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Engraved portrait of John Milton (1608–1674), by William Faithorne (c. 1620–1691). Courtesy Special Collections, University of Leicester.

John Milton, Joseph Smith, and the Book of Mormon

Robert A. Rees

In my Introduction to Mormonism class at Graduate Theological Union in 2013, among other topics we discussed the Book of Mormon and its possible provenances. The assignments for the class included my article “Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance,” in which I compare Joseph Smith with his illustrious contemporaries Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman in terms of their respective literary imagination, talent, authorial maturity, education, cultural milieu, knowledge base, and intellectual sophistication.¹ In that article, I attempted to demonstrate that each of these authors enjoyed a much greater advantage in all of these categories in comparison with Joseph Smith at the time he published the Book of Mormon. Further, I argued that even if Joseph had been blessed with all of the advantages of his contemporary authors, the time, conditions, and circumstances under which the Book of Mormon was produced were insufficient for the composition of such a lengthy, complex, and elaborate narrative as the history of the Nephites and Jaredites. In a follow-up article, I took the comparison one step further by examining each of these writers’ magnum opus and all of the study, preliminary drafts, critical responses, and written works that preceded them.² That is, the

1. Robert A. Rees, “Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (2002): 83–112.

2. “Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance: An Addendum,” publication pending.

major work of each of these writers has a history, one that allows us to trace its evolution from inception to completion.

In my original article, I spoke of what Melville scholars refer to as his “try works.” The image, found in chapter 96 of *Moby-Dick*, refers to the two large kettles or “try pots” situated on the decks of nineteenth-century whaling ships that were used to “try out” or reduce whale oil by boiling the blubber. One of the ways in which *try works* functions is as a metaphor for the process of writing, the refining fire of paring, condensing, and rewriting required to reduce a work to its essential plot, structure, and style and to boil away the rhetorical blubber that plagues most authors, especially in their early years. In this sense, it stands for the process a successful writer must go through in order to refine and perfect his or her writing. Thus, for Melville, the five novels he wrote prior to *Moby-Dick* (*Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, and *White-Jacket*) constitute the try works that prepared him for the more complex rhetorical style, universal themes, and timeless scope of *Moby-Dick* as well as the subtleties and other stylistic refinements that constitute the novel’s amazing power and ontological density. The process was essentially the same and can be demonstrated from the historical record for the other writers of the American Renaissance.

In my Graduate Theological Union class, one of my students, Ryan Eikenbary, who had significant experience studying and analyzing John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, argued that a more plausible comparison with Joseph Smith in terms of authorial composition was not writers of the American Renaissance but rather John Milton, who dictated his great epic poem in some ways similar to Joseph Smith’s dictation of the Book of Mormon. Eikenbary’s thesis was that just as Milton had absorbed an enormous amount of material through his education and his informational and cultural environment that allowed him to dictate his masterful epic, so Joseph Smith did the same in mentally and imaginatively preparing for and then composing and dictating the Nephite-Jaredite narrative. This paper examines the validity of that comparison.

It would be difficult to find two authors whose educations, backgrounds, and cultural milieus differ more dramatically than those of Joseph Smith and John Milton. Milton had a classical education that was vastly superior to Smith’s in all particulars. He had the family stability and support as well as the wealth and leisure to sustain long periods of study and reflection; he held prominent positions in government and was involved in affairs of state for two decades; he traveled widely and was exposed to the best of European culture; he published

many works of literature, politics, and theology before undertaking his major work; he had a large and essentially appreciative audience; and he had an assembly of readers, amanuenses, and reviewers during the long period he was writing *Paradise Lost*.

Milton “from a very early age . . . [was] cherished by his family as something of an educational phenomenon, given to reading, translating, and writing.”³ According to Harris Fletcher, Milton’s education, like that of other English boys of the time, was in three stages: “the Institution, or grounding in the fundamentals”; the grammar school; and the university.⁴ Milton’s father, a scrivener (clerk or scribe), “carefully planned and directed the education of his son,” so that from an early age, even before he attended school, Milton had tutors in “the elements of classical learning.” As Milton later wrote, “My father destined me from a child to the pursuits of literature.”⁵

After this period of “home schooling,” Milton went to the prestigious St. Paul’s School, where he studied the scriptures, Latin grammar and literature, writing in imitation of Latin models, and Greek and Hebrew. In addition, he learned the mathematical arts of the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) as well as the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic). As was the custom, the students at St. Paul’s memorized classical and scriptural texts and were required to translate Latin texts to English and vice versa. In addition to the classical languages Milton learned at school, his father had him tutored in Spanish, French, Italian, and possibly Aramaic and Syriac. Even as a boy, Milton was a serious student, often staying up until midnight to pore over texts and write.

In 1625, at the age of sixteen, Milton continued his formal education by attending Christ’s College, Cambridge, where he was “able to deepen and enrich his already considerable knowledge of both classical literature and languages,” earning his bachelor’s degree in 1629 and his master’s, cum laude, in 1632. Following his master’s degree, Milton devoted the next six years to full-time private study. In 1638, he traveled

3. Roy Flannagan, *John Milton: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 5.

4. Harris Francis Fletcher, “Preface” to *The Intellectual Development of John Milton*, 2 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 1:preface.

5. John Milton, *The Reason of Church Government*, as quoted in Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *John Milton: A Reader’s Guide to His Poetry* (New York: Noonday Press, 1966), 6.

on the continent, where he met a number of notable figures, including Grotius and Galileo.

Milton was what Roy Flannagan calls an “omnivorous reader.” As Flannagan states, “There is no one that I know of, living or dead, who has read all the books that we know Milton read in his lifetime. . . . No modern scholar, indeed no scholar . . . from any time after Milton, would have the combined linguistic skills and historical scope to be able to read and comprehend all of what Milton seems to have studied with pleasure and understanding.”⁶

Milton established himself early as a poet of considerable talent, writing his first major poem, “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” at age twenty in 1629, followed by “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” in 1631, “Comus” in 1634 (at about the same age Joseph Smith was when he published the Book of Mormon), and “Lycidus” in 1637. Milton published his first collection of poetry in 1645, which ran “the gamut of various genres: psalm paraphrase, sonnet, canzone, masque, pastoral elegy, verse letter, English ode, epigram, obituary poem, companion poem, and occasional verse.”⁷ In other words, Milton, began writing mature verse in a variety of genres in his twenties and continued doing so (with an interruption at midcentury when he was occupied primarily with governmental affairs) until he produced his masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*, in his fifties and early sixties.

A gifted and prolific writer of prose, which he referred to as the work of his left hand, Milton composed tracts and other polemical writings in this genre primarily during the middle decades of the seventeenth century when he was heavily engaged in supporting and defending Cromwell’s government, including serving as secretary of foreign tongues, which included being responsible for diplomatic correspondence. *Areopagetica* (1644), considered his most famous prose work, is an impassioned defense of freedom of the press. Other major prose works include *The Reason of Church Government* (1641), *The Doctrine of Discipline and Divorce* (1643), and *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649).

This is not the place to discuss Milton’s personal life, which included three marriages, the deaths of two wives and a son and daughter, and imprisonment, among other challenges, but perhaps none was as significant as his blindness in 1652 at the age of forty-four. For so intense an

6. Flannagan, *Milton: A Short Introduction*, 10–11.

7. Poetry Foundation, “John Milton,” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-milton>.

intellectual and ambitious a writer as Milton, his blindness affected his life profoundly. His most famous sonnet addresses it:

When I consider how my light is spent,
 Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
 And that one talent which is death to hide
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present
 My true account, lest He returning chide;

.....
 . . . who best
 Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best.

A true Puritan, in this sonnet Milton stoically accepts his fate and remains faithful to his calling as a Christian poet. From this point on, he was dependent on the eyes and voices of readers and the pens of those who took dictation from his tongue for his compositions, including the culminating work of his great epic poem.

There is ample evidence that Milton had been preparing to write an epic tragedy of one kind or another since his days at Cambridge. Marjorie Nicolson speculates that from his youth “Milton aspired to write an epic” and that his “Latin exercise [at Cambridge] vaguely foreshadows *Paradise Lost*, in that its main character is Satan.”⁸ Roy Flannagan argues, “Milton undoubtedly began outlining the tragedy that would become the epic *Paradise Lost* long before he became completely blind.”⁹ In the absence of evidence from the historical record, Nicolson speculates that Milton’s plan to write a drama on the subject of the Fall, “Adam Unparadised,” took form as early as the 1640s. One could argue that in a way Milton had been preparing his entire life for his masterwork. Many of the elements of his early poetry and even some of his prose writings were his “try works” for his epic poem.

Milton began dictating *Paradise Lost* in 1656 with his two daughters alternating as scribes. His dictation was then transcribed and read back to him for any changes, revisions, or corrections. It was an arduous, time-consuming process, and it took more than a decade to complete the first ten books, which were published in 1667. The expanded version to twelve books was published in 1671, when Milton was sixty-three. Later the same year, he completed *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonisties*, also by dictation. He died three years later.

8. Nicolson, *Milton: A Reader’s Guide*, 177.

9. Flannagan, *Milton: A Short Introduction*, 75

By any measure, *Paradise Lost* is one of the great accomplishments in the history of world literature, taking its rightful place alongside Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. That it was dictated by a blind poet makes it an even more astonishing accomplishment. Fortunately, we can trace its development over the course of Milton's entire life, showing how his family circumstances, religious training, education, public service, foreign travels, personal history, and especially his voluminous reading and extensive writing prepared him to dictate his epic poem.

In comparison with Milton and the writers of the American Renaissance, each of whom has a clear record of evolving through a long apprenticeship to become a mature major writer, we actually have very little understanding of Joseph's intellectual or compositional development before the publication of the Book of Mormon. In other words, there is no evidence of Joseph spending hours in libraries or even reading on his own. (In fact, his mother said, "he seemed much less inclined to the perusal of books than any of the rest of our children."¹⁰) There is also no evidence that he was keeping a journal or developing his writing style, no record of his writing sketches or short stories, no indication that he was creating the major characters of the Nephite history, planning its plots, or working out the major themes and ideas found in its pages; nor is there any evidence that he was consciously developing an authorial voice or cultivating a personal writing style (or that he even understood what this would have entailed). Neither did he exhibit any proclivity for composing large narrative forms or differential styles or anything at all like the complex, interwoven, episodic components of the Book of Mormon.

An article titled "Could Joseph Smith Have Written the Book of Mormon?" on MormonThink offers what I consider a lot of silliness on the subject, including the assertion that the imaginative stories about the ancient inhabitants of America his mother recalls Joseph telling his family reveal a "vivid, constructive imagination . . . [that] was as strong and varied as Shakespeare's and no more to be accounted for than the English Bard's."¹¹ That's about as uninformed an opinion as one could imagine.

10. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 344.

11. See MormonThink, "Could Joseph Smith Have Written the Book of Mormon?" <http://mormonthink.com/josephweb.htm#full>.

The same article argues that Smith's "lack of education does not mean lack of intelligence or imagination," but neither does it substantiate Smith's ability to produce anything like the Book of Mormon. The article so frequently resorts to the hypothetical as to be a parody of responsible scholarship.

Some argue that the only substantive preparation Joseph Smith needed to write the Book of Mormon was a knowledge of the Bible. The MormonThink article also makes this argument: "Young Joseph was able to read and ponder scriptures. [He] also attended many protestant church services and studied the Bible in depth."¹² As evidence, it cites Joseph's assertion, "I can take my Bible, and go into the woods, and learn more in two hours than you can learn at meetings in two years, if you should go all the time."¹³ Instead of seeing this as typical frontier exaggeration, the writers take it as fact, ignoring Lucy Smith's assertion that her son "had never read the Bible through" before age eighteen.¹⁴ This was likely true of the sixteen-year-old Joseph, but likely untrue of his acquaintance with the Bible by the time he began translating the Book of Mormon. Thus, although there is ample evidence, according to Philip Barlow, that Joseph's "mind was demonstrably saturated in biblical language, images, and themes,"¹⁵ the same could be said for many of his contemporaries, including many more scholarly than Joseph Smith, who failed to produce anything comparable to the Book of Mormon.

The contours of Smith's life as a creator of narratives is rather simple and essentially undisputed, at least by those whose scholarship is based on fact rather than speculation. That he was bright and had a far-reaching mind and imagination is agreed upon by his defenders and critics alike. Nevertheless, Smith was a rustic who, like many who came of age on the American frontier, had only the rudiments of a formal education. According to his own brief history, he attended elementary school for several years, which consisted of being "instructed in reading, writing, and the ground rules of arithmetic which constituted my

12. See MormonThink, "Could Joseph Smith Have Written the *Book of Mormon*?"

13. Andersen, *Lucy's Book*, 357.

14. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 344.

15. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 220.

whole literary acquirments.”¹⁶ Beyond this, according to school teacher William McLellin, Joseph attended “high school during the winter of 1834” (when he was twenty) where, although entering “without scientific knowledge or attainments,” he “learned science.”¹⁷ Martin Harris recalled, “I was Joseph Smith’s scribe, and wrote for him a great deal; for he was such a poor writer, and could not even draw up a note of hand [a promissory note] as his education was so limited.”¹⁸

As in many families in America’s nineteenth-century small towns and rural areas, Joseph’s parents attempted to provide their children as much education as limited time and resources allowed. Although his educational and reading materials were limited, Joseph was, according to his mother, often “given to meditation and deep study.”¹⁹ What this actually amounted to is difficult to tell, but those who take historical tidbits as evidence that Joseph was capable of composing the Book of Mormon simply do not understand either the preparation or the process required to write so lengthy and complex a work, even if it were fiction.

According to his wife, Emma, by the time he was translating and dictating the Book of Mormon, Joseph “could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon.”²⁰ As Brant Gardner says, “The Book of Mormon is a translation that shouldn’t have happened. Joseph Smith Jr. should not have been able to translate anything.”²¹ Or, as Richard Bushman asks,

16. Fred C. Collier, comp., *Unpublished Revelations of the Prophets and Presidents of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Collier’s Publishing, 1993), 2:2.

17. Michael De Groote, “Inside the Lost McLellin Notebook,” *Deseret News*, January 28, 2009, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/705280695/Inside-the-lost-McLellin-notebook.html?pg=all>.

18. Simon Smith to the editor, April 30, 1884, *Saints’ Herald* 31 (May 24, 1884): 324, cited in John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch with Erick B. Carlson (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 136. Simon Smith visited Martin Harris in Clarkston, Utah, in July 1875.

19. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 344.

20. “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” in *Saints’ Herald*, 26, no. 19 (October 1, 1879), 289–90.

21. Brant Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2011), 3.

“Why would Joseph Smith think that he could translate when he lacked all the necessary qualifications?”²²

Joseph commenced keeping a journal in 1832, following the completion of the Book of Mormon, but he was anything but a regular or systematic record keeper, and he was more likely to dictate his words to scribes. This, according to Dean Jessee, was due to Joseph’s insecurity in expressing himself in writing. As Jessee explains, “A complicated life and feelings of literary inadequacy explain this dependence. He lamented his ‘lack of fluency in address,’ his ‘writing imperfections,’ and his ‘inability’ to convey his ideas in writing. Communication [in general] seemed to him to present an insurmountable barrier. He wrote of the almost ‘total darkness of paper pen and ink,’ and the ‘crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.’”²³ Although Joseph eventually gained confidence as a writer, he continued to rely on the words and rhetorical styles of others more than on his own. Jessee provides an example of the significant contrast in rhetorical styles between Joseph’s own writing and that of his clerk Willard Richards, the one (in 1835) ungrammatical and unpolished and the other (in 1843) quite the opposite.²⁴

When Walt Whitman sent Emerson his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Emerson immediately recognized it as a great work of imagination. He wrote to his fellow American poet, “I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had *a long foreground somewhere* for such a start.”²⁵ Emerson was right, of course. There was a long foreground, including Whitman’s education, journalistic career, early fiction, and extensive reading, which included Emerson’s own poetry and essays. Milton’s daughters, whose father schooled them in literature and languages, did not consider his dictation of *Paradise Lost* as somehow supernatural or even miraculous. They knew that the words that flowed from their

22. Richard Lyman Bushman, “Joseph Smith as Translator,” in *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 224.

23. Dean C. Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), xv.

24. Jessee, *Personal Writings*, xv, quoting Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, p. 4, available at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/#/D2L/1832>.

25. R. W. Emerson to Walter Whitman, July 21, 1855, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., emphasis added; images of letter available at <http://www.lettersofnote.com/2010/12/i-greet-you-at-beginning-of-great.html>.

father's lips had their foreground in both his lengthy study and his extensive writing. On the other hand, Emma Smith, who knew her husband better than anyone, including during the years preceding the translation and dictation of the Book of Mormon, considered the process by which her husband produced the record of the Nephites truly miraculous. As she recounted in an 1879 interview with her son, Joseph Smith III,

Though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, and was present during the translation of the plates, and had cognizance of things as they transpired, it is marvelous to me, "a marvel and a wonder," as much so as to any one else. . . . My belief is that the Book of Mormon is of divine authenticity—I have not the slightest doubt of it. I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscripts unless he was inspired; for, when acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he could at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him. This was a usual thing for him to do. It would have been improbable that a learned man could do this; and, for one so ignorant and unlearned as he was, it was simply impossible.²⁶

And so the Book of Mormon continues to strike many millions nearly two hundred years since its publication.

By way of summary, one can trace almost everything in *Paradise Lost* to the "long foreground" of its composition. As stated above, Milton had been planning and preparing to write his epic poem for decades before its actual composition. One can trace specific elements of the epic to Milton's actual sources, experiences, and previous writings. Everything could be considered Milton's "try works" for dictating his masterpiece. In addition, he had many people to assist him in checking his sources, correcting and rewriting his own dictation that was read back to him, and helping him through all the stages of composition and publication.

By way of contrast, from all we can tell, Joseph had none of these advantages. There was certainly no "long foreground" of study, planning, or "working out" of what we find within the pages of the Book of Mormon. Further, there is no evidence in any of Joseph's writing before 1830 (and scarcely any thereafter) of the sophisticated use of such things as irony, multiple styles, differential authorial voices, use of imagery and symbolism, and an array of rhetorical devices that we find in the Book of Mormon. Also, when one looks at the years immediately preceding

26. "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 289–90.

the production and publication of the book, Joseph was anything but a person with abundant time and freedom to devote to the work of translation. After fleeing Palmyra, Joseph accepted his father-in-law's "generous offer" and "began to live the life of a poor farmer," occupying with Emma a "fourteen-acre farm [that] included a frame home, a barn, and other improvements, which Joseph formally purchased from Isaac Hale."²⁷ While he got financial support from some sources, it was not enough to free him from the burden of caring for his family. Richard Bushman reports, during this time Emma "gave birth to a son after an exhausting labor." The child died immediately and Emma was gravely ill. "Emma came close to death herself, and Joseph attended her night and day." In the fall of 1828, Joseph had to interrupt the translation in order to prepare for winter. The next year (1829) during the process of translation, Joseph and Oliver Cowdery both had to stop to look for work, "a frustrating dissipation of time," according to Bushman.²⁸ And, whereas Milton's dictation took place over more than a decade, Joseph's took place primarily over a period of less than three months.

While it has been popular since 1830 for critics to debunk or diminish the Book of Mormon, it has stood the test of time in more ways than one. Occasionally, someone takes it as seriously as it deserves to be taken. Recently, two non-Mormon critics have praised the Book of Mormon. In his *The Lost Book of Mormon*, "Avi Steinberg, a self-described 'fascinated nonbeliever' . . . nominates the Mormon scripture as a Great American Novel, or, failing that, as a priceless artifact from the Old, Weird America—a uniquely American product, like jazz music and superhero comics, that deserves our attention."²⁹ In a review of Steinberg's book in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Peter Manseau says the Book of Mormon is "without a doubt one of the most remarkable books ever written."³⁰ And in a recent interview in the *New York Times*, the author

27. Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2015), 33.

28. Richard Lyman Bushman, with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 63, 67, 69, 74.

29. Rollo Romig, "In Search of the Great American Bible," *The New Yorker*, February 9, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/search-great-american-bible>.

30. Peter Manseau, "'The Lost Book of Mormon,' by Avi Steinberg: Review," October 22, 2014, *SFGate*, <http://www.sfgate.com/books/article/The-Lost-Book-of-Mormon-by-Avi-Steinberg-5841248.php>.

Freeman Dyson, when asked, “What books might we be surprised to find on your bookshelf?” replied, “‘The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ.’ I treasure it because . . . [it] tells a dramatic story in a fine biblical style. The reader has to wait with growing tension almost until the end of the story to reach the final climax, when Jesus arrives in America and founds his second kingdom here.”³¹

Of course, the Book of Mormon is no *Paradise Lost*, but one hundred fifty million copies of it have been published since 1830, it has been named by the Library of Congress as one of the one hundred “Books That Shaped America,”³² and it is read today by many more people than read Milton’s great epic about our lost paradise.

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31. “Freeman Dyson: By the Book,” *New York Times*, April 19, 2015, Sunday Book Review, 8.

32. “Library of Congress ‘Books That Shaped America’ Available on Amazon,” January 22, 2013, <http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2013/13-005.html>.