

The Mormon Conference Talk as Patriarchal Discourse

Dorice Williams Elliott

EVERYTHING MEANS SOMETHING. When I write a list of food names on a long, narrow sheet of paper, not only the words themselves but the form in which they are written indicate this is a grocery shopping list. I can tell at a glance my grocery list from the notes I've been taking for a seminar paper. By the time I've read half a sentence, I can distinguish a newspaper article from a romantic novel. Merely from the tone of voice of a radio announcer, I can distinguish a public radio station from a "top 40" station. And if I should happen to turn my radio or TV set to a general conference broadcast, it takes only about thirty seconds to identify it — even if I'm not listening carefully to what is being said.

As a literary critic and a Latter-day Saint, I often find myself sitting in Church meetings listening not only to the content of a talk, but also the message conveyed by the form itself. And, as a feminist, I am often aware that many of the forms we use to communicate with each other in the Church inherently reinforce and reproduce patriarchal relationships.

Of all the unique Mormon genres — testimony bearing, two-and-a-half minute talks, public prayers, etc. — undoubtedly the most distinctive and authoritative is the conference talk, delivered by a General Authority at a general conference, our most public meeting. Along with its various broadcasting conventions (the set time limit, the plexiglass square in front of the speaker, the frequent glances at the teleprompter, etc.), the talk itself has a predictable pattern. It often begins with a personal address to the audience ("My dear brothers and sisters . . .") or with a humble admission of the awesomeness of the occasion ("It is a humbling experience to speak before you today"). The

DORICE WILLIAMS ELLIOTT holds a master's degree in English literature from the University of Utah. She is currently working on a Ph.D. in nineteenth-century English literature and feminist theory at Johns Hopkins University. She and her husband, Robert F. Elliott, live in Towson, Maryland, with their three children. This paper was presented at the 1986 Sunstone Theological Symposium in Salt Lake City as part of a panel on "Feminist Approaches to Mormon Culture."

talk generally deals with a general Christian moral-ethical principle, a "missionary" message, or a generally accepted (noncontroversial) doctrine. Speakers frequently cite personal anecdotes (especially experiences with members resulting from talks, interviews, or letters received) almost always quote scripture, and commonly use at least two or three apt quotations from famous writers taken out of their original context from quote books. The conference talk frequently stresses the uniqueness of the Church's messages or organizations by contrasting the Church or its members with "the world," though it never singles out other religions, political parties, or specific groups. The talk frequently includes blessings, assurances, and admonitions — almost always in the second-to-last paragraph (as reprinted in the *Ensign*). It always ends, of course, with a testimony.¹

This basic form with its various conventions, formal and informal, is manipulated with varying levels of skill by general conference speakers (and by thousands of other speakers who imitate the form in other meetings). Some of the talks are masterfully constructed, others less so. And of course the sincerity of the speaker — or the Holy Ghost — can make a poorly written talk effective and powerful. But along with whatever content a particular speaker intends to express within the standard form, the form itself has both a function and a meaning.

One way to make the meaning of a form more visible is to alter its use. What happens, for instance, when a form conventionally used by the most powerful men in the Church is used to address an audience that is all women? For of course the General Authorities asked to speak in the annual general women's meeting use exactly the same format that they are accustomed to using in their other assignments. Even though their subjects differ from those addressed to a mixed audience in the more public general conference or to a priesthood leadership meeting, the essential form is identical. And transferring that patriarchal form to the discussion of issues thought to be relevant to women triggers a dissonance between form and content that exposes some of the meanings built into the form.

To demonstrate this potential conflict between the content and the form of the general conference talk, then, I intend to apply some of the techniques of contemporary literary analysis to a talk given by President Gordon B. Hinckley at the general women's meeting on 28 September 1985 and reprinted in the November 1985 *Ensign*. I choose this particular talk for analysis because its content is one of the most progressive I have heard from an official Church source on women's issues. Nevertheless, the intended message of the talk is subtly undermined by the powerful message of the form. I want especially to note here that it is not my intent to criticize President Hinckley. This

¹ Obviously, this is not a statistical or even a detailed rhetorical analysis of the form of the general conference talk. Doing such an analysis would be an interesting and useful project in itself but is outside the scope of this paper. My intent here is merely to suggest a few of the conventions of this relatively unique genre (though it is of course similar to many other kinds of public speeches), since my interest is not so much in the details as it is in the *ideology* of the form.

is a significant talk by a good man, significant because it gives institutional weight to some of the real concerns of Latter-day Saint women. President Hinckley, like all of us, speaks in the discourse available to him; we are all trapped by the language forms in which we speak and think. But by analyzing what I consider to be an exceptionally progressive and significant talk, I hope to show all the more clearly the inherent "message of the medium."

President Hinckley's talk, entitled "Ten Gifts from the Lord," is addressed explicitly to women who wonder why they don't have the priesthood and discusses the "privileges" women have that compensate for the lack of priesthood power. As such, it directly, though tactfully, engages issues of power — institutional as well as spiritual. Many of us are uncomfortable using the word power when discussing Church leadership relationships because we have been warned so many times about the sin of "aspiring." Mormon women especially have been taught that to desire power is worldly, un-Christlike, and unfeminine. But there are many ways to define power, and some of our most sacred ceremonies are designed to enable all of us, including women, to share God's power. And certainly, however we might want to disguise it with more tactful language, our Church leaders do exercise a great deal of power over the lives of the members. Even "righteous dominion" is still dominion, and women, of course, are generally excluded from exercising the most obvious form of that dominion in Church government. The purpose of President Hinckley's talk, however, is to demonstrate to women that they *do* have power in the Church. But, paradoxically, the form of President Hinckley's talk, while addressing issues of women's power — power to serve, teach, lead, pray, and prophesy — effectively asserts his own *greater* power and, by extension, that of all males in the Church.

Although I want to examine President Hinckley's talk primarily as an oral presentation, let me first say a word about its written form in the *Ensign*. Although President Hinckley spoke last in the actual meeting (the position of most impact, or the power position), in print his talk occurs first (the most powerful position in that setting). The description of the meeting explains that

Latter-day Saint women and girls ten years and older joined with those in the Tabernacle on Temple Square to receive counsel from Pres. Gordon B. Hinckley, Second Counselor in the First Presidency; Elder J. Thomas Fyans, of the Presidency of the First Quorum of the Seventy; Sister Barbara W. Winder, Relief Society President; Sister Ardath G. Kapp, Young Women General President; and Sister Dwan J. Young, Primary General President (1985, 86).

This introduction implies that the women assembled primarily to hear the men speakers, and secondarily the women. As with all the talks printed in the conference issue, a photo of the speaker appears in the first column. President Hinckley looks serious, dignified, and intent, as do all the other male speakers in the magazine, except one. The women's pictures, by contrast, show them smiling broadly and, in one case, actually pulling a face. While their pictures are admittedly more engaging, they do not convey the same sense of authority.

Another aspect of the printed talk is the kicker (the one-sentence excerpt from the talk which is printed in italics below the title). These short quotations also tend subtly to give a sense of authority to the male speakers, especially President Hinckley. The kicker to his talk reads: "Dwell on the remarkable blessings that are yours, the great privileges of your lives as women of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the transcendent spiritual gift that may be yours" (1985, 86). To attract attention to President Hinckley's talk, the *Ensign* editors have chosen a quotation that is an imperative rather than a simple declarative statement. The quote contains both a command and a promise, giving it the feel of scripture, the most weighty Church discourse of all. Even in terms of space, President Hinckley's kicker takes up four lines of print; most of the others are three lines, the women's all two. Thus even the printed form of the talk lets the reader know that this talk is important because it was delivered by one of the Church's highest leaders.

Similarly, in both the printed and the oral versions of President Hinckley's talk, the tone of authority is established in his first three words: "I am confident . . .," as compared to the women, who begin "Thank you, girls," "How I wish," and "My dear sisters." President Hinckley's syntax throughout is characterized by his almost exclusive use of imperative and strong declarative sentences: "May your prayers be answered," "I urge you . . .," "Spare yourself the indulgence of self-pity," "Do not worry away your lives with concerns over 'rights,'" "Accept the challenge," "Go forward," etc. When President Hinckley expresses a wish, as did Sister Kapp, he says not "How I wish" but, more directly, "I wish he were. . . ."

President Hinckley begins his talk by establishing — humbly — his position as spokesman for the First Presidency by explaining the absence and relaying the blessings of Presidents Kimball and Romney. He follows this by invoking the central binary opposition that is the foundation of both his talk and of the Church attitude toward women in general — *we* the Brethren/leaders and *you* the women. Says President Hinckley: "In behalf of *these*, our Brethren and leaders, in behalf of the First Presidency of the Church, I thank *you*, all of *you*, wherever *you* may be, *you* great Latter-day Saint women" (1985, 86, my emphasis).

The notion of binary oppositions is central to the thought processes of Western civilization, as it is to Mormon culture — "For it must needs be that there is an opposition in all things" (2 Ne. 2:11). Even our ability to perceive objects depends on our perception of their difference from other objects. But contemporary deconstructionist² critics point out that wherever there is a binary opposition—truth/error, presence/absence, identity/difference, speech/

² Deconstruction (also called post-structuralism) is an influential and controversial philosophical and literary movement which critiques the foundations of Western thought and puts language itself into question. Initiated by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, its most famous American adherents are the critics of the "Yale School"—Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom, and Paul De Man. Very simply put, deconstructionists try to undo either/or thinking and to explore the paradoxes inherent in all uses of language. By looking for the hidden premises or the key exclusions on which texts or thought-systems are built, such critics are said to "deconstruct" discourse.

writing, being/nothingness, life/death, mind/matter, master/slave — one half of the pair is “privileged.” There is always, says Jacques Derrida, a “violent hierarchy” in which “one of the terms governs the other . . . or has the upper hand” (1981, 41). We can be quite comfortable with such “violent hierarchies” when the concepts involved are good and evil, life and death, sin and righteousness, love and hatred, joy and pain, etc. But when the pair is man/woman, the dichotomy is less comfortable. Here we want to try to impose some notion of “separate but equal” — a notion which the Supreme Court and our own cultural system of logic says is not possible. Deconstructionists want us to learn to “use and erase our language at the same time” (Derrida 1981, 41), and feminists want us to preserve positive difference while establishing full equality, but our language as we use it currently — and as President Hinckley’s talk uses it — does set up binary oppositions in which one half is clearly “privileged.”

In fact, President Hinckley uses “you,” “your,” and “yours” so frequently and insistently throughout his talk that it becomes a refrain reminding women that they are the Other. Even when he talks about himself growing up, he says “When I was a *boy* growing up.” He repeatedly uses phrases like “the men, as well as the women,” “their views [the women’s] carry as much weight as do the views of any of the Brethren,” “in the case of women as it is in the case of men,” “as surely as there is a temple president there is also a temple matron,” etc. Such phrases keep the terms constantly opposed, constantly locked in the hierarchy, even while asserting “privileges” and “rights” for women. This is even more apparent when, in his conclusion, President Hinckley begins using the rhetorical device “no less” — “Please know that your place in the divine plan is *no less* important, *no less* great, and *no less* necessary than that of men” [emphasis added]. The effect on the listener of this repeated “no less” is particularly ambiguous — while the literal meaning of the phrases suggests equality, this construction actually emphasizes the “less” — I am telling you that you are equal, says President Hinckley, but of course you know everyone thinks you are less.

This brings up another interesting point about the language which a feminist must pay attention to in a discourse like this one. As I mentioned earlier, we tend to perceive objects, concepts, etc., in opposition to other objects, concepts, etc. We recognize a chair partly because it is *not* a table, a desk, a couch, or a piano. Thus when we say “chair,” we simultaneously call up in the mind images of chair and not-chair. This has interesting applications for President Hinckley’s talk when he says, “a few Latter-day Saint women are asking why they are not entitled to hold the priesthood. To that I can say that only the Lord, through revelation, could alter that situation. He has not done so, so it is profitless for us to speculate and worry about it” (1985, 86).

The not-said of this passage is that since the Lord *could*, he actually *might* alter the situation. Though it is profitless (prophet-less?) to speculate about it, President Hinckley’s language actually invites us to do so. Similarly, when he lists the executive opportunities of the auxiliary presidents, he simultaneously

calls up for the listener — largely subconsciously — the list of areas where they do *not* have executive power. When he climaxes that list by saying that Dwan Young serves on the National Cub Scout Committee, the not-said is the hundreds of other committees — almost all more powerful than Cub Scouts — on which she might serve.

Let me hasten to add, however, that I for one do not doubt President Hinckley's sincerity when he says, "My dearest sisters, you, as women, have tremendous executive responsibilities in this Church. And no one appreciates more than I the wonderful contributions you make and the great wisdom you bring" (p. 88). I think the not-said here is the great personal burden this man has felt in his role as leader and chief executive to the Church, and perhaps his personal friendship with and gratitude for the women he is talking about — here it is the not-said which conveys his real emotions through the formal words of the official discourse.

Because of their generally noncontroversial nature, conference talks often deal in stereotypes, especially when dealing with the subject of women and their roles. In President Hinckley's talk, the most obvious of these are statements like "you possess an instinctive inclination to help those in distress, and have a peculiar and remarkable way of doing so," (p. 87) and "we regard a happy marriage as the greatest mission any young woman can enjoy" (p. 88). When President Hinckley holds out rewards and promises to women, they tend to be peace, love, and security — stereotypically feminine desires. In this talk, however, these kinds of stereotypes are used with a peculiar rhythm which I call the "give-and-take-away" pattern. For instance, President Hinckley spends three quite provocative paragraphs discussing scriptural precedents of women prophesying. But then he follows that up with "Can anyone doubt that many women have a special intuitive sense, even a prescient understanding of things to come?" (p. 88), which seems to turn the spiritual power of prophecy back into stereotypical "women's intuition." Similarly, he speaks of the great power of sister missionaries — and follows up with the line about marriage being a woman's greatest mission. He celebrates at some length women's opportunities for education — and then tacks on the old "in case you don't marry" and the familiar "sense of security" having an education brings to women; where he began with women studying for science, the professions, and "every other facet of human knowledge," he ends by urging women to enhance their appreciation of the arts, especially music — so we're back to the drawing room.

Throughout this talk addressed to women, as he advises and counsels them, President Hinckley keeps himself separate and uninvolved. He speaks as a kind, benevolent, appreciative leader to *others* who have concerns, questions, and problems. One of the tacit rules of the conference talk, in fact, is that the speaker never expresses his own anguish, doubts, or fears, unless they are already safely resolved and in the past. But the surface of any text may also cover a hidden message, as recent feminist critics have discovered in texts written by women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Despite the

apparent seamlessness of the surface, if we look closely we see that many texts have a point of rupture — a place where the texts transgresses the laws it seems to have set up for itself.³

Although it may not be obvious to a casual listener, there is such a point in President Hinckley's women's meeting talk — a point at which the terms of opposition are reversed and man's fear of women is revealed — the fear that lies behind all patriarchal discourse. The "blessing that no man can enjoy" is, of course, bearing children. As President Hinckley points out, without mothers, the race would soon die and "the purposes of God would be totally frustrated" (p. 88). Thus even God, in a sense, is dependent on women to fulfill his purposes, although President Hinckley is careful to assert from the beginning that motherhood is a "God-given privilege." The glories of motherhood are, of course, another standard cliché, especially in Mormondom. What reveals the fear, however — the fear of the power women have which men must keep under control — are his remarks about artificial insemination: "I recognize that there are many unmarried women who long to have a child. Some think of bringing this about by artificial impregnation. This the Church strongly discourages. Those who do so may expect to be disciplined by the Church. A child so conceived and born cannot be sealed to one parent. This procedure frustrates the eternal family plan" (p. 89).

What is so insidious, so dangerous about artificial impregnation for a single woman? Simply that it leaves men out of the birth process entirely. It does indeed frustrate "the eternal family plan" where a priesthood holder rules over the woman like God. This one little paragraph taps into the fears of man since the beginning — as Dorothy Dinnerstein puts it, "men's powerful impulse to affirm and tighten by cultural inventions their unsatisfactorily loose mammalian connection with children" (1976, 80–81). Could "the Brethren" of the Church share, in a guarded, veiled, hidden way — hidden especially from themselves — the male ideology of a Norman Mailer, who says of another male writer, Arthur Miller:

For he captured something in the sexuality of men as it had never been seen before, precisely that it was man's sense of awe before woman, his dread of her position one step closer to eternity (for in that step were her powers) which made men detest women, revile them, humiliate them, defecate symbolically on them, do everything to reduce them so one might dare to enter them and take pleasure of them . . . Men look to destroy every quality in a woman which will give her the powers of a male, for she is in their eyes already armed with the power that she brought them forth, and that is a power beyond measure — the earliest etchings of memory go back to that woman between whose legs they were conceived, nurtured, and near strangled in the hours of birth (1971, 116).

³ See especially Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), and Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 339–60.

Such language seems strong, even shocking, especially applied to the general blandness of a conference talk. I don't actually mean to suggest that President Hinckley and his spiritual colleagues harbor the extreme sexist animosity which oozes from a Norman Mailer. But the conventions and traditions they have inherited for thinking about, classifying, and relating to women are built on a foundation of fear and a need to control the root of that fear — women. In the midst of this otherwise progressive and loving talk, a hint of that collective fear emerges.

Nonetheless, I find President Hinckley's talk a hopeful one. His careful combing of the standard works for scriptures which hold out promise to women, his emphasis on powers and capabilities of women, his oblique inferences that radical changes are at least possible, and his personal expressions of gratitude and appreciation for women's contributions mark important departures from similar communications of only a few years ago. Unfortunately, as I hope I have demonstrated, the form in which these insights have been expressed tends to undermine their force. Besides the graphic presentation of the printed talk, the tone of authority established through the strong syntax, the insistent setting up of binary oppositions with one term — the male one — being privileged, the insistent use of "you" to emphasize woman's otherness, the implications called up by the not-said when discussing women's opportunities, the use of stereotypes in a "give-and-take-away" pattern, and the talk's "navel" — the rupture that lets in a vision of man's desperate need to control women — all these aspects of the discourse tend to subtly counteract the positive message the talk is trying to express.⁴ President Hinckley discusses women's access to spiritual power in a power discourse that reinforces his own power and their exclusion from it. Still, it is a beginning. If powerful men like President Hinckley are even attempting to infuse new content into the patriarchal forms of the Church, that is a positive sign.

If women themselves are ever to have full access to spiritual and even administrative power in the Church, perhaps they will need to invent a new kind of Church discourse, one that will allow discussion and celebration of their capabilities and concerns without reinforcing their lack of any real power. I think it is in response to that need for another discourse that women have always joined together in discussion groups, neighborhood chats, Relief Society testimony meetings, and in their own publications, which the official Church, incidentally, has consistently attempted to abolish. The recent rise of such publications as *Exponent II* and of retreats for LDS women indicates that at least some Mormon women are actively seeking to find both printed and oral means of expressing their concerns and capabilities outside of official conventional forms. But real progress will have been made only when the men in positions of power are also able to escape the confines of their patriarchal discourse and the modes of thinking about women which it forces on all of us.

⁴ I borrow the word "navel" to describe this moment of rupture from Gayatri Spivak (1974, xlix).

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