



9-1-2012

Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition

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Recommended Citation

Mould, Tom and Thursby, Jacqueline S. (2012) "Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 51 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol51/iss3/9>

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Tom Mould. *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Jacqueline S. Thursby

Tom Mould is an associate professor of anthropology and folklore at Elon University in Greensboro, North Carolina. He is the author of two books on Choctaw narrative: *Choctaw Prophecy: A Legacy of the Future* (2003) and *Choctaw Tales* (2004). He has published articles on varied aspects of generic boundaries and constructed identities and has produced video documentaries for public television on folk art and culture in Indiana, Kentucky, and North Carolina. Mould is particularly focused on the study of oral narrative, and his interest in prophecy and sacred narratives led him to his work with the Latter-day Saints. His book *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition* will appeal to LDS scholars, general LDS readers, and others interested in knowing more about the shaping power of personal revelation among Latter-day Saints. The book has six chapters and is made further accessible by an introduction, afterword, appendix, extensive chapter notes, works cited, and an index.

In his book, Mould creates a significant scholarly analysis of Latter-day Saint performance-centered personal revelation and presents it with a thoroughly researched folkloric perspective. His work is a long-overdue academic discussion of personal revelation and its importance in Latter-day Saint practice and culture. He has gathered and analyzed both spiritual and temporal revelations by conducting extensive ethnographic fieldwork, researching folklore archives housed in Utah universities, and examining published records of representative LDS experiences involving supernatural revelations. These revelations are more often called impressions or promptings by the LDS people; indeed, Mould mentions that in the Utah archives where he researched, there was surprisingly no specific category called personal revelation (23).

In the introduction, Mould observes that there is a long-ignored “thriving oral tradition [among the Mormons] that puts a contemporary face to

scripture” (2). Mould uses scholarly folkloric theory to deconstruct personal revelation and explain its place in the variable Mormon folk tradition. Using many categorical examples of personal revelation received by LDS people, he seamlessly ties both spiritual influences and temporal guidance to performance theory, an influential theoretical approach in folklore research and scholarship. He states, “For the past three decades, performance theory has dominated the field. The idea of performance shifts the focus from product to process. Folklorists explore the social and cultural contexts of specific performances—storytelling events, ritual acts, throwing pots on a wheel—and the processes by which performers create and present their work and express themselves. . . . Performance is viewed as a social act . . . [and includes] the construction of particular social identities” (6).

Defining performance theory in order to situate the reader in contemporary folkloric discussion as used in his analysis of LDS revelation, Mould cites respected folklore scholars, including Richard Bauman and Burt Feintuch. Based on their research, Mould explains, “Storytelling, joking, dancing, healing, worshiping, woodworking, and painting can all be understood as performance” (60). These are expressed social aesthetics, or “informal, deeply contextualized acts of creation widely shared throughout a community” (60). In the context of the Mormon folklore tradition, telling an experience of spiritual revelation is one form of performance. Mould suggests that sharing spiritual revelation may raise the prestige of trusted members of the Church, but that such an action may risk “accusations of a lack of humility” as well (62). Subsequently, revealing personal revelation is sometimes guarded.

Further discussing folkloric research, Mould explains, “As in all academic disciplines, folklore scholars approach their work with a set of assumptions” (4). By explaining these basic academic perspectives and assumptions, Mould assists the general reader to better comprehend the influence revelatory narrative has on the broad, diverse community of LDS people. The assumptions he covers are that folklorists accept narrative folklore as having elements of truth that carry significant meaning for the teller; that exploring folklore, sometimes called expressive culture, leads to an understanding of the beliefs and values of a community; that folklore—meaning oral, material, and customary lore (things people say, make, do, and believe)—has value as artistic performance; that folklorists value all human beings and their traditions and consider the entire human family as folk; and that the genre employed matters. In relation to the importance of genre, Mould states, “An idea explored through a joke may not emerge in the same way when conveyed in a deeply personal [supernatural] memorate” (4–5).

In addition to folkloric theory, Mould discusses various genres of folklore that can be found in LDS revelations. Addressing earlier studies that covered broad spectra of LDS revelations, Mould observes, “Narratives of personal revelation continued to cross generic lines, appearing primarily under the rubric of faith-promoting stories, stories of dreams, and stories of the still small voice” (22). Now and then, another genre appears, sometimes labeled “faith-promoting rumors.” These stories usually have no identifiable origin and few or no elements of truth, but they become transmitted widely among the LDS people. This type of story is also considered a genre of verbal folklore; but when such a story occurs in the Church, Mould explains, the General Authorities step in and issue a statement to be shared with members that immediately squelches the falsehoods.

Mould also distinguishes between two general types of legitimate revelation: spiritual and temporal. Clarifying the basic differences, Mould explains, “Theologically, personal revelation encompasses both spiritual and temporal revelations. In the folk narrative tradition of personal revelation, however, temporal revelations dominate. Ask people for their testimony, and they will respond with spiritual revelation. Ask people about personal revelation, however, and they will typically respond with temporal revelations about the guidance they received in conducting their daily lives on Earth” (40–41). He explains further that at the monthly Sunday meeting called fast and testimony meeting, “testimonies are more frequently shared as declarative statements rather than narratives. . . . Rather than telling full-blown narratives, people may speak generally of their experiences” (41). “A person’s testimony is his or her declaration of faith in the church, its leadership, and its principles and derives from personal revelation” (41). Temporal revelations, Mould writes, are given for guidance in life both to aid in Church callings and to use as personal direction. These revelations may guide stewardships in the Church or family, warn of danger, or help resolve personal dilemmas.

After quoting some of the research and analysis of folklorists David Hufford and Christine Cartwright, Mould concludes that “these experiences [with personal revelation] must have some degree of validity outside the confines of cultural construction” (322), because people are frequently unfamiliar with similar tales told by others. He also clarifies that revelations experienced by individual Church members are not “identical to formal scripture” (20). While members are called to serve in various capacities and receive revelations relative to their assignments, declarations by General Authorities are separate and accepted as having more weight and value than those shared by individual Church members around the world. However,

Mould asserts the many stories of personal revelations, promptings, warnings, and impressions transmitted from person to person contribute to the cultural and folkloric shaping of LDS beliefs and practices. Mould insightfully reveals how these revelations and their meanings are firmly “rooted in the pews” (7). These are faith-promoting narratives, and Mould’s text is replete with documented variant examples.

Though the book is sometimes overladen with folkloric theory and examples of revelation, it remains accessible and instructive. Mould develops the intertextuality of the present as being affected by the past and the consequent “social constraints on narrative performance” (138). He suggests that “revelation demands the constant reification of a reciprocal relationship. . . . Express your faith in God, and you open yourself to revelation and blessing” (187). With a plethora of examples gleaned from his research, Mould has succeeded in making known the cornerstone of Latter-day Saint belief—personal revelation.

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