"We Know How to Keep House and We Know How to Keep a City": Contextualizing Dr. Martha Hughes Cannon’s Feminism

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"I can't bear a mannish woman or a mannish man either," Martha Hughes Cannon declared a few days after she was elected the first female state senator in the United States. "All the best men I know are ladylike and all the best women I know are gentlemanly" (qtd. in Black). Running on a Democratic platform, she'd just beaten her own husband, the Republican Angus Cannon. The Mormon enclave of Utah territory was one of long-avowed seclusion from the outside world, and yet it wasn't immune from transitioning dialogues regarding "the woman question." Even at a young age, Martha (Mattie) Cannon attested to that. In the late 1870s, while avant-garde women in high society were adopting typically masculine performances like attending universities and participating in politics, Mattie Cannon chopped her hair short and walked six miles every day in men's boots in order to go to her typesetting job and university classes (McCrimmon 2). As shocking as it might have been for some nineteenth-century Salt Lake City inhabitants to see the bobbed Cannon tromping through the city, skirt hitched up to reveal masculine footwear, it might be equally shocking for the present-day reader to learn that Cannon's ambitions were not without the precedent of, nor encouragement from, both male and female leaders of her Mormon polygamist community.

Throughout her life, Cannon pulled seemingly subversive stunts framed within a milieu of social support that demystifies, or at least partially elucidates, her frequent departure from normative female behavior. However, the purpose of this paper is not to join the voices of scholars arguing that nineteenth-century Mormon culture
was one of radical egalitarianism. As Catherine Brekus notes in “Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency,” Mormon scholars sometimes react to charges of a sexist, patriarchal past (and present) with overly effusive depictions of early Mormon women as independent proto-feminists. For instance, in “Plural Wives,” Stephanie Smith Goodson argues that polygamy provided a matriarchal family structure in which women presided together in sisterhood; similarly, Joan S. Iversen’s “Feminist Implications of Mormon Polygyny” emphasizes what she sees as the “intense female bonding” and female autonomy inherent within this marriage structure, an idea which Terryl Givens in The Latter-day Saint Experience in America also chooses to highlight (qtd. in Brekus 73-74). Rather, I argue that Cannon’s personal understandings and explorations of gender performance must be contextualized in an environment in which negotiations between the customary and the progressive were conventionalized, coded as acceptable at the leadership level, and emulated as such at the congregational and individual level.

The germ of this discussion is indebted to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. In her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Butler argues that “gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo,” meaning that gender is constructed by a historically situated “script” reified by social circumstance (520). However, just as different actors perform the same script differently, gender is still interpretable by individuals. “Gender is an act which has been rehearsed,” Butler writes, “much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (526). With this framework in mind, this paper will examine Cannon’s public roles as doctor, suffragist, and politician within a contextualizing narrative, and also discuss the ways in which she interacted with this script.

Martha Hughes Cannon was born in Llandudno, Wales in 1857 to Peter Hughes and Elizabeth Evans Hughes, both converts to the burgeoning Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1860, the Hughes family left Wales to join the Saints in “Zion.” On the trail West, Cannon’s father and younger sister died of an illness that would have been treatable had the proper medicine been on hand, the memory of which affected young Cannon deeply (Graña 7). In 1861, her mother married James Patten Paul, a widower, with whom she had five more children. At an early age, Cannon worked alongside her siblings to help provide for the large family, becoming a schoolteacher at age fourteen. She despised the work, however, and soon afterwards at the recommendation of Brigham Young, she was apprenticed to the manager of the Deseret News print shop (Graña 11). Here, Cannon learned to set type, a skill that later secured her employment for the Woman’s Exponent, the Church’s publication for women. It was while she was

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1 Of course, Butler’s theory of performativity cannot be reduced to scripts, or even to “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” See Butler’s Gender Trouble for her later, and more thorough, discussion about gender performativity.
working for the *Exponent* that she learned that the University of Michigan had begun accepting women to its medical school (Grana 11).

Cannon's community encouraged her to go to medical school because of—and not despite—her gender. Prior to that encouragement, however, significant rhetorical transitions took place at the leadership level regarding doctors and medicine without which, validation from leaders and community would have been unlikely. Brigham Young had remarked in 1869, “Doctors and their medicines I regard as a deadly bane to any community . . . I am not very partial to doctors . . . I can see no use for them unless it is to raise grain or go to mechanical work” (qtd. in Wilcox 26). He preferred the more traditional Thomsonian method of healing to orthodox medicine, as demonstrated when he urged in 1852:

> When you are sick, call for the Elders, who will pray for you, anointing with oil and the laying on of hands; and nurse each other with herbs, and mild food, and if you do these things, in faith, and quit taking poisons, and poisonous medicines, which God never ordained for the use of men, you shall be blessed. (qtd. in Wilcox 28)

Brother Brigham's change of heart was largely a response to the Saints' increased exposure to “Gentiles,” who came along with the transcontinental railroad and the booming Utah mining industry (Crall 9). Cultivating Mormon doctors would keep Mormons self-sufficient in the face of Gentile hospitals and doctors. In 1872, Brigham began calling men to study medicine in Eastern schools, and a year later the “Matriarch of Mormonism” Eliza R. Snow, then General Relief Society president, urged him to call women to receive equal training (Grana 11). In 1873, Brigham Young declared, “The time has come for women to come forth as doctors in these valleys of the mountains,” which definitively endorsed Snow's counsel (qtd. in Crall 10). She in turn announced in the 1873 Relief Society conference, with certain satisfaction, one imagines, that “President Young is requiring the sisters to get students of Medicine. If they cannot meet their own expenses, we have means of doing so” (qtd. in Derr et al. 106).

As noted previously, Butler’s theory of gender performativity operates under Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir’s understanding of gender to be “an historical idea” or “situation” rather than “natural fact” (520). On this token, Cannon was situated in a place and time that had reified a concept of femaleness congruent with higher education, particularly in the medical field. Romania B. Pratt, Ellis R. Shipp, and Maggie Shipp were Mormon women “called” by Young to study medicine before Cannon knew about the Michigan opportunity, and the ambitions of the younger doctor-to-be had inherited a certain degree of normalization from the previous generation’s steps forward. To further contextualize historically, the Victorian notion of “separate spheres,” often used to bar women from engaging in public activity was interpreted to almost mandate female doctors for the sake of propriety. As Linda Wilcox notes, “The motivation behind this movement
came not so much from a desire to promote equal opportunity for women as from a desire to head off the influence of Gentile doctors and especially to keep obstetrical care as a female province" (33). With a hint of warning, Eliza R. Snow stated at a meeting of the Cooperative of General Retrenchment Association in 1873 that, "We want sister physicians that can officiate in any capacity that the gentlemen are called upon to officiate and unless they educate themselves the gentlemen that are flocking in our midst will do it" (qtd. in Crall 10-11). Female Mormon doctors would both keep Gentile practice at bay and pacify Victorian fears of immodesty; consequently, as Wilcox further notes, "Mormon women . . . were doubly qualified by gender and by religion for this work" (33). Hence, the "historical idea" within which Cannon was situated made it conceivable for her to pursue a medical career without deviating from the normative gendered script.

Cannon continued to cross into and redefine traditionally male-dominated spheres when she entered the world of politics—first as a suffragist and later as a state senator. As in her medical school education, however, she was far from being a lone trailblazer. Years before she was politically active, the "great indignation meeting" of 1870 had established Mormon women as political actors, fully capable of functioning in the public sphere (Wagenen 66). The purpose of this meeting was to protest the Cullom Act, an anti-polygamy bill recently introduced in Congress, as well as to demand their revoked suffrage. Their spirited articulateness challenged the nation's construct of Mormon women as slavish dupes and made room in the Mormon identity for politicized women. For these early Mormon feminists, fighting for women's rights was inextricable from fighting against anti-polygamy legislation; hence, the suffrage movement in Utah simultaneously expanded Mormon female identity while upholding traditional Mormonism. The Utah Woman Suffrage Song Book is a microcosmic case of this phenomenon: to the tune of the chorus of "Hope of Israel," for example, suffragists sang:

Woman, 'rise! thy penance o'er,
Sit thou in the dust no more;
Seize the scepter, hold the fan,
Equal with thy brother, man
(qtd. in Derr et al. 147)

Hence, Mormon women, Cannon included, used their Mormon lexicon to form their discourses on gender equality, whether in demonstrations, speeches, or rewritten hymns.

Suffrage was still an important issue when Cannon returned to Utah after a self-imposed exile. (During the years of enforced anti-polygamy legislature, Cannon and her small daughter went "underground" in order to avoid incriminating
Angus, her polygynous husband, and avoid being called to court to testify against her patients. For more information on this chapter of Cannon's life, see Lieber and Sillito’s *Letters from Exile: The Correspondence of Martha Hughes Cannon and Angus M. Cannon, 1886–1888.* Having earned multiple degrees, including a degree in oratory, she became an intelligent and vital voice in Utah’s and the nation’s suffragist movement. An 1894 speech published in the *Exponent* shows that she saw gender as a historically situated script, but also as mutable. “Once to be born a female was to become a plaything or a slave,” she declared, “today in the best most cultivated, and most powerful circles woman is the peer of the noblest man” (Cannon 115). Still operating to an extent within a gender essentialist and separate spheres ideology, she argues, “the difference in the natures of men and women, is not a difference in value, but the kind of merit. He has qualities which she has not; she possesses traits and genius that he has not, they differ from each other, and to God they are equal with each other” (115). Female liberation doesn’t entail individual masculinization, she insinuates, but rather a feminized cultural script. “In these modern times the standards of value have been readjusted,” she then states, going on to compare “masculine” and “feminine” traits: “whereas once physical strength and reckless courage were held in the highest and almost exclusive esteem of mankind—now the gems of wisdom, culture, purity, beauty, love, and skill have a value which may outweigh and purchase that brute force once so priceless” (115). Interestingly, the following poem published in the *Exponent* later in the year exhibits similar language in support of cultural reform:

We but ask for freedom and the right to live and be  
What we are designed in God’s great plan;  
And we’re sure all thinking men will very shortly see  
Women must have equal rights with man [ . . ]  
We must pay our taxes, and the laws we must obey.  
And it’s time an era now began  
When in the elections we can also have a say –  
Woman should have equal rights with man  
(qtd. in Crall 62)

This poem exhibits the scripts Cannon and Mormon suffragists interpreted to further their cause. The plea for an era of egalitarianism is tellingly framed within a religious plea to “be / What we are designed in God’s great plan.” Well aware of the cultural scripts they inherited, Cannon and the author of this poem believe that God’s plan includes equality—i.e., women should no longer be treated as slaves and should have political voice. However, it is worth noting that Cannon’s vision of a feminized culture and the phrase “what we are designed in God’s great plan” nevertheless appeal to the Victorian notion of gender essentialism, a “deeply entrenched or sedimented [expectation] of gendered existence” (Butler 524). Her understanding of gender, then, is an interpretation of the social forces that constitute her as a gendered subject.
Politics is generally considered a masculine sphere, but Cannon lived up to her own principle of “feminizing” the culture/script rather than “masculinizing” herself in order to fit in. After she was elected State Senator in 1896, she said to a reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner*, “I shall take great interest in all the sanitary bills, of course, and all bills pertaining to educational matters” (qtd. in Black). This was consistent with the traditional script of women performing as nurturers, and the oft-cited perception of women in the “public sphere” operating as “social housekeepers.” Cannon was well aware of this. “Women are good ones for those things,” she said, “We know how to keep house and we know how to keep a city” (qtd. in Black). True to her word, the bills she introduced as senator related to public health and education, all of which became laws. She helped create and became a member of the State Board of Health, which significantly improved municipal sanitation. While the Board’s attempts to require smallpox vaccination and improve livestock sanitation were unsuccessful, it eradicated unsanitary drinking fountains and improved Salt Lake’s sewage system, thus lowering high infant mortality rates and the spread of typhoid (Edwards 5, Graña 96–97). She passed an act to provide for the compulsory education of deaf, mute, and blind children, and built a hospital for this explicit use (Graña 90). Her act to protect the health of women and children employees required the seemingly obvious amenity of chairs for women to rest in while they were not working. She helped defeat a lobby intending to dissolve the State Board of Public Examiners, which certified doctors and midwives and “prevent[ed] incompetents from practicing medicine” (Wells 48). In sum, Cannon adhered to her own advice that, “To secure just laws and then execution [sic] will require the exercise of much common sense and at this point woman’s foresight and quick judgment would be an aid in the construction of good government” (Cannon 114).

While cultural context is key to understanding gender performance, Butler notes that “the body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations” (Butler 526). Rather, just as scripts can be individually interpreted and enacted, “so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” (526). While pointing out the historical events that influenced Cannon’s construct of appropriate female behavior, her agency cannot be disregarded. At times, in fact, her opinions were frankly discordant with mainstream Church discourse. In an 1896 interview with a reporter from the *San Francisco Examiner*, for instance, she states, “Motherhood is a great thing, a glorious thing, and it ought to be a successful thing. It will be when it is regulated. Some day there will be a law compelling people to have no more than a certain number of children and the mothers of the land can live as they ought to live” (Black 5).

To an earlier Mormon worldview, the idea that a woman living or performing as
she ought to live could entail birth control would have been antithetical. Indeed, one of the main points of polygamy was to provide physical accommodations for spirits needing to come to earth. As Orson Pratt expounded at length in his 1852 talk “Celestial Marriage,” the object of marriage is to multiply the “species,” and having plural wives enables maximum reproduction. In addition, the nation was in the throes of an anti-abortion crusade, and at the time contraception and infanticide were frequently characterized as indistinguishable (Bush 13). Mormons were similarly seized up in the national scare, as well as the national confusion, as John Taylor conveyed when he mourned in 1882, “already are licentiousness and debauchery corrupting, undermining and destroying society; already are we interfering with the laws of nature and stopping the functions of life, and have become the slayers of our own offspring” (62).

Even in this dissent, however, Cannon did not completely depart from the script; rather, she merely continued to interpret it. At one point in the *San Francisco Examiner* interview, she adds as if to validate a point, “Our great teacher, Brigham Young, understood all these” (qtd. in Black 5). By “all these,” she signified gender equality: “He said, I heard him say it with these ears of mine, ‘The day shall come when men and women shall walk together side by side in the temple.’ That day is dawning now.” Her very next comment, “Electricity will soon do away with much of the domestic drudgery,” demonstrates that, in her mind, with equality in the temple would come gender equality in society. The following quote by Young further emphasizes the crucial point that Cannon’s egalitarian version of “doing” gender was not without authoritative permission:

> We believe that women are useful, not only to sweep houses, wash dishes, make beds, and raise babies, but that they should stand behind the counter, study law or physic, or become good book-keepers and be able to do the business in any counting house, and all this to enlarge their sphere of usefulness for the benefit of society at large. In following these things they but answer the design of their creation. These, and many more things of equal utility are incorporated in our religion, and we believe in and try to practice them. (61)

Young’s vision would be impossible, Cannon insinuates, if women were only subject to the “domestic drudgery” of “wash tubs and baby flannels” and “the worship of the holy stove” (Black 5). Thus, according to her interpretation of the script, Young’s sanction for women to “enlarge their sphere of usefulness” resulted in Cannon’s almost de facto reading in favor of women controlling their own fertility.

Oftentimes when scholars discuss nineteenth-century Mormon women, they tend to depict them either as presiding matriarchs or oppressed victims of patriarchy. The former rejects conventional gender roles, the latter epitomizes
them, and both are caricatures. Butler’s theory of gender as performance offers
a humanizing balance between the liberated feminist and the subordinate. Keeping in mind that historical subjects like Cannon, as extraordinary as they
are, “enact[ed] interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” (Black 5) encourages us to examine those directives, giving us a glimpse into their zeitgeist. While Cannon was constrained by her gender in many ways—for instance, polygamy often left her feeling abandoned by her husband, and going underground forced her to stop practicing medicine—it would be a mistake to think that Cannon herself envisioned Mormon women as capable of anything less than presiding matriarchy. “Show me a nation,” she said, “where the machinery of every household is conducted by an intelligent woman, who is its superintendent—Queen if you please—and not its drudge—assisted by the advice and counsel of the masculine element, and I will show you a nation that has well nigh reached the Zenith of its glory” (Cannon 114). True, her language of emancipation is domestic-bound, which might moderate its progressive message to twenty-first-century sensibilities, but it is nonetheless a stirringly, even daringly, emancipatory interpretation of her script.

Works Cited


