1997


Richard H. Cracroft

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol9/iss2/10
Title

Author(s)  Richard H. Cracroft


ISSN  1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Mormon studies scholars and aficionados—and even an enlightened gentile or two—will welcome Terryl L. Givens’s *The Viper on the Hearth*, a landmark study of anti-Mormonism and its reflections in nineteenth-century American fiction. Givens, himself a Latter-day Saint and associate professor of English at the University of Richmond, breaks new ground in his sound scholarly examination of "the long and tumultuous relationship between Mormonism and American society" (p. 5). Givens’s probing of nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-Mormon fiction in the contexts of American cultural, social, and religious history discovers a number of typical patterns that put us far on the way toward understanding early and late anti-Mormon defamation and persecution, anti-Mormon construction of Mormon heresy, and anti-Mormon demonizing of the Mormon people.

In "Mormonism, Politics, and History," part 1 of his closely and well-argued treatise, Givens establishes the Mormons as a unique people, the best example in U.S. history of an "indigenously developed ethnic minority" (p. 16). Placing Mormonism in well-elucidated contexts with other new American religions and Roman Catholicism, he chronicles the history of religious persecution and violence levied against the Latter-day Saints by Christian majorities as well as the aggressive anti-Mormon actions of the U.S. Presidency, Congress, and Supreme Court.

In his examination of anti-Mormon literature, Professor Givens undertakes to answer at least five questions that have puzzled the much-maligned Latter-day Saints since 1830: (1) Why was the response to Mormonism and its relatively small handful of members so disproportionate to the so-called "crimes" of Mormonism? (2) Why, in an age of general opposition to (a) Spiritualism,
(b) Christian Science, (c) Mesmerism, (d) the Grahamites, (e) the Millerites, (f) Utopianism, or (g) Transcendentalism, was anti-Catholicism the only antagonism which approached in virulence, although not in persecution and violence, the anti-Mormon crusade of 1850–90? (3) Why, in a nation which prided itself on pluralism and religious tolerance, did America’s “one native religion” become the most glaring and anomalous exception “to the American rule of universal toleration”? (p. 20)—how, in other words, did nineteenth-century anti-Mormon critics reconcile their Jeffersonian religious ideology of tolerance amidst pluralism (e pluribus unum) with a rhetoric of vituperation and exclusion against minority religions in general and Catholicism and Mormonism in particular? (4) What was it in Mormonism, asks Givens, that “lifted it out of the realm of simple religious nonconformity and into the realm of heresy” (p. 75)? (5) Finally, he asks why, after 160 years, Mormonism is still assailed, on one hand, by detractors as “heresy,” “cult,” or “non-Christian,” while on the other hand, sociologists and theologians predict that the worldwide acceptance and growth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints place Mormonism “on the threshold of becoming the first major faith to appear on earth since the Prophet Mohammed rode out of the desert” (p. 80).

Givens addresses these questions very thoroughly, and following him through the dense complexities of his answers not only takes the reader on a quick but intensive march through nineteenth-century American religious history, but, in an age of nearly universal literacy, through a survey on the power of the Nativist and popular press in identifying, ostracizing, and demonizing more or less helpless minorities, such as the always unpopular Mormons.

Just how unsavory the Mormon reputation had become by the 1880s, at the height of the anti-polygamy turmoil in Utah and Congress, is illustrated by a sermon given in Brooklyn on 2 October 1881 by the Reverend Thomas De Witt Talmage. Attempting to console his parishioners who had been shaken by the ineffectuality of their prayers in behalf of President James Garfield, who had been murdered by an assassin, Talmage, referring to an early report that the assassin was allegedly a Mormon, proclaimed that, “if the death of Garfield shall arouse the nation to
more hatred of that institution of Mormonism, . . . he will not have died in vain." No one knew for sure, he continued, but if the assassin were not a Mormon, the vile wretch clearly "had the ugliness of a Mormon, the licentiousness of a Mormon, the cruelty of a Mormon, the murderous spirit of a Mormon" (p. 40). In fact, the popular image of the Mormon was that of a degenerate, sensual, evil, and profligate outcast, a kind of Hunchback of the Eighteenth Ward, and a threat to traditional American values of family and fireside. Givens lifts his Viper on the Hearth image from a 1911 Cosmopolitan series attacking Mormonism, in which the author attempts, as journalists had done for over fifty years, to make the Mormons appear as Strange, Other, Exotic, Immoral, Fanatic, and Alien.

Givens explores what Gary Bunker and Davis Bitton refer to as a "ritually recited litany" of Mormon offenses (p. 47), a list not unlike the offenses of anti-Catholicism—with a twist: From Mormon religious peculiarities, based on ongoing revelation and additional holy scripture, through their phenomenal missionary success, communalistic economic practices, and their doctrinal exclusivity, to their claim that all other Christian churches are apostate, Mormons exasperated Christian clergy by insisting on restoration not reformation; by claiming "a monopoly on the path to salvation" (p. 5); by announcing that historic Christian orthodoxy is heresy, while the upstart Mormon heresy is simply ur-Christian orthodoxy. Nativists, already suspicious of Catholic loyalty to Rome, found ways to transform Mormon loyalties to Salt Lake City into an implicit threat to the constitutional principle of separation of church and state; and since, after all, both Catholics and Mormons sponsored secret ceremonies "of dubious repute" and encouraged "the licentious or economic exploitation of women" (p. 47), it became evident that Mormons, like Catholics, were indeed "a peculiar people" and thus "Other," dismissible, and expendable.

Having established the contexts of his study, Dr. Givens undertakes in part 2, "Mormonism and Fiction," a consideration of the image of the Mormon as it slithers its way among a selection of the fifty-six anti-Mormon novels written between 1853 and 1900, and, gentled and disguised, raises its still-ugly head amid fiction written late in the twentieth century. (I wish Givens had
included a bibliography of these anti-Mormon novels from both centuries—especially since one wonders about his exclusion of such anti-Mormon authors as Joaquin Miller, "Bill" Nye, and Marietta Holley, who, as "Josiah Allen's Wife," made devastating comic attacks on Mormon polygamy, especially in My Wayward Partner [1880]. I also wish that Givens had treated the large and influential body of anti-Mormon fiction of Great Britain, Germany, and France.

Givens introduces John Russell's The Mormoness; or, the Trials of Mary Maverick (1853) as the prototype of the essential patterns of anti-Mormon fiction (pp. 109–10). Such tawdry work would repeatedly illustrate Mormon licentiousness, corruption, "hundreds and thousands of murders," human sacrifice, and a system of polyandry "only privately talked of in select circles" (p. 118). Anti-Mormon fiction, like anti-Catholic fiction, became a means by which Americans could legitimize their animosities while engaging in a politics of ostracism and exclusion. By demonizing the Latter-day Saints as the Other, to whom American values did not apply, writers could still wave their patriot banner of Nativism, pluralism, freedom, and tolerance. Capitalizing on American hostility toward the strangeness of immigrating ethnic minorities, anti-Mormon writers seized upon two recurring patterns of representation, (1) Oriental images and (2) themes of coercion and bondage, to scandalize readers by exaggerating differences and distancing the villains from American society, culture, and religion.

The practice of polygamy and the likening of plural wives to the inhabitants of Eastern harems, together with suggestions of rampant sexuality and exoticism—and wild imaginations—did wonders for the anti-Mormon market. From the beginning, writers transformed Mormon prophets in general, and Brigham Young in particular, into Islamic sheiks and despots, and Salt Lake City into a lurid city with, as Charles Heber Clark (Max Adeler) described it, "a distinctly Oriental appearance" (p. 132). Orientalism enabled distancing of the new religion from the familiar and acceptable. Scientists fostered this distancing by insisting that the polygamous Saints had created a degenerate "new race": Among the Mormon youth, they reported
an expression compounded of sensuality, cunning, suspicion, and a smirking self-conceit. The yellow, sunken, cadaverous visage; the greenish-colored eyes; the thick, protuberant lips; the low forehead; the light, yellowish hair, and the lank, angular person, constitute an appearance so characteristic of the new race, the production of polygamy, as to distinguish them at a glance. (pp. 136–7)

At the heart of anti-Mormon fiction were the unsavory but delicious tales of coercion and bondage—the unwilling wife in matrimonial bondage, the freedom-seeking wife fleeing in terror, the white slave trade, and other “unimaginable depravities” (p. 118). Throughout the nineteenth century, anti-Mormon fiction insisted that no normal individual could become a willing convert to Mormonism, so conversion to Mormonism was rewritten as coercion to Mormonism. In tale after novel, conversion to Mormonism was due to “magnetic attraction, compulsion, captivity, enslavement, [or] kidnapping”—words and images which, asserts Givens, “pervade virtually the entire gamut of works in which Mormons figure as characters” (p. 138). Such led to unnatural sexual charisma and licentiousness as Mormons wove their secret, devious, intangible web, wooing the innocent and sincere believer down to hell. Anti-Mormon fiction orders its narratives, then, not around the conversion process but around the flight of captive wives, the capturing of maidens by missionaries sent out by Brigham Young to raid wagon trains for the purpose of bringing back young virgins (p. 143), or the Danite pursuit of vengeance against runaway wives or apostate Saints. Because “Mormonism was perceived as representing values and practices antithetical to the evolving image of America” (p. 151) in an America which was beginning to see itself as law-abiding, “theologically Protestant, morally Puritan, and politically Jacksonian,” fictional Mormonism was transformed literarily into an outlaw un-American cult, theologically heterodox, morally evil, politically separatist, socially exclusive, and economically independent and aloof.

And while the Mormon image in twentieth-century fiction seems, on first glance, to be different, the tired old stereotypes merely take on other, more sophisticated, guises. Harold Bloom,
for example, demonstrates that the progress of the Mormon image is, at best, quaint. He writes that,

the visitor to Salt Lake City, after just four days, has learned to tell the difference between certain Mormons and most Gentiles at first sight. There is something organized about the expressions on many Mormon faces as they go by in the street. (p. 155)

And Paul Fussell, a respected contemporary literary critic, can still get away with proposing, in an essay mourning the death of “American sensibility and taste” (p. 40), that the era of bad taste may well have begun in the 1830s, when Joseph Smith took from dictation a number of miserably written narratives and injunctions conveyed to him by the angel Moroni and then persuaded a number of hicks to begin a new religion[!](p. 41)

Contemporary Mormonism, lacking, says Martin Marty, any “anti-defamation lobby” (p. 160), and despite the projection of squeaky-clean, well-dressed, financially affluent Mormons complete with Boy-Scout-law virtues, continues to confront an image such as that projected by The God Makers films and dozens of devoted and zealous professional anti-Mormons. The prevailing anti-Mormon task is to see and depict Mormonism—as the National Council of Christians and Jews wrote in condemning The Godmakers—as “some sort of subversive plot—a danger to the community, a threat to the institution of marriage, and ... destructive to the mental health of teenagers” (p. 157), accusations that resemble the sensational speculations leveled against the Mormons a century earlier by Harriet Beecher Stowe or Robert Richards (in The California Crusoe... A Tale of Mormonism, 1854).

In much of late twentieth-century fiction, wherein a Mormon or the Mormon people play no central part, the Mormon stereotype has become positive and goody-goody wholesome. Today the stereotypical Mormon “is successful, white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, suburban, one working parent in a traditional family with stay-at-home mother and five children” (p. 163). Mormons
in Tom Clancy’s fiction are ringingly “honest and hardworking, and fiercely loyal to their country, because they believed in what America stood for” (p. 163). And when Nicholas Cage, in *Raising Arizona* (1987), dreams of domestic bliss “where all parents are strong and wise and capable and all children are happy and beloved,” he concludes that, while it has all the earmarks of heaven, “maybe it was Utah” (p. 164).

Amidst these wholesome images (which make many Saints shudder) lurks many a viper. Forthright anti-Mormonism is flourishing in writings of such contemporary authors as ex-Mormons Robert Irvine and Cleo Jones (pp. 160–2). In *Angel’s Share*, one of Irvine’s “Moroni Traveler” mysteries set in contemporary Utah and fraught with anti-Mormonism, Irvine depicts Mormons as at once ultrapatriotic and treasonous. In *Prophet Motive* and other novels, Cleo Jones undertakes to describe a city-of-the-saints full of “sexually voracious” Mormons, deranged fanatics, totalitarian church government, intrusive surveillance, contemporary (winked-at) polygamy, and assorted LDS Church cover-ups of church involvement in Watergate, the Bay of Pigs, the assassination of President Kennedy, and so forth. Both Irvine and Jones view polygamy in either century as justification for Mormon lust, and both attempt to “uncover” a zeal for “corruptive power” in the contemporary Mormon.

Givens concludes his study by pointing up an irony: twentieth-century Mormons, despite their firm hold on the old verities and values, and despite a brushed-up, clean-cut, wholesome, Donny-and-Marie image, now find themselves on the moral periphery and thus, once more, suspect. Because Mormons occupy what used to be the center, Latter-day Saints seem puzzled by the “politics of the periphery,” which devalue the center to which the Latter-day Saints cling. Thus John Le Carré, in *The Russia House*, describes two American CIA agents as faceless twins, as “Americans, so slight, so trim, so characterless,” whose “Mormon cleanliness” he “found slightly revolting” (p. 164). And Mormon viewers of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* find equally revolting the negative reversal of the Mormon image in clean-cut “Harper Percy, Utah Mormon” and closet homosexual (p. 164).

Professor Terry L. Givens, in defanging *The Viper on the Hearth* (if one “defangs” vipers), has performed an inestimable
service for Mormon letters and the Mormon people. While his excellent study proffers ideas "often thought, but ne’er so well expressed," the phenomenon of virulent anti-Mormonism continues unabated. Contemporary antagonism may seem gentler and more moderate, but it continues harmful, damaging, and decidedly un-Christian, for reasons which Givens takes pains to enumerate and clarify.

In The Viper on the Hearth, Terryl L. Givens has pried open a barricaded door between Mormons and gentiles and enabled a fresh gust of mutual toleration, understanding, respect, and Christian charity—which will circulate, I hope, for a long time to come.