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Bayard Taylor's "The Prophet": Mormonism as Literary Taboo

Thomas D. Schwartz*

In recent years scholars have been piecing together the story of Mormonism's bizarre image in American literature. The basic historical outline, as Leonard Arrington and Jon Haupt have argued, is that the Mormons, "ignored by literary masters," quickly "fell into the hands of hack writers who denied them a grandeur they rightfully deserved."¹ Consequently, the hack writer's image of Mormons has triumphed and the Mormons entered nineteenth century American literature either as "wily insincere leaders," or as "ignorant, fanatical followers."² Neal Lambert and Richard Cracroft have similarly found the nineteenth century fictional Mormon to be either a "murderer or a seducer,"³ and scholars seem in agreement that the Mormon in fiction settled firmly into the "stereotype of the popular villain."⁴

No one has attempted to explain why, popular as it was among the reading public, the theme of Mormonism was ignored by America's foremost writers. Neal Lambert has suggested by implication that the Mormon's popular image did not lend itself to great literature. "Polygamy, secret rites, blood atonement, [and] priestly orders . . . have made the Mormons slip easily into a stereotype for slick fiction and

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¹Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt, "The Missouri and Illinois Mormons in Anti-Bellum Fiction," *Dialogue* (Spring 1970), 49.

²Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt, "Intolerable Zion: The Image of Mormonism in Nineteenth Century Literature," *Western Humanities Review*, XXII (Summer 1968), 245.

³Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, "Through Gentile Eyes: A Hundred Years of the Mormon in Fiction," *The New Era*, March 1972, p. 19.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 14.

gross comedy.”⁵ This, of course, better explains the interest of hack writers than it does the silence of literary greats.

A partial explanation can be offered through a discussion of Bayard Taylor’s poetry drama, *The Prophet: A Tragedy* (1874), the only significant break in that silence. The play, which has hitherto escaped the notice of Mormon scholars, is itself an indispensable addition to the literary history of Mormonism; and the play’s reception by the critics, the denunciation of Taylor’s attempt to write of Mormonism from no less a “literary master” than Henry James, clearly suggests that Mormonism was not simply ignored by America’s greatest writers of the period, but rather, was consciously avoided.

During the 1870s and 1880s Bayard Taylor was a highly regarded man of letters. He included among his friends such illuminati as Mark Twain (who described Taylor as “a genial, lovable, simple hearted soul”), Howells, Longfellow, Holmes, Whittier, and Bryant. A man of no small ego or ambition, Taylor aspired to greatness as a poet and produced a considerable quantity of lyrical verse characterized by technical proficiency and the sort of liberal ideas which were considered safe in the New England of his time. Today most critics agree with Richard Henry Stoddard’s assessment that Taylor was a versemaker and not a poet, and he is remembered chiefly for his 1871 translation of Goethe’s *Faust*, which even now is considered by some the most accurate English translation of the great German epic. Taylor has often been given the dubious title of poet laureate of the Gilded Age, for he reflected in his work the homely sentiments, the common goals, and the self-satisfaction of his readers. Like the age, his aspirations were high but his talents limited.

Early in his career, Taylor felt that a religious theme would tap his deepest powers. After immersing himself in nature worship, Taylor abandoned altogether the idea of an institutionalized religion for the possibility of inner communion with the divine force, and became zealously concerned with what he saw as the heresy of orthodoxy. Christians, he felt, were paying too close attention to the scripture, refusing to accept what scripture did not guarantee.

Taylor, needing a dramatic vehicle for his ideas about an

⁵Neal E. Lambert, “Saints, Sinners and Scribes: A Look at the Mormons in Fiction,” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, XXXVI (Winter 1968), 64.

excessive adherence to scripture and the dangers of fanaticism, saw a rich potential in the phenomenon of Mormonism. At this time the Utah Mormons were coming under increasing attack from the American press because of polygamy. Seeing the tragic possibilities in the ongoing Mormon drama, Taylor began as early as 1862 to think of Mormon history as the perfect vehicle for his project. By the mid-sixties he had already committed himself so firmly to a drama about Mormonism that when Thomas Bailey Aldrich told Taylor that he was working on a piece entitled *Seven Mormon Wives*, a stunned Taylor immediately felt that his own piece had been purloined and later feared that Aldrich would accuse him of having stolen the Mormon theme. It was not until 1873, however, that he wrote the play. The conception of writing a Mormon play, he wrote in 1873, "struck me at first as so important that I kept it so many years in order to grow up to it."⁶

Taylor's letters from Gotha, Weimar, and Leipzig between August and November of 1873, during the writing of *The Prophet*, reflect intense satisfaction with his work. Supposedly vacationing after the nervous exhaustion which followed his translation of *Faust* in 1871, Taylor felt himself at the peak of his poetic powers and believed that he had found a theme worthy of his best.

Writing to J. R. Osgood and T. B. Aldrich, he predicted accurately that "the poem will certainly attract a great deal of attention—possibly of controversy. I assure you in advance of its originality and of its power, as contrasted with my former works." (*Letters*, 636) Several days later he wrote Aldrich, "The poem is by far the best thing I have ever written." (*Letters*, 638)

That the play is based on the early history of the Mormon Church is made clear both by the play and Taylor's letters. In November, 1873, he wrote, "The history of the Mormons is a back-ground to the poem. Nauvoo is suggested; but the conception of the prophet's nature is quite independent." (*Letters*, 635) Much of the plot material, he suggested, is taken from early Mormon history. "It is full of passion and intrigue; among the scenes are: a camp meeting; miracles in a mountain valley; camps on the prairies; the Temple of the New Zion;

⁶Marie Hansen-Taylor and Horace E. Scudder, eds., *Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor*, II (New York 1884), 636. Hereafter: *Letters*.

secret councils of the Twelve; and at last battle and death.” (*Letters*, 635) In December, 1873, he informed Aldrich that the play was to be:

wholly American in scene, character, and plot; in fact the story could not happen in any other part of the world. The rise of the Mormons under Joe Smith, the building of the Temple at Nauvoo, and the death of Joe Smith there, form a sufficient historical background. (*Letters*, 638)

Taylor’s letters also make clear his intention to write something more than an expose on Mormonism. “The poem is a two-edged sword,” he wrote in November, “cutting the fossilized orthodox to the heart no less than the Mormons.” (*Letters*, 635) Taylor insisted that he was not writing about religious aberrations but about human passion. In February, 1874 he wrote:

I make the origin of the Mormon sect and the Joe Smith tragedy the historical background of my poem; but my plot has the universal human element. It stirs up more than one question which disturbs the undercurrents of the world just now; for it is pervaded with that sort of logic which lay behind the Greek idea of fate. (*Letters*, 647)

In another letter he spoke of the hero as having a “Hamlet-nature.” (*Letters* 635) Taylor clearly felt that in the theme of Mormonism he had found a framework for a dramatic presentation of issues which he considered central to American society.

David Starr, who dominates *The Prophet* as Taylor’s fictional Joseph Smith, is introduced as a spiritually intense young man living in a period of religious unrest. David’s father interprets his dissatisfaction as a product of adolescence and suggests to David’s mother that what the youth needs is a wife. This confusion of David’s spiritual unease for sexual restlessness provides early tension for the theme of polygamy which is central to the later development of the play. At a camp meeting, David finds in the preacher’s words evidence of a loss in power in contemporary Christianity. In Mormon terms, he senses apostasy. The preacher calls on David to confess. David answers:

The heart within me aches from the stress of faith:
I have no need to pray, except for power,

Which is the seal and covenant for them
Whom he has chosen.⁷

David seeks the restoration of the power of Christ's church: the miracles of faith, the gifts of tongues, healings, and spiritual manifestations. While not rejecting prayer and confession, he finds these preoccupations indicative of a loss of power. He shouts:

Have you the privilege
To darken counsel with your cloud of words?
To teach the lesser part, reject the whole,
And mutilate His glory unto men? (*Taylor*, 13)

David also has graver doubts augmented by the impotence of modern Christianity. Momentarily tempted by atheism, he doubts if Christianity was ever more than it now is, and he cries:

O my God! There is no faith, no power,
Nor miracle; and never can have been.
But this is madness! This makes truth a lie,
Makes life an emptiness far worse than death. (*Taylor*, 14)

Encouraged by his wife, Rhoda, and his servant, Peter, David determines to become a preacher. He stirs up some controversy and wins the admiration of Nimrod Kraft, Taylor's fictional Brigham Young. Kraft contrasts the vigor and personal strength of David to the enervated Christianity he has known, and says of David:

He claims his birthright, will possess,
And may restore to others, bringing back
The old, forgotten forces of the Church,
Whose right hand is Authority, whose left
Obedience. But, however, he may build,
My coarser strength must hew and set the stones.
If but my purpose can be squared with his. (*Taylor*, 27)

From his first appearance in the play, Nimrod Kraft is depicted as a self-seeking Iago, a man of demonic determination, who manipulates David Starr into providing a framework for his own glory and dominion. Throughout the play Taylor describes the two leaders in fire imagery, David being the pure flame (spiritual, intuitive, a man of faith), Nimrod being the fuel (practical, sensible, a man of action).

⁷Bayard Taylor, *The Dramatic Works of Bayard Taylor* (Boston 1880), p. 12. Hereafter: *Taylor*.

Nimrod asks David to lay his hands upon his head and bestow upon him understanding and "the power to serve," but David falters, realizing that without the power he can not assume the office. However, David feels that Nimrod's desire obligates his exertion of faith, so he blesses Nimrod with whatever power he may possess.

Musing later, David convinces himself that authority is a consequence of faith. Here as elsewhere Taylor blends Protestant ideas into the fabric of his Mormon drama, omitting the Mormon claim to direct restoration of the power through heavenly messengers.

David assembles a crowd and speaks of his religious fears:

I tried to understand
The many promises that rust unused;
And all I asked, was, Are they granted yet? (*Taylor, 37*)

If faith were sufficient, he explains, the power of God would be restored. He ponders:

Who knowest whether I deserve or no
The signs of power,—Who, should I point, as now
And say, "Be Thou Removed." (*Taylor, 37*)

At these words a large part of the rock which he is standing upon falls with a great noise. The people cry out, recognizing David as a prophet.

This miracle, borrowed from the life of the prophet Matthias, seems irritatingly pale next to the events which began the ministry of Joseph Smith. In attempting to strengthen the credibility of the miracle, Taylor weakens the credibility of David's impact on his followers. It is one thing to follow a man who claims to have seen God and spoken directly with his Son, and with angels, and to have translated from golden plates the prophetic history of an ancient people, and it is quite another thing to follow a man who happens to have been standing on a rock speaking of faith, when the rock broke with a loud noise.

In Taylor's attempt to make the Mormon prophet appealing by reducing the supernatural aspects of his ministry, he strips the prophet of that which in the case of Joseph Smith made him a powerful leader. However interesting David Starr may be as a character, he is not a leader; and however credible he may be as an individual, he is conspicuously incredible as

the dictator which his dramatic role demands. The reader scours the play in vain for some property of a leader in David Starr, for self-confidence, charisma, determination, and finally must content himself with having ferreted out Starr's capacity for exuding a faint spiritual effervescence. Even David realizes before long that his miracle was slight, that the rock could have split by coincidence, and he comes to doubt his own prophetic calling.

With his newly gathered followers, David builds a city, which, though unnamed, is clearly Nauvoo. He sets the members to work on the Temple, establishes a Council of Twelve Apostles, the law of tithing, the principle of revelation, and a priesthood hierarchy.

As Nauvoo is being built, Livia, whom Nimrod describes as possessing "knowledge of the world," and "influence with her sex," approaches the camp and asks David for the gift of tongues. He blesses her and she speaks in Dutch, French, and Cherokee. The people naively take it as a wondrous miracle and David feels that he has met his equal in faith. When David praises Livia for her faith, she replies:

I was the harp-string, mute until you touched;
If to your ear the sound be melody,
Strike out of me the strong, full-handed chords
To your exaltment! (*Taylor*, 63)

More a seducer than a prophetess, Livia makes her purpose clear:

There is no woman lives but in her soul
Demands a bridegroom; failing one of flesh,
Then one of spirit. Learn to promise this
In secret visitations, mystic signs,
Make truth seem love, and knowledge ecstasy,
And you will lead our sex. (*Taylor*, 69)

One afternoon David's servant, Peter, talks to Nimrod about his marital predicament. He loves both Jane and Mary Ann and doesn't know which to marry. Nimrod asks why he should not marry both. "You've read your Bible," he explains; "What the Lord himself established for the fathers of the world, is justified to us." (*Taylor*, 79) Whereas in Mormon history polygamy was introduced by revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith, here it comes to Nimrod Kraft (Brigham Young), the man whom the gentile world had identified with

polygamy. Also it should be noted that although David speaks about revelation throughout the play, the ultimate authority rests with scripture, and as Taylor does not introduce the Mormon's claim to additional scriptures, this means that authority rests in the Bible. But again it should be remembered that Taylor is using Mormonism as a vehicle for his argument with Christianity.

Nimrod convinces the other members of the Twelve that polygamy is desirable and calls in David to hear their proposal:

We would restore that patriarchal home
The Lord preferred,—its fair, obedient wives,
Its heritage of Children; as He gave,
So giving now, that none be left alone
Or fruitless. (*Taylor*, 82-83)

David's belief in the need for a restoration of the primitive church predisposes him to the suggestion that polygamy reflects the power which has been lost. He also realizes that this would evoke the anger of the gentiles and make "a chasm impassable between us and the world." (*Taylor*, 83) Nevertheless, the desperate plan answers his need for a supreme test. "There is faith that loves a trial" (*Taylor*, 83), he says, affirming the plan. When he tells his wife, Rhoda, she pleads with him to change his mind. "Put me aside," she cries:

But think of innocent wives, whose joy of life,
So satisfied with trust in one man's truth,
Sustains them in long weariness and fear,
That ends in pangs, and endless, narrowing cares:
No, no: you will not rob them! (*Taylor*, 86)

David goes to the temple and as he prays, Livia enters and plays the organ. She lies and tells David that it was his faith which enabled her to play, and proclaims her love for David in words of spiritual union. They embrace and David finds a personal commitment to the new law. Meanwhile, Rhoda, at home, realizes that Livia's ingenuity has destroyed her marriage:

My tongue deceives my heart,
I speak but foolishness, and vex him more.
But hers makes beautiful a darkened thought,
Makes purity a secret selfishness,
And holy love an evil. (*Taylor*, 97)

She vainly goes through the Bible trying to find a verse

which denounces polygamy. Taylor's purpose again is to show that a close adherence to the Bible can lead one into moral turpitude or downright villainy.

Rhoda is not the only wife who is appalled by the new law. Because of their wives' indignation at plural marriage, two members of the Council of Twelve, Jones and Hugh, conspire against the prophet. They visit Colonel Hyde, the leader of the gentile forces, and guarantee him evidence that plural marriages are being performed in the Temple.

Following David's secret marriage to Livia, word comes that Colonel Hyde plans to suppress polygamy. Nimrod responds with indignation at the law's harrassment, and he fulminates:

What have we done that should alarm the law?
Low! Strife and murder in this border land
It scarcely chides, is patient of free lust,
Yet makes a culprit of the sanctioned love
That broadens home. (*Taylor*, 115)

Taylor denounces polygamy, not as illegal but as unnatural. The play becomes a poignant statement against polygamy, focusing not only on the spiritual development of David, but on the love and sorrow of Rhoda; and Taylor is at his best when he allows Rhoda to articulate her grief:

There's something in a woman's heart,
I think, so delicate, so soft a force,
That it will cling like steel, nor feel a bruise;
Yet loose one fibre, it may bleed to death. (*Taylor*, 124)

But she also knows now that David's life is endangered. Like the mother in the story of Solomon, who would rather give her baby to another woman than have it killed, Rhoda, worried about David's safety, goes to Livia for help. She knows that Livia has a quicker mind and will be more useful in saving David. But Livia, like the errant mother who cared little for life, is reluctant to help because she is thrilled by the glory of the trial that awaits David. It is not life but dramatic effects which she values.

When the soldiers come for David, he commissions Nimrod to take care of the Saints. As David turns to meet the soldiers, Nimrod tells the people not to lament. Nimrod prophesies that they will cross the river and "found another

Eschol in the West." Then David reappears, mortally wounded, supported by Rhoda and Livia. David asks the people to listen to his last revelation. Then he falls, exclaiming, "I see no more—but, yes! one blessed face;/ 'Tis yours! —You're with me, Rhoda! you, my/love!" (*Taylor*, 164) With David dying in her arms, Rhoda sends Livia away: "Leave us! You have no more a part in him./ He is all mine at last." (*Taylor*, 164)

David Starr had not been driven into polygamy through sensual desire—the usual fictional approach to the Mormon prophet. He genuinely saw himself as an instrument of the Lord in bringing about the restoration of all things. Nimrod Kraft had convinced Starr that polygamy was a necessary part of the old order of things. Starr's dying realization, that he had been duped by his strict adherence to the scriptures and that he had struck out against the wisdom of the heart, forced him to see his second marriage as adulterous. The reconciliation between Rhoda and David thus became a scene of repentance and forgiveness for an act of infidelity. The play ends with affirmation, as David Starr, fully aware of the mistakes of his past and the pain they have caused Rhoda, reestablishes in his dying moments the joy of monogamous love.

Despite Taylor's enthusiasm for his play, and the popularity which his translation of *Faust* had engendered, *The Prophet* did not receive critical acclaim. It was criticized both on points of poetry (its language was too commonplace, too realistic) and on the subject (the critics were not really interested in a poetized history of Mormonism). In November, 1874, Taylor responded to the criticism in a letter to Paul H. Hayne: "The critics are mistaken," he wrote "in supposing that my design was to represent a phase of Mormon history. The original conception was totally unconnected with any actual events; the features which suggest the Mormons were added long afterwards." (*Letters*, 664)

For Taylor, such a response was natural, even predictable, concerned as he was about his reputation and standing with the critics. His defense of the play from this point on becomes a denial of its Mormon elements and a reversal of his original ideas.

The most substantial attack on the play was a seven-page discussion in the prestigious *North American Review* by Henry

James, already a significant voice in American letters and the man whom T. S. Eliot later credited with having possessed the finest mind of his generation. To James the historical source was too glaring to be lightly disposed of. He writes:

[Taylor] has written the tragedy of Mormonism, and taken Joe Smith and Brigham Young for his heroes. His experiment has not, to our taste, been remarkably successful, but it is creditable to his intellectual pluck.⁸

Throughout the review James wavers between a revulsion against the subject of Mormonism and a respect for Bayard Taylor's literary reputation. However, his discussion centers on the subject of Mormonism:

It disturbs our faith a little to learn that the prophet is Mr. Joe Smith, and the denouement is to be the founding of Salt Lake City by Mr. Brigham Young; we reflect that there is a magic in associations, and we are afraid we scent vulgarity in these. But we are anxious to see what the author makes of them, and we grant that the presumption is in favor of his audacity. Mormonism we know to be a humbug and a rather nasty one. It needs at this time of day no "showing up," and Mr. Taylor has not wasted his time in making a poetical exposure. He assumes that the creed was founded in tolerable good faith, and he limits his view of its early stages, which already, at Western rates of progression, have faded into the twilight of tradition. His design has been to show how a religion springs into being, and how an honest man may be beguiled into thinking himself a prophet. (*James*, 231)

James commends Taylor on the subtlety with which he makes his prophet a mysterious mixture of "fierce monomania" and "clever charlatan," and also compliments Taylor on not spending too much time on the doings of Brigham Young whom he refers to as the "theocratic millionaire of Salt Lake City." (*James*, 233) But overshadowing such petty compliments is the insurmountable criticism that Taylor went beyond the limits of propriety. James insists that:

If his book has no atmosphere, the fault is not only Mr. Taylor's but his subject's. It is very well to wish to poetize common things, but here as much as ever, more than ever, one must choose. There are things inherently vulgar, things

⁸*North American Review*, January 1875, p. 188. Reprinted in Henry James, *Literary Reviews and Essays by Henry James*, ed. Albert Mordell (New Haven 1957), p. 230. Hereafter: *James*.

to which no varnish will give a gloss, and on which the fancy contents only grudgingly to rest her eyes. Mormonism is one of these; an attempt to import Joseph Smith into romance, even very much diluted and arranged, must in the nature of things fall flat. (*James*, 236)

To writers of the 70s and 80s "vulgarity" was not a light charge. This was a time of literary taboos, and one need only to recall the press' vicious attack on Harriet Beecher Stowe for her airing of the incest theme in the Byron controversy to realize that the serious writer had reason to take such taboos seriously.

Following James' review, Taylor decided on a public statement denying the Mormon emphasis in the drama. In early spring of 1875, the *New York Staatszeitung* reviewed *The Prophet* as a history of the early Mormon Church, and Taylor had his chance. In a letter to the editor of the *New York Staatzeitung*, published on May 3rd, 1875, he wrote, "*The Prophet* does not represent the early history of the Mormons, and David Starr is as far as possible from being Joe Smith. The man who most nearly stands for his prototype in real life was the Rev. Edward Irving." (*Letters*, 664) Irving had been a Scottish religious reformer who emphasized spiritual gifts and faith.

Luckily for Taylor his letters which had made clear that the plot, characters, and themes were distinctively American and Mormon, were private and could not be used to disprove his new stance. According to Taylor, "The immigration to the West and the manner of David's death are the only features that coincide with the story of the Mormons." (*Letters*, 665) Taylor conveniently ignores David's calling to the ministry, the building of the Temple in New Zion, the meetings of the Council of Twelve, the Danite-inspired conspiracy in Act Five in which Jones is apparently killed by Nimrod's men, the institution of tithing, revelation, and the priesthood hierarchy, the commissioning of Nimrod to lead the members across the river to the West, and of course, the central theme of polygamy.

The anti-Mormon sentiment was so pervasive that even Taylor's biographer, Albert H. Smyth, familiar with many of Taylor's letters, felt it important to carry the argument in Taylor's behalf. Smyth wrote that "in David Starr . . . there

is no attribute of the Mormon leader. Starr is a fine idealist, not a vulgar sensualist," and Smyth underlined the assertion that the play bore only slight resemblance to Mormonism.

What Taylor had earlier called the finest thing he had written, now became an embarrassment. By November, 1874, he was feigning indifference. "*The Prophet* now belongs to my past," he wrote, "and will not trouble my thoughts any more." (*Letters*, 664) Dissembling his irritation, he told his friends that he was relieved to get to work on other projects, more important projects, and *The Prophet* was effectively forgotten by author and critics alike.

In this manner America's most able critics succeeded in silencing this fictive study of Mormonism, and in silencing Taylor they possibly silenced other writers who may have been interested in the theme of Mormonism. Had the critics sounded a different note, a note of interest and appreciation, Taylor's effort might have encouraged other serious writers to continue the dramatic study of Mormonism. Eager as American writers of the period were to find American material, a usable past, such encouragement might have led to a significant literary interest in this uniquely American religion.