

2011

Preface: Monsters and Mormons

Terryl Givens

University of Richmond, tgivens@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/english-faculty-publications>

 Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Givens, Terryl. "Preface." Preface to *Monsters & Mormons*, edited by Wm Morris and Theric Jepson, 1-3. El Cerrito, CA: Peculiar Pages, 2011.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

PREFACE TO MONSTERS & MORMONS

Terryl Givens

IN THE nineteenth century, Mormonism seemed grist for everybody's mill. Humorists like Artemus Ward and Mark Twain made hay out of polygamy; conspiracy theorists like Thomas deWitt Talmage imputed President Garfield's assassination to the Mormons; pseudo-memoirists like "Maria Ward" recounted their seduction, imprisonment, and torture at the hands of Mormon mesmerists; the Republicans jump-started their political party with a promise to expunge the Mormon "relic of barbarism"; and pulp fiction writers and serious novelists alike fueled sales with stories of bloodthirsty Danites, lecherous elders, and grief-maddened Mormon wives who murdered competitors.

Motives behind this array of representations ranged from the innocuous (audience twitters) to the malevolent (expulsion or eradication of the Mormon menace). What they all shared was the exploitation and manipulation of the Mormon identity for purposes of a self-serving agenda. Mormonism, in other words, was a pliable entity, largely fashioned according to cultural or ideological imperatives. The most remarkable evidence of the success of this enterprise is evident in an entry in the *Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups*. Mormonism, suggests the entry under that

title, appears to be the only example in American history of an “indigenously derived” ethnic community. The collective weight of generations of depictions of Mormons as peculiar in their dress, their language, their customs—even their physiognomy—seems to have had its effect!

In the politics of representation, however, one’s case is always stronger if identity is presented as something that is revealed, rather than constructed. That is why nineteenth-century (and some contemporary) treatments of Mormonism favor words like “unveiling,” in their titles (“exposed,” “unmasked,” and a dozen cognates will also do). In doing so, authors like Eber Dudley Howe, who first employed that term in his 1834 critique, were suggesting that the menace of Mormonism was inherent and objectively present in the religion, not a mere fancy of concerned Cassandras. The ploy also kept Mormonism on the defensive. By insinuating that concealment and subterfuge were Mormon strategies, their detractors dictated the terms of the debate. And indeed, Mormons were initially willing enough to spend a great deal of their time refuting charges and misinformation.

Parley P. Pratt was astute enough to recognize the implications buried in the language of the critics, which is why he refused to passively acquiesce to the status of clay in the hands of rhetorical potters. When he found Mormonism unfairly depicted in newspaperman La Roy Sunderland’s 1838 series of articles, he responded quickly and vigorously. Not hesitating to steal Howe’s title, he published his own “Mormonism Unveiled: Zion’s Watchman Unmasked.” The turnabout was itself an important statement. If Mormonism is to be unveiled, he was saying, we will do the unveiling ourselves. His pamphlet was striking for its change of direction. Rather than retreat, retrench, or correct most of Sunderland’s allegations, he embraced them. Sunderland objected to Mormons “placing themselves on a level with the Apostles.” He replied unapologetically, “This, we acknowledge, of course, for they were men of Adam’s fallen race, just like every body else by nature . . . I know of nothing but equality in the Church of Christ.”¹ Sunderland indignantly quoted the Saints as believing that they “shall be filled with glory, and be equal with [Christ],” a paraphrase of Doctrine and Covenants 7:33 (1835). Pratt ignored the safety of biblical precedent and instead pushed possible metaphor into a literal reference to theosis. Indeed, he proclaimed, “They [will] have the same knowledge that God has, [and] they will have the same power . . . Hence the propriety of calling them ‘Gods, even the sons of God.’”² Why, Pratt defiantly suggested, should he retreat from “this doctrine of *equality*”?

¹ PPP, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 9.

² PPP, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 27.

MONSTERS & MORMONS

In the century and a half since Pratt's death, progress toward détente is not always easy to measure. Since the medals won by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, Americans and Mormons have found a kind of peaceful accommodation. Mormon theology is still treated as largely outside the pale, but the faith group's cultural contributions are applauded and appreciated—on the stage, the dance floor, and the football field. When Mormons threaten to invade the White House, however, old fears and caricatures resurface, and the safe boundaries setting Mormonism-as-a-culture apart from Mormonism-as-a-religion threaten to disappear.

This collection could well serve as an ironic commentary on the contemporary situation, as much as it reveals a healthy coming-to-terms with the Mormon past. In a gesture reminiscent of Parley Pratt's, the contributors in this case are embracing the epithet. If there is anything monstrous or threatening about Mormonism, they seem to be saying, we will depict it—with all the silliness it deserves. "Cultural re-appropriation," the editors call the device of exploiting rather than ignoring the historical associations of Mormon deviance, supernaturalism, and strangeness. Playful self-parody, I would call it. The selections range from the comic and light-hearted to the poignant and provocative. But taken together they should remind readers everywhere of a wonderful truth: humor can be the best revenge.