

THE OTHER CRIME: ABORTION AND CONTRACEPTION IN NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY UTAH

Amanda Hendrix-Komoto

On a shelf in my office, I have a small red container marked “Chichester’s English Red Cross Diamond Brand Pennyroyal Pills.” I bought it in a moment of curiosity after learning that Utah’s newspapers once advertised abortion pills. The inside of the tin features a woman reclining on a moon. She promises consumers that Chichester’s pills “are the most powerful and reliable emmenagogue known” and are “safe, sure and always effectual.” Students rarely, if ever, notice the box, which sits in front of a Christmas ornament honoring Jeannette Rankin, an early female politician and pacifist from Montana, and next to a potato scrubber. Even if they did, it is unlikely that they would guess that it was a container for abortion pills.

Since graduate school, I have been friends with several women whose academic work focuses on reproductive justice. In a particularly poignant piece, my friend Lauren MacIvor Thompson connects a man “punching his wife when she didn’t undress fast enough for sex” to his support for a fetal heartbeat bill.¹ Although I have been interested in

1. Lauren MacIvor Thompson, “Women Have Fought to Legalize Reproductive Rights for Nearly Two Centuries,” *History News Network*, June 9, 2019, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/172181>. Dr. MacIvor Thompson has also pointed out in private conversations with me that heartbeat is inaccurate and puts the word in quotation marks in her own article. At six weeks

the history of abortion and contraception for several years, I have not joined my colleagues in publishing on the subject. I feared that I would not be able to write a piece that was interesting to both academics and popular audiences and that the politically divisive nature of the topic would alienate people I needed to support me as a junior scholar.

My friends' engagement with public history, however, has convinced me of the need to engage with wider audiences. On social media and in an article published in the *New York Times*, for example, MacIvor Thompson has argued for the importance of detailed historical analysis when discussing abortion and birth control. Her deft exposition of the coded language that women used to discuss abortion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demonstrates the need for historical expertise when analyzing women's history.² Discussions of abortion and birth control within Latter-day Saint communities, however, often lack the historical awareness for which MacIvor Thompson and others have called.³ This essay is an attempt to provide an overview

of gestation, the fetus does not have a fully formed heart. Instead, what we see on an ultrasound is the electrical activity of the cells that will eventually become the heart. For a full explanation of the misleading nature of the term "heartbeat" and its use in contemporary politics, see "Doctor's Organization: Calling Abortion Bans 'Fetal Heartbeat Bills' is Misleading," *Guardian*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/05/abortion-doctors-fetal-heartbeat-bills-language-misleading>.

2. See Lauren MacIvor Thompson (@lmacthompson1), "1/Good morning! I am compelled to write my first ever tweet thread because @CokieRoberts on @NPR this morning stated that she could not find abortion ads in 19th newspapers and therefore historians are just playing at pro-choice politics," Twitter, June 5, 2019, 6:26 a.m., <https://twitter.com/lmacthompson1/status/1136247963817304064>; and MacIvor Thompson, "Women Have Always Had Abortions," *New York Times*, Dec. 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/13/opinion/sunday/abortion-history-women.html>.

3. I have chosen to use the Church's style guide as much as possible for this article. Since I am not a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it seemed important to try respect the Church's wishes as much as possible, especially when dealing with a sensitive topic such as this one.

of scholarship on the history of contraception and abortion as it relates to Latter-day Saint women.

Before the mid-nineteenth century, most people did not consider a fetus to be “alive” before it quickened, nor was first-trimester abortion illegal. Most authorities considered birth control and abortion to be under the purview of midwives and part of women’s health care.⁴ Latter-day Saint understandings of women’s bodies and pregnancy closely mirrored those of other Americans at the time. In this essay, I discuss this history, present evidence that Latter-day Saint men sold abortion pills in the late nineteenth century, and argue that it is likely some Latter-day Saint women took them in an attempt to restore menstrual cycles that anemia, pregnancy, or illness had temporarily “stopped.” Women living in the twenty-first century are unable to access these earlier understandings of pregnancy because the way we understand pregnancy has changed as a result of debates over the criminalization of abortion and the development of ultrasound technology. Reconstructing this history is important, however, because it provides a context for our own discussions of women’s bodies and reproductive rights. Too often, these discussions are ahistorical, and Latter-day Saints and their neighbors act as though society has always understood women’s bodies, pregnancy, and the origins of life in the same way.

One of the things that I have learned from my colleagues is that abortion was once fairly common and unremarkable. Until recently, there was no way for a woman to know for certain that she was pregnant until she felt the baby quicken or move. A woman whose period had stopped might be experiencing malnutrition or illness, or she might be pregnant.⁵ If women saw the cessation of their menses as a sign of ill

4. Tatjana Buklijas and Nick Hopwood, “Experiencing Pregnancy,” *Making Visible Embryos* (website), http://www.sites.hps.cam.ac.uk/visibleembryos/sl_1.html.

5. John M. Riddle, *Eve’s Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 26.

health, they could take medicine to restore their menstrual flow. Sometimes these medicines induced an abortion; at other times, they likely provoked menstruation in women who were anemic or malnourished. It was impossible to distinguish between these two outcomes. As historian John Riddle argues in his own discussion of the issue, a medieval woman “could not possibly know whether she had assisted a natural process or terminated a very early pregnancy.” Nor would she have framed the question in that way. In the medieval period, women and doctors did not see “pregnancy” as starting “at conception or implantation.”⁶ Indeed, early signs of pregnancy were ambiguous. According to an online exhibit by Tatjana Buklijas and Nick Hopwood, women in the medieval and early modern periods lived “perched between good growth and evil stagnation” of their bodily fluids.⁷ The authors make the same point as Riddle about differing definitions of pregnancy and the inability of women in that time period to differentiate between an early abortion and late menstruation. The ambiguity in which women lived was a part of their daily experience and points to the gap between their experiences and ours.

Women have long practiced contraception and abortion. John Riddle describes an affair between a Catholic priest and a widow in fourteenth-century France that has provided scholars with information about late-medieval birth control. Inquisition records suggest that the priest often brought “with him [an] herb wrapped in a linen cloth” whenever they had sex. He placed it on “a long string,” which hung from her neck “between [her] breasts.” It is unclear how exactly the herb worked, but Riddle argues that the priest likely placed it in her vagina.⁸ Although the priest was eventually accused of heresy, these accusations should not blind us to the existence of birth control in medieval Europe.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Buklijas and Hopwood, “Experiencing Pregnancy.”

8. Quoted in Riddle, *Eve’s Herbs*, 22–23.

Medieval women used a variety of contraceptive methods, including the withdrawal method, to prevent pregnancy.⁹ A ninth-century medical text also contains directions for restoring the menses.¹⁰ Centuries later, women in the nineteenth-century United States used teas made from pennyroyal to induce miscarriages. One of my students tells a story of her rural Wyoming grandmother making her own pessaries in the 1930s, which an unfortunate visitor once mistook for treats (much to his dismay).¹¹ What these examples demonstrate is that knowledge circulated between women in a variety of places and contexts about how to prevent pregnancies and how to use items from their kitchens to do so.

Understandings of abortion and pregnancy began to change in the mid-nineteenth century. Male physicians launched a campaign to redefine how women thought of their bodies and abortion.¹² Historians like Jennifer Holland, Leslie Reagan, and Judith Leavitt have argued that the campaign was ultimately about the prestige of male doctors and academics who sought to establish themselves as authorities

9. Maryanne Kowaleski, "Gendering Demographic Change in the Middle Ages," *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, edited by Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 190.

10. Jessica Cale, "Sex, Contraception, and Abortion in Medieval England," *Dirty, Sexy History* (blog), July 17, 2017, <https://dirtysexyhistory.com/2017/07/30/sex-contraception-and-abortion-in-medieval-england/>; Hunter S. Jones, et al., *Sexuality and its Impact on History: The British Stripped Bare* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword History, 2018), 62.

11. Andi Powers, "Bitter Lessons," *High Altitude History* (blog), Mar. 8, 2017, <https://historymsu.wordpress.com/2017/03/08/bitter-lessons-andi-powers/>.

12. Jennifer L. Holland, "Abolishing Abortion: The History of the Pro-Life Movement in America," *American Historian*, Nov. 2016, <https://tah.oah.org/november-2016/abolishing-abortion-the-history-of-the-pro-life-movement-in-america/>.

over women's reproductive health.¹³ In the 1850s, the American Medical Association (AMA) began a campaign to criminalize abortion and discredit midwives. In an article on "criminal abortion," the AMA asserted "the independent and actual existence of the child before birth, as a living being" and urged people to protect that life.¹⁴ The famous American phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler accused a particularly famous purveyor of female pills of "destroying the lives of both mothers and embryo human beings to an incredible extent."¹⁵ He advocated for her arrest in print. "If human life," he wrote, "should be protected by law—if murderers should be punished by law's most severe penalties—she surely should be punished, and her deathly practice be at once arrested."¹⁶ In the second half of the nineteenth century, states began to pass laws criminalizing abortion. It is important to note here, as Holland has done, that the emphasis on the "life" of the fetus "was not a result of any advancements in embryonic knowledge. In fact, there were none during these campaigns."¹⁷

The first generations of Latter-day Saints developed their understanding of pregnancy during this tumultuous time period. Their understandings of the body, however, do not fit easily within this

13. Holland, "Abolishing Abortion;" Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867–1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

14. Cited in D. Brian Scarnecchia, *Bioethics, Law, and Human Life Issues: A Catholic Perspective on Marriage, Family, Contraception, Abortion, Reproductive Technology, and Death and Dying* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 280.

15. Orson Squire Fowler, *Love and Parentage: Applied to the Improvement of Offspring* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1852), 68.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Holland, "Abolishing Abortion"; Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime*; Leavitt, *Brought to Bed*.

timeline. On the one hand, Latter-day Saints believed that the soul was not created at the same time as the physical body. Instead, they believed that the soul existed before it became embodied in human flesh.¹⁸ Orson Pratt, for example, argued in 1853 that human souls “were present when the foundations of the earth were laid” and “sang and shouted for joy” as they watched creation. He believed that an individual’s body became enjoined with their soul in the womb.¹⁹ Two decades later, Brigham Young identified quickening as the moment when a fetus became alive during a funeral sermon for a Latter-day Saint named Thomas Williams. He told the mourners that “when the mother feels life come to her infant, it is the spirit entering the body preparatory to the immortal existence.”²⁰ These statements by Young and Pratt were perfectly consonant with the understandings of pregnancy widely accepted during the early modern period, which had placed the beginning of life at quickening and accepted abortion in the first trimester as a return of menstruation.

Latter-day Saint leaders, however, also made speeches denouncing abortion despite the fact that their theology did not necessarily require doing so. In 1867, Young explicitly decried attempts to avoid infanticide through “the other equally great crime.” Some scholars have interpreted his statement as a reference to abortion, but he could also be referring to birth control.²¹ In 1884, Erastus Snow lauded Latter-day Saint women

18. Terry L. Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

19. Orson Pratt, “The Pre-existence of Man,” *Seer* 1, no. 2 (February 1853): 20. Thank you to Matthew Bowman for pointing me toward this source.

20. Brigham Young, July 19, 1874, *Journal of Discourses*, 17:143.

21. Brigham Young, Aug. 17, 1867, *Journal of Discourses*, 12:120. See Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Surprise! The LDS Church Can Be Seen as More ‘Pro-Choice’ than Pro-Life on Abortion. Here’s Why,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 1, 2019, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2019/06/01/surprise-lds-church-can/>; and Lynn D. Wardle, “Teaching Correct Principles: The Experience of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Responding to Widespread Social Acceptance of Elective Abortion,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (Jan. 2014): 112.

for refusing to patronize “the vendor of noxious, poisonous, destructive medicines to procure abortion, infanticide, child murder, and other wicked devices.”²² Snow and Young never explicitly define abortion, but it appears that they accepted the arguments of the American Medical Association decrying abortion even as they rejected their position about when life began.

It is important, however, not to just examine the sermons and speeches of elite Latter-day Saint men. Although Latter-day Saint leaders railed against abortion, there is evidence that some of their female followers took medications to regulate their periods and did so without much censure. In 1896, a Latter-day Saint female physician named Hannah Sorensen published an obstetrical textbook designed to provide women with information about their bodies. She had attended medical school in Denmark in the 1860s before converting to the LDS Church and traveling to Utah, where she set up a practice.²³ Sorensen accused the Latter-day Saint patients she saw in her practice as having “a terrible misunderstanding in regard to foetal life.” Perhaps with disbelief or even disdain, she wrote, “Many believe it is no sin to produce abortion before there is life, but there is always life.”²⁴ Her descriptions of her encounters with Latter-day Saint women suggest that some of them agreed with their contemporaries that quickening represented the

22. Erastus Snow, Mar. 9, 1884, *Journal of Discourses*, 25:111–12. Although I have consulted the *Journal of Discourses* for these citations, many of them have been previously refenced by Lester Bush, and readers would do well to reference his work. See Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Birth Control among the Mormons: Introduction to an Insistent Question,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10, no. 2 (1976): 12–44.

23. Robert S. McPherson and Mary Lou Mueller, “Divine Duty: Hannah Sorensen and Midwifery in Southeastern Utah,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (1997): 336.

24. Hannah Sorensen, *What Women Should Know* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons Company, 1896), 80.

soul coming into the body of an infant and did not see early abortion as a moral issue.

Like their counterparts throughout the United States, Utah newspapers advertised abortion pills. Increasing restrictions on abortion and birth control meant that the advertisements used euphemisms to refer to the pills' effects, but they were ubiquitous. A quick newspaper search using the database Newspapers.com reveals advertisements in a long list of Utah newspapers, including the *Salt Lake Tribune*, the *Daily Enquirer* (Provo), the *Standard* (Ogden), the *Wasatch Wave* (Heber), the *Ephraim Enterprise*, the *Broad Ax* (Salt Lake City), the *Transcript-Bulletin* (Tooele), and the *Deseret Evening News* (Salt Lake City).²⁵ Reed Smoot, a future Utah senator and member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, owned a drug company in Provo that sold Mesmin's French Female Pills. An ad in the Provo *Daily Enquirer* styled the pills "The Ladies' Friend" and promised "immediate relief of Painful, and Irregular Menses, Female Weakness etc."²⁶ The *Deseret Evening News* assured women in 1910 that Dr. Martel's Female Pills could be found "for sale at all drug stores."²⁷ And, as a final example, a British convert named William Driver stocked Dr. Mott's Pennyroyal Pills in his store in Ogden, Utah.²⁸ Although I have been unable to find a direct statement from a Latter-day Saint woman describing her experience taking female pills, it is likely that some women did so. Otherwise, Hannah Sorensen would

25. In this case, I used Newspapers.com to find these examples, but a similar search could be performed using *Chronicling America* (chroniclingamerica.loc.gov) or any number of sites.

26. Advertisement, *Daily Enquirer* 7, no. 88, Apr. 10, 1893, 2, available at <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/42896775/>.

27. Advertisement, *Deseret Evening News*, Sept. 12, 1910, 9, available at <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/42896791/>.

28. Advertisement, *Standard*, May 2, 1893, 2, available at <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/42896809/>.

have had no reason to lodge her complaint and Latter-day Saint businessmen would not have stocked them.

Sorensen found this situation troubling. In her obstetrical textbook, she dismissed the idea that it was “no sin” to have an abortion before quickening by arguing that “life” existed “from the moment of conception.”²⁹ She also tried to convince Latter-day Saint women of the rightness of her position by giving classes on the subject. The notes that women took during her lectures and classes give us a window into changing Latter-day Saint attitudes about women and pregnancy. The George Teasdale collection contains the notes that Rosa B. Hayes took while listening to Sorensen lecture in 1889. Her notes locate the origins of pregnancy in the first moments after conception. Immediately after this event, she notes, “great changes take place in the system, causing many little troubles and ailments.”³⁰ “All ther [sic] nature,” she continued, “is in sympathy with, and lends assistance to develop the new being.”³¹ She encouraged any pregnant woman to “ask *Him* to help her observe all the rules of nature, keep her mind placid, and contemplate on the future of her offspring.”³² Women were to avoid eating “pork, pickles, beans, onions, bacon, unripe fruit, mustard, horse radish, cabbage, tea, coffee and all other stimulants.”³³ Sex was also forbidden as was her usual routine of “hard work.”³⁴ This new understanding of pregnancy encouraged women to see their bodies as vessels for potential life. It is difficult to know how Latter-day Saint women as a whole responded to Sorensen’s lectures and classes. While women like Rosa

29. Sorensen, *What Women Should Know*, 80.

30. Rosa B. Hayes, *Midwife Instruction Book*, 1889, p. 24, George Teasdale Papers, box 21, folder 5, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

31. *Ibid.*, 24.

32. *Ibid.*, 26

33. *Ibid.*, 29.

34. *Ibid.*, 31.

Hayes welcomed Sorensen's information, others likely rejected it as nonsense. The latter were unlikely to leave records of their opinions.

By the late nineteenth century, attitudes surrounding abortion had already begun to change. Within a few decades, Latter-day Saint women would experience increased pressure to have large families. The *Relief Society Magazine* published a series of statements from members of the Quorum of Twelve on birth control in its July 1916 issue. Rudger Clawson called the decision to limit family size "a serious evil"—"especially among the rich who have ample means to support large families."³⁵ Joseph Fielding Smith argued that "it is just as much murder to destroy life before as it is after birth."³⁶ Likewise, Orson F. Whitney wrote that "the only legitimate 'birth control' [was] that which springs naturally from the observance of divine laws."³⁷ The frontispiece featured a collage of young children and infants as an explicit argument for the value of children.

It is difficult for women born in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries to imagine how women living in earlier time periods experienced pregnancy. Modern photography and ultrasound technology have transformed how we understand early pregnancy. In 1965, *Life* magazine published an emblematic set of photos of the fetus. The images invited people to imagine fetuses at each stage of development. One depicted an eighteen-week-old fetus, in the words of one historian, "radiant and floating in a bubble-like amniotic sac." The same historian continues, "It is the image of a sleeping infant, eyes closed, head turned to the side, petite and glowing against a black background flecked with star-like matter."³⁸

35. "Birth Control," *Relief Society Magazine* 3, no. 7 (July 1916): 364.

36. *Ibid.*, 368.

37. *Ibid.*, 367.

38. Ann Neumann, "The Visual Politics of Abortion," *The Revealer* (blog), Mar. 8, 2017, <https://therevealer.org/the-patient-body-visual-politics-of-abortion/> For the original images, see Lennart Nilsson, "Drama of Life Before Birth," *Life*, Apr. 30, 1965, 54–71.

Around the same time, doctors began to “see” inside the womb using ultrasound technology. Newspapers around the United States printed articles about the innovation’s promise: one woman from a Boston suburb discovered that she was having twins; a doctor in Colorado urged its use in conjunction with amniocentesis to diagnose Down syndrome; and an Alaska hospital used it to predict difficult deliveries.³⁹ Ultrasound has given us the illusion of direct access to the womb and has created the idea that the infant is a separate patient from its mother.⁴⁰ Before the mid-twentieth century, women did not have access to these technologies and saw early pregnancy as an indeterminate state.

It is difficult to recapture the uncertainty that existed around early pregnancy in the nineteenth century. It is impossible to remove ourselves from the technologies and cultural concepts that shape our relationships to our bodies and pregnancies. I became pregnant with my second child at a difficult time in my life. I had just started a tenure-track job and was struggling to connect to people at the university. After I took the pregnancy test, I remember thinking that no matter what happened that it would be me and this child. My thoughts were directed at an embryo that was just a few weeks old. Although I like to

39. Respectively, “Ultrasound Tells Mom ‘Twins Due,’” *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, Nov. 14, 1971, 12, available at <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/42901981/>; Joanne Koch, “Tests are Urged for Late Pregnancies,” *Daily Times-News* (Burlington, N.C.), Jan. 28, 1976, 11A, available at <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/42902070/>; and Diane Simmons, “Hospital Squeeze is Result of More Patients, More Deliveries,” *Fairbanks Daily News*, Mar. 24, 1976, A-11, available at <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/42902070/>.

40. For analyses of the role ultrasound has played in changing pregnancy, see Barbara Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*, translated by Lee Hoinacki (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Malcolm Nicolson and John E. E. Fleming, *Imaging and Imagining the Fetus: The Development of Obstetric Ultrasound* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); and Sarah Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn: A History of the Fetus in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

imagine those thoughts as completely my own, they were made possible by decades of imagining the fetus as a separate being. Changing understandings of pregnancy have also shaped how Latter-day Saints relate to their bodies. Like their non-Mormon sisters, Latter-day Saint women initially placed the beginning of life in the womb at quickening and likely used a variety of herbal remedies to regulate their periods and pregnancy. Debates over abortion in the second half of the nineteenth century politicized women's control over their bodies and created the idea of conception as the moment in which individual human lives began. The current stance of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on abortion is that "human life is a sacred gift from God" and that "elective abortion for personal or social convenience is contrary to the will and the commandments of God."⁴¹ It is important to remember, however, that Latter-day Saints have not always agreed on when life began and, as a result, have not always accepted that early abortion is a sin. It is important to ground our discussions of abortion and reproductive rights in a historical context. Too often, these conversations proceed as though our understandings of women's bodies and the nature of life within the womb are self-evident.

41. "Abortion," *Gospel Topics*, accessed Sept. 29, 2019, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/abortion?lang=eng>.

AMANDA HENDRIX-KOMOTO {amanda.hendrixkomoto@montana.edu} is an assistant professor at Montana State University in the Department of History and Philosophy. She received a BA from the College of Idaho and a PhD from the University of Michigan. Her book *Imperial Zions: Race, Sex, and Religion in the American West* is under contract at the University of Nebraska Press. It explores how American ideas about sexuality shaped Latter-day Saint missionary work among Polynesians and Native Americans.