Poetry and the Private Lives: Newspaper Verse on the Mormon Frontier

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher

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

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol25/iss3/6
Poetry and the Private Lives: Newspaper Verse on the Mormon Frontier

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher

A handful of verses eventually led to the founding in 1872 of the Woman's Exponent and the choosing of Louisa Lula Greene as its first editor. A student in the first class of the University of Utah, the twenty-year-old northern Utah girl needed train fare back home to Smithfield and so offered the poems to an editor on the Salt Lake Herald in exchange for the exact price of a ticket. Quite taken with the verses, and with their writer, the editor later persuaded her to return to Salt Lake City and assume editorship of a paper for women which he would underwrite.1

The Exponent published for forty-two years, from 1872 until 1914 when it was replaced by the Relief Society Magazine, official publication of the women's organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Amidst a variety of feature and news articles—some local, some lifted, some polemic, and many feminist—there was from the outset poetry. In the tradition of the newspapers in the eastern United States—from which area most of the leading lights among Mormon women came—it contained always a poetry corner, not labeled such, but invariably positioned in the upper left-hand corner of the front page. Besides this prominent token to verse, there were often other pieces scattered through the eight to sixteen pages of the semimonthly tabloid-sized paper.

It is natural on several counts that poetry should have been featured so prominently. The propensities of its first editor, the young Miss Greene, and of her successor, Emmeline B. Wells, alone would account for a spot for poetry, even if the tradition had not been there to direct them. It is not to that question that this article addresses itself,

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher is an associate research professor in the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at Brigham Young University, and past president of the Mormon History Association.

1 The Woman's Exponent, in its full forty-two-year run, is available in hard copy in only two repositories: the Harvard University Library and the Archives of the Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives). That institution, however, has been generous in providing microfilm copies to many individuals and libraries, so access is not difficult. Some private collectors have full runs of the magazine.
for the conventions of the poetry corner are still with us, testimony to an undying tradition. This paper has more to do with the women who wrote and submitted their verses to the *Exponent* than with its editors and their policies. Why these women wrote as they did, even why they wrote at all is a larger question. For these were not "poets" such as those of literary judgment might acknowledge. It takes no great literary sensitivity to realize that newspaper poetry a hundred years ago was for the most part superficial, bland, unimaginative, derived from known forms and themes, spelling out its message in language more akin to prose than to poetry except for a self-conscious adherence to rhyme and rhythm.

Some of the unspoken motives which insured the continuation of poetry-writing in so unlikely a region as the desert of the Great Basin and so inappropriate a time as the early frontier days have to do with the women and their sense of their own identity. Perhaps it was true for the men, as historian Frederick Jackson Turner posited, that the western frontier would demand of its inhabitants a new society, a civilization unique to its roughness. For the women, however, that would not, could not be so. Frontier women generally, not just Utah’s Mormon women, required from their new environment more than mere survival, and from their earliest entry into the Salt Lake Valley Mormon women found ways of affirming their place in and responsibility for preserving the civilization from which they had come. So we find Patty Sessions, not even two weeks into the forbidding new land, spending two whole days making artificial flowers for a coming wedding, and Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball then and for decades afterwards arguing in vain that their women should wear homespun designed in a bloomer-like costume appropriate to Utah’s dust and muddy streets. The similarity of their adornment to that currently in vogue in the East was the women’s thermometer measuring their own self-worth as civilized women, equal in every regard to their sisters back home whose scorn for their strange religion and even stranger practices demanded response.

The writing of poetry was another means of asserting to themselves and (they wished) to their critical eastern sisters that they were not the poor, ignorant, downtrodden dupes of harem lords they were portrayed to be. It is not coincidence that the one woman who would figure most consistently as the queen bee in Deseret society, Eliza Roxcy Snow, achieved her first praise as "Zion’s poetess," a title

---

2The theme of gentility among frontier women is developed in the author’s paper “Women’s Work on the Mormon Frontier,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 49 (Summer 1981): 276-90.
awarded her by Joseph Smith. Fine writing, like fine dress, bespoke a gentility which the women craved.

An overview of the contents of the first decade of the *Exponent*, the years 1872–82, might help assess the tradition. The issues of that period, published on the first and fifteenth of every month, yield more than four hundred complete poems. In style they show very little imagination. The verses seem more bound to replicate past forms than to attempt even moderate alterations. Occasionally there would be a five-line stanza, or a twelve-line collection of couplets titled “Sonnet,” or, from one young writer, a few poems experimenting with iambic pentameter lines ending with structure words:

But no, it could not thus remain and God’s great
Plan of being perfected, so Adam fell that
Man might be: might know both good and
Evil, might choose and win eternal life.³

Such infelicities might be overlooked as unhappy accidents, but they persist throughout the issues—such failures of the poet’s craft as make holy things profane and sincere sentiments ludicrous, most noticeably by the jarring juxtaposing of a verse pattern inappropriate to the thought of the poem. The singsong quality of the iambic 3–4–3–4 verses demeans the sense of the following poem:

His Truth is pure, it must endure,
   For Right it sanctions ever:
His law we deem the Truth supreme—
   ’Tis just, and wrongs us never.⁴

Granted, several hymns in the canon scan this way, but somehow sixteen such stanzas can’t but reduce the lofty thoughts to the rum-te-tum more appropriate to Gilbert and Sullivan opera.

One verse on a serious theme took the form of a series of limericks strung together:

If a stormcloud be over us riven,
   The very next thing that we know—
   Right over us bending—
   A glory transcending,
   Is the promised, the beautiful Bow.⁵

Years before the *Exponent* began publication, Charley Walker, the irreverent rhymester of the southern Utah “Dixie Mission” wrote a

---

cheerful complaint of the hardships of that experience usually titled "St. George and the Drag-on." One chorus goes:

The wind with fury here doth blow
That when we plant or sow, Sir,
We place one foot upon the seeds,
And hold 'em till they grow, Sir!\

The pattern, to a syllable, is repeated later by an Exponent contributor who lived just thirty miles upriver from Walker. One would hate to suspect conscious imitation, realizing what satirical effect would result if the following verse were sung to Walker's bouncy tune:

For this is the truth we will maintain,
Until our dying day, Sir!
That Jesus Christ our King shall reign,
And righteousness bear sway, Sir. 7

Be it said to their credit that when these writers set out to follow a pattern, they could usually bring it off—often, however, with boring regularity which allowed for no deviation for sense or effect. In 1881, perhaps tiring of endless reading of unrhymed or unscanned verses, editor Emmeline Wells published this lifted poem of James G. Clark with the following superscript:

Competent literary critics have pronounced the following poem unsurpassed by any other production of its class in our language. It is perfect in rhyme, beautiful in figure and expression:

Leona, the hour draws nigh,
The hour we've waited so long,
For the angel to open a door in the sky,
That my spirit may break from its prison and try
Its voice in an infinite song. 8

The model seems to have had no effect on subsequent submissions; the old forms remained. As consistent as the versifiers might have been, they seldom achieved that unity of form and substance which is poetry.

However one might disparage the poetic skill of the women who wrote for the Exponent, the content ought not to be dismissed. What these women of the frontier's second generation wrote—and what

6 "St George and the Drag-On" is in the repertoire of most folksingers of Utah. These words are as it is sung by Rosalie Sorrels. A slightly different version can be found in Thomas E. Cheney, ed., Mormon Songs from the Rocky Mountains: A Compilation of Mormon Folksong (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 113–15.

7 Jacob E. Terry, "The United Order," Woman's Exponent 3 (15 March 1875): 154. Terry is one of the few men whose writings appear in the magazine and one of two whose poetry is found in the present sample.

8 James G. Clark, "Leona," Woman's Exponent 10 (15 August 1881): 43.
they did not write—speaks obliquely but often eloquently about their concept of themselves and their lives. Earlier I suggested that the very act of composing verses was a statement of identity, an affirmation of gentility, of civilized womanhood. The conventional character of the poems may well be attributed to that need for conformity: the women were loath to alter their pattern lest their inventiveness reveal a qualitative difference between them and their eastern sisters and they be forced to admit that the rough isolation of the preceding decades had toughened their senses as it had reddened their faces.

Perhaps for the same reason, only certain topics were appropriate to *Exponent's* poetry corner. By far the largest subject categories are didactic poems which teach the doctrines of the Latter-day Saints, which promote religious concepts generally, or which admonish readers towards moral rectitude. Of the four hundred-odd verses in the ten-year span, 115 were of this sort. The next largest category is predictable, considering the century and its conventions: poems responding to death, more particularly the death of a loved one. These overlap the next category, poems about children and mothers. (Fathers are seldom mentioned—perhaps a suggestion of female chauvinism or of the frequent absence of men from their homes?)

More than forty of the poems are those interminable occasional verses which even now plague Mormon celebrations: reflections on Christmas, Joseph Smith’s birthday, the Twenty-fourth of July, somebody’s marriage, New Year’s, whatever. They merge with the tribute poems, of which there are twenty-nine, not including the death-of-a-loved-one verses. Tribute is paid to such diverse people as Washington’s mother, Isabella of Spain, Mrs. Garfield (on the assassination of her husband), Bishop Edward Hunter (he got three poems on his eighty-sixth birthday!), and Mother Whitney, the grand old lady who sang songs in the gift of tongues.

There were travelogues (mostly from Eliza R. Snow on her trip to Palestine) and nature poems (mostly from Emmeline B. Wells, in the vein of “Our Mountain Home So Dear,” whose inclusion in the Mormon hymnal has long been questioned).

A predictable category for a woman’s magazine found itself split into two quite different modes. Romantic love was seen first in the traditional sense of the sentimental novel, improved by a note of pathos such as that suggested with the poem “You Kissed Me.”9 Lest readers should miss the foreshadowing of the final stanza, that “‘Twere delicious to die if my heart could grow cold/While your arms

---

wrapt me round in that passionate hold!” they were informed in a prominent superscript that “the wedding was appointed, at 8 o’clock P.M. and the expectant bridegroom suddenly died at 6 P.M. only two hours before the time fixed for his marriage.” And then, to wrench from the reader her final tear, “Miss __________ was never married; but refused repeated subsequent offers.”

But there was also the Maud Muller twist, the imposition of reality on the romantic, as in one poem entitled “Mismated,” in which the dove, wed to a hawk, uncomplaining at the turbulence of the hawk-life, “with no visible sickness . . . drooped and died.”10 This is still romantic in its thrust (more realistically, I suppose, she would have become a hawk and fought back) but with a moral-bearing purpose. But most delightful to the jaded twentieth-century soul, perhaps, is the direction suggested in “My Sister,” by a Beaver, Utah, contributor. In this poem, the suave philanderer from the city summers in the country, for his health’s sake, where he “In idle moments sought to win/A maiden’s pure heart, undefiled.” The guileless maid, who is onto his tricks, delivers him a scathing, though reasoned, discourse on his wicked ways, concluding with the advice that he

> Return to town; and when you find
> Such bride, midst fashion’s devotees,
> Reflect your worth would not suffice
> A simple country girl to please.11

What the women did not write about, however, intrigues me fully as much as what they did. Exponent readers and contributors were living frontier lives, if no longer in Salt Lake City, then in some part of Mormon country for the first half of Exponent’s run. But there is nary a verse in this first ten years of the paper to spell out the vicissitudes of pioneer life. It is as though to describe real suffering, physical or emotional, were to deprecate the community, and in that stage of Mormonism’s history to defame the community was to deny the faith.

A second practically unwritten category was polygamy. Those who knew them both might realize that when Emmeline Wells wrote a tribute to Elizabeth Whitney she was praising her sister wife, but an outsider would never see it. Yet it is not that the women were hesitant to discuss the subject: they turned out in droves to attend meetings defending polygamy; they wrote memorials to Congress; indeed, the prose columns of the Exponent are tediously full of the rhetoric of “the

---

10 Luna S. Peck, “Mismated,” Woman’s Exponent 6 (15 October 1877): 75.
Newspaper Verse on the Mormon Fronteir

Principle.” Only the poetry, with two exceptions, is hushed on the subject.

Women’s rights is another topic the Exponent found unpoetic. Utah women had voted in a civic election, practically the first in the nation to do so, just two years before the Exponent was founded. The paper’s prose acknowledges that victory and cries consistently for even greater civic equality between the sexes, but despite the publication in Utah Woman Suffrage Song Book,12 full of rousing lyrics, and despite the editor’s own ardent feminism, hardly a poem in Exponent’s first decade echoes the cry.

And there is little laughter in Exponent’s verse. Five poems might be considered intentionally humorous, and some others for their Victorian quaintness amuse us now. But either the seriousness of the contributing sisters or editor Emmeline’s own melancholy kept Exponent’s pages free of loud laughter.

Prodded by Leon Edel, who reads so well the personal life of the writer from his literary outpourings, I determined to look at the poetry of these women for insight into their private lives. To give some balance to the investigation, I chose a few women whose prose autobiographies or diaries are available, to see what light one source might shed on the other. The interface proved fruitless of the kind of revelations I had hoped for; confessional poetry was as yet undiscovered, nontraditional, unacceptable to Exponent writers. What I found instead was the occasional glimpse of a poet’s real life, glazed over with a sheen of idealism which actually reveals as much as shared introspection might the difficulty of her circumstance.

Let four writers suggest what I mean. The first editor of the Woman’s Exponent, Lula Greene Richards, published a longish poem called “The Mother’s Dominion,” written 21 November 1877.13 In it she affirms that at no time could she permit a nursemaid to undertake the care of her children, even for a walk in the park: this from a woman whose writing did not cease with the birth of her children nor her resignation from the Exponent, who gave in her farewell to her readers the advice to be neither “selfishly home bound, [nor] foolishly public spirited,”14 and who, it is said by descendents, was more than happy to leave the care of her four growing boys to her sister wife Persis while she, Lula, pursued her literary interests. This smacks more of hypocrisy than merely idealizing of reality, until one realizes that “The

---

12Utah Woman Suffrage Song Book (Salt Lake City: Woman’s Exponent, n.d.).
Mother's Dominion" was written just a few months following the death of her second baby, the first having died a year earlier.

Those deaths inspired another poem, but only after a third child had been born and proved healthy. In "We Can," Lula affirms that however attached we might be to a loved one, baby, youth, adult, even prophet, "We can live, though bereft of the blessings, / Which seem more than half our lives." The poem concludes most soberly that "We can do without all but our God," leaving us in the Job condition with nothing but faith as explanation. The gloss, however, is there in another poem, an optimistic, Pippa-like expression of that faith. In "The Children," Lula admonishes her sisters similarly bereaved to respond not with grief but with gladness, for "oh think! in the blest Resurrection, / What joy to embrace them again!" Part of the tone of the Exponent poetry, where it deals with sobering life situations, is to affirm, even in the depth of that sorrow, the brighter horizon ahead.

The second, and only other editor of the Exponent, Emmeline B. Wells, composed, among her nature poems, a moving address of "The Wife to Her Husband":

It seems to me that should I die, And this poor body cold and lifeless lie. And thou shouldst touch my lips with thy warm breath, The life-blood quicken'd in each seep' rate vein, Would wildly, madly rushing back again, Bring the glad spirit from the isle of death.

The following stanzas suggest a relationship on all levels intimate and exemplary, a love sublime, "friendship's purest, highest tone," and though she does not say so outright, she implies that such a love was hers—or at least of her "I" persona.

The letters, however, which passed from her to her husband give the lie to such implication. One missive to him (whom, be it noted, she shared with six other wives) begins,

Am I presuming to ask you to come to see me? It really seems as if I might enjoy the privilege of your society for an hour or so two or three times in the course of a year.

Closer to the time of the poem, a diary entry reads:

All our folks nearly went to the Lake... but my husband was not to be seen, O how I want to see him, how long the time seems, and how weary I grow for one sight of his beloved face one touch of his dear hand; O how

15 Lula [Greene Richards], "We Can," Woman's Exponent 7 (15 March 1879): 207.
18 Emmeline B. Wells to Daniel H. Wells, 2 January 1862, autograph, Daniel H. Wells Papers, LDS Church Archives.
Looking back now at the first stanza, the frame of the poem, I am more inclined to see a veiled death wish than a miraculous return to life, an expression of a deep and unresolved need to demonstrate to the absent husband the depth of her caring, and at the same time to punish him for failing to return the love. And yet, on its own, the poem reads as a model of supreme love worthy of emulation, ideal in every sense.

Lucinda Lee Dalton, of all the *Exponent* poets the least likely to idealize, submitted a poem entitled “To Ernest,” published in May 1873. She had at that time been married for five years to a man already married pluraly, and several years her senior, but of an attitude similar to hers on the equality of the sexes. Her autobiography relates in immediate and moving terms the prayerful beginning of that marriage, a moment of such high intensity as to inspire both celestial hope and dreadful fear. As Lavina Fielding Anderson writes, the marriage “should have been the beginning to an idyllic Mormon love story, not the prelude to a cancellation of sealing [divorce] several years later.”

“To Ernest” takes from Lucinda’s life story the moment of that prayer and, despite the fact that by the time of the writing the marriage was already deeply threatened, makes of it the heaven-blessed beginning “of that fair life we call Eternity.”

On those occasions, however, when Lu Dalton climbed on a feminist soapbox, there was usually no such optimistic resolution to the difficulties she described. A contributor writing under the pseudonym “Queery” raised the question of a woman’s right to proclaim her love, asking rhetorically if it were not idealistically and practically appropriate. Lu answered in a following issue of the *Exponent*, realistically pointing out the dangers of such admirable honesty in an “earth wherein guile brings us wo,” admonishing the young woman (for such she seems to be) to “lay not your armor aside!” Queery answers again, in a subsequent issue, that

Yet still, (must I own it?) there lingers
Far down in the depths of my heart,

---

19Emmeline B. Wells, Diary, 4 September 1874, autograph, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
22Queery [pseud.], “Questions,” *Woman’s Exponent* 3 (15 November 1874): 90.
An ideal man true and noble
Who scorneth the recreant’s part. 24

Lucinda responds with a level-headed admission that some such men do exist—that she is indeed married to such a one—but that they are so few that her correspondent would do well to follow her own spiritual insight or, more likely, be prepared to wait for the right love. 25

She has not heard the end of Queery, however. This time the issue is woman’s secondary status, and the sorrow Lucinda feels while anticipating the future of her “Sweet woman-child” baby in her arms. Telling her infant daughter of the indignities to women, the worst of which is their dependence on men for even the approach to Divine Grace, she pleads to be assured by the baby, so recently come from that holy Presence, that women might have access to God “without a brother’s hand outstretched between.” In the child’s eyes she reads as much solace as is there: in a future life, if not in this one, Magdalen-like, women would receive the precious word directly from their Savior. 26 Queery, in a voice which reeks of expediency, tries to add the ideal view which Lucinda must have forgotten: after all, Christ himself was a man, “Thine Elder Brother,” and the sister must “not shrink from Heaven’s decree.” And, most of all, she must not corrupt the babe by telling her of the “heart’s bewildering fears” and should “break not the magic charm of infant trust.” 27 Magnanimously, it seems, Lucinda replies with a poem in praise of a husband, hers presumably, who makes no such sex-based distinctions, who proclaims,

No mine, no thine, no first nor last be known,
But we desire our Father’s will be done. 28

It’s an evasion, but how else does one handle those who, like Queery, would provide facile answers to deep-rooted questions?

Once more Queery plays Job’s comforter, this time with a younger writer, one who will rise to prominence and, her anger past, do her own glossing over reality in favor of the ideal. She is Susa Young, daughter of Brigham Young, at this point recently divorced from her first husband, Alma Dunford, who had won custody of their daughter Leah, then four years old. Susa uses that incident to flail out at the authority of men over women:

26 Lucinda Lee Dalton, “Questionings,” Woman’s Exponent 6 (1 April 1878): 161.
27 Query [pseud.], “To Lu Dalton,” Woman’s Exponent 6 (1 May 1878): 177. Though the writer or editor has changed the spelling of the pseudonym from Queery to Query, there is no doubt that the writer is the same. To be consistent, the text will retain the original spelling.
Newspaper Verse on the Mormon Frontier

Man's cruel word betrayed my heart,
And left it cold and bleeding,—
What cares that man, in all his pride,
For the wife's tears and pleading?29

On the same page with Susa Young's diatribe is a long editorial-toned demand that woman be granted her "most sacred right," "the custody of her children," seeing the issue as one basic to the winning of woman's rights.30 Queery, a month later, acknowledges that "some men may ... falter" but argues for "loving hands" which "will hasten to lift the vail" between worldly and divine justice. But the final gloss comes in Queery's last stanza, as she argues an "all's right with the world" position:

He leads His servants as He willeth,
And through them His designs fulfilleth,
Then why repine?
For though ye may not know His meanings
Behind the clouds His smiles are beaming,
And soon thy pathway will be streaming
With light divine.31

Why would editor Emmeline Wells permit a voice such as Queery's to oversimplify complexities which she herself acknowledged? Or, more generally, how could a whole generation of women write such "whatever is, is right" sentiments so in contrast with the lives they led? In a journal which amazes Mormon women of this century with its outspoken stand on women's issues, which speaks out so forthrightly of problems, however difficult of solution they seem, such covering up of disagreeable concepts seems wholly out of place. Comparison of the prosaic voice with the poetic suggests not duplicity, perhaps, as much as wish fulfillment. In speaking poetically of the ideal, the higher good, the heavenly vision, the women were reminding themselves of the better life they were promised as children of the covenant. Let prose speak the sordid truths; poetry would sing, albeit by the waters of Babylon, the songs of Zion.

29Susa [Young Gates], "By the Brook," Woman's Exponent 7 (15 October 1878): 73.
30Ma Goodwin, "Women's Rights: The Theme of Latter Days," Woman's Exponent 7 (15 October 1878): 73.
31Queery [pseud.], "To Susa," Woman's Exponent 7 (15 December 1878): 105.