

A Test Case for Heresy and Gender Discourse

The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy. By Terry L. Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

The Antipolygamy Controversy in U.S. Women's Movements, 1880-1925: A Debate on the American Home. By Joan Smyth Iversen (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997).

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THE NINETEENTH CENTURY saw the rise and fall of many "crusades" that have been painstakingly examined by scholars, including abolition, temperance, and nativism. Yet the equally important campaigns to eradicate polygamy and stem the tide of Mormonism have been sorely neglected by historians. In 1997 two outstanding books appeared which correct that oversight by examining different aspects of anti-Mormonism in the nineteenth century.

The first, Terry Givens's *Viper on the Hearth*, successfully blends cultural history, literary criticism, and social theory. Givens's book fills a real void in the often insular field of Mormon history by illuminating broad connections between early Mormonism and American culture. Givens is far more interested in the portrayal of Mormonism than in traditional Mormon history. Often, he says, it is people's perceptions that determine the course of events. It is these perceptions—how Mormonism was constructed and subsequently demonized by outsiders—which form the core of this book. Mormonism becomes a case study for the

much larger story of how those in power construct categories of "heresy" to define their adversaries.

Givens uses fiction as a lens to gauge the depth and nature of the anxieties of non-Mormon Americans in the nineteenth century. He draws important literary connections between anti-Mormon literature of the nineteenth century and literature that excoriated other groups, especially Catholics. Similar tropes appear, such as the concern with libidinous sexuality or the fear of untempered ecclesiastical tyranny. Givens's key agenda is to determine what identity Mormonism's detractors derived from presenting Mormons as heterocultural. Givens transcends earlier studies by not simply noting how novelists used the same rhetorical devices to castigate both groups, but in exploring the ways in which Mormons resisted the ethnic stereotypes so easily heaped onto antebellum Catholics. Mormons were, as Givens tells us, only "quasi ethnic." Part of American culture's discomfort about Mormons resulted from what anthropologists might term their "liminality"; as an indigenous American religion, nineteenth-century Mormonism occupied the dangerous interstices between American and un-American, Christian and apostate, civilized and heathen. Mormons looked too much like their neighbors to be easily exoticized.

Givens insists that Mormons were excoriated from the beginning for religious reasons, more than for the social or cultural differences that are generally blamed for anti-Mormon sentiment (58). Givens downplays the

impact of social practices such as polygamy, which was not publicly acknowledged until 1852, arguing instead that Mormonism was dangerous for its radical reinterpretation of accepted religious truth. This is an important assertion, but Givens may de-emphasize polygamy too severely as a reason for hating Mormons. Although Mormons denied the charges that they were practicing polygamy throughout the 1840s, and the *Nauvoo Expositor* was destroyed to publicly prove their point, the very fact that they were forced to deny such charges demonstrates that such rumors were common. Even far-off Adventists evidently heard these rumors; an editorial in the 26 August 1846 edition of the *Advent Herald* wrote of the late Hyrum Smith's "being covetous of [another man's] wife" whom he succeeded in seducing and "making . . . his victim." Rumors were circulating about polygamy for almost a full decade before 1852. And as Givens himself tells us, rumor is "an active ingredient" in shaping public opinion (14).

Another criticism of *Viper* is that this topic deserves more conscious attention to gender issues. In chapter 6 ("Ground in the Presbyterian Smut Machine"), Givens points to a number of elements which combined to give rise to the success of anti-Mormon fiction, including changes in print media and the explosion of the penny press. But he misses a key aspect of this revolution, which is the new role of women as both consumers and producers of this new literature. Even a partial list of some of the authors Givens cites—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Maria Monk, Mary Martha Sherwood, Victoria Metta Fuller, Ann Radcliffe, Grace Kennedy, Maria Sedgwick, Cor-

nelia Paddock, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Orvilla Beslisle, Jennie Switzer, Alfreda Bell, and so on—indicates that *women* helped to set the tone of anti-Mormon discourse. Moreover, women's fears about Mormonism sometimes differed from men's.

Our other book under consideration deals explicitly with gender and its impact on the anti-Mormon crusade and, as such, makes for a valuable companion volume to *Viper*. Joan Smyth Iversen's *The Antipolygamy Crusade in U.S. Women's Movements* explores nearly half a century of American women's changing discourse about marriage, womanhood, and suffrage. As part of a series on the development of American feminism, this book's primary concern is to employ gender analysis to understand the antipolygamy crusade.

As Iversen points out, Mormonism continually muddied the clear waters of Victorian gender discourse. Mormon women were "supposed" to be oppressed by polygamy, yet they exercised suffrage half a century before women could vote nationally, owned property, and enjoyed lenient territorial divorce laws. Suffrage advocates could not agree on how to address the complex issues raised by Mormon women. Iversen traces woman suffrage on a national scale and in Mormon Utah, where plural wives like Emmeline Wells sought to forge alliances with national suffragists like Susan B. Anthony.

The woman suffrage movement, already divided after the Fifteenth Amendment granted the vote to black men but not to women, experienced further discord over the presence of polygamous suffragists. An antipolygamy crusade, led and mobilized by women, gathered force in the 1880s