

"Her Preference was to Heal"

Women's Choice of Homeopathic Medicine
in the Nineteenth-Century United States

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Over the past two decades, historians of medicine have significantly expanded the scope of the field. The new, broader perspective has greatly enhanced our overall understanding of medical practice and has brought health care issues under the purview of social history. Two groups that have received particular attention in recent historiography are sectarian practitioners and women, but analyses of these two groups have converged remarkably little. Historians generally agree that the emergence and persistence of medical sects in competition with the established profession represent an important chapter in the history of nineteenth-century American medicine. These historians recognize that homeopathy¹ was the largest and most influential sect, and commonly note that women were particularly likely to be involved in irregular or unorthodox medical groups. In the extensive historical literature about nineteenth-century American medicine, however, no study has thoroughly investigated the relationship between women and homeopathy. Naomi Rogers, in a survey of current scholarship, has called for more work in the area of women and sectarian medicine. She argues that "much of the history of sectarian medicine in America has remained limited to traditional ways of investigating a profession and medical history; that is, intellectual and institutional history."² Too often, historians have undervalued the role and unique character of sects and sectarian practitioners in an attempt to portray an image of a smooth transition from nineteenth to twentieth century medicine.³ This traditional view of sects as fleeting or important only insofar as they shaped later 'scientific medicine' tends to overlook patients and ordinary practitioners, and minimizes the choices that these people made about their therapeutic allegiances. This essay,

¹Homeopathy, spelled "homoeopathy" by Samuel Christian Hahnemann, its nineteenth-century founder, and by modern advocates of the system, prescribed infinitesimal doses of drugs which induce symptoms similar to the disease being treated. Most indexes and recent sources use the anglicized "homeopathy." I will use the latter spelling in this essay, except in instances of direct quotation or titles in which the older spelling is used in the original.

²Naomi Rogers, "Women and Sectarian Medicine," in *The History of Women and Health in America: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Rima D. Apple, forthcoming, 11.

³Kenneth M. Ludmerer, *Learning to Heal: The Development of American Medical Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) is a particularly salient example of this kind of history which selectively uses the past to exalt the present.

drawing from the perspectives of the new social history and of women's history in particular, builds on the extant literature about homeopathy and about women in medicine, and presents a new perspective on the complex relationship between women and homeopathy.

Closer inquiry into the nature of the women who chose homeopathy and of their reasons for doing so can be fruitful for both medical and women's history. An awareness of why many women rejected traditional medical therapy and turned to a new, unorthodox vision of bodily health can illuminate the particular dilemmas nineteenth-century women faced because of the Victorian preoccupation with the body, and can provide additional insight into the appeal of sectarian medicine. A more complete sense of the intellectual structure and social position of homeopathy in the United States can expand our understanding of sectarian challenges to the medical establishment and can also shed light on the social, political, and professional position of nineteenth-century women who practiced homeopathy. An investigation into the often separatist techniques women employed to overcome discrimination within the medical profession can reflect on strategies they exercised in other areas of their lives.

Careful investigation of modern scholarship and of biographical information compiled by nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers suggests that the argument, commonly presented by modern historians, that women turned to homeopathic medicine because they had no other options is inadequate. While it is certainly true that nineteenth-century women faced enormous obstacles within the regular medical profession, homeopathic institutions were not as unconditionally supportive of women as has formerly been suggested. Americans in the nineteenth-century faced a wide array of therapeutic alternatives. The large proportion of female homeopathic patients and the lengths to which women doctors went to acquire a homeopathic education suggest not that women turned to homeopathy as a last resort, but rather that they actively chose homeopathy above all their other options. I want to suggest that female patients and practitioners chose homeopathy for similar reasons: because they considered homeopathic therapeutics both more appealing and more efficacious, and because they supported the political and social implications of the commitment to reforming medicine. In this essay, I will review the existing scholarship, examine the nineteenth-century context within which women became

involved in homeopathy, and will finally consider how and why these women, both as patients and practitioners, chose homeopathy as their preferred medical system.