

In Search of Women's Language and Feminist Expression among Nauvoo Wives in *A Little Lower than the Angels*

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VIRGINIA SORENSEN'S 1942 NOVEL, *A Little Lower than the Angels*, is a colorful, straightforward look at the Mormon experience during the four to five years in Nauvoo, Illinois, before the Mormons' exodus West. A careful reading beyond the historical aspects of the text also reveals a novel that is seeking a phenomenon as yet unnamed in the 1940s—*écriture féminine*, a means of expression that is uniquely women's own. Sorensen depicts through several different female protagonists in the novel the determined but ultimately frustrated search for a specific sort of language through which women can express themselves and discuss problems and emotions, both emotional and spiritual, that affect women in a way in which they cannot similarly affect men.

Although the narration is shared from the point of view of numerous characters, fictional and non-fictional, male and female, including the prophet Joseph Smith, I find the most touching and passionate narrative views are from the women characters, notably Mercy Baker and the poetess Eliza R. Snow. The novel is several decades in advance of the phenomenon of feminist literary criticism (beginning ca. 1968) that urges a casting off of male discourse, and of women critics' introduction of the idea of *gynesis*—a language that is conceived and expressed purely according to women's history and women's experience. Bits and pieces of women's thought and dialogue fall into place as *A Little Lower than the Angels* unfolds, as the Mormon women strive to express themselves according to the tumultuous and often violent history that is being made around them and the emotional upheaval that invades the core of their personal lives.

The novel opens with Mercy Baker, newly arrived in Nauvoo and not yet baptized into the Mormon church, reflecting on her contentment with the special closeness she feels to her husband, Simon. "All the little things that made him Simon and nobody else, they were mighty important. The one Simon."¹ The narrator reveals that Mercy keeps a likeness of herself in her Bible at the story of Leah.

This expression of Mercy's perception of the beauty of her monogamous marriage and her place as first wife sets up an ambiance of contentment and peace that creates an effective tension with the completely different philosophy on marriage that will soon be thrust on her and be explained away in terse, condescending, male terminology.

Ann Rosalind Jones wrote in 1981 that Western culture has always been phallogocentric and therefore fundamentally oppressive of women. Such oppression is particularly evident in traditional language, which Jones describes as "another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else—including women." Therefore women have typically written "as hysterics, as outsiders to male-dominated discourse."²

This involuntary and crippling genuflecting by women writers to male language was not being identified in the 1940s. Nonetheless, Sorensen is in tune with her female characters' sentiments and with their *verbal* struggle to make sense out of the Nauvoo experience, which was all but monopolized by male discourse. In *A Little Lower than the Angels* early Mormon wives sought to articulate certain female experiences—polygamy in particular—in feminine terms. The women's dialogue with the men and with one another as well as their actions during the years leading up to the Utah exodus indicate that Sorensen was aware of the *spirit* of gynesis, or at least aware of a lack of feminist expression during the 1840s, and how destructive this lack proved to be in the lives of faithful Mormon women.

A Little Lower than the Angels contains numerous examples of women thirsting and groping for an accurate, sensitive way to express themselves according to their own sense of their terrestrial selves and what they understand and believe to be their divine destiny. The struggle is neither easy nor successful for Nauvoo women. In many instances one perceives the female characters, as Jones noted, striving to express their feelings and needs according to the strictly male terminology they have always been taught.

1. Virginia Sorensen, *A Little Lower than the Angels* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), 55.

2. Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Towards an Understanding of *l'écriture féminine*," *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 358.

Through her female characters, Sorensen is straining for a yet-undefined mode of female expression. She is, as contemporary feminist critic Charlotte Hogsett describes it, "Chafing at the restrictions placed on women writers, tapping along the walls (of male language and expression) in search of a way out."³ Sorensen is also aware of the male tendency to use and twist traditional male language and clichés to dismiss women's protests and to achieve their own ends.

The narrator notes that Nauvoo women and youths, many of whom love poetry, have been warned (by their fathers and husbands) against the works of certain English poets since, in the words of Simon Baker, "that man Byron was notably wicked, and Shelley, a deserter of wife and children" (116).

Ironically, though, the prophet Joseph Smith is seen wooing Eliza R. Snow into a polygamous marriage with a few lines from Shelley's inflammatory poem, *Epipsychidion*. He quotes:

I never was attached to that great sect,
Whose doctrine is, that each one should select
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend,
And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend
To cold oblivion, though it is in the code
Of modern morals, that the beaten road . . . (90)

Although *Epipsychidion* is described by Shelley scholars as "the most outspoken and eloquent appeal for free love in the language,"⁴ it would appear that the words of Shelley, as radical and anti-Victorian as they were, can become useful male language to achieve male purposes, even in Nauvoo. For certain goals and projects of Mormon men, Shelley's words can be cleverly interpreted to sound heaven-sent. "It seems to me that [Shelley] was inspired to write this poem," the prophet tells Eliza, "just the way I'm inspired to write my revelations" (90).

A sensitive, semi-fictionalized rendering of Eliza R. Snow's writing of the words of the hymn "O My Father" shows her epiphany with the concept that a heavenly mother must exist. Sorensen uses a combination of third-person narration and free indirect style to view Eliza's thoughts, and to describe her feelings when her poem is complete: "She was terribly excited, and her body was blazing with something besides the heat of the day. I have made something, I have made something; if you make some-

3. Charlotte Hogsett, *The Literary Existence of Germaine de Staël* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 65.

4. Harold Bloom, "Introduction," *Modern Critical Views: Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), 21.

thing from what you believe, then the blessing of belief can never leave you. I have something to show [Joseph] that he will like" (129).

However, when she seeks out the prophet to share the poem and its new idea with him, he is preoccupied and anxious to send her on her way. He, as well as the other men of the community, is well-meaning but painfully out of tune with a woman's striving for an expression and explanation of her own place in the church and in life's eternal plan.

Nowhere in the novel is the contrast between self-serving male language and lack of viable female language so evident as in the attempts to explain and to justify the practice of polygamy, to make it sound vital not only to building up the Kingdom of God on earth but to the individual lifestyles of men and women alike.

Joseph Smith's eloquence in explaining the divine nature of polygamy to Eliza is dramatically undercut by Eliza's sincere desire but complete inability to repeat his explanations convincingly to Mercy. Here Joseph's interpretation of the words of Shelley and the logic of the spiritual ideas as described by the prophet suddenly ring hollow. As two *women* now discuss the idea, not only do the words fall flat, they barely come at all.

"I wish I could tell you just the way he told it to me," Eliza tells Mercy. "'The most beautiful—' She spoke with unsteady lips and a shaking chin" (104). Eliza fumbles to recreate Joseph's exalted explanation for a higher order. "He tells you how it is and you see it differently, you forget about this world, and all you think about is the spiritual thing—about heaven" (107). Mercy, however, can only see the worldly (the male) aspects in the plan—"The human side of the whole thing, this side eternity," and she hopes the new idea will not get around. "You give men an idea like that and they'll all start looking around" (106). As polygamy takes an increasingly stronger hold in the community, male efforts to justify the practice and the difficulties that inevitably surround it are intensified.

On the evening after Eliza has written "O My Father," the prophet tells his "little Eliza-wife" (142) that he will visit her "when the moon is in the quarter" (143). Months later, after the party celebrating the finishing of Joseph and Emma's Mansion House, Eliza upbraids the prophet for not keeping his promise:

"Joseph,—you said when the moon is in the quarter—"
 "Well," he said brusquely, "it isn't."

Eliza's voice turns "steely sober" as she reminds him.

"No, it isn't in the quarter now, but it has been. Three—*four* times—since that last night. And if I'm your wife, as I hope in the name of God I am, you

owe me at least a quarter-moon. Not a whole one, I'm not asking that, but a quarter" (170).

Hogsett noted in 1987:

[Woman] is a secondary being who depends on the male mind for her existence. Every word she speaks travels out of her contingent place, its route to the listener inevitably indirect, distorted. The primary, fundamental role belongs to man. It is he who substantiates, who defines, who decides on and imposes meanings. He insists that she function in his world, where he has established the links between signifier and signified.⁵

Sorensen's women are slowly beginning to realize that they are being manipulated and put off by men's choice of metaphors and pretty expressions that may placate the wives for awhile but quickly turn out to be a mere means of sidestepping true communication, as well as a coverup for the full spectrum of men's true intentions.

A moving attempt to achieve a strictly female mode of expression for a heart-rending emotional situation comes midway through the novel from Melissa Vermazon, who has lost all four of her children to disease within the past few years. After the birth of Mercy's twins, Melissa appears inexplicably at the window of the Baker home, wishing to comfort the crying toddler-daughter, Beck, with the simple words, "Darling, Darling!"

Her pathetic expression of hurt, emptiness, and need to still give some measure of maternal comfort becomes a small legend among Nauvoo women. The unknown whisperer of soothing words from the window becomes known in the female community simply as "The Darling Lady." While some women try to explain the mysterious voice as the spirit of the martyred prophet come to watch over the settlements, "The men, who had learned to sleep whether babies cried or not, thought the whole tale as a woman-thing, a fabrication, and simply let it be" (249). Thus even the most rudimentary attempts of Nauvoo women to express themselves in purely feminine discourse tend to be dismissed by men as nonsense, while the women continue to search for and to hurt over the lack of an emotional and verbal language of their own.

When the matter of polygamy arises in the Baker home, the principle is explained and analyzed by Mercy, Eliza, and other women friends, but always according to male language—that is, the reasonable, logical justification of the doctrine that comes directly from the prophets (first from Joseph Smith, then from Brigham Young) and from Simon Baker's second-hand explanations. As Sorensen describes the women's struggle to make

5. Hogsett, 26.

sense out of a practice that puts their everyday lives in constant turmoil and wrenching them emotionally, the lack of a viable feminist expression becomes more painfully clear.

It is interesting to observe that Charlot Leavitt, one of the most admirable of all the women in the novel (she is intelligent, resourceful, creative, unselfish, compromising, and forebearing, among other things), comes off badly in the narrative simply because she is Simon's polygamous wife and therefore an interloper and spoiler. Although there is no female language that can justify her troublesome presence in the Baker household, there is more than adequate *male* verbiage to make her position seem natural.

Brigham Young encourages Simon's second marriage with painstakingly logical phrases:

Now, that's what Brother Joseph said about it. He was thinking of men like you when he wrote that, and of women like your wife. And he was thinking of women who love children and houses and don't have any of their own to take care of. And he planned it for men who were strong-minded, not for men who wanted a thing that's the least part of a woman . . . if a man lives this principle as it should be lived, he learns to be impartial, like God. And women learn to be unselfish, they learn what's the best and the most important part of marriage, giving and sharing. That's the best part of any life, Brother Baker (283, 284-85).

After the death of Joseph Smith, Eliza tries gamely to continue his justification of polygamy, telling Mercy, "If you're big enough, you can climb up in the middle of the fence, and look at both sides. You don't have to sit and growl over what's on your side like the old dog in the manger!" (269)

Prior to that, however, after the bodies of Joseph and Hyrum had come home in the wagon, the narrator shows Eliza thinking to herself, "If I should die first, if I should go on before any of them, then I would be the only one for a little while. I'd be the only one until she came, and the others" (241). Sorensen manages to show subtly how Eliza, despite her outward, male-originated attempts to explain polygamy, thinks of her marriage musingly, semi-consciously in an entirely different way. In the privacy of her own mind, to which Sorensen allows us access, Eliza sees her union with the prophet ideally in *monogamous* terms, however brief those terms might promise to be.

Also, as Mercy discusses polygamy with Portia Glazier, she recalls the reference to the dog in the manger and muses, "Only, Portia, it always seemed to me that there was something to the dog's side of it. A property right, really. Maybe the straw kept him warm even though he couldn't eat it" (344). Thus a piece of male language has been gently turned about and questioned without being defied.

Amid the constant bickering and unhappiness in the Baker household, Simon turns a blind eye and a deaf ear to the real difficulties and persists in viewing the situation in male terms only. He refuses to let Charlot leave the family home and return to her own house in town. Sorensen reveals Simon's thoughts:

He must not be the first to fail, or the second, even, or the last. . . . The blessed were those who bore the burden in the heat of the day. . . . Why should love alone be allowed selfishness? For a man it is even unnatural—did not most men cast their eyes on many women, suffering under their instincts and the burden of the other commandment? And did God smile on the rows of woman-bodies, unused and lonely. . . . Before the first terrible misstep, a simple ceremony that gave sanction and invested pleasure with responsibility. It seemed a simple solution (332-33).

Simon mouths such justifications continually to his wives, promising, as did Brother Joseph, eventual "world harmony, world perfection" (334). Mercy, however, knows the pat, male phrases are impotent in the face of the hurt and indignation of everyday reality. "'You can hold up a penny,' Mercy thought, 'and it will hide the sun'" (334). Such verbalized female insights are few, however.

There is virtually no language that either Mercy or Charlot can employ that will assuage the pain or temper the emotional chaos that Charlot's mere presence brings to the home. Although Charlot runs the Baker home with cheer and uncommon efficiency, Mercy is driven to mute rage by Charlot's presence, the older Baker children detest and defy her, and we resent her too.

In the midst of this swirl of bad feeling, Sorensen herself does nothing to calm the storm. Readers observe the unhappiness in the household through dialogue and incidents. There is little probing into the women's minds except a brief note that Mercy calls this time the Era of Man's Patience (abbreviated E.M.P.) in her journal. Simon admires this reference, but the sensitive oldest son, Jarvie, knows that this is not really his mother's true self (340).

Therefore through the words and thoughts of the women themselves there are no indications that women can actually come to understand and accept polygamy because of their husbands' rote explanations. Sorensen's paucity of revealing *female* discourse here indicates that the polygamous family situation can be neither explained nor justified, nor even tolerated, if approached through women's language. Thus Sorensen begins in the last few chapters to employ a tactic that is traditionally a pathetic, although ultimately effective technique of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century women to express themselves in a world of men's rules and men's languages—the technique of *silence*.

"No one questioned the authoritative way in which a man could write (in the nineteenth century.) He shaped the world," recently noted Michelle Stott. "Woman was the Other. She couldn't shape, criticize, or speak in a voice of authority. Therefore, she used strategies of self-effacement, self-deprecation that would direct irony inward and against herself. Her silences, omissions, and self-protective rhetorical devices were meant to conceal and yet to *reveal*."⁶

When Mercy Baker falls into an inexplicable illness toward the end of the novel, her situation becomes another dimension of this strange yet effective oxymoron—*woman's expressive silence*. The narrator and dialogue indicate that there is no real physical cause why Mercy remains bedridden. True, she had a tendency toward weakness, and her recovery takes longer and longer with the birth of each baby. However, she is recovered from her twins' birth and from the death of tiny Mary and is up and about when she discovers the secret of Simon's second marriage to the woman whom she had been led to believe was hired help.

When Simon tries awkwardly to explain, again with the same male platitudes, Mercy realizes there is no *woman's* viewpoint he will tolerate from her. "He hates woman-emotion, uncurbed and hysterical; he's like other men, he gets out of the room before it, he shuns it, embarrassed" (322). All attempts at explanation, at verbalization from a woman's point of view, are void. Mercy's silence is now her only weapon.

There is an interlude of several months between Mercy's recovery from the twins' birth and the collapse that leaves her an invalid. During this time, the two wives can communicate only in terms of their disagreements over household chores and habits—"A waffle iron on a different hook . . . the plates piled in a different corner of the cupboard . . ." (329). Complaints to Simon are cut short by the usual references to the doctrine of practicing "unnatural unselfishness" (333). However, what he says "only served to stifle her words, not her feelings" (335). The wives' efforts to understand and accept their situation through male language is consistently undercut by a deep and festering silence, a rage that goes unarticulated, but is manifest in indirect ways—such as their power struggle within the domestic scene and their vying for the children's love and favor.

It is evident from the narrative that Mercy's final illness is an outgrowth of her inability to express her true feelings, her linguistic incapacity in the face of male prejudice and male language. Because Mercy is unable to verbalize her emotions, she is ultimately unable to cope. Her sickness has no apparent physical cause, yet the narrator eventually tells us she is "sick

6. Michelle Stott, "Speaking Silences: Literary Discourse of Nineteenth-Century German Woman Authors," 6 Mar. 1992, symposium address, Department of German and Slavic Languages, Brigham Young University, my emphasis.

at heart" (370), and Portia Glazier observes that Mercy's spells "are in the mind, not in the body" (417).

When the Baker home on the bluff is burned by persecutors, and the family must move into Charlot's house in town, the silence intensifies. Mercy withdraws increasingly into herself, she and Charlot rarely speak: "neither thought to find a way around their feelings; some things are not spoken" (381).

That her sickness is psychosomatic is evident as Mercy seems miraculously to arise from her sickbed and sit by Simon's side as the wagons leave Nauvoo. However, as she looks across the river to the bluff and sees the site of the home where she was once happy as a monogamous wife, the image and emotions are too much. There is no way, no language to express her feelings as woman, to articulate her sentiments of betrayal and loss; and there on the wagon seat Mercy slumps forward and dies.

"Masculine society has traditionally repressed woman's voice," says French feminist critic Hélène Cixous. "Writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence, political, typically masculine—economy . . . where woman has never had her turn to speak." In this 1975 essay, Cixous proclaims boldly, "It is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language. . . . Women should break out of the snare of silence."⁷

In 1942 Sorensen lacked the terminology and tight sisterhood of modern feminist writers to allow her to break out of this snare by verbalizing precisely what polygamous wives were facing in Nauvoo. From a historical point of view, Sorensen is aware that the Mormon women of the 1840s were lacking even further in any method of explaining to themselves or to one another their sentiments and perceptions about their bewildering new situation. Feminist language was simply a phenomenon which they could not be expected to develop or to comprehend in their era.

An early chapter of *A Little Lower than the Angels* shows a gathering of Nauvoo women at a quilting bee where Mercy is happy to learn that they can discuss together with ease anything from domestic concerns to sexual matters (38). However, as the novel progresses, we see such sisterhood unraveling as slowly and as painfully as the threads of the piecing on a quilt. Some good feelings among the women remain, but the erosion is evident as one realizes that at the novel's beginning Emma Smith and Eliza R. Snow were close friends and confidantes. Also it is logical that under different circumstances Mercy and Charlot might easily have been friends as well. In the course of the story, however, polygamy has taken enough of a toll on female solidarity in Nauvoo to scotch much development of common, sisterly expression and communication.

7. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Feminisms*, 337.

There is therefore some truth in Cixous's assertion that "almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity."⁸ Nevertheless, Sorensen's perceptions of the lack of a female mode of expression is made clear in her novel through her creative, varied narration and dialogues. Effective also is her method of backing away at times to let the story tell itself "cinemagraphically," thereby letting the characters' difficulties and silences portray their lack of language on a personal level. Sorensen's novel, therefore, is an effort towards a strictly female mode of expression that begs departure from accepted 1940s norms of thought and verbalization.

Thus in Sorensen's novel *Nauvoo* women struggle diligently for self-understanding and self-expression through the restrictions of men's explanations, men's stereotypes, men's clichés, and traditional male language. Their success is limited and their concept of the individual female self and her role in an unusual society is bewildering. Also we readers are left vaguely unsatisfied and disappointed in women's inability to protest and to cope.

Nevertheless, Sorensen's creativity in allowing readers to see the true sentiments and perceptions beneath the surface of male-dominated doctrines, and beyond the silences of courageous women, is an early foray into the now-prolific realm of feminist language and expression.

8. *Ibid.*, 342.