Gender in Mormon Studies: Obstacles and Opportunities

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Past and present

According to thy sex thou art a mother in Israel, thy posterity shall multiply and become numerous upon the earth, thy name shall be handed down to the latest generation in remembrance of thee as an honorable mother in Zion. (Patriarchal blessing given to Sarah Burroughs Davenport by Elisha H. Groves on 23 February 1854)¹

Even in airports, gas stations, and department stores, we Mormons could spot other Mormons: married people with several children in tow; always modestly dressed . . . ; our men clean-shaven and sort of girlish because they were free of vices, and still wearing haircuts short as missionaries; never a curse word uttered, never a Coke or a coffee or cigarette in hand. (Joanna Brooks, The Book of Mormon Girl)²

Scholars of Mormonism must consider gender as a central interpretive category in order to fully understand the history and culture of this community. Gender is an essential way that LDS leaders and members structure time and space, rituals, and cultural roles. It forms the backbone of

the *habitus* of Mormon cultures.\(^3\) The LDS community is well known for fostering traditional gender and family structures and for being self-consciously patriarchal. Davenport’s 1854 patriarchal blessing given by a member of the church’s priesthood ratified the idea that motherhood was a religious role for women. These gender structures carry through in the lived religious experiences of members as demonstrated by Joanna Brooks in her recent memoir when she describes how easily she could recognize Mormon men and women. The Mormon community nurtures these traditional gender norms in order to set itself apart from mainstream American culture. From a Mormon theological perspective, men and women are born gendered in a spiritual preexistence as spirit children of Heavenly Father and a Mother in Heaven, and they remain essentially male and female into eternity. The unit of highest exaltation is a man and women sealed together for eternity by the priesthood power manifest only in the lay institutional structures of the LDS Church. Gender distinctiveness, therefore, is one of the central engines for eternal progression, even as it offers clear directions on how men and women should go about their daily lives—how they should be a mother and father walking through an airport or department store.

And yet, in Mormon studies, gender has been often neglected as an interpretive category. This stems, in part, from internal pressures on Mormon scholars who have gender as their focus. Because gender is so central to the community, and because, in Mormonism, historical interpretations have theological resonance, as is well known, in the recent past some scholars and writers who studied gender ran afoul of the church.\(^4\) For the most part, Mormon studies scholars have explored the lives of Mormon women from historical and theological points of view, with little consideration of how gender expectations shape the lives of men, or issues of sexuality and sexual identity, or of larger theoretical questions surrounding

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gender as a category. In the late nineteenth century, the government campaign against polygamy intensified and the image of Mormon women became a symbolic weapon used by both sides. Mormon women stepped into the fray and began writing faith-based, valedictory women’s history.\(^5\) Sparked by the burgeoning feminism of the 1960s and the subsequent creation of the distinct field of women’s history in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars built on this long tradition of valedictory history and also began to study Mormon women from a more academic perspective. Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Lavina Fielding Anderson, Maxine Hanks, and Claudia Bushman, among many others, generated a tremendous body of literature on Mormon women.\(^6\) Their work gave voice and importance to the experiences of Mormon women and shaped subsequent scholarship. To cherry-pick a few examples, today John Turner incorporates the experiences of early LDS women into his biography of Brigham Young, the church has published the minutes of the Nauvoo Relief Society, and Dave Hall is preparing a biography of Amy Brown Lyman that explores shifting notions of gender in the early twentieth century.\(^7\) The snowball of gender studies is gaining speed, volume, complexity, and theoretical sophistication.

Questions and obstacles remain. How much should the study of gender in Mormonism remain as a distinct subfield? How much should it disappear into the fields of history, religious studies, theology? How

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much should we give up control of the subject matter in return for greater scholarly acceptance and assimilation? Mormon scholars of Mormonism have been protective of the historical and cultural legacy of their community, a community that has faced much public derision. The people and subjects Mormon scholars write about are alive to them in ways that escape non-Mormon scholars—alive, perhaps, in the memory of a loved one, or alive in the proxy embodiment of a deceased relative during temple rituals. Thus, there will always be internal, community-focused discussions over this central issue of gender. This is inevitable and healthy in a community where historical interpretations shape present-day expectations and church policies.

Still, as scholars we need to continue to reach out to larger academic discussions. This creates scholarly synergy on all sides. Just one example of this: Mormon history and scholarship prompted historian of American religions Catherine Brekus to write a Tanner Lecture that reflects on how to find women’s agency in history, a hot topic in history and religious studies. Brekus’s essay helped generate a 2012 conference and conversations about gender within circles of Mormon studies that will, I hope in circular fashion, enrich more general discussions of women’s historical agency. The history and experiences of the LDS community are a vital part of wider cultural dialogues about gender. They illuminate larger realities in the American experiment, as the work of, for instance, Sarah Gordon and Samuel Brown demonstrate in their books on marriage morality and death practices, respectively. Mormon studies scholarship on gender can contribute much to the ultimate goal of the academic study of religion: to understand the varieties of religious experiences and, thereby, to support more civil, informed dialogue about religion and gender.

Prospects and sources

Thou shalt obtain knowledge both by dreams and by visions and be able to claim thy children, that none of them shalt fall by the hands of the destroyer. Thou art a daughter of Abraham of the loins of Joseph, a lawful heir to the blessings, privileges and power that pertain to the fullness of the Holy Priesthood. (Patriarchal blessing given to Sarah Burroughs Davenport by Elisha H. Groves on 23 February 1854)⁹

In the world I grew up in, it was not okay to tell unorthodox stories. We did not hear them in church. We did not read them in scripture. But sooner or later they break through the surface in every Mormon life, in every human life, in every life of faith. (Brooks, *Book of Mormon Girl*)¹⁰

Because of the more internal focus of Mormon studies, scholarly questions around gender can get focused on the big, obvious, and controversial: polygamy, priesthood, the Mother in Heaven, same-sex marriage. This is necessary, and even as a non-Mormon, I am as guilty of it as the next person. Yet I hope—and see this is happening—that we also can move behind these big issues and delve more deeply into the multifarious, complex ways that gender has shaped and continues to shape Mormon culture, from how men and women dress and move in their bodies to how gender assumptions inform noninstitutional modes of authority. Because gender has always been so central to the social structures and theology of the church, gender has always been discussed in the community. These conversations have been loud, quiet, challenging, reinforcing, negotiating, direct, indirect, and even unknowing. Scholars are exploring the orthodox as well as the unorthodox conversations that Brooks claims always come to the surface. Just as importantly, they are looking to a rich array of sources to find these stories.

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As Davenport’s blessing indicates, seemingly strict Mormon gender roles are complicated by the prophetic nature of the community and ambiguous, conflicting statements from church officials about key doctrinal concepts such as the priesthood. Even today, after charismatic manifestations of the early church have faded, individual LDS members can tap into their own prophetic power, a prophetic power, in Davenport’s case, authorized by a church patriarch. They use this personal, prophetic authority to work out—to live within and even create—the ideal gender structures of their community.

Inspired by the founding events of the church and instructed by church leaders, women and men recorded their lives in diaries, journals, letters, and autobiographies such as Brooks’s. In addition, as they worked out how to live within and understand gender categories, men wrote theology and produced “official” publications and pronouncements of the church, such as Davenport’s blessing. Women wrote literature that was also theology. That is too dualistic and simple a formulation, but there is some truth to it. Mormon men and, especially, Mormon women have been writing stories and poems since they began converting to Mormonism in the 1830s. In the nineteenth century, there was an especially lively culture of literary Mormon women. This literary culture flourished because of the very gender roles authors struggled with: literary and poetic writing was seen as an appropriate occupation for women, allowing them to spread their much-vaunted moral influence, but at a safe distance from the rough and tumble of the public sphere. In her capacity as editor, Emmeline B. Wells encouraged women to write and then published their stories and poems in the *Woman’s Exponent*. Best-selling authors Orson Scott Card and Stephenie Meyer are descendants of these earlier authors, as are lesser-known authors and poets who contribute their work to the *Ensign*, *Sunstone*, or Mormon mommy blogs.

These literary, poetic, and personal creations are gold mines for scholars as they examine how men and women talked about and lived within the simultaneous distinctiveness of gender roles, the realities of life, the patriarchal structures of the church, and the wiggle room of prophetic opportunity. In their popular literary output, for instance, I found Mormon
women in the nineteenth century helping to create the present-day understanding of the Mother in Heaven and arguing for the centrality of femaleness through the use of uncontroversial nature imagery. These are men and women firm, simultaneously, in their faith in the church and in their own prophetic and commonsense abilities to negotiate the gendered structures of that faith.

As scholars mine these sources with an eye to gender as a central, organizing category, we will learn more about the way gender has shaped—and continues to shape—the history, theology, and everyday lives of Mormons. We will see the diversity of experiences in the church through time, and the increasing diversity of the LDS Church today as it becomes even more of a global community. This is an exciting time for those interested in understanding gender in Mormonism. The will, sources, and experience exist to widen, complicate, and, thus, enrich the discussion. The door is open; I hope we step through.

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