


Mothers and Daughters in Polygamy

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uring an oral history interview, Jeneveve Eyring Layton began a description of her mother with the exclamation, “Oh, my mother! She was wonderful. You know how you feel about your mother” (Layton 1982, 4). Indeed, the closeness of the mother-daughter bond in the nineteenth century generally goes without saying. Perhaps more importantly from a social perspective, daughters learned the domestic values and skills which would govern the rest of their lives by doing household chores with their mothers. Mormon women were no exception to the traditional trends. Church leaders encouraged mothers to “teach . . . daughters to be housekeepers, to be particular, clean, and neat” (JD 9:188–89). Eva C. Webb noted, “In Aunt Margaret’s home, eventually there were seven living daughters, trained to do their part so well that even the four-year-old could use dust pan and brush up the crumbs that might fall from the table and those just older would wash and dry and put away the dishes” (Webb 1939, 1:285–86). Such domestic training, although not always so thorough, was typical of most households, as was advice about building relationships.

However, polygamy added a unique dimension. The first generation to practice plural marriage adapted monogamous traditions to the polygamous situation whenever possible. But having more than one woman fill the mother role was not part of this tradition; the mothers had to create new norms. The children who grew up in these families had a different perspective of close relationships than did other nineteenth-century children.

Annie Clark Tanner obtained first-hand information about plural marriage as she grew up in a polygamous household. There she observed the difficulties which sometimes occurred between the wives. Her father gave his first wife special consideration; whenever the families traveled together Annie’s

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mother, the second wife, sat in the back seat. And the second Mrs. Clark resented the unequal distribution of attention. "See, there she goes," Annie remembered her mother saying as Ezra Clark drove off with his first wife Mary. "She never lets him go without her." Despite this strain on the relationship, however, Annie also noted the mutual respect. "I have heard my brothers and sisters say, and I agree with them, that at no time in our lives did we hear any unpleasant words between our mothers" (Tanner 1976, 10).

Annie also learned to accept the principle of plural marriage as a divine commandment of God. Though she appreciated the difficulties, she was also aware of the promised rewards. "The principle of Celestial Marriage was considered the capstone of Mormon religion," she wrote in her autobiography. "Only by practicing it could the highest exaltation in the Celestial Kingdom of God be obtained." Therefore, when Joseph Marion Tanner proposed marriage, Annie became his second wife (Tanner 1976, 12, 57-69).

Annie Tanner's perspective on the necessity of plural marriage was shared by Emma Romney Eyring. Emma grew up in the Mormon colonies in Mexico where "close to 100 percent of the people then living in Juarez Stake were so attached to this order [polygamy] that it was the woof and warp of their domestic life and also the theme and central idea of community worship" (Ivins Collection). Emma became the plural wife of Edward Christian Eyring — her sister's husband — not only because "she loved Father," as her daughter reported, but because "it was the only thing that she knew. Her parents had lived in polygamy and Father's parents had lived in polygamy. Most of the people in the colonies lived in polygamy. . . . It was what the Church taught" (Layton 1982, 7). Isabel MacFarland Bingham also saw plural marriage as the ultimate Mormon lifestyle. "When we're born in polygamy and raised in it, we believed in it; I never saw anything in my father's family that would make me think it wasn't right" (Bingham, 1937).

Women like Isabel Bingham, Emma Eyring, and Annie Tanner, who saw polygamy successfully practiced, were more likely to become plural wives themselves. Those women whose girlhood experiences with polygamy were less positive often sought monogamous relationships or refused to marry at all. One family's experience with polygamy on the underground tainted the three daughters' feelings on marriage in general. They were taught to distrust strangers, to lie to federal officials, and to assist in the elaborate subterfuge required to protect their father. One maintained that, for her, this paranoia of strange men extended to all men. None of the three married (Van Rosen 1983).

Lottie and Amanda Farrell became fearful that their father's special attention to their mother's maid would lead to the marriage altar. When the domestic told the girls she was going to make a trip to Logan, Utah, with their father, Lottie and Amanda "spiked that scheme all right by telling the girl all the bad tales we could think of about polygamy — how she'd have to spend the rest of her days scrubbing floors and how much other work like milking and gardening she'd have to do." The potential bride did not marry their father and left Utah as well (Farrell).

Daughters who accepted polygamy had learned ways to interact as plural wives from their mothers' examples. Emma and Caroline Romney's expectations of their own roles as Edward Eyring's plural wives were based upon what they had learned from their mother's marriage. Edward, however, tried to treat both wives alike whereas the first wife in their mother's marriage had had more decision-making power. This led some of Caroline's children to observe that Edward's equality was actually inequality to Caroline because she expected more authority as the first wife (Miner 1980, 6-7).

Ada Lowe Hart learned the peacemaking role she would assume in her own plural marriage from her mother. Ada's brother Glen Lowe noted that "Aunt Lizzie was a little more excitable than Mother was. I think Mother was the mainstay of holding them all together to start with. Mother would always give in if Aunt Lizzie wanted a few favors." According to Glen, Ada assumed the same relationship with her sister-wife. "Aunt Vady was demanding. She always got the best. But Ada was good just like Mother. She was just as calm and low tempered as Mother was. You would never hear her complain. Aunt Vady was more of a flighty type. But they got along just as good as Mother and Aunt Lizzie" (Lowe 1976, 7, 16-17).

Interestingly, Ada had been very close to Aunt Lizzie ("I loved her almost as my own mother," Hart, 19) and wanted to be as close to Vady's children. Vady sent her eldest daughter Evadyna to help Aunt Ada, whose older children were sons. Evadyna recalled how she once complained about there being so many "damn" dishes. Her father overheard her remark and said that because of her swearing she would have to do the dishes all alone without her half-brothers' help. "But I remember Aunt Ada coming to my rescue and I've always loved her for it" (Palmer 1980, 3).

The mothers in polygamous families also set the tone for the relationships between the families. In the Hart family, Ada emphasized cooperation. Her daughter Rhea remembered Ada sending her to Vady's for some sugar. Vady asked Rhea to divide the sugar but then complained that Rhea had taken more than half. Rhea, angry when she returned home, appealed to her mother. Ada assured Rhea that Vady had been fair. "She could have easily taken my side. But they were very concerned about keeping unity in the family and not having any bad feelings. Each of them would just bend over backwards to maintain and foster love and unity" (Grandy 1980, 14). Because of this sense of cooperation, one of Vady's daughters said, "I think my mother just made us realize, and Aunt Ada did in her home, that we were all brothers and sisters and that was the way it was to be" (Palmer 1980, 6).

There had been the same feeling of togetherness in Ada's parents' home. The mothers worked closely together, and the children felt close to their father's other family. Jennie, one of Ada's younger sisters, remembered Aunt Lizzie's home, "We went over there and made ourselves at home . . . We felt we were as welcome there as if it were our own home . . . I never thought of her as being other than just like my mother because if we had any trouble . . . and Mama wasn't around, she was the one we went to" (Huff 1976, 5, 10).

Jennie and her brothers and sisters were close enough to play practical jokes on Lizzie. When some of Lizzie's relatives were coming to visit, Ann's children hung a bucket on a nail so it would spill on the first person to walk in the door. Jennie said, "I guess my mother just went along with it . . . That was for April Fool's" (Huff 1976, 9).

Mary and Sarah Thompson Patterson, full sisters, also cooperated and passed on this feeling to their children. Sarah's oldest daughter and namesake commented, "I've wondered sometimes how they arranged their affairs so that everything just went off so smoothly. There was no arguing. They did all the weaving and were paid for it, but they never argued about . . . how much the other should have." She further explained that the children loved both of the mothers, "The only difference was the mothers did the personal things for their own children and other than that the children would go to either mother for things that they wanted" (Hart and Ward, 5, 2-3). Zina, another of Sarah's daughters, said, "It didn't matter who the mother was. We were all brothers and sisters. We all shared the same hopes and dreams and liked the same things" (Dunford 1980, 14-15).

Although many daughters of polygamous families remembered loving their "other mother" as much as their own, a pattern of small differences emerges from their memories: they went to the other mother for assistance only if their own mother were absent; they felt at home in the other wives' houses but usually knocked before entering; and though another mother might rebuke them, their own mother usually gave them household assignments or disciplined them for disobedience. Caroline Eyring wanted to feel she had something of her own that Emma did not share. When the older children returned home on a visit, they recalled, she expected them to visit Emma, but they were not to stay too long and they were not to enjoy themselves too much (Miner 1980, 10). In turn, Caroline wanted to make sure her daughters did not have to do more work than Emma's children. Her daughter Rose remembered, "My [half] sister Maurine didn't have to milk until a long time after I had started. Mother finally put her foot down and said that I didn't have to milk if Maurine didn't" (Calder 1980, 8).

Caroline's oldest daughter Camilla had especially resisted her father's marriage to Emma "When I was to set the table for dinner, I found the oldest silverware to put at Aunt Emma's place. I feel ashamed now of my petty reaction, but as a child I did not understand the great sacrifice it represented on the part of all three of them to live harmoniously in that relationship" (Miner and Kimball 1980, 12-13). According to her sister Rose, polygamy was always "very hard on Camilla. She was only nine years old when Aunt Emma came into the family, and she took Mother's part right from the beginning. Always throughout her life she could see more Mother's side" (Calder 1980, 12).

Similarly, Emma's daughters described their mother as an excellent seamstress and an extremely hard worker in the home, in the Church and on a job. While they thought a lot of Aunt Caroline too, they believed their mother was neglected by the people in Pima when she was compared to Caroline (Boyd

1982, 12). Such differences, even in happy homes, indicate closer bonding with the birth mother.

In homes where polygamous wives were neglected by their husbands, the mother-daughter bond was often the primary emotional relationship. Annie Clark Tanner remembered relying on her infant daughter Jennie for "comfort" during her sojourn on the underground. "When I felt to complain, almost at the same moment I felt to reproach myself at seeing her innocent trusting ways. She has indeed been a comfort to me." Later when Annie's husband abandoned her, she depended even more on her growing children for moral support. She explained, "A woman in polygamy is compelled by her lone position to make a confidant of her children" (Tanner 1976, 118, 269). Annie's own mother took her out of school to help raise her younger siblings who came in rapid succession, and Annie early functioned as a woman with adult responsibilities (Tanner 1976, 34-35).

When the plural wives did not get along at all, the children had little contact with the other mothers. Sisters Margaret and Agnes Wildman Roskelley apparently had some disagreements even before they were married to William Hendricks Roskelley. Agnes's daughter Lula asked her mother, "How could you consent to marry Pa with Aunt Maggie already the first wife? You must have known what a troublemaker she was as your older sister?" She said her mother replied, "Well, I guess we expected everyone to be perfect, living in the principle" (Mortensen, 5). Their disagreements carried over into the marriage. Margaret's daughter Roxey remembered, "In my day Mother and Auntie were not close at all. I can't understand because I love my [own] sisters so much. I have sat in church more than once with Mother on one side and with Auntie on the other side of me. They didn't speak" (Rogers 1979, 8) or visit each others' homes. Another daughter said, "They worked in their raspberry patch together, but that was the only time they visited. It didn't seem like they had any resentment to each other like I would in that position. They tolerated each other" (Lewis 1980, 6).

As a result of their estrangement, Margaret's and Agnes's daughters did not feel very welcome in their aunts' homes. Zina visited Agnes occasionally and "liked my aunt as well as you could expect a person to" (Bell 1976, pp. 1, 5). Roxey, however, did not feel welcome in Agnes's home and rarely visited (Rogers 1979, 7). And Agnes's Lula had very little contact with Margaret. She resented the fact that Margaret divided all the goods and set Agnes's share on the window sill. She also felt it was unfair that Margaret had a large home and her mother only had a two-room log cabin. Lula described Aunt Maggie as "a small woman with a fierce scowl, piercing black eyes and a shrill voice . . . I was scared to death of her" (Mortensen, 6).

The very real difficulty of accepting and loving the children of the other wives was expressed by Jane Snyder Richards; she admitted competing for their father's affection (Richards 1880, 3). Rose Eyring also noticed that her mother, Caroline, "had difficulty being always kind and fair to Aunt Emma's children" (Calder 1980, 5).

Major differences were difficult to overcome in polygamous families, but minor disagreements were forgotten, and many wives worked closely together. Times of illness especially encouraged cooperation. Nancy and Sarah Harvey were separated by the death of their husband and the tragedy of leaving their homes in Mexico. However, when Sarah learned that her sister-wife was dying of cancer, she took her daughters and moved to Blanding to care for Nancy until she passed away (McConkie 1976, 7). Adelia and Georganna Stowell remembered that their mother often sent them to help the other wives in times of illness or simply when they had too much work to do (Lilywhite 1982, 21). Women helping each other in times of illness was, of course, not unique to polygamous families. One historian has called this special effort "the sisterhood of the sickbed" (Faragher 1979, 138). But many sister wives seemed to feel a special responsibility to help each other at such times.

Another special relationship between wives and children occurred when one wife was barren. Sometimes the sterile wife would take some of the other wife's children into her home and raise them as her own. Dennison Romney was raised by his mother's sister and his father's plural wife under such an arrangement (Romney 1981, 1). Ann Jarvis Van Orden remembered that her "Aunt Rose," who was without children, acted as the primary mother figure in their home for many years while Ann's mother was an invalid (Van Orden 1939, 1:284-85). Margaret Smoot mothered her sister wife's two small children while their own mother taught school (Smoot).

The ultimate test of the relationship between mothers and their sister-wives' children came when one of the wives died. If they had been close, the other wife would become a mother to the orphaned children. Such was the case in the Edward Patterson family where the second wife Sarah died one month after giving birth to her daughter, Venna. Zina, who was nine years old when her mother died, recalled that the first wife Mary "just felt terrible and lost. They [Sarah and Mary] would discuss things together and work together." But despite her grief, Mary became a mother to Sarah's daughters. Venna, who never knew her own mother, always called Mary "Mama." The other girls still called her Auntie but accepted her as a mother. Three years later when their father died, Zina explained, "Auntie carried on courageously without him and life went on the same as always . . . She just took over and treated us like we were her own children. I don't know that there was any difference . . . I'm sure it was easier for us to grow up normally because of her" (Dunford 1980, pp. 15, 12, 8-9).

Sarah Edwards Hutchings also moved into the mother role for her sister-wife's children. She was only eighteen when her husband's first wife, who lay dying, implored her to raise her seven small children. Sarah loved all the children, particularly the baby who was only seven months old. This baby girl died six months after her mother. Sarah mourned the baby and only the birth of her own child six weeks later "helped reconcile us to the loss" (Hutchings 1958, 8: 381-87).

Sometimes even a loving mother-substitute was not enough. Abolone Porter Hurst had been very close to her mother. When she died, her father's other

wife Mary took care of the children. Lone was close to Aunt Mary and appreciated her help, but she "was never exactly like Mother to me. I don't mean to say that she . . . didn't treat me just as good as our mother would . . . I always got lonesome for Mother" (Hurst 1981, 17).

Special problems arose if the wives had been unable to work together when they were both alive. When Samuel Walter Jarvis approached his wife Francis (Fanny) Godfrey Defriez about taking another wife, she selected two possible candidates. According to one version, he decided not to marry at that time because of financial problems (Young 1976, 20). However, the other version says that the candidates were undesirable — "two old maids." Later, Sam had a dream to marry his "pearl," Pearley Dean Taylor (Augustus 1976, 8). Fanny did not approve of the marriage and, according to her daughter, "As far as Mother was concerned there was just no contact, social or otherwise" (Young 1976, 21). Pearley's daughter, Pearl, agreed, "Mother cried a lot because she was unhappy. She never was accepted by the first wife and it was real hard" (Augustus 1976, 8).

After Pearley fell fatally ill during the flu epidemic of 1918, Sam told Fanny "she had to" take care of the children. Pearl remembers Fanny agreeing, "but she didn't want anything to do with [Pearley's namesake] Pearl." Fanny only remained for a short while, then Sam stayed home to take care of the children (Augustus 1976, 3, 11).

Four years later, Sam died. Pearl chose to ride in a wagon at the end of the funeral procession rather than in a car with Aunt Fanny. She then lived in various homes throughout Colonia Juarez where she could help with the housework, though some of her brothers stayed with Fanny. Bessie, the youngest sister, was raised by her aunts and maternal grandmother (Augustus 1976, 13-14).

After her father's death, Pearl had no contact with her father's first wife until "Aunt Fanny called me over to her son George's place . . . She apologized for the way she had treated me all those years. Of course, it would take a lot of courage to do this" (Augustus 1976, 8). Fanny's daughter Esther further explained her mother's bitterness, "Mother just didn't ever want to become reconciled, and she remained extremely bitter to the end. Even after having the children with her, I don't think she tried to feel any different toward their mother and Pearl" (Young 1976, 20).

Just as in other nineteenth-century homes, life in polygamous households varied from family to family. The homes were domestic laboratories in which girls learned what it meant to be female. They learned how to act, how to work, and how to think as women. But in the polygamous household, daughters learned more. Since there was no handbook or set of rules about how to live in polygamy, it was within the families that this "research" was done. When the girls saw how their mothers got along with each other, how they ran their families, and what accommodations they made to the peculiar demands of the principle in practice, they adapted this learning to their own lives. The important messages that polygamous mothers were inadvertently teaching their daughters were the intricate patterns of relationships — how to live with others

in obedience to a difficult principle, how to share both husband and children, and finally how to be a female member of a polygamous family.

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