moved to Lake Keuka and had a census of 260 residents. The utopian community was, respecting the Friend's non-dogmatic, non-doctrinaire, but practic/able theology, loosely organized. Robert St. John articulated the Friend's philosophy in his historical fiction, Genesee Fever:

(S)he said the Society had . . . not come to this wilderness to gain new advantages in the world's struggle for mastery--a principle copied from beasts--but to find a retreat where they would conform to the Christ-given rule of brotherhood and helpfulness Here none would covet another's wealth for land and dwellings and the most important goods of life would be held in common. . . . The traveller and the stranger would be entertained. . . They would rear the orphan, nurse the sick, soothe the dying, bury the dead.¹¹

Now the "intruding feet" which the Friend so feared would enter to destroy this New Jerusalem ironically revealed themselves to be shod not in the clothing of outsiders, but of insiders.¹² While still very much in its early stages of development, the community at New Jerusalem began to develop fault-lines. Potter and Parker, two of her first adherents, now became two of her most vocal detractors: "The men who had put the largest amounts of money into the common purse demanded that the land be distributed according to the share each had contributed."¹³ While the Friend persisted in saying that "Redeeming Love was Free," "the men who had invested large sums of money in the land sought to resell it . . . to the members of her little flock . . . at a handsome profit."¹⁴ Despite the Friend's invectives against the accumulation of money, and especially against the exercise of any form of presumed mastery, and despite their own earlier relinquishment of wealth and slaves, "among the first apostates were those for whom unclaimed, fertile land in the region surrounding Jerusalem became simply too much of an attraction."¹⁵ This opened out a chasm between these wealthy men and the poor friends, celibate

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Robert St. John. Jerusalem the Golden (NY, 1926) 208.

¹²Letter of Sarah Friend (a.k.a. Sarah Richards) in the microfilm collection of the Wilkinson papers, owned by Cornell University Collection of Regional History, Ithaca, NY; 1951.

¹³Upson 32.

¹⁴Mrs. Walter D. Henricks and Arnold Potter, "The Universal Friend: Jemima Wilkinson," in New York History, Vol. XXIII(1942) 163.

¹⁵Tibbetts 307.

women, orphans and sick, who--along with those faithful few wealthy folks--remained true. In a rebuke of the prosperous, the Friend gathered up the faithful, making the final move a few miles westward into the wilderness, living there until the Friend's death in 1819.¹⁶

Gender, Millennialism and Pneumatology:

Given her self-charted destination to the wilderness of "New Jersusalem," encouraged by her sparse iconographic emblems of stars and crucifix on saddle and carriage, and noting her reliance for images on Biblical sources, some read the Friend as the second coming of Christ in the guise of the apocryphal Woman in the Wilderness, the Woman Clothed with the Sun (Cf. Rev. 12). Indisputably, the tracks do lead into the woods, but shall we name this one "Woman?" In the refraction of one moment the Friend apocalyptically unveils the bindings of gender binaries, yet in the next those colorful scarves tease us back. Wrapped in the clerical cloaks of corporeal invisibility and social commonality (which is the claim made regarding clerical robes), the Friend yet became--with petticoats peaking out--troublingly wo/man: a most cumly (it was said),¹⁷ if uncommonly public wo/man. Unlike her contemporary Mother Ann Lee or the later Sister Aimee McPherson, the Friend declined the mimetic possibilities in the antithetical underside of the binary division and instead parodically performed a seemingly noncategorical gender, a third sex--positively provoking, as the disaffected and acrimonious David Hudson had nevertheless intuited, alternative identity formations for both individuals and society.¹⁸ If the teachings of Jesus seemed all the same when articulated by the Friend, it was rather the Friend's enspirited reading of the "law" or "order of nature" that troubled minds.

Since we do not know to what pamphlets or texts Jemima had access (though she was known as a voracious reader); and since embarrassed descendents of the community had most of the society's papers destroyed, we are here reduced to only suggestive historical linkages.¹⁹ Nevertheless I would like to propose three overlapping antecedent historical events that might have played through the imaginary of the one become incarnate Friend: 1) the arguments in 17th century England surrounding the social proliferations of a third and an even more feared fourth gender--namely, the "Hic-Mulier" (the "Man-Woman") and the "Haec Vir" (the "Woman-Man")--a controversy that surfaced in the wake of the first public exercise of "masculine-feminine" authority, the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (cf. Haraway 29-32, Potter, Clark); 2) the large scale women's riots during the 1640s and '50s, which opposed the new economic structure occasioned by the enclosure of the commons and which earned the protesting women the derogatory label of having a "masculine spirit" (Higgins 178-179; also Noble 189); and 3) the millennialism of the Radicals during the English Civil War.

¹⁶Wisbey 126.

¹⁷ "Let me say," Colonel Johnson wrote shortly after her death, "as to her person that nature has not been stingy, either in bulk of material, or symmetrical adjustment." See Colonel Johnson's article, "Jemima Wilkinson, the American Prophetess," in The Eclectic Magazine, Vol. 5(August 1845) 551.

¹⁸Cf. Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex," (London: Routledge, 1993), xi.

¹⁹Cornell University was able to microfilm only some of the Wilkinson papers, and the originals of these were later destroyed.

During and after the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, "woman"--as Louis Wright still wrote it in 1935--"was becoming articulate in her own defense and . . . was demanding social independence unknown in previous generations" (490). Some women were not only insisting that women "are as free-borne as Men..." (496), but were dressing in male ruffs, carrying weapons, uncovering their heads or wearing men's hats (as Jemima did when outdoors), or even cutting their hair--the shame of any truly modest woman. The dread fear exacerbated in other onlookers, however, was that "women's masculine clothing" was "a symptom of a more general social decadence" inasmuch as Deuteronomic law forbade women from wearing "that which pertaineth unto a man" (Clark 171, 170 and see Deut. 22:5). Yet, these fears--which King James certainly shared--capped off a century during which women "had been gradually increasing [their] social privileges and position" (Wright 506) until England had become known--in jest--as a paradise for women. The fact of women's real social progress, Wright observed, was that against which the Puritans reacted (506). Given the Friend's gender-blending, gender-bending dress and that masculine-feminine voice: could it be that the infamous third gender, the veritable "Man-Woman," had figuratively leapt 150 years forward, landed on his/her feet on the new continent, and there assumed the body born Jemima Wilkinson--"a female body 'with all the powers of [a] masculine mind'"(Hudson 59)?

Given her Quaker roots and the Quakers' appreciation for the indwelling Spirit, not surprisingly the Friend shaped theology and practice from a pneumatological, rather than christological, frame. But inasmuch as Spirit was that which, according to the Friend, gave "all nature birth," a position consistent with the English Radicals, Quaker pneumatology would also seem then to provide a hermeneutic for the Friend's reading of the "law of nature," which according to Hudson and Robert St. John she so obviously had misread or inverted. As Elizabeth Potter noted in an article about the co-incident "making" of gender and science in 17th century England, there were three sides to the controversy named the English Civil Wars: Politically speaking, the Puritans defeated the Royalists; but religiously speaking both--agreed in their disregard for the sects populated by women (Thomas 52)--defeated the Radicals (Potter 177). After the English Civil War, Margaret Wertheim has observed, Newton's explication of cosmic order and design provided the natural laws upon which to order Christian society (132). If the Cartesian God of Creation had acted as distant director of a mechanistic nature (92), Newton's Anglican gravitational field--with its more intimate, pervading Spirit--nevertheless still insured that women, like little moons, would be naturally compelled to stay in the gravitational orbit of their planet, "man" (133).

Among the Radicals, however, indwelling Spirit appeared as the vitality of each and logically lead to the leveling of all pretenses to "mastery"--lead to felling the hierarchical ladder or breaking the chain of being and its consequent patterns of domination (which had often in Christian theology been premised upon women being devoid of a relationship with Spirit, except when subordinated to male headship). Likewise, among the Society of Friends as also among other Radicals sharing this pervasive naturalism of Spirit: all humans were equally sources of Spirit's on-going revelations. Consequently, dream journals, which recorded friends' dreams and visions, intuitions, intimations, visitations, etc., were considered revealed text along side the biblical canon. But in addition and most significantly here, read from the pneumatically immanent view of nature popular among the radical sects, from which women's religious leadership--including Jemima's--arose, the "law of nature" also implied living the land as commons, the earth as a common storehouse. "In the beginning of time," the Radical Digger

Gerard Winstanley had written, "the great creator, Reason, made the earth to be a common treasury, to preserve beasts, birds, fishes and man..." (Hill132). Only the covetous imagination of the armed and wealthy had enclosed it.

Again, while the historic links leading from the Radical Diggers to Jemima can only be suggestive, the Friend did seem to share their "common" sense about the earth.²⁰ To be sure, the Friend expected that "the Spirit who gave all nature birth" would now "chase the dragon from the earth." But what apocryphal "phantasm" did this Woman in the Wilderness expect to face down? Could it be, as Winstanley had put it, "that Beast, kingly property"--that is, private ownership of land (Hill 149)? Or, as hinted at by Robert St. John, the "beast-like" "presumption of mastery"--at any and all levels (208).

What counts as natural law, feminist philosopher Judith Butler has asserted, remains vulnerable to performative social recitation, but also then to performative re-citation (15). While the Friend was accused of subverting--by inverting--the laws of nature, these so-called laws were, of course, so recent as still to be under negotiation, as still to be tenuous, open--especially where the Spirit was allowed breathing "room."

In the waning 11th hour, Spirit uttered a new, if archaic, political figure of speech, the Publick Universal Friend of Life so as to rearticulate the room of women's lives. Keller observed that the apocalyptic vision of John of Patmos enjoined a "denatured universalism," "a historical temporality denuded of natural cycles" (Keller 92). In the visitation by the Publick Universal Friend the earth itself became the grounding universal--a universal that, in its embodied particularity, nevertheless negated the "law of nature" which authorized the rule of men over women; an embodied universal that, moving by the energy of friendship, tried to hold open room not only for women, but also the poor, the orphaned, the indigenous.

Oh, by the way: the "man-woman," that potent political figure of speech, the "third person" figured forth in the Friend? S/He has been called back to the stage in this 11th hour of the second millennium in hopes yet again of averting binary closures, here of classes and kinds, of beginnings and ends. For more information, see Donna Haraway's Modest Witness@Second Millennium.FemaleMan Meets OncoMouse (emphasis added).

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²⁰ Not only did the Friend seem to share the natural reason of the Diggers, her policy of active hospitality and engagement with the indigenous peoples also follows. In fact, her most famous sermon on relations with the indigenous, i.e., "Have We Not All One Father?," echoes the sentiment of both Winstanley and Edward Burrough, who wrote "Hath not God made of one mould and one blood all nations to dwell upon the face of the earth?" (Hill 337).

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