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“The Women of the Bee-Hive”:**Depiction of Mormon Women in Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing**

By the time the Latter-day Saints had settled in the Great Basin, travel writing had become a major genre of American literature. During the nineteenth century, a mass-reading American public who wished to experience the exotic vicariously were consuming book-length travel narratives and articles in American periodicals at a prodigious rate. Naturally, many travel-writers making their way West to chronicle the overland passage and capitalize on the tastes of the eastern readership paused in Utah to capture in prose the strange religion and peculiar people they observed there. The Mormons thus became a subject of great interest in Western travel narratives, and due to the unorthodox marital practices of the Mormons—which both repulsed and intrigued the eastern public—Mormon women became a subject of particular interest. Although these travel writers were generally united in their intrigue and repulsion of Mormon plural marriage, they often varied greatly in how they construed and depicted the odd practices of matrimony they observed.

While an analysis of how nineteenth-century travelers portrayed Mormons and Utah is certainly nothing new,¹ most commentators and historians have either looked at the large picture or conversely narrowed the focus of their research to specific travelers (most notably Mark Twain, Sir Richard Francis Burton, and Artemus Ward),² narrow time periods,³ or by the

¹ See for example Eric Eliason, “Curious Gentiles and Representational Authority in the City of the Saints,” *Religion and American Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), 155-190; T.K. Hafen, “City of Saints, City of Sinners: The Development of Salt Lake City as a Tourist Attraction, 1869-1900,” *Western Historical Quarterly* Vol. 28, No. 3 (Autumn 1997), 342-277; and Leonard Arrington, “Mormonism: Views from Without and Within,” *BYU Studies* 14 (Winter 1974), 140-153.

² See Richard H. Cracroft, “Distorting Polygamy for Fun and Profit: Artemus Ward and Mark Twain among the Mormons,” *BYU Studies* 14 (Winter 1974), 272-288; and Fawn M. Brodie, *The Devil Drives: A Life of Sir Richard Burton* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1967).

authors' nationalities.⁴ This paper, however, will address how female travel writers depicted the Mormon women they encountered on their journey to the Great Basin. It will do so by first comparing and contrasting female travel accounts with their male counterparts' works, and then summarizing three general positions taken by these female travelers in their representation of Mormon women—that of the homely Mormon woman, the immoral Mormon woman, and the noble Mormon woman.

It has been noted by Mormon historians Ronald Walker, David Whitaker, and James Allen that during the nineteenth century, “more than four hundred journalists, literary figures, ministers, military men, politicians, territorial appointees, and ordinary tourists visited the Mormons and recorded their impressions in articles, chapters in books, memoirs, and travel guides.”⁵ This vast body of literature has received extensive treatment from a variety of historians interested in both Mormon studies and Western history. However, much of this secondary work has largely focused on male travelers' writings while ignoring volumes of work written by females who made the trek out west. One possible explanation is that prior to the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, the percentage of male travelers who visited Utah greatly outnumbered that of females. After the completion of the railroad, a swarm of females made their way west, most coming from Great Britain. Historian Valerie Fifer, who specializes in tourism history, observed that the attraction of the Mormons made Salt Lake City

³ Edwina J. Snow, “Singular Saints: The Image of the Mormons in Book-Length Travel Accounts, 1847-57” (M.A. Thesis, George Washington University, 1971); and Martin Mitchell, “Gentile Impressions of Salt Lake City,” *Geographical Review*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (July 1997), 334-352.

⁴ See for example Karen M. Morin and Jeanne Kay Guelke, “Strategies of Representation, Relationship, and Resistance: British Women Travelers and Mormon Plural Wives, ca. 1870-1890,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (Sept. 1998), 436-462; Edwina Snow, “British Travelers View the Saints, 1847-1877,” *BYU Studies* 31, No. 2 (Spring 1991), 63-81; and Wilfried Decoo, “The Image of Mormonism in French Literature: Part I,” *BYU Studies* 14 (Winter 1974), 157-175.

⁵ Ronald W. Walker, David J. Whittaker, and James B. Allen, *Mormon History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 12.

“the first and forever the most popular of all the side-trips on the original Union Pacific-Central Pacific Railroad.”⁶

These women claimed that “their gender gave them legitimate and unique access and insights unavailable to men because plural marriage centered so firmly in women’s experience,” and to a certain degree, as Karen Morin and Jeanne Kay Guelke have pointed out, the plural marriage of the Mormons “with its connection to conventionally feminine themes of home, love, and family, was a ready-made topic for nineteenth-century women travel writers.”⁷ Upon arriving in Utah, many female travelers did make mention of gaining the confidence and trust of Mormon women looking for a gentile confidant to disclose their burdens to—something most male travel writers certainly did not enjoy the privilege of. In the end, though, the writings of female travelers seem to draw similar, if not exactly the same, conclusions as those of traveling men. Not only is there as much diversity of opinion among women as among men, but many female inferences mirror those drawn by male predecessors.

That men and women travelers depicted similar portraits of the Mormon women should not be surprising. As historian Edwina Jo Snow points out, travelers of both genders had similar interests, namely “[American] democracy, Christianity, the role of women, the sanctity of monogamous marriage, and foreign immigrants.”⁸ In addition, nearly all travel writers were influenced by the writings of those who had journeyed to Salt Lake City before them, as well as novels that included Mormon characters and plots. Thus the travel writings of most females either confirmed previous stereotypes of the Mormons or served as a sort of corrective response

⁶ Valerie Fifer, *American Progress: The Growth of the Transport, Tourist, and Information Industries in the Nineteenth-Century West* (Chester: Globe Pequot Press, 1988), 285.

⁷ Morin and Guelke, “Strategies of Representation,” 442.

⁸ Snow, “Singular Saints,” 2.

to those stereotypes. Most notably, all travel writers brought with them some degree of knowledge regarding the Mormon practice of polygamy, and Mormon women were almost always defined by their relation—whether direct or indirect—to the odd marital system. Descriptions of Mormon women themselves were almost always incidental to a larger discussion of polygamy, usually as an illustration of some aspect or influence of the marriage system. Thus depictions of the Mormon woman were bound up with how their descriptors viewed and understood polygamy. They often imposed stereotypical understandings of polygamy onto the women themselves, and thus often saw the women as either products of the system or as an explanation of how such a system is possible, or both.

The creation of the several Mormon woman stereotypes in nineteenth-century travel-writing can probably be viewed as an attempt—though a poor attempt in many accounts—to understand an institution that to most Westerners was simply baffling. Most nineteenth-century Europeans and Euro-Americans could not understand why any woman in the “civilized” Western world would choose to subject herself to polygamy. The Mormon woman was an enigma. The urge to explain that enigma was the impetus for the stereotyping that surfaced first in the aforementioned lurid novels and subsequently in most travel accounts. Following in the steps of male travel writers, females varied in their portrayal of Mormon women. Many saw them as products of the Mormon patriarchal system—oppressed, homely, and/or self-sacrificing. Others conversely labeled the Mormon women as immoral and compared them to concubines of the Orient or indiscreet prostitutes. Finally, a third label applied to Mormon women was that of noble, pious, and respectable women, firm in their faith (misguided as that faith may be).

The depiction of Mormon women as “‘homely’ creatures,” though not originated by Mark Twain, was certainly popularized in his 1872 volume, *Roughing It*. In classic style, Twain concluded that

the man who marries one of [these homely Mormon women] has done an act of Christian charity which entitles him to the kindly applause of mankind, not their harsh censure—and the man that marries sixty of them has done a deed of open-handed generosity so sublime that the nations should stand uncovered in his presence and worship in silence.⁹

This typecast of Mormon women was used as a way to both explain how such an institution as polygamy was possible in the “civilized Christian world” and also to demonstrate the purportedly deplorable effects of the practice. Many British writers succumbed to the first impulse—describing the ugliness of Mormon women to explain why any woman would marry into polygamy. Mrs. F.D. Bridges, who described the Latter-day Saint women as “sad and ugly,” closely mimicked the description by male counterpart Samuel Bowles, who speculated that perhaps “good-looking women being supposed to have more chances for matrimony than their plainer sisters, . . . insist upon having the whole of one man, and leave the Mormon husbands to those whose choice is like Hobson’s?”¹⁰ In other words, the women of polygamy were simply those who couldn’t hack it in monogamy, and thus sought refuge in the much larger and less discriminating social network of Mormonism, where men who, yearning for progeny—or, as Richard Bushman puts it, “lust[ing] for kin”¹¹—in order to secure a celestial glory that

⁹ Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens), *Roughing It* (San Francisco, Cal.: A. Roman & Company, 1872), 101.

¹⁰ Samuel Bowles, *Across the Continent: A Summer’s Journey to the Rocky Mountains, The Mormons, and the Pacific States* (Springfield, Mass.: Samuel Bowles & Company, 1865), 126. “Hobson’s Choice” is an idiomatic expression for no choice at all. Etymologically, the expression apparently alludes to “Thomas Hobson (1544–1630), a livery stable owner at Cambridge, England who, in order to rotate the use of his horses, offered customers the choice of either taking the horse in the stall nearest the door—or taking none at all.”

¹¹ Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*

required quantity irrespective of quality, could not afford (or did not care) to be quite as particular in their spousal selections (he could, after all, always net another).

The latter impulse—to use the “homeliness” of Mormon women as an illustration of the effects of polygamy—was far more common. Several travel writers commented on the debasing influence of polygamy, using the women’s appearance as evidence of their claims. “The Mormon girls, as a rule, are very beautiful, with fine eyes, soft, rich complexions like a peach-blossom,” remarked Lady Duffus Hardy. “It would be terrible to think they would ever sink into the faded, woe-worn Mormon wife.”¹² Fellow British traveler Emily Katherine Bates made a similar observation six years later, in 1887.

One of the arguments for polygamy is that a fine healthy race can be produced by this means alone. I am bound to say that I saw no sufficient justification for the doctrine in the appearance of the Salt Lake City Mormons. As a rule, the men and women are hard-featured careworn and anxious-looking. . . . I never saw so many ‘homely’ (we should call them ugly) looking women in all my life. Polygamy must indeed be looked upon as a sacred duty to induce the men to take more than *one* wife from amongst them.¹³

In several writings, the reference to homeliness seemed to be more in reference to a lack of Eastern fashion than necessarily to women’s bodies or physical features. Mrs. B.G. Ferris, wife of a government official sent to Utah in the 1850s, described the appearance of young brides. “[They] are bedizened with some finery; but all look poorly clothed for the season.”¹⁴ After months among the Mormons, she again lamented that “it is not common here [to find] good taste in dress.”¹⁵ It seems as though Mark Twain’s satirical take on polygamous wives

¹² Lady Duffus Hardy, *Through Cities and Prairie Lands: Sketches of an American Tour* (New York: R. Worthington, 1881), 111.

¹³ E. Katherine Bates, *A Year in the Great Republic* (London: Ward & Downey, 1887), 225.

¹⁴ Mrs. B.G. Ferris, *The Mormons at Home: With Some Incidents of Travel from Missouri to California, 1852-3, In a Series of Letters* (New York: AMS Press, 1971), 133.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

both cemented the idea of Mormon women as “homely creatures” and influenced later writers’, notably females’, own narratives of their experience among the Mormons.¹⁶

The second general depiction of Mormon women was characterizing them as immoral. This was perhaps due in part to a desire among Americans and Europeans to understand why any women in the Western world would subject themselves to such a system as plural marriage in a country where monogamy was not only the norm, but was the only system of marriage deemed acceptable. Eastern harems were frequently associated with lust and debauchery, so it was natural to also attach such stigma to Mormonism, which was often done by comparing it to the Oriental marriage customs. As a way of understanding polygamy, the characterization of Mormon women as immoral was initially little more than a copout and typically betrays a writer with no or very little actual association with the Mormon people, or one who refused to let reality influence preconceived notions and disdain for polygamy.¹⁷ For some more liberal women, plural marriage was acceptable among people of the Orient, but Mormon marital customs were not becoming of Christianity and Western civilization. Maria Theresa Longworth, for instance noted that she had lived in Oriental countries

where plurality of wives was the law of the land, but had never thought a man a monster because he had two or three sultanas, a score of “yearling wives,” and numberless others of different grades. But that was in the East, and they were Mahomedans. Living in the West, and being Christians, . . . then . . . made the crime.¹⁸

¹⁶ See Morin and Guelke, “Strategies of Representation,” 445.

¹⁷ Geographer Martin Mitchell noted that “especially with polygamy, a certain voyeuristic anticipation was in place on entry. Whether the observations were truly made at the time or came in hindsight is difficult to ascertain.” (Mitchell, “Gentile Impression of Salt Lake City,” 344).

¹⁸ Maria Theresa Longworth, *Teresina in America* (London: R. Bentley and Son, 1875), 36. See also Morin and Guelke, “Strategies of Representation,” 447.

Florence A. Merriam simply described her feeling that “polygamy has developed all the evil in the natures of the weak Mormon women, while it has made the best women do outrage to the most sacred instincts of womanhood.”¹⁹

A later move away from the comparison of Mormon polygamy to Islamic customs did not end the descriptions of Mormon women as immoral. Rather, more stinging accusations of prostitution and incest covered the pages of female writers’ travelogues. Edwina Snow summarized that “[the more] hostile travelers, having no accurate details to relate, fill their accounts with the stereotyped image of polygamy, an institution fostering legalized prostitution and incest.”²⁰ Mrs. B.G. Ferris, for instance, noted with disgust the excitement of a middle-aged Mormon man whose daughter had just entered into plural marriage. “Here was a father, dancing a merry jig over the prostitution of his own daughter.”²¹ Accusations of incestuous ritual occurring under the all-seeing eye within Mormon temples was a common motif in anti-Mormon exposes. Catherine V. Waite, in her travelogue, recalled that “a man by the name of G.D. Watts is married to his half sister and this case has often been cited as the worst phase of polygamy.”²² In most instances, though, in order to utilize this inflammatory keyword, travel writers often had to slightly modify the definition of “incest” to refer to the polygamic practice of marrying two women who were sisters or were otherwise related.²³

¹⁹ Florence A. Merriman, *My Summer in a Mormon Village* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1894), 137.

²⁰ Snow, “Singular Saints,” 105.

²¹ Ferris, *The Mormons at Home*, 183.

²² C.V. Waite, *Adventures in the Far West, and Life Among the Mormons* (Chicago: C.V. Waite and Co., 1882), 128-29.

²³ An article entitled “Incest Among the Mormons,” printed in the New York *Sun* stated: “As revolting as polygamy is by itself, the Mormons have complicated it with the repulsive accompaniment of incest. These two crimes, the most abhorrent of all crimes, from which not only the civilized and Christianized, but the natural man, even recoils, are incorporated with their system. It is no uncommon thing in Utah to see a man have a mother and

Thus Mormon polygamy was often associated “with Mohammedanism, Turkish pashas, seraglios, incest, prostitution, jealousy, and lust—a sensational if not a racy topic.” And all too often “travelers [were forced to] observe that polygamy [was] not as bad as anti-Mormon literature would have it.”²⁴

The last of the significant stereotypes set by female travel writers was that of the virtuous, noble, and pious lady of Mormondom. Although this stereotype appears to be (and in many cases, is) complimentary and praiseworthy of Mormon women, it was often the only compliment travelers could muster enough kindness to grant the Latter-day Saint females. Emily Pfeiffer, for instance, remarked that “fanaticism among the women dominates natural sentiment,”²⁵ but nevertheless gave a positive portrayal of perhaps the most fanatic Mormon woman of all—Eliza R. Snow. Pfeiffer described the elderly Snow as “an old lady with a mild and serious face, spare frame, and the sort of dignity which comes from the possession of, and living up to, an ideal. She had the high narrow forehead of a visionary, was upright, and her black dress hung upon her with a certain homely grace. . . . [She had] the spirit of a Hebrew Prophetess.”²⁶

Other women seemed more genuinely impressed with Mormon women, and found much to compliment. Sarah Wood Kane, whose views no doubt were influenced by her husband’s friendly relations with the Mormons, remarked that Mormon women “appeared to be a happy and contented,” and noticed “the unconscious tokens of a tender intimacy” between two polygamous wives of the same man.²⁷ Kane even recalled that, contrary to popular stereotypes,

daughter, or two sisters, or his own nieces for his wives” (“Pictures of Mormonism,” an unidentified newspaper clipping from Ontario Archives, Mackenzie-Lindsey Collection, no. 3275; the article is reprinted from the *New York Sun*).

²⁴ Snow, “Singular Saints,” 96.

²⁵ Emily Pfeiffer, *Flying Leaves from East to West* (London, Field and Tuer, 1885), 142.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 144-145.

Mormon women “wore very much the same countenances as the American women of any large rustic and village congregation.” She was at a loss to find ““hopeless, dissatisfied, worn’ expression travelers’ books” had described all Mormon women as possessing.²⁸ Kane was not alone in her praise. Helen Hunt Jackson went so far as to say:

If the truth were to be known, there would be few persons in whose minds would be any sentiment except profound pity for the Mormon woman—pity, moreover, intensified by admiration. There has never been a class or sect of women since the world began who have endured for religion’s sake a tithe of what has been, and is, and forever must be, endured by the women of the Mormon Church. It has become customary to hold them as disreputable women, light and loose, unfit to associate with the virtuous, undeserving of any esteem. Never was a greater injustice committed.²⁹

And the liberal Frenchwoman Olympe Audouard simply noted with approval that “the Mormon woman is happy” in this system “of biblical patriarchal polygamy.”³⁰

Not all portrayals of Mormon women in travel literature, then, were negative. Ultimately, all writers were prone, albeit subconsciously, to employ what one scholar has called “strategies of ‘othering,’” by which “the places [and the people] visited are constructed as alien.”³¹

Opinions were also influenced by one’s background, motives, and preconceived notions. First and foremost among these notions was polygamy, which “framed their interpretation of Mormon physical and cultural landscapes.”³² Influenced by the popular media and travelogues of those

²⁷ Elizabeth Wood Kane, *Twelve Mormon Homes Visited in Succession on a Journey Through Utah to Arizona* (Philadelphia: Printed by William Wood, 1874), 12, 46.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁹ Helen Hunt Jackson, “The Women of the Bee-Hive,” *The Century*, Vol. 28, No 1 (May 1884), 120.

³⁰ Mme. Olympe Audouard, *A travers l’Amerique: Ler Far West* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1869), 340, 350; as cited in Decoo, “The Image of Mormonism in French Literature: Part I,” 174.

³¹ David Seed, “Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing: An Introduction,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 34 (2004): 1; Seed is summarizing the views of Sara Mills, as she expressed in her study *Discourses of Difference* (1991).

³² Martha Allen, *Traveling West: 19th Century Women on the Overland Routes* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1987), 35.

who went before, female travelers responded by either reinforcing and adding to negative stereotypes of Mormon women as homely and ugly or immoral and lascivious, or they instead chose to cast a positive light upon the Latter-day Saint lady and break down former labels of these western women.