



7-1-2020

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Recommended Citation

Bushman Silver, Cherry (2020) "Making the Acquaintance of Eliza R. Snow," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 59 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol59/iss3/10>

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Making the Acquaintance of Eliza R. Snow

An Interview with Her Biographer, Jill Mulvay Derr

Cherry Bushman Silver

This is half of an interview conducted by Cherry B. Silver on August 8, 2019, in the BYU Studies offices. The other half will be published in a later issue. Many thanks to Laurel Barlow for transcribing the recording.

*When, as a young woman living in the Boston area, Jill Mulvay Derr heard a lecture by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher about Eliza R. Snow, she immediately felt a great desire to become involved in researching historical Latter-day Saint women. She got her first job as a researcher in the Church History Department at Church headquarters, locating and compiling the poetry of Eliza R. Snow; four decades later she retired from the department as a senior research historian. In her long and prolific career, Derr has also pursued research, writing, and teaching at Brigham Young University in the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, where she eventually served as associate director and then director, and also as an associate professor of Church history. She was president of the Mormon History Association and helped organize the Mormon Women's History Initiative Team. Derr has published a number of landmark books, including *Women's Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints* (with Kenneth W. Godfrey and Audrey M. Godfrey); *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (with Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Janath Russell Cannon); *Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry* (with Karen Lynn Davidson); *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History* (with Carol Cornwall Madson, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow); and *The Life and Faith of Eliza R. Snow* (with Karen Lynn Davidson). Throughout her career, she has studied the life and contributions of Eliza R. Snow and is writing a*



Jill Mulvay Derr. Photo by Melese Spaulding Miller.

scholarly biography on this important figure in Church history.

Silver: We all admire Eliza R. Snow as we consider her life and contributions. You have spent years and years with her. What do you find compelling about her?

Derr: First, she had a remarkable intellect. Uncovering the layers of her thinking and the development of her theology is an exciting challenge. I think her poems reveal much of that development, as do her discourses to women. It's been rewarding to look at those

works to discover what she is trying to say because she can speak in a pretty sophisticated way. Even if her forms are sometimes less sophisticated, her thinking is bright, clear, and intriguing.

Second, she was a woman of faith who looked to God and who, from her early years, had a firm commitment to Jesus Christ. She treasured the sacrament—you see her devotion in her sacrament hymns. They weren't written out of obligation but out of love for that ordinance. She looked to God for direction and comfort and power. Following her baptism as a Latter-day Saint, she learned to exercise spiritual gifts as part of her Kirtland Temple experience. Those gifts became a significant way for her to bless others. She learned and taught, as Joseph Smith had, that women can access the powers of heaven.

Silver: And that women can access those powers directly, not just through spouses or fathers.

Derr: Exactly. She became a great proponent of women using their spiritual gifts and abilities. Of interest to me—and this was true from her youth—is that she was committed to being useful. She often employs that phrase—“to be useful.” For her, making a contribution equaled greatness. Intentionally making a difference was part of her life from the time she was a young poet. She had the capacity to seize and enlarge upon opportunities. It followed

that she taught Latter-day Saint women to step forward, seize opportunities, and contribute to the building of the Kingdom of God. She celebrated their contributions as much as her own, if not more.

And finally, I have to say, she was loyal, doggedly loyal. In her youth, she expressed her patriotism and loyalty to the new American nation. When she became a Latter-day Saint, she was loyal to the Church and its purposes, doctrines, and leaders.

She believed that the restored priesthood was the power to transform the world and its inhabitants—to redeem and exalt humankind—and she was totally loyal to the doctrines and the order of that priesthood. To be part of that worldwide transformation was her cause. She remained loyal to her family and to her friends. Love and loyalty shine through in her poetry, especially in her poetry to individual people.

Silver: I know she had the capacity to make her cohorts feel that she wanted them with her. Zina D. H. Young often stood at her side; Eliza mentored Emmeline B. Wells and taught her how to be an organizer. These women helped Eliza as well, but she certainly kept them strong in the fold. She was called four things: poetess, presidentess, priestess, and prophetess. How did her life lead her to these titles?

Derr: I think these titles fit her well. She ultimately composed more than five hundred poems. Her spiritual gifts made her a



Eliza Roxcy Snow. Photo taken in 1875 by Charles William Carter in a studio. Two photograph albums sit on the table; the chain is a fob connected to the watch Joseph Smith gave her. Courtesy Church History Library, PH 3754.

prophetess in many ways. Her long-term involvement in temple ordinances in the Salt Lake Endowment House led her contemporaries to call her a priestess; she presided over women's work there and blessed many women. And the term "presidentess" covers her many administrative duties: organizing and presiding over the Relief Society once it was reestablished as well as facilitating the launch of new organizations for youth, including those now named the Young Women and the Primary; she was known ultimately as presidentess of all of those organizations.

Her identity as a poet came from the time she was twenty-one years old and published her first poem. Even before that, she had been practicing by experimenting with forms that imitated popular poets. She published poems even before she joined the Church.

Silver: In the newspapers of the community in which she lived?

Derr: Yes, she was living in Mantua, Ohio, and published in two Portage County newspapers—the *Western Courier* and the *Ohio Star*—a total of about thirty poems, quite a significant number. When she joined the Church, the first thing she did was to write a hymn that was soon published at Kirtland in the *Messenger and Advocate* and then was included in Emma Smith's 1835 hymnal. Actually, she composed two texts that found their way into the first hymnal.¹ Then she was silent through most of the Kirtland era and a large portion of her time in Missouri, but the extreme violence she saw there from militia groups that became mobs outraged her. In her youth, she had written poems concerned with social justice, and after the months she spent in Missouri, she really took up that theme, both to chronicle what had happened to the Saints in Missouri and to express her disdain for the contempt Missourians had shown for the rule of law.

At the close of 1838 and in the early months of 1839, she began to take on the mantle of poet for the Saints, declaring that she would no longer write for the "Gentile ear." However, that was not entirely the case. She published a significant number of

1. "Great Is the Lord: 'Tis Good to Praise" and "The Glorious Day Is Rolling On," in *A Collection of Sacred Hymns, for the Church of the Latter Day Saints*, comp. Emma Smith (Kirtland, Ohio: F. G. Williams and Co., 1835), 92 and 93; Jill Mulvay Derr and Karen Lynn Davidson, eds., *Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009), 67–70.

poems in the *Quincy (Ill.) Whig*, mostly about the persecution of the Latter-day Saints but also other poems that were, in fact, for the “Gentile ear.” A beautiful poem titled “My First View of a Western Prairie” is exceptionally well crafted in blank verse.² She had the capacity to write poetry with great skill, but she wanted to be useful, so most of her poetry communicates in the meter of songs or other poetic forms that would be accessible to the average person. She was at times less inclined to be an artist, more inclined to be a communicator and a rallier.

Silver: And she was; her political satires could be sung with vigor.

Derr: Yes. She went on to expand her role as poetess in Nauvoo and in Utah, where she came to be known as “Zion’s Poetess.” Her poetry first made her a public figure. Subsequently we see, in a sense, a layering of her various other roles onto her identity as a poet.

Silver: It also associates her very closely with Joseph Smith. In Nauvoo, she came into his house as a schoolteacher to his children. When did she marry Joseph Smith? What was her commitment to him?

Derr: Eliza was not initially impressed with Joseph Smith. I do not have the sense that he personally played a role in her joining the Church. She had her own spiritual experiences. Her initial acquaintance with the Latter-day Saints was not with Joseph; she was much closer to Sidney and Phebe Rigdon. Eliza eventually followed her mother and sister into the Church. They were both baptized by Joseph Smith, but she joined four years later and was not baptized by Joseph Smith, or I am sure she would have recorded that. Yet he became a critically important figure in her life, probably beginning with her relocation to Kirtland, where she moved into his household and taught school. She would also teach the Smith children later in Nauvoo.

I have the sense that she became friends with Emma because of their proximity. Eliza was an important part of their household at certain moments in time, both in Kirtland and Nauvoo. She was sealed to Joseph Smith as a plural wife on June 29, 1842. She begins her diary on that day, “June 29, 1842. This is a day of much interest to my feelings.”

2. “My First View of the Western Prairie,” *Quincy Whig*, June 29, 1839; Derr and Davidson, *Complete Poetry*, 91–94.

Silver: Rather an understatement.

Derr: Eliza, as you know, was a reserved woman. She often kept her emotions to herself. We get peeks at them in her poetry, in her letters, and in her diary, but in this diary entry, we certainly see understatement and the deliberate cloaking of her plural marriage. She was sealed to Joseph confidentially. This was private, secret, as was all plural marriage in Nauvoo. Eliza developed a very close relationship to Joseph. She was intrigued by his mind. She felt that he had glimpsed eternity in ways that no mortal man could know. She was excited about his thought and doctrine, and she saw his humility and kindness as well as his capacity for anger when Saints were going astray. I have a sense that the two of them became devoted friends with shared hopes for establishing Zion. Eliza felt deep affection for Joseph. Wilford Woodruff later paid tribute to the closeness of their relationship. Eliza would later take on Joseph's name; in the 1880s she became known as Eliza R. Snow Smith and preferred to be addressed that way. Instead of the initials ERS, she became ERSS. Eliza R. Snow Smith is the name on her grave marker in Brigham Young's family cemetery in Salt Lake City.

Silver: People are always interested in knowing about Eliza and Emma Smith. What do you see as the ties between these two women? How did strains arise?

Derr: Eliza grew close to Emma first in Kirtland. Eliza had written these two hymn texts. I don't know if Emma solicited one or both because of Eliza's reputation as a poet; Eliza's hymns, so far as I know, are the only two by a Latter-day Saint woman in Emma's 1835 hymnal. Of course, there are many Protestant hymns in that hymnal, but among the hymns Saints initially contributed to the *Messenger and Advocate*, the Kirtland periodical, Eliza's were the only female contributions. Likewise, there is something unique about Emma being a compiler of hymns; that was not a common thing for women to do, and it gave Emma a unique distinction in the Kirtland community. Music may have drawn the women together. We know that Emma had a beautiful singing voice. I don't know much about Eliza's voice, but I know she loved singing and she loved music. That's clear because many of her poems were written to popular tunes of the day.

I imagine that in Kirtland, with Eliza living in the Smith household, she and Emma developed a solid friendship. Eliza

later wrote a fine poem in honor of Emma that sympathetically describes her friend and the kind of sufferings and hurt she must have felt in the wake of the Missouri persecutions. Eliza then becomes Emma's secretary in the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, taking down Emma's words in the minutes. She accompanies Emma and Amanda Barnes Smith to Governor Carlin to present the Relief Society petition,³ so I think there is every indication that they were close. Eliza wrote in the 1880s, "I once dearly loved Sister Emma." But the strains that you mentioned definitively separated the two friends. Of course, the heaviest strain on the relationship was Eliza's sealing as a plural wife to Joseph Smith, a contract that Emma likely was not aware of until later. I can't say for certain what Emma knew, but I think there's every likelihood she was not initially informed of the sealing and was devastated when she discovered it. That is a long and complicated story. Emma's decision to not go west with the Saints was probably another factor. Eliza was totally committed to the order and doctrines of the priesthood, and I think it was probably hard for her to understand why Emma hadn't embraced temple teachings or Brigham Young's leadership as Joseph's successor.

Silver: So, we see two bright women on two different trajectories. In terms of speculative questions, one researcher uncovered the story that Eliza was abused during the Missouri persecutions. Writers have also spoken of Emma pushing Eliza down the stairs. What is your viewpoint about these possibilities?

Derr: There has long been talk of Eliza and Emma and the stairs. As I recall, Maureen Beecher, along with Linda Newell and Val Avery, Emma's biographers, wrote an article with almost that title: "Emma and Eliza and the Stairs." Their article claims pretty convincingly that it is not likely that such an incident happened.⁴ It was remembered long after the fact by people who were not close to Emma or Eliza. In more recent years, Brian Hales has done work on the same story to take a look

3. The July 1842 petition urged Illinois Governor Thomas Carlin to halt the extradition of Joseph Smith to Missouri on spurious charges. See "1.5 Nauvoo Female Relief Society, Petition to Thomas Carlin, ca. July 22, 1842," in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History*, ed. Jill Mulvay Derr and others (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 136–41.

4. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, "Emma and Eliza and the Stairs," *BYU Studies* 22, no. 1 (1982), 87–96.

at the home where it was supposed to have happened, and he concluded that given realities of timing and space, it was not possible.⁵ From my point of view, the incident, as it has come down to us in tradition, is not based on fact.

On the other hand, we have to say that these stories persist because there is some kernel of truth in them, and in this case that kernel of truth is almost certainly disagreement between the two women, hostility at some point, and perhaps a scene. It's hard to imagine that there was not a scene, however undramatic it might have been. Eliza lived with Emma and Joseph in Nauvoo from August 1842 until February 1843. She wrote diary entries and some poems about Emma, Joseph, and the household happenings. She tersely noted leaving the home in February. She abruptly left Nauvoo in July 1843 and moved to Lima [Illinois] to live with her sister for ten months. Her diary talks about an unpleasant encounter immediately prior to her departure from Nauvoo without naming the person, who almost certainly was Emma. There is circumstantial evidence for a substantial disagreement.

After Joseph's death, Eliza wrote a poem honoring the birth of Emma's son David, and the women may well have been able to reconcile before Eliza left Nauvoo. Thirty-five years later, the thing that provoked Eliza's statement "I once dearly loved Sister Emma" was "The Last Testimony of Sister Emma," published in the [Reorganized] *Saints' Advocate* in October 1879. In that final interview, Emma denied that Joseph had ever had other wives. There was so much national persecution against plural marriage at that point in time that Eliza really blew up at Emma's "last testimony" remarks because they refuted Joseph's revelation regarding plural marriage and negated Eliza's own legitimacy and that of some of her closest friends as plural wives of Joseph Smith. The letter Eliza wrote to the editor of the *Deseret News* in response is very angry and harsh.⁶ So, yes, good times and times of sorrow and two great women.

5. Brian C. Hales, "Emma Smith, Eliza R. Snow, and the Reported Incident on the Stairs," *Mormon Historical Studies* 10, no. 2 (2009): 63–75.

6. Eliza R. Snow to Editors *Deseret News*, October 17, 1879, as part of "Joseph the Seer's Plural Marriages," *Deseret News*, October 22, 1879, 12; reprinted in *Woman's Exponent* 8 (November 1, 1879): 84.

Silver: With commonalities and at times with differences.

Derr: As for Eliza suffering sexual assault during the Missouri period, that possibility has hung out there in a shadowed form for many years. It was brought to light more recently by Andrea Radke-Moss, who has been studying violence and sexual assault in Missouri.⁷ The source that identifies Eliza as a victim is the autobiography of Alice Merrill Horne, which is still in the private hands of the family, although some copies have surfaced in recent years. Alice Merrill Horne was the granddaughter of George A. and Bathsheba Smith, who were very close friends of Eliza, as close as any friends, but Alice Merrill was fourteen when Eliza died, and her reminiscence was written in 1947–48, many, many years after the fact. Horne states that Eliza was attacked by eight ruffians, and this attack upon her innocence devastated her. She was a victim. Joseph Smith rescued her. This is the way that Alice Merrill Horne formed the story.

I don't see any way to prove that Eliza was attacked either by one man or by several ruffians. Eliza never said a word about it. Her other friends never said a word about it. Admittedly, such silence is not surprising in cases of sexual assault. Even though Eliza had a mentoring relationship with young Alice Merrill, she had close relationships with other young women as well. Given Eliza's reserve and the delicacy of the subject, I think it is highly unlikely she would have confided in Alice. Alice may have overheard something, but what she overheard we will never know. She might have overheard someone talking about another rape, some other violence that impacted Eliza. I don't think we can say for certain. I probably lean more against the possibility of assault than for it, even though I consider Alice Merrill Horne to be a credible person. But she certainly could not have been a witness.

Silver: The story has raised our consciousness of the suffering that women endured in those Missouri persecutions, even if the stories were not written down then or cannot be validated.

7. Andrea R-M[oss], "Eliza R. Snow as a Victim of Sexual Violence in the 1838 Missouri War—the Author's Reflections on a Source," March 7, 2016, from <https://juvenileinstructor.org/eliza-r-snow-as-a-victim-of-sexual-violence-in-the-1838-missouri-war-the-authors-reflections-on-a-source/>.

Derr: Absolutely, I agree with that. The evidence is clear that an unspecified number of women were raped in Missouri. Naming victims makes it all the more real. In particular, centering such a story on Eliza Snow, a heroine for so many women, affirms that any woman is vulnerable and gives hope that women can ultimately emerge from such horrific experiences with new strength. Radke-Moss's study underscores that. Alice Merrill Horne's framing of this story also indicates that the alleged assault is the reason Eliza never had children. It's interesting that the story of Emma pushing Eliza down the stairs also comes to that same conclusion—that this is the reason Eliza never had children. In a church that stresses motherhood, we see people seeking for some explanations about why this prominent woman, married to two men, did not have children. She married Joseph at the age of thirty-eight, Brigham at the age of forty, so that in and of itself may be a reason, but we see this additional need for people to explain her childlessness.

One other thing I wanted to say about Missouri is that whatever the nature of the violence Eliza experienced there, that violence did have a significant impact on her. It radicalized her in many ways. She became zealous for the Saints' holy nation, for the house of Israel. The Church drew her entire loyalty. She was certainly not alone in this; the experience left a lasting imprint on the life of every Latter-day Saint who was there. The injustices of Missouri—the violence, the property seized and never purchased, the lives not protected by legal authorities like the governor and militia—outraged her. She was painfully disillusioned when the country she loved fell so far short of its promised liberty and law. She was indignant, furious, and that rage showed up throughout her life. It surfaced in the poems she wrote for the Fourth of July almost every year and whenever laws were passed or officials sent that intruded upon the Saints' freedom to live their religion.

The other part of that persecution narrative was biblical. In the New Testament, Paul wrote that being persecuted is a sign of being God's chosen people. So Eliza's faith became stronger, and her commitment to Joseph Smith as a prophet became unbendable in the wake of the Missouri persecutions. The violence did not leave her unchanged.

Silver: Well-explained and very helpful insights. We think of Eliza mainly in connection with the wonderful hymn "O My Father"

and the teachings of a Mother in Heaven. Was she being a prophetess here or just a recorder of what she had heard? How do you account for the power of this hymn?

Derr: Let me preface what I say about that by indicating that in 1995 the Smith Institute offered a special seminar on “O My Father,” celebrating the 150th anniversary of the writing of the hymn. *BYU Studies* followed up with a superb issue that featured my presentation about Eliza and her hymn as well as some surrounding discussions of Mother in Heaven, and also the beautiful John Hafen illustrations of “O My Father.” I salute *BYU Studies* for having published that singularly beautiful issue.⁸

Silver: Yes.

Derr: Two important understandings that came out of that study for me are the tremendous displacement that Eliza experienced in Nauvoo as she moved from household to household and, most importantly, her total embrace of the teachings of Joseph Smith. We see so many of his Nauvoo teachings encapsulated in “O My Father”: premortal existence, a key of knowledge, eternal increase, and Heavenly Parents. We don’t have a record of Joseph Smith teaching about Mother in Heaven—I should say we don’t have a contemporaneous record. Zina Diantha Huntington Young later talked about Joseph’s teaching her about the Eternal Mother at the time her own mother died. David O. McKay’s father, David McKay, wrote about discussing the concept with Eliza: Did she learn it from Joseph? According to his reminiscence, she said yes, yes she did. The closest contemporaneous reference we have to Joseph teaching the idea is a William W. Phelps hymn published in January 1845 that includes the line, “Here’s our Father in heaven, and Mother, the Queen.”

So, one has the sense that this concept of Heavenly Mother was certainly in the air when Eliza penned her hymn in fall 1845. I feel that she was a prophetess in the sense that she internalized this teaching, and the Spirit must have spoken to her in a particular way that confirmed its truth and gave her voice. Her poem including the reality of the Eternal Mother becomes the Church’s expression of this doctrine across many years. The

8. Jill Mulvay Derr, “The Significance of ‘O My Father’ in the Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow,” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1997): 84–126, and other articles in *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1.

poem, sung as a hymn, brings the concept to us in the clearest and most enduring form, sweeping across past, present, and future. Its clarity has been a beautiful, blessed gift to Eliza, her sisters, and the Church. It may have been prompted in part by the death of her father in October 1845. She wrote the hymn within two weeks or so of his death, and one can sense her own searching in it. It is intriguing to consider how her thinking and theology developed as she composed the poem: from examining her own sorrow for her father, she looked to the Eternal Father and then to the eternal companionship of Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother. Her later poems also talk about her Heavenly Parents and her desire to please them and return to them.

Silver: She certainly is a spokesperson here for many deep feelings. In the hard times in Winter Quarters, she seemed to be a spiritual light, a center for the women.

Derr: Yes. I think her intense involvement with exercising spiritual gifts at Winter Quarters was an outgrowth of meetings of the Female Relief Society in Nauvoo. In those meetings, Joseph Smith spoke to the sisters about the importance of cultivating spiritual gifts as described in the New Testament: prophesying, speaking in tongues, and healing. He set some limits on speaking in tongues—it was not to be for doctrine, but for uplift. The laying on of hands by sisters to heal the sick he unequivocally endorsed.⁹ Women felt confirmed in their desire to exercise spiritual gifts. When the women were at Winter Quarters and death and sickness surrounded them, they ministered to one another through these gifts. They didn't have the Relief Society, which had been officially disbanded in March 1845, but they could gather together for prayer and for the exercise of these gifts. It brought them comfort, it was empowering, and it bonded them together. It built sisterhood. I have to say that while Eliza took a prominent role in such spiritual ministering, she certainly was not the only one.

Silver: We read Patty Sessions's diary.

Derr: Patty Sessions, yes, and Zina D. H. Young and many others. It was the collective exercise of these spiritual gifts that became so

9. "1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 54–55 (April 28, 1842).

important to these sisters, and they did not want to give that up. They did not give it up after they came to the Salt Lake Valley.

Silver: No. We read in Emmeline B. Wells's records of tours among the sisters in Relief Society that Zina Young often invited speaking in tongues and interpretations.

Derr: This bonding experience on the trail had particular importance for Eliza. She had left her family behind. Her parents, her two younger brothers, and her younger sister did not come west. Her older sister, Leonora, and her brother Lorenzo did remain with the Saints and joined the westward trek. Still, as Eliza traveled west, she was placed with other families, and these women became family to her; they became her sisters. Her experience on the trail connected her to women in ways that would never be forgotten, nor did that feeling of sisterly connection change in years to come.

Silver: Did she carry the minutes of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo with her as she came west? What was her role in preserving those documents?

Derr: Yes, Eliza personally preserved the record of the Nauvoo Relief Society and took it west with her. As secretary, she recorded minutes of society meetings through 1842 and I think through one meeting in '43. Then assistant secretary Phebe Wheeler and others took minutes while Eliza was living outside Nauvoo at Lima, Illinois. But sometime after her return in April 1844, the minute book came back to her, and she kept it. The Relief Society minutes were not packed with the other official Church minutes when the Saints left Nauvoo; they were not listed in the inventory of the crate of official Church records because they were in Eliza's possession. I think that says something about the way she felt about them. It is clear from her diary that when she came to the Valley, she had the minutes with her. In 1849, she met with a group of women on the fifth anniversary of Joseph's death and shared with the sisters excerpts from Joseph's addresses to Relief Society.

Silver: That must have been a powerful moment. But then weren't the minutes changed somewhat in the 1850s as the Church Historian began to compile a major history of Joseph Smith's time? Eliza's minutes were reviewed and revised. Changes were made to the original Joseph Smith statements, for example the notable shift from "I turn the key to you" to "I turn the key in your behalf." What was Eliza's role in these modifications?

Derr: We can see from the Historian's Office Journal that in spring 1855 Eliza was asked by Church Historian George A. Smith to bring the minutes to his office. As I have already said, they were close friends. George A. and others were gathering various records to compile Joseph Smith's history. They were drawing from Wilford Woodruff's diaries and from other diaries and minutes, so Eliza gave the book of Relief Society minutes to the Church Historian. I have no indication that these compilers consulted with her as they made their redactions. We have contemporaneous minutes that record, however, that the changes were made, and Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young were very pleased with the new wording.

The changes approved by Brigham Young and the Twelve emphasized that men held priesthood authority in a way that women did not and that the women's organization did not operate independently of male priesthood leaders' counsel and direction. Joseph's words, as recorded by Eliza, seemed to suggest greater authority and autonomy for women. That's the way I would interpret it. Others might see it differently. Church leaders felt that the edits were a clarification of something that might be misunderstood. Of course, these changes were made in the wake of disputes with Emma Smith: Emma's conflicts with Brigham Young, Emma's conflicts over plural marriage, and Emma's assertion of authority as somehow independent of the First Presidency and the Twelve. The original minutes might be read to affirm her authority, so I think the redactions were seen as correcting what might be misinterpreted. This is why the redacted versions of Joseph's March 31 and April 28 sermons to Relief Society were included in Joseph Smith's history, later published by B. H. Roberts as *History of the Church*.¹⁰

I don't know what the women's response was because we have yet to discover records that convey it. Eliza wrote a poem¹¹ about the same time the minutes were submitted that suggests to me that the altering of her record was painful for her. That is speculation on my part, but the edits would have been difficult

10. "2.2 Joseph Smith, Discourses to Nauvoo Female Relief Society, March 31 and April 28, 1842, as Revised for 'History of Joseph Smith,' September 5 and 19, 1855," in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 198–208.

11. "The Will," Eliza R. Snow, Journal, 1842–1882, holograph, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (dated: March 1855). This is poem 253 in Derr and Davidson, *Complete Poetry*, 500–502.

for her to accept because she was so careful in seeking to capture every word of Joseph's and because she fervently believed in the possibilities for women conveyed in his words. She probably took minutes while Joseph delivered those six important sermons and later transcribed them in the minute book. I think she felt confident in her accuracy, but she doesn't say.

Silver: We contemporary sisters feel confidence in Eliza's record, too, and it is a grand thing to have the original wording restored. You said earlier that Eliza was very loyal. At that point she was married to Brigham Young, which meant she had to balance her support and respect for him with the expression of her own ideas and talents. Tell us about Brigham Young and Eliza.

Derr: Eliza was sealed to Brigham Young in October 1844, about three months after Joseph's death. It would have been a marriage or sealing for time. I have a sense that the plural wives of Joseph Smith—many or most, though not all—were sealed to members of the Quorum of the Twelve. The women probably had some choice in that matter, so it is likely that Eliza chose Brigham Young. The two of them were very, very different. Brigham Young was less reserved and far rougher around the edges than Eliza; nevertheless, they were married for thirty-three years, and she was part of his household for most of that time.

Silver: Reminiscences speak of her being by his side at family dinners and so forth, and that Brigham often relied on her.

Derr: Yes; she served as a counselor to him with regard to women's expanding responsibilities. There aren't a lot of glimpses of their personal relationship. We have some wonderful letters that she wrote to Brigham that are supportive, humorous. Some are about the economic enterprises that the Relief Society had become involved in, specifically the Women's Commission Store, a cooperative venture that sold women's homemade goods on commission. Such letters provide a peek at their private relationship. Eliza wrote a number of poems sustaining Brigham Young as president or praising or saluting him. Eliza's public voice reflects her continuing loyalty and efforts to rally the community in loyalty and faith.

In terms of theology, I have not discovered too much tension. Eliza embraced Brigham Young's Adam-God teachings as a way of supporting him or framing her own theological ideas within that context. What I see Eliza considering in her encounter with

this controversial theology is a way of bringing women into the story, a way of affirming women's place in the doctrine of exaltation. Eve was elevated to the status of a goddess, her stature a pattern of progression that all women could follow. In the 1850s, Eliza began to place a lot of emphasis on Mother Eve. This doctrinal emphasis became a way for her to express the reality and importance of the divine female. She found that the idea of the exalted Mother Eve gave her hope in her own eternal destiny and could likewise lift other women, so she used it frequently in her poems and later in her discourses. Within that context, this particular approach to theology makes sense, even if it no longer makes sense to us. I think that through this Adam-God teaching, Eliza furthered respect for the divine feminine.

Eliza did have a run-in with Brigham over her ideas about resurrection, which had been fine when she incorporated them into various poems she published. But when she published her article on "Mortal and Immortal Elements of the Human Body," Brigham objected. Poetry is not scrutinized in the same way that prose is. Eliza's article appeared twice in the *Woman's Exponent*, first in 1873 and then in 1875, at which point Brigham issued corrections in various forms, all of which pronounced her theory "untrue." He did not believe, as she did, that there is some eternal kernel of a person that enables resurrection. She could not understand how all the original physical elements of a body could be brought back together since our bodies disintegrate and go into grass, which goes into cows, etc. It's not our very molecules laid in the grave that are resurrected, she wrote, but some core she does not exactly identify. Brigham opposes that idea as unscriptural, believing in only one class of matter, and he makes sure that the theories of this highly respected woman leader are discredited.

Silver: As I remember, Emmeline B. Wells received word from her husband, Daniel Wells, counselor to Brigham Young, that Brigham was not pleased with that article—would she please retract it? Emmeline published Brigham's objection and then John Taylor's clarification. Finally, Eliza wrote a statement of retraction that was published both in the *Woman's Exponent* and in the *Deseret News*.¹²

12. Eliza R. Snow, "Mortal and Immortal Elements of the Human Body: A Philosophical Objection to the Resurrection Removed," appeared in the *Woman's Exponent* 2

Derr: After six months.

Silver: The length of time says something, doesn't it?

Derr: It may tell you something about their relationship. I don't know what happened at home during those six months, but yes, Eliza relented. That is an interesting conflict, and some of Eliza's letters to Brigham likewise reveal minor disagreements. She tells him that his clerk will not dictate the terms of commission for women's goods in the Women's Commission House.¹³ She is very clear about that, but it is a husband/wife letter. "Don't you remember when you were sitting in the green chair, and I told you such and such?" We get a little sense of that.

Silver: She did support his economic desire to make the West independent of those nefarious merchants coming from the East.

Derr: Absolutely, and we can see how well they worked together as organizational partners. He might suggest something like midwifery or physician training for women in the East, and she took that and ran with it. But she was not alone in such efforts. A whole group of women—including Sarah Kimball, Bathsheba Smith, Mary Isabella Horne, Marinda Hyde, and Emmeline Wells—were eager to promote women's professional achievement. Eliza would convey Brigham's suggestions, and off the women went with their own cooperative commission stores, midwifery training, tailoring establishments, and other mercantile enterprises. It was such an exciting time in the history of Latter-day Saint women, and Eliza was one of several leading women at the center of it.

(December 1, 1873): 99, and *Woman's Exponent* 4 (September 1, 1875): 54. Snow's retraction reads in part, "Permit me to say that I fully concur in the views expressed by Pres. Young, and withdraw everything contained in my article at variance therewith, and trust that no Latter-day Saint may be led into erroneous doctrine through anything written by me." Eliza R. Snow, "To Whom It May Concern," March 19, 1876, in *Woman's Exponent* 4 (April 1, 1876): 164, and *Deseret News Weekly*, April 5, 1876, 152. For a more detailed discussion of the incident see Jill Mulvay Derr, "The Lion and the Lioness: Brigham Young and Eliza R. Snow," *BYU Studies* 40, no. 2 (2001): 55–100.

13. "In the fall of 1876 she [Eliza R. Snow] became superintendent of the Woman's Store, a commission house for Utah-made goods, opened in the Constitution Building, Salt Lake City." Orson F. Whitney, "Eliza Roxy Snow Smith," *History of Utah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1892–1904), 4:575. Origins of the store are discussed in Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 83–84.

Silver: She herself wielded the needle, as I recall, and made men's suits, among other things.

Derr: Yes, she made her living as a seamstress. She sewed caps, suits, coats, pantaloons, and other items, both simple and complicated. Sometimes she traded her labor for provisions, and sometimes, like other women, she employed her sewing skills to outfit missionaries.

Silver: She was also called priestess. How did she fulfill this role? There was no temple in Salt Lake until several years after her death.

Derr: In 1852, Eliza was called to assist with ordinance work in the Council House in Salt Lake City. Presendia Huntington Buell Kimball initially presided over women's work there. Eliza went there in 1852, as she documented at the back of that famous Nauvoo minute book where she scratched little notes of having helped with ordinances in the "C.H." The Council House was a civic building, but its "upper room" was set apart for the performance of temple ordinances. Then, in 1855, the Endowment House was constructed and dedicated, and Eliza began presiding over and officiating in women's ordinance work there. No work for the dead was performed in the Endowment House. These were ordinances for living women, especially endowments and sealings. In helping to administer these sacred rites, Eliza had very close contact with hundreds of women.

Of course, many Saints who came west had been endowed in the Nauvoo Temple, but by the 1850s, immigrants who had not had that temple experience began arriving in the Salt Lake Valley by the thousands. Women who came to receive their endowments and be sealed to their husbands not only experienced these ordinances but often also received from Eliza R. Snow healing blessings or prophecies about their lives to come. Within the context of the Endowment House, her roles as priestess and prophetess were not separated. She became well known as a priestess, a title that is not often used now but was used in her day.

Silver: Then Brigham Young turned to her to say it was time to organize women again. In connection with Eliza's work in Relief Society, we think of her as a presidentess. Let's talk about the things she did.

Derr: This is one aspect of Eliza's life that comes alive in the documents published in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, where

we see the beginnings of her ministry and its burgeoning. From 1868, when she was first called to reorganize long-defunct Relief Societies, until her death in 1887, she was always active organizing and teaching. First, she helped reorganize each local Relief Society, taking her Nauvoo minutes and going from ward to ward. She shared with those sisters and their bishops the form, structure, and constitution of Relief Society and how it was meant to function. And then Brigham Young gave her an additional calling, which was to instruct the sisters. Upon receiving that new mission, she said, “My heart went ‘pit a pat,’”¹⁴ because she could see new possibilities in extending Relief Society work to include preaching and teaching.

We should note that at first she was neither called nor set apart to be president, but she was called to do this organizing and teaching work, and so the sisters called her president. That tells us something about the lack women felt, their need for a female leader.

Eliza was brilliant in the way she leveraged the retrenchment movement to reinforce Relief Society and expand its reach to include the nurturing of younger women. Retrenchment was a response to Brigham Young’s counsel to women to simplify their dress and food preparation and free up their time for other important personal and collective developments. He aimed his counsel first at older women, then at younger women. As you know, Brigham Young assigned different women to do different things: Eliza to organize the Relief Society, Emmeline Wells to oversee grain storage, and Mary Isabella Horne to head retrenchment. But the women united, brought these diverse assignments together, and approached them collectively.¹⁵

Brigham Young told Mary Isabella Horne, “Bring the local Relief Society presidents together and get them to commit to retrenchment.” As they began to meet together with Eliza, this

14. “3.5 Eliza R. Snow, Account of 1868 Commission, as Recorded in ‘Sketch of My Life,’ April 13, 1885 (Excerpt),” in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 268.

15. Beginnings of retrenchment for older and younger women are featured in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*: “3.15 Ladies’ Cooperative Retrenchment Meeting, Minutes, February 10, 1870,” “3.16 Ladies’ Cooperative Retrenchment Meeting, Minutes, February 19, 1870,” and “3.18 Young Ladies’ Department of the Ladies’ Cooperative Retrenchment Association, Resolutions, May 27, 1870,” pp. 338–42, 343–49, and 353–57, respectively.

group of a dozen or so presidents from different Salt Lake City wards became both prototype and pro tempore for a general board. Suddenly these local Relief Society presidents came together across ward boundaries to talk about and coordinate their economic programs, their financing, their building of halls and granaries. Their meetings became the forum where what Brigham suggested to Eliza was talked about and implemented. General Retrenchment was the name of this semi-weekly meeting, and it gradually grew to include a larger contingent of women. It continued on even after a general board was organized in the 1880s. It had become the foundation for women communicating about and between their local Relief Societies. This was a brilliant move on the women's part, because Brigham Young had only authorized ward Relief Societies, not one big general Relief Society as had existed under Emma Smith's direction.

It's exciting to me to see how Eliza and the sisters with whom she worked leveraged their assignments to build their own structure for their organization. As Eliza helped extend Relief Society work to different stakes and different counties, she designated a president to preside over ward presidents even before Brigham Young instituted stake Relief Society presidents in 1877. So Eliza operated without an official calling, but the authority she exercised made her work official in many respects.

- Silver:** She had a mandate, and she knew how to structure, how to bind people together so they would be effective.
- Derr:** Exactly. She likewise became instrumental in establishing what is now known as the Young Women organization. At Brigham Young's direction, she rallied his teenaged daughters and helped them come up with retrenchment resolutions. As the young women's movement spread, Eliza tied it right away to the senior women's retrenchment. For a while there was this Cooperative Senior and Junior Retrenchment, the older women working with the younger women. Of course, they eventually broke away to be known as Young Ladies' Retrenchment and then the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association, but Eliza still regularly visited, organized, and taught those groups. Then, in 1878, after Brigham's death, she worked with Aurelia Spencer Rogers, who had a particular concern about teaching good principles to rambunctious boys and also girls. Thus, the idea of the Primary Association came along. It was Eliza who

facilitated getting John Taylor's approval and spreading this movement churchwide.¹⁶ In all these cases, Eliza visited wards and stakes throughout the Church and spoke about women's potential, young women's potential, and children's potential. She was so committed to the Primary that she developed its first curriculum. For a while she was known as the presidentess of all the women-led organizations.

Silver: As Jenny Reeder has pointed out, Eliza would show groups Joseph Smith's pocket watch, one that he had given her, as a link to him and as a testimony of her faith in him and his principles.¹⁷

Let's talk a little about politics. Much has been written recently about the Great Indignation Meeting of January 1870 in gaining the vote for women. What was Eliza's vision for women in the public world?

Derr: We see in local Relief Society minutes that Eliza talked repeatedly about the importance of women taking on public duties. She saw that as critically important. I probably did a great disservice to her in my early article "Eliza and the Woman Question" because, being a total novice as a historian, I looked for significant quotations while paying little attention to chronology. That article featured many statements Eliza made in the 1850s about women not moving into the public sphere, women not taking on the same responsibilities as men. But the article did not consider the development of her ideas over time. Like other women of her era, her thinking changed. Certainly by the 1870s she was pressing for a larger public role for women.¹⁸

Silver: Women were afraid of being thought of as strong-minded.

Derr: Exactly. In terms of the women's movement nationally, there were women's suffrage conventions, not just at Seneca Falls in 1848 but up to the Civil War, where pretty radical things were expressed against religion and against men. Eliza took quite a stand against such ideas, saying that Latter-day Saint women didn't oppose their church leaders and didn't need those kinds

16. See "3.30 Aurelia Spencer Rogers, Reminiscences of August 1878, as Published in 'History of Primary Work,' 1898," in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 428–34.

17. Jennifer Reeder, "Eliza R. Snow and the Prophet's Gold Watch: Time Keeper as Relic," *Journal of Mormon History* 31, no. 1 (2005): 119–41.

18. Jill C. Mulvay, "Eliza R. Snow and the Woman Question," *BYU Studies* 16, no. 2 (1976): 250–64.

of rights. But she was also open to the ideas that came forward in the world, and by the late 1860s, there was a lot more talk about suffrage among some Latter-day Saint women. Sarah Kimball, for example, totally espoused the cause, took the suffrage periodical *The Revolution*, and shared it with her sisters. These women educated Eliza, and she was responsive to their ideas.

The Indignation Meeting of 1870 started as a demonstration of women's united opposition to the Cullom Bill, proposed antipolygamy legislation then before the U.S. Congress. Other earlier bills had come up through Congress, I think in '68 or '69. Eliza's signature was there with those of other women who published their opposition to those early bills as being unfair to plural wives and mothers. In January 1870, Eliza joined the contingent of sisters in the Fifteenth Ward (Sarah Kimball's ward) who gathered to compose resolutions opposing the Cullom Bill and then determined to move the effort from a ward indignation meeting to a much larger, more inclusive indignation meeting. Eliza and others succeeded in getting notices in the paper calling women to gather in the Old Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. Similar meetings were held in other communities.

Eliza, taking a prominent role, was one of many powerful speakers at the Great Indignation Meeting. Some of the speakers pressed for women to be enfranchised so their opinions could be registered at the ballot box. Still, there was not a general demand for the vote, as Lola Van Wagenen's fine work has shown.¹⁹ Nevertheless, women had impressively represented themselves and their ideas, and the possibility of enfranchising women was soon before Utah's Territorial Legislature. There was only a month between the January 1870 indignation meeting and the legislature's February 1870 bill granting the franchise to Utah women. Many scholars have been fascinated by that and have done great work on the granting of the franchise. We have also tried to lay out the sequence of events in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*.²⁰

19. Lola Van Wagenen, "Sister-Wives and Suffragists: Polygamy and the Politics of Woman Suffrage, 1870-1896" (PhD diss., New York University, 1994; Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2003).

20. See "3.13 Minutes of 'Great Indignation Meeting,' January 13, 1870," in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 311-32; as well as "3.12 Minutes of 'Ladies Mass Meeting,' January 6, 1870," pp. 305-10; "3.14 'Female Suffrage in Utah,' February 8, 1870," pp. 333-37;

Some people feel that Eliza opposed the enfranchisement of women. If she had expressed reluctance earlier, she didn't oppose it in 1870. By then, she was very supportive of women voting and wanted to see them given the opportunity to hold public office. I think these later attitudes are sometimes eclipsed by her earlier statements. That said, she wasn't the outspoken kind of suffragist that Emmeline Wells was or that Zina Young would be after the 1887 Edmunds-Tucker Act disenfranchised Utah women. Eliza died in 1887 and wasn't alive to react to the disenfranchisement or to the 1895 debates about including women's suffrage in the Utah Constitution. Those critical developments were after her time.

Silver: Yes, but she was among the women who spoke well in that 1870 indignation meeting covered by national reporters, one of whom paid tribute to their logic and rhetoric.²¹ That praise sounds as if it could have been in response to Eliza's contribution to the meeting.

Derr: She was all for women's rights, but to her, the real engine for change in the world was the Church, and she did not ever give that belief up. As I said earlier, she was totally committed to the priesthood and its authority, order, power, and ordinances being the real means to transform the world.

Silver: It sounds to me, Jill, as if you enjoy becoming better acquainted with Eliza as you write her biography.

Derr: Definitely. The more I learn about her, the more I appreciate her complexity. I remember Leonard Arrington saying as he was working on his biography of Brigham Young, "Great men have great strengths and great weaknesses," and I think becoming acquainted with both of those aspects of Eliza and being honest about them has been important to me. She treasured relationships, one of her qualities that is often underestimated. She was an intellectual, but she was a social one. Salvation for her was social. She loved her family. She loved the Smith family, the Young family, and she loved and appreciated the generation

and "3.17 Eliza R. Snow and Others, Letter to Stephen A. Mann, and Stephan A. Mann Reply, February 19, 1870," pp. 350–52.

21. Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 243, quoting "Mormon Women in Council," *New York Herald*, January 23, 1870, 6.

of women and men around her. She seized the opportunity to lead women, and as she did so, she enlarged her voice, her influence—her usefulness, we might say—and she encouraged other women to step forward and enlarge their influence. They could make a difference, and they did, as we have talked about, in all these activities they undertook.

At the heart of Joseph Smith's temple theology was the eternal family, eternal increase, husband and wife, and the Eternal Father and Mother in Heaven. Priesthood quorums and Relief Society reflected this gender balance in ecclesiastical structure, and that may have been one reason that Eliza took to the Relief Society with such a passion. The Latter-day Saints had a prophet and president, a visible Quorum of the Twelve. Not only was the Relief Society organization missing for a time, but with Emma gone, a significant female figure was missing. In her era, Eliza became that central figure. You can feel her magnetism. Women need visible women leaders, and during her era Eliza's great gifts came together with that need and made her a legend.²²

Silver: A powerful tribute to her. In concluding our conversation, I invite you to reflect more generally on the writing of Latter-day Saint women's history during your career. What have been the trends in examining the lives and contributions of women in the nineteenth century? What approaches have been fruitful in these studies?

Derr: Initially—as a team at the Church History Division under the direction of Leonard Arrington—Maureen Beecher, Carol Madsen, and I focused on the “women worthies,” the most famous women and their lives, to begin to include a few of the women who were missing from history at that time. We looked to the women who had had a significant public presence, to women who made a difference in politics or economics. At that time, the world prized politics and economics, and we saw achievement in these fields as success. Things have changed over the years, and social history has taken on greater significance. One important shift was the turn toward exploring the

22. The complete discourses of Eliza R. Snow are being published online. The documents are posted on the website “The Discourses of Eliza R. Snow,” <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/eliza-r-snow?lang=eng>.

personal writings of women. Another has been the attention to the collective work of women, beginning to unpack their institutional minutes, or looking at women's discourse as it appears in those minutes, or particularly in their *Exponent* articles or their poetry. Susanna Morrill did beautiful work by looking at the poetry of Latter-day Saint women as it appeared in the *Exponent* as their means of expressing theology.²³

Our horizons have expanded over the years. We're more interested in lesser-known women and their writings and experiences. As we have moved forward, different approaches have greatly expanded the field. You mentioned Jenny Reeder's work on Eliza Snow's watch. This is material culture. Work on quilts is also material culture, as is the study of the ways that women express themselves in their cooking. Kate Holbrook has started to look at food as a way of revealing women's lives and even their religious experiences or expressions. Of course, we see now lots of fresh approaches and new topics. Taunalyn Rutherford's wonderful work on women in India and other innovative work on women in Europe and in Asia have shown us the experiences of Latter-day Saint women from other parts of the globe. These will tell us something about what our faith means to women as it is expressed through a different culture.

Theological inquiry, once so suspect, is now being embraced more readily, especially since scholars have begun to compare the Latter-day Saint experience with that of women in other faiths—with Jewish women or Muslim women or evangelical women. In the world generally, many such comparative topics are being addressed. Scholars from outside the Church, such as Catherine Brekus, are bringing this broader perspective to their study of Latter-day Saint women.²⁴ Gender studies have become very important, and a closer examination of women's documents. I think it is exciting that minute books for Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary are being digitized, because so many more women will be able to explore the history they reveal.

23. Susanna Morrill, *White Roses on the Floor of Heaven: Mormon Women's Popular Theology, 1880–1920* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

24. Catherine A. Brekus, "Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 59–87.

Silver: I was surprised when Janiece Johnson was told by a dissertation advisor, “You have a pretty good topic, but where are you going to find writings by women, enough to be able to write a major study?” No problem now in finding sources. We have only to open our eyes and accept what is there. This has been a fascinating discussion. Do you have any final comments?

Derr: My final comment would be to echo something Carol Cornwall Madsen said years ago in her memorable address to the Mormon History Association. She talked about lots of different approaches to Mormon women’s history and about the women who have been hidden and become visible. She said that uncovering these women helped her to discover herself.²⁵ I think that for any Latter-day Saint woman who studies the history of women, that growing self-discovery is probably the greatest blessing. In many ways I feel that my life has unfolded as it has because of these dear and wonderful women of the past. I will be eternally grateful.

Silver: Thank you so much. You have helped us see that Latter-day Saint women’s history is not only a work of paying tribute but of finding joy and companionship in the present and through the past. Heartfelt thanks for your decades of work with women’s history and the views you have set forth today.

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25. Carol Cornwall Madsen, “‘Feme Covert’: Journey of a Metaphor,” *Journal of Mormon History* 17 (1991): 43–61.