

THADDEUS OF WARSAW AND THE BOOK OF MORMON: A SYMPOSIUM

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Editor's note: What follows is a transcription of a bootleg audio recording of a symposium held over a popular video sharing platform in the early 2020s. Invited presenters were Cleo, a literary historian; Bauer, a lawyer turned scripture scholar; and Miranda, an art historian. The footnotes come from sources shared in the chat. Unfortunately, Miranda's beautifully curated slides escaped the audio recording medium.

CLEO: Welcome, speakers and selected guests. Please make sure you are muted. We hope you've brought your own beverages to the symposium!

Among many claimants for possible literary influence on the Book of Mormon (1830), no one that we know of has yet nominated *Thaddeus of Warsaw* (1803), published in four volumes by the English novelist Jane Porter (1775–1850). I will present the case at length, and then invite responses from Miranda and Bauer.

The novel tells the story of the young noble Polish patriot Thaddeus Sobieski who bravely defends his country. After losing to the Russians and witnessing the partition of Poland, he is exiled to England, where he casts an outsider's eye on British mores. A bestseller, the novel followed a formula stretching from Homer's *Odyssey* to the latest Hollywood blockbuster: action and adventure plus romance and relationships. Volume 1, set in Poland, covers the rebellion against the Russian occupation; volumes 2–4 cover Thaddeus's adventures in England. The Poland and England settings stage very different kinds of narratives, moving from large-scale historical chronicle to social commentary and

satire. It is the first volume that has the relevant intertextual material with the Book of Mormon.

Thaddeus is a larger-than-life fictional figure whose inner struggles only magnify him more. He is loosely based on the Polish military hero Tadeusz Kościuszko, by whose side he fights in the novel. Thaddeus is a courageous and effective soldier, an inspiring leader, skilled with a sword, often bloodied but never beaten. He also has a tender side: He is devoted to his dying single mother, attends mass and reads the Bible, nurses an old dying Polish war hero and an aristocratic lady in distress, and weeps easily and soulfully at the troubles of his country and of other people. In England, he does a stint in debtor's prison for not being able to pay the medical debts he incurred in caring for the venerable war hero. Walking home through London in the wee hours of the morning after a *soirée* (these aristocrats stay up really late!) he chances upon a house on fire, rushes in to save two children and then heads home to bed before anyone can thank him or find out who he is. He's an all-purpose hero who knows German, can translate poetry into French and Italian, somehow speaks flawless English, and has the suavely self-effacing manners of an impeccable gentleman. Wherever he goes he cuts an impressive figure, "a young Apollo"; men and women alike often ogle his beautiful legs. (Porter has a keen eye for clothing and the effects of personal beauty on others.)

Hiding behind the name of Mr. Constantine because everyone in England is well informed through the newspapers about the valiant exploits of Thaddeus Sobieski, he soon becomes an international man of mystery often mistaken for an exiled French aristocrat and the swoon-worthy most eligible bachelor in town, despite having left all of his wealth behind in devastated Poland. (He survives in part by selling his original artwork.) He is hired by a pretty but shallow flirt to tutor her, but it's an obvious and unsuccessful pretext to win his fancy (she never manages to pay him, clueless to his penniless condition). Among several blushing or conniving ladies, at one point Thaddeus has to fend

off the blandishments of a married would-be seductress whose romantically wild long black tresses make his resistance an impressive tribute to his virtue. (There's nothing risqué in this Joseph-with-Potiphar's-wife episode or anywhere else: As a film, the novel would be rated PG, though the battle scenes could easily be PG-13 or R.) This dashing gent has no interest in this "little bevy of fashionable butterflies."¹ Climactically, he meets and is reconciled with his long-lost father; it turns out that Thaddeus always was, by birth, an English gentleman. He is set up with a handsome annual allowance of 3,000 pounds, more than sufficient to resume the life he enjoyed in Poland, and marries a woman of genuine substance and beauty, with whom he has found true love.

Thaddeus was a pioneering example of the historical novel, a genre soon made famous by Sir Walter Scott in the UK and James Fenimore Cooper in the US, and one that several scholars have suggested might be a relevant model for the Book of Mormon.² *Thaddeus* sold well on both sides of the Atlantic, was translated into several languages, and was in print throughout the nineteenth century. (Porter sold over one million books total in the United States alone over the century.) Thaddeus's struggles for the liberty of his country recalled the actual Tadeusz Kościuszko, who also made major contributions to the American cause in the Revolutionary War and was a favorite of such Romantic eminences as Coleridge, Keats, and Byron.³ The novel's full-throated praise

1. Jane Porter, *Thaddeus of Warsaw: A Novel*, edited by Thomas McLean and Ruth Knezevich (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 205.

2. See Jillian Sayre, "Books Buried in the Earth," *Americanist Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, edited by Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman (Oxford University Press, 2019), 21–44; Nancy Bentley, "Kinship, the Book of Mormon, and Modern Revelation," in Fenton and Hickman, *Americanist Approaches*, 233–258; and Kimberly Matheson Berkey and Joseph M. Spencer, "'Great Cause to Mourn': The Complexity of the Book of Mormon's Presentation of Gender and Race," in Fenton and Hickman, *Americanist Approaches*, 289–320.

3. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 406–410 ("Appendix C: Poland in the Nineteenth-Century British Imagination").

of liberty readily chimed with patriotic sentiments in the young American republic, and left a mark on the names of cities and statesmen in the US, perhaps even inspiring the name of Warsaw, Illinois, known in Latter-day Saint history for a vociferously antagonistic newspaper during the Nauvoo period. Emily Dickinson's dog-eared copy shows her to have been a passionate reader of the novel. It was a favorite among some Mormon pioneer readers, such as Charlotte Chase (1825–1904), who married a man aptly named Thaddeus Constantine Hix.⁴ It also rated a mention in the *Young Women's Journal* of October 1900: Evidently, the journal's editor, Susa Young Gates, found it worthy. It cost twenty-five cents.⁵ At whatever price, however, Porter unfortunately reaped little financial reward due to mismanagement of the rights. She issued rewritten new editions in an attempt to take back control from male managers (an early, less successful example of star Taylor Swift reclaiming her intellectual property rights in earlier songs by rerecording them as "Taylor's version"). Reputationally, a similar loss of capital occurred when Scott—someone she had known from afar during a childhood stint in Edinburgh, though four years her senior and belonging to a higher social class—increasingly took credit for founding the historical novel genre.⁶

By the early twentieth century, *Thaddeus of Warsaw* had gone into eclipse, and has only recently been reissued in an informative new scholarly edition based on the original 1803 UK publication rather than later revised versions.⁷ And a recent sympathetic dual biography of Porter

4. Lisa J. South and Pamela S. Olschewski, *Our Blessed, Honored Pioneers* (n.p., 2005), 5, <https://www.familysearch.org/patron/v2/TH-301-44484-97-69/dist.pdf?ctx=ArtCtxPublic>.

5. *Young Women's Journal*, Oct. 1900, 476.

6. For such general background see Devoney Looser, *Sister Novelists: The Trailblazing Porter Sisters, Who Paved the Way for Austen and the Brontës* (Bloomsbury, 2022).

7. Porter, *Thaddeus*.

and her sister Maria, also a bestselling author, aims to restore their reputation.⁸ Reasons for the novel's eclipse are not hard to find. By the early twentieth century, it was out of step with the modernist taste for formal complexity and psychological depth. It was no *Heart of Darkness* in probing of evil, no *Ulysses* in experimental form, no *To the Lighthouse* in revealing the subtle webs of human relations. It had already been surpassed by the great historical novels of the nineteenth century. In reading it, I confess, I occasionally found it *Tedious of Warsaw*, as I missed the ethical insight, philosophical imagination, and powerful language of a George Eliot or Leo Tolstoy. There is no higher bar, of course, and in fairness, *Thaddeus* has many amusing set pieces, moves the plot along briskly (though relying too often on coincidences), and makes merciless observations about both the vanity of silly women, some of whose heads are puffed up with the fantasies they've gotten from novels, and the blasé entitlement of self-involved men. Porter has a gift for panoramic battle sequences and bases her vivid Polish material in the first volume on substantial historical research. Kościuszko himself was said to be a fan.⁹ *Thaddeus* includes several well-drawn portraits of minor characters, though marred by an ugly treatment of Jewish pawnbroker. She often exposes the decadence of the aristocratic class in England; at one point, as a late-night card game breaks up, the guests "like bees and wasps, were swarming about the room, gathering and stinging as they passed."¹⁰ Though the French Revolution is nowhere explicitly mentioned, Porter is clearly sympathetic with it; her Polish fighters are rebels against the regal despotism of Catherine the Great, and it's not hard to transpose that struggle elsewhere, as indeed American readers did. "*Thaddeus of Warsaw* deserves a place among

8. Looser, *Sister Novelists*.

9. Elizabeth Lee, "Jane Porter," *Dictionary of National Biography 1885–1900*, vol. 46 https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography,_1885-1900/Porter,_Jane.

10. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 249.

the best novels of the Romantic era,” concludes Thomas McLean, coeditor of the aforementioned new edition of the novel.¹¹

In his unblemished gallantry, Thaddeus reminds one of Book of Mormon heroes, especially Captain Moroni as praised by Mormon. If Thaddeus has any faults, they are hard to find. We first get to know him early in volume 1. He has no ambitions for the glory or financial rewards of a military career. Walking meditatively under a moonlit night sky by the pitched tents of his men, Thaddeus “offered up a prayer for the brave inhabitant who had quitted the endearments of home, to expose his life, and stand on this spot, a bulwark of liberty. . . . [H]e had but one motive for appearing in the field, and one for leaving it. The first energy of his mind, was a desire to assert the rights of his country; it had been inculcated into him, from an infant; it had been the subject of his morning thoughts, and nightly dreams; it was now the passion which beat in every artery of his heart: yet he knew no honour in slaughter; his glory lay in defence; and when that was accomplished, his sword would return to its scabbard, unstained by the blood, of a vanquished or invaded people.”¹²

The next morning, the battle begins. Mounted on horseback, he rallies his men by exerting “his voice to the utmost.” He “put spurs to his horse, and rushed into the thickest of the battle. His soldiers did not shrink; they pressed on, mowing down the foremost ranks, whilst he, by a lucky stroke of his sabre, disabled the sword-arm of the Russian standard-bearer and seized the colors. His own troops seeing the standard in his hand, with one accord, in loud and repeated cries, shouted victory.” Seeing him holding aloft their standard, the enemies shrink. He calls on his men to stop fighting, but in the excitement of the chase, they end up surrounded: “Heedless of anything but giving their enemy

11. Thomas McLean, “The Costs of Women’s Writing: On Devoney Looser’s *Sister Novelists*,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2 Feb. 2023, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-costs-of-womens-writing-on-devoney-loosers-sister-novelists/>.

12. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 29.

a complete defeat, the Polanders went on, never looking to the left nor to the right, till, all at once, they found themselves encompassed by two thousand Muscovite horse." Things grow desperate for the "little army." Thaddeus "thought not of himself; and in a few minutes the scattered soldiers were consolidated into a close body. . . . File after file the men were swept down, their bodies making a horrid rampart for their brave comrades, who, rendered desperate by slaughter, threw away their most cumbrous accoutrements, and crying to their leader, 'let us escape or die!' followed him sword in hand; and bearing like a torrent upon the enemy's ranks, cut their way right through the forest." Stunned by Polish gallantry, and running low on musket fire, the Russian forces grudgingly retreat "like a wounded lion," sulking but still dangerous.¹³

After an assessment of the bleeding and wounded, a long march, and the successful overcoming of an objection that he was too wounded to keep fighting, Thaddeus again leads Polish forces into the tumult of battle. Thaddeus's aged but valiant grandfather is also fighting, and in a moment of horror, Thaddeus realizes he has lost him. He asks a soldier, and "the man made no answer, but lifted from the heap the bodies of two soldiers; beneath, Thaddeus saw the pale and deathly features of his grandfather." He is, fortunately, still breathing, so they bind up his wounds, give him water and carry him away to safety. Asking permission to stay with his grandfather, an aged general, Thaddeus is gently reprimanded by him, who warns that by abandoning the field, he risks the life of his soldiers: "You forget the effect which all this solicitude about so trifling a matter might have on the men." Thaddeus returns to battle, and at the end of a long day, the enemy "called up the body of reserve, consisting of four thousand men besides several cannon." This rebuffs the Poles briefly. "Kosciusko alarmed at the retrograde motion in the troops, gave immediate orders for a close attack on the enemy in

13. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 30–32.

front, whilst Thaddeus, at the head of his hussars, should wheel round the hill of artillery, and with loud cries, charge the opposite flank. This stratagem succeeded." Thinking that Thaddeus was leading fresh troops threw the Russian troops "into a confusion that completed the defeat." The Russian army, surrounded, desperately tries to escape, including a group of musketmen "entangled between the river and the Poles." "Thaddeus, who saw the perilous situation of these regiments, directly ordered that they might be taken prisoners, and the slaughter cease." His men want to complete the kill, "but the young count charging through them, ranged his troops before the Russians, and threatened that the first man who would dare to lift a sword against his order, should be shot. The Poles dropped their arms. The poor [Russian] carabineers fell on their knees to thank his mercy, whilst their officers, in a sullen silence, which seemed ashamed of gratitude, surrendered their swords into the hands of their deliverers."¹⁴

Not all of the enemy fighters are happy to surrender. One young Russian soldier "held up his sword in a menacing posture when Thaddeus, who was approaching, drew near; and before he had time to speak, the young man made a longe [lunge] at his breast, which one of his hussars parrying with great dexterity, struck him to the earth: he would have killed him on the spot, had not Thaddeus caught the blow on his own sword." The quick reflexes of Thaddeus's lieutenant are outdone only by Thaddeus's own! Thaddeus takes a liking to the young soldier, recognizing something noble in his refusal to admit defeat, and takes him into the same tent as his grandfather to nurse their wounds. The soldier turns out not only to be an Englishman in the employ of the Russian army but also (spoiler alert) Thaddeus's half-brother. (In an evergreen plot formula, initial foes turn into best friends.) The Englishman, named Pembroke Somerset, sends his mother a gushing letter about Thaddeus: "He is one of the warmest champions in favour of

14. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 33–36.

the invaded rights of his country; and though born to command, he has so far transgressed that golden law of despotic rulers, '*Ignorance and subjection*,' that throughout his territories every man is taught to worship his God, with his heart as well as with his knees." Thaddeus is a principled fighter and a just leader. "He well knew the difference between a defender of his own country and the invader of another's. He felt his heart beat, his soul expand, at the prospect of securing liberty and life to a virtuous people." In a later chapter, Thaddeus takes an oath of "eternal fidelity to Poland," kneeling and calling "on Heaven to hear him as swore, to assert the freedom of his country to the last gasp of his existence."¹⁵

Things grow dire for the Poles. The King of Poland, "enervated by age, and sinking under the weight of so many afflictions," makes sad preparations to leave the redemption of Poland to later generations. The Russian ambassador commands all remaining Polish patriots to lay down their arms, but Thaddeus "had gathered, and kept together, a handful of brave men still faithful to their liberties. Indeed his name alone had collected numbers around him in every district through which he marched. Persecution from their adversary, as well as admiration of Thaddeus, gave a resistless power to his appearance, look, and voice; all which, had such an effect on this afflicted people, that they crowded to his standard by hundreds." Thaddeus's men soon carried "redress and protection to the provinces through which they marched." He is skilled at uniting both people and land against their common enemy through grand tours. In the meanwhile, his grandfather has been jailed, and Catherine the Great is wary of releasing him: He "remained in confinement, hopeless of obtaining release without the aid of stratagem." The grandfather is discouraged by his inability to contribute but heartened by news of his grandson's exploits. He reflects that Russian chariots will not roll down the streets of Warsaw until "all

15. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 36–37, 43, 37–38, 59.

virtue is dead in the land” and praises Thaddeus as “ready to die, or ready to live, for his country.”¹⁶

As the end grows nigh, the panoramic fight scenes continue, including two riverside bouts. Thaddeus and his troops have pushed the Prussian forces, allied with Catherine, to “the opposite bank of the river,” but the enemy gets fresh reinforcements from the rear. Fearing defeat, the Poles break down a bridge to prevent the enemy from crossing the river. The river’s current is swift, swollen with recent rains, and the Poles stand there, stymied. The two Thaddeuses, Sobieski and Kościuszko, “perceiving their panic” (i.e., of their men), “both together plunged into the stream.” Inspired by the example of their leaders and embarrassed to have hesitated, the troops follow, and the enemy retreats, intimidated by their courage. In a later encounter, “twice the Russians rushed on them like wolves, and twice they repulsed them by their steadiness.” In the exchange, both Sobieski and Kościuszko are wounded, and it seems at first that the latter has been killed, which causes the Poles to scatter. “Thaddeus [Sobieski] with difficulty extricated himself from the bodies of the slain; and, fighting his way through the throng of the enemy which pressed around him, he joined his terror-stricken comrades, who in the wildest confusion, were dispersing under a heavy fire, to the right and left, and flying like frightened deer.” As they flee, he comes to another river. “Almost alone in the rear of his soldiers, he opposed with his single and desperate arm, party after party of the enemy, until a narrow stream of the Muchavez [the Mukhavets river, now in western Belarus] stopped his retreat. The waters were crimsoned with blood. He plunged in, and beating the blushing wave with his left arm, in a few seconds gained the opposite bank; where, fainting from fatigue and loss of blood, he sunk, almost deprived of sense, amidst a heap of the killed.”¹⁷

The enemy hosts, in hot pursuit, gallop past him, presuming him dead. “He raised himself from the ground, and by the help of his sword,

16. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 62–64.

17. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 64, 69, 70.

on which he leaned, supported his steps a few paces farther,” when he is terrified to discover his grandfather, yet again, abandoned and barely hanging onto life. Thaddeus looks for material to stanch the old man’s wounds: “He took his sash and neck-cloth, and when they were insufficient, he rent the linen from his breast.” This time, the grandfather really is going to die. “‘My son,’ said the veteran, in a low voice, ‘Heaven hath led you hither to receive the last sigh of your grandfather.’” The intergenerational baton is passed: “May that God preserve you; ever remember, that you are his servant; be obedient to him: and as I have been, be faithful to your country.” Thaddeus embraces him: “No heart beat against his; all was still, and cold. The body dropped from his arms, and he sunk senseless by its side.” When Thaddeus comes to, he sees that it is a cloudy, windy, moonlit night and discovers he is the sole survivor of a cataclysmic battle: “He was now lying, the only living creature, amidst thousands of the dead who, the preceding night, had been like himself, alive to all the consciousness of existence!” At dawn, he’s discovered by some Polish soldiers sweeping the battlefield, who accompany him and his grandfather’s corpse in a solemn procession back to camp. A state funeral is arranged with requiems, anthems, chants, nine volleys of gunfire, and a brief eulogy from the bishop. A fellow general takes the deceased’s sword, “and breaking it, dropt it into the grave. The aid-de-camps of the deceased did the same with theirs, shewing, that by so doing they resigned their offices.” The funeral having ended, the exertion and loss is too much for Thaddeus, who enters his tent, collapses on the bed, and does not arise for five days: “The effects of these fatigues and sufferings had brought him very low.”¹⁸

At the last stand, Thaddeus spends a restless night in camp preparing for battle: “From east to west, as far as the eye could reach, her [Russia’s] armies were stretched to the horizon. Sobieski looked at them, and then on the handful of dauntless hearts, contained in the small circumference of the Polish camp, and sighing heavily, retired

18. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 70–71, 74, 75.

into his tent; where he mixed his short, and startled slumbers, with frequent prayers for the preservation of these last victims of their country." The overconfident sentinels think everything's fine, but Thaddeus knows better than to trust them: "Ascending the nearest bastion to take a wider survey, in a few minutes he discerned, though obscurely, through the faint gleams of morning, the whole host of Russia advancing in profound silence towards the Polish lines." He hastens to awake and prepare his men, speeding throughout the camp. Because of his preparations, the Russians are deprived of a sneak attack and face fierce gun fire: "However, in defiance of this shower of bullets, they pressed on with an intrepidity worthy of a better cause." In the ensuing fog of war, the pounding artillery and enveloping smoke makes it hard to tell friend from foe. Though losing ground and facing imminent defeat, "the Poles fought like lions; quarter was neither offered to them, nor required; they disputed every inch of way, till they fell upon it in heaps; some, lying before the parapets; others, filling the ditches; and the rest, covering the ground for the enemy to tread on, as they cut their passage to the heart of the camp."¹⁹

The battle continues to worsen for the Poles: "Every hope hung upon Thaddeus; his presence and voice infused new energy into the arms of his almost fainting countrymen; they kept close to his side, until the Russians, enraged at the dauntless intrepidity of this young hero, uttered the most unmanly imprecations, and rushing on his little phalanx, attacked them with redoubled numbers and fury. Sobieski sustained the shock with firmness." He can hardly bear to take in what he sees around him, and "beheld his companions, and his soldiers, strewing the earth." Just as he tore his eyes "from the spectacles so deadly to his heart," he is struck with a sword by an enemy officer, and falls to the ground, apparently dead. (This is volume 1 of 4, so we know it is only apparently.) When he comes to—he was hit on the top of his helmet and knocked out rather than wounded—he sees that the battle has

19. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 78–79.

moved on and watches as the city of Prague is looted and burnt in the distance. (Prague? As in the Book of Mormon, plotting the geography in *Thaddeus* requires more than a casual reader.) He calculates that his mother is only four miles away and rushes to her defense. He can escape safely because the Russians were too busy looting “to perceive a solitary individual hurrying away amidst heaps of dead bodies.” He finds her, dying in parallel grief with the motherland. She is shocked to see him covered in blood, and he is helpless to save her. She gives him a locket with a portrait of his father in England. Mother and son have always been very close. In their penultimate meeting, she both hugs him and praises God: She “raised her head from her son’s neck, and said, whilst she strained him in her arms, ‘Receive my thanks, O! Father of Mercy, that thou hast yet spared to me this blessing!’”²⁰

Thaddeus feels like the sole survivor of national collapse. (In England he will later meet other Polish exiles.) “He had survived all his kindred.” Poland had vanished and all its liberties. Before he sails away, Thaddeus has a brief audience with the deposed king Stanislaus and assures him that “he has felt from you the care and affection of a father. O! sir, how will future ages believe that, in the midst of civilized Europe, a brave people and a virtuous monarch were suffered, unaided, undeveloped, to fall into the grasp of usurpation and murder?” As Thaddeus makes a final tour of his city, “he met with little interruption; for the streets appeared deserted. . . . The shops were shut. Thaddeus stopped a few minutes, in the great square, which used to be crowded with happy citizens, but not one man was now to be seen. An awful and expecting silence reigned over all. He sighed.” He soon falls to his knees and in one last apostrophe to his lost nation, “plucked a blade of grass, and pressing it to his lips, exclaimed, “Farewell, Poland! Farewell all my hopes of happiness!”²¹

20. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 79–80, 76.

21. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 86, 88–89.

Thaddeus is soon in England, where the novel will take a very different turn. There is little in the way of resonant language or thematic material in volumes 2 through 4 for the Book of Mormon. The closest might be a scene of happy transport when Pembroke and Thaddeus, after a long series of failed meetings, finally embrace in the presence of their shared father. “Their father, with a speechless tongue, but an eloquent heart, stood over them with uplifted hands, invoking the spirits of their beatified mothers to behold this heavenly scene.”²²

Let me summarize the echoes, including the heart swelling for God and country,²³ souls expanding,²⁴ the sword left unstained,²⁵ the fleeing army turning neither to the left nor the right,²⁶ cutting through enemy lines,²⁷ calling off the fighting when the enemy is outmatched,²⁸ the use of stratagem,²⁹ the enemy repulsed by firmness,³⁰ ditches filling up with bodies,³¹ surprise operations undertaken in profound silence,³² fainting from fatigue and loss of blood and then reviving,³³ the little army,³⁴

22. Porter, *Thaddeus*, 376.

23. Alma 48:12.

24. Alma 5:9.

25. Alma 24:13, 15.

26. Alma 56:37, 40.

27. Alma 52:34, Hel. 1:23.

28. Alma 44:1.

29. Seven uses, all in Alma, starting 43:30 and ending 62:35.

30. Mormon 2:25.

31. Alma 49:22.

32. Alma 55:7.

33. Alma 57:25; Ether 14:30, 15:9, 27, 29. See also Robert Patterson, “Helaman’s Stripling Warriors and the Principles of Hypovolemic Shock,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 4 (2002): 135–141.

34. Alma 56:19, 33.

the attack from front and behind around a hill,³⁵ captives surrendering swords,³⁶ the importance of a better cause,³⁷ fighting like lions,³⁸ the motivational leader who sweeps the land while multitudes flock to his standard,³⁹ the strategic value of flags,⁴⁰ the ceremonial burial of swords as a renunciation of a military life,⁴¹ a deeply stressed person taking to bed for days and being very low,⁴² the battle-weary soldier briefly resting on his sword,⁴³ and battles near rivers including hazardous crossings.⁴⁴ There are also larger thematic similarities. Like Captain Moroni, Thaddeus's heart swells for his country, tears his clothes, and gathers many to his standard; clement to his enemies, he fights only for self-defense, never for revenge or conquest; love of country is one with the love of God. His grandfather, like Mormon an aged general, is left for dead on the battlefield and pulled out from among the corpses as the distracted enemy rushes by (as also occurs for Thaddeus himself).⁴⁵ There is the intergenerational passing of advice and covenant between men, often on the deathbed of the older man, a recurrent theme in the Book of Mormon (consider Lehi, Alma, and Mormon). Like the later Moroni, Thaddeus narrates the horror of civilizational collapse as a lone survivor without remaining kin.⁴⁶ Like Mormon, he laments

35. Alma 43:31–35.

36. Alma chap. 43, 52:38–39.

37. Alma 43:45.

38. Mosiah 20:10.

39. Alma 62:5.

40. Alma 46:36.

41. Alma 24:16–17, 25:14.

42. Alma 15:5.

43. Ether 15:30.

44. Alma chap. 2.

45. Mormon 6:10.

46. Mormon 8:3, 5.

the quick change of national destinies.⁴⁷ Just as Thaddeus's embrace brings his mother to praise God, so Abish's touch of another queen does the same.⁴⁸ Particularly impressive are the parallel stories of an enemy swordsman's attack on the commander intercepted by a loyal lieutenant after the conflict has been briefly halted.⁴⁹

I do not claim the Book of Mormon slavishly steals matter unaltered from *Thaddeus*. What traces appear are creative refashionings. In Porter, for instance, the Russians lack a "better cause," whereas the Nephite armies are inspired by one. Whatever the Book of Mormon takes, it digests and transforms. And there are obviously vast differences between *Thaddeus of Warsaw* and the Book of Mormon. Most conspicuous in volume 1 is the technology of battle: Porter gives us a full picture of Napoleonic-era warfare, with its mounted fighting, musketry, cannonades, smoke, noise, and confusion. (Tactics and strategies, however, appear quite similar between the two books.) She describes weather, emotions, and everything else in a way that is much more colorful and metaphorical than the Book of Mormon; she is florid where the Book of Mormon is terse. Across all four volumes, her novel shows erudition with its occasional snippets of Latin, French, and Italian, and often makes references to literary history—*Hamlet* is a recurrent source—whereas the Book of Mormon's only admitted literary debts are to the King James Bible; it acknowledges no modern library. Though clearly endorsing Christian faith and virtue, the novel is not meant as a sign of God's work, a call to the modern world, or a witness of Christ; it is an entertainment, a kind of sociological sketch, and an effort at moral education. Perhaps above all, the novel abounds in well-drawn female characters, shown richly in their social and domestic lives, something much harder to say about the Book of Mormon.

47. Moroni 9:11–12.

48. Alma 19:29.

49. Alma 44:12.

Of course, we cannot prove that Smith knew the novel. We do know it was popular and widely read in the young republic and was held in the Manchester, New York, lending library, among a collection of over 400 books, which also included two copies of Porter's *The Scottish Chiefs: A Romance* and a copy of *A Narrative of the Campaign in Russia, during the year 1812*, by her brother Robert but clearly coauthored by Porter.⁵⁰ The copy of *Thaddeus* there was the second American edition, published in two volumes by I. Riley.⁵¹ There is a copy of this edition in the Beinecke Rare Book Library at Yale University, and it is identical to both the London edition of 1803 and the novel's reissue in 2021. (*Nota bene* to future sleuths: Online versions of the novel use later editions not likely available to Joseph Smith before 1830). We know that Smith went to school in Manchester for at least one winter semester in 1820–21 and as many as five winter terms through 1825.⁵²

There is one final tantalizing hint. In 1831 Smith and his wife Emma Hale Smith had twins who sadly died within a few hours of birth. They named one of them Thaddeus.

Thanks for your patience during this long presentation. I believe you are up next, Miranda.

MIRANDA: Umm, thank you, but I can't share my screen.

CLEO: No worries, what's a symposium without a few hiccups? We'll work on getting you access but in the meantime let's have Bauer go next.

MIRANDA: Yes please.

50. Robert Paul, "Joseph Smith and the Manchester (New York) Library," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1982): 347; Looser, *Sister Novelists*, 294.

51. Miss Porter, *Thaddeus of Warsaw, Four Volumes in Two*, 2nd American ed. (New York, 1810).

52. William L. Davis, "Reassessing Joseph Smith Jr.'s Formal Education," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 4 (2016): 39.

BAUER: Fine with me. Thank you, Cleo, for the thorough presentation. Proving period influence on the Book of Mormon has a checkered history, some of it hostile. I don't get that vibe from you, but I worry about the implications. From its publication in 1830, the Book of Mormon has been dogged by sleuths seeking to show its debts to other texts, typically in a debunking spirit, starting from Solomon Spaulding's *Manuscript Found* or Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* to more recent efforts to show a link to the 1816 pseudo-biblical epic *The Late War*, by Gilbert Hunt, a link admirably refuted by my colleagues.⁵³ None have stuck. The secular assumption is that such a complex production would have to be plagiarized, but no one's found smoking guns.

CLEO: Don't forget Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.⁵⁴

BAUER: Okay, will look into it. I find the frankly supernatural origin story more plausible and parsimonious. You are totally right that any evidence of influence is circumstantial. We don't know if Joseph or anyone around him read *Thaddeus*. As to naming a child, how common a name was Thaddeus? Was it a family name? To demonstrate influence, you would have to build a much more watertight case than you have here. One would need to compare specific phrasings and narrative elements between the two books, and then compare both more broadly with a wider corpus of texts from the early nineteenth century to separate conventional usage from an authorial fingerprint. "Stratagem," though now archaic, may be standard in the time; to our ears, it might sound like a link, but perhaps not to period ears. Influence would need

53. "The Late War Theory of Book of Mormon Authorship," FAIR: Faithful Answers Informed Response, accessed Mar. 19, 2025, https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/The_Late_War_theory_of_Book_of_Mormon_authorship.

54. William L. Davis, "Hiding in Plain Sight: The Origins of the Book of Mormon," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 30 Oct. 2012, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/hiding-in-plain-sight-the-origins-of-the-book-of-mormon/>.

to be a statistically rare match between Porter and Joseph. Criticism of “parallelomania” can apply to modern as well as ancient sources. I mean, fighting like lions—could there be a more perennial trope?

CLEO: I certainly don’t suggest that all of my findings are equally compelling or that this work is anything but preliminary! Lots of research yet to do.

BAUER: Of course. Let’s break down your claims. You argue that volume 1 of *Thaddeus* provided *topoi*—linguistic commonplaces or stock phrases—for the Book of Mormon *and* plot elements as well. The first claim is less controversial. Any translation is an updating into the language of its time. We might even say that a good translation is a kind of controlled anachronism, a bridging of two times. Some have seized upon the Book of Mormon’s mention of synagogues as damning, since the Lehites couldn’t have known about them, emerging only centuries after their departure from Jerusalem, but Joseph did know, and simply used a good word for a “meetinghouse” to translate whatever the Reformed Egyptian original was.

CLEO: Sorry to interrupt again, but Alma 16:13 seems to suggest post-exilic synagogues. Please go ahead.

BAUER: Or should we fuss that *Isabel* is a name that only appeared in twelfth-century Spain? No, Joseph just found a modern equivalent for whatever the siren’s original name was. *Isabel* is a natural artifact of the translation process, not an original document of ancient culture. Translation theory can also cover the New Testament Greek names of Jesus’ disciples Timothy and Jonas.⁵⁵ And as to barley, long considered a mismatch with known pre-Columbian agriculture? Well, the Book of

55. 3 Nephi 19:4.

Mormon got ahead of archaeology: In recent decades, three kinds of barley have been discovered in the Americas!⁵⁶

CLEO: You have a rather ample theory of translation! Barley, silk, steel, wheat, wheels, Bethabara, horses, Isabel, second and third Isaiah, slippery treasures—translation has a lot of work to do! I see some slippage here: Why do *Isabel* and *synagogue* get to be generic terms without referential force while *barley* has a secret referential link to historical truths long hidden? Couldn't *barley* just be Smith's generic term for any staple grain? This is methodologically just as swively.

BAUER: Yes, and you have a rather loose account of influence.

UNMUTED PARTICIPANT: Did you two used to be married or something?

CLEO: No, we just like sparring with each other.

BAUER: True. Your point that the Book of Mormon is, if I am using the word correctly, a bricolage rather than a direct lifting from *Thaddeus of Warsaw* is theologically useful in my view because it protects the Book of Mormon from strong period indebtedness and perhaps even adds and enriches translation theory, with Porter potentially providing yet one more source for Joseph's language. But the claims about narrative elements are methodologically dubious. You say an army "looking to the left nor to the right" is a possibility. But the stripling warriors did not dare "turn to the right nor the left." The verb and the order are different. You could say that such variation is just the way that recombinant appropriation works, but you thereby dilute the proof of influence.

56. John L. Sorenson and Robert Smith, "Barley in Ancient America," *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: The F.A.R.M.S. Updates*, edited by John W. Welch (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 130–132.

Affinity is not influence, and affinity is promiscuous. Anything can be like anything. Structuralist literary analysis was once famous, and then heavily criticized, for showing how the plot elements of a given narrative could be permuted into other narratives. We need hard evidence, the kind that would hold up in court. Critics have always put the Book of Mormon on trial. You're not doing that, but we should be prepared to reply to the strongest criticisms with evidence like chiasmus and names of Egyptian origin Joseph couldn't possibly have known. I fear you're letting in the Trojan Horse. If the Book of Mormon borrows not only language but elements of plot, character, and action from an 1803 novel, that threatens, however slightly, its status as a translation of an ancient record. Our religion depends on the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

CLEO: Is truthfulness the same as historicity? I find it ironic: Today's Bible fans work so hard to show the modern appeal of an obviously ancient book, but you work so hard to show the antiquity of an obviously modern book. If you define truthfulness as lack of modern influence, then that puts the whole book at risk. Should an entire religion be potentially in hock to the changing tides of historical research? Jane Porter would be surprised to know that she could set 17 million people trembling! The stakes are so massive!

UNMUTED PARTICIPANT: Maybe not. Porter's echoes show up mostly in the war chapters, and even the most devout readers have sometimes secretly wondered if they were inspired.

CLEO: Very funny! So we now have a theory of the book's patchy or differential inspiration? And some readers like the war chapters. But please, everyone stay muted. Anyway, Bauer, you seem guided by a principle we might compare to the so-called central dogma of molecular biology: DNA can influence protein, but protein cannot influence DNA.

The Book of Mormon could influence the nineteenth century, but the nineteenth century could not influence the Book of Mormon except as translation. Its supernatural origins keep the Book of Mormon immunologically free from period influence. But how long will this highly militarized boundary between history and translation be able to hold up? Autoimmune diseases arise from hyperactive immune responses.

BAUER: The Book of Mormon has continually proved itself greater than its critics.

CLEO: No one here is doubting the book's greatness. The evidence will not stop accumulating. Recently, new works by Walt Whitman have been discovered. This is a man who died over 130 years ago. We live in a digital efflorescence, a growing archival fulness of times: "As well might man stretch forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri river in its decreed course, or to turn it up stream, as to hinder the Almighty from pouring down knowledge from heaven upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints."⁵⁷ I'd love to have the holdings of the 1820s Manchester public library digitized for comparative research. *Thaddeus of Warsaw*, I expect, is just one opening to many intertextual sources. We already know how much the oral composition of the Book of Mormon owes to the sermon culture of its day.⁵⁸ And to intertextual borrowings from the King James Bible.⁵⁹ What transformations will new knowledge invite

57. D&C 121:33.

58. See William L. Davis, *Visions in a Seer Stone: Joseph Smith and the Making of the Book of Mormon* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

59. For leading examples, see Nicholas J. Frederick, *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016); Colby Townsend, "'Behold, Other Scriptures I Would That Ye Should Write': Malachi in the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 2 (2018): 103–137; and Grant Hardy, *The Annotated Book of Mormon* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

in how we read the Book of Mormon? Are we ready for the religious consequences of its shrinking non-nineteenth-century core?

BAUER: Are you steadying the ark? Don't you think the brethren are on top of things? And one day perhaps archaeologists will find a sword of Laban or a Mulekite encampment, a potshard with reformed Egyptian, or a set of engraved metal plates. Never say never.

CLEO: I agree that openness to future surprises is certainly part of the scholarly credo. I think you'll enjoy this cartoon I am sharing.⁶⁰ Speaking of material culture, shall we pause and turn to Miranda's presentation?

BAUER: Of course, to be continued!

MIRANDA: Sure, thank you! Let me share my screen.⁶¹ Porter's relevance for the Book of Mormon is not confined to *Thaddeus of Warsaw's* status as a possible source for language, scene, and theme. The novel also demarcates a cultural style. I suspect this will be less controversial methodologically because in Mormondom, less seems at stake, unfortunately, in the visual arts. Porter has a panoramic way of seeing. As Katie Trumpener and Tim Barringer show in a recent volume, the panorama was one of the leading media genres around 1800, a popular spectacle one could visit in London, Edinburgh, Paris, Rome, and elsewhere.⁶² Everyone knows the term *panoramic*, but few know that it was once a specific cultural form. It was one of several visual techniques invented around 1790 in Paris along with the phantasmagoria,

60. Cleo showed a Pat Bagley classic visible here: <https://i0.wp.com/sunstone.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/cropper-digging.jpg?ssl=1>.

61. Miranda's presentation included several beautiful images of panoramas.

62. Katie Trumpener and Tim Barringer, eds., *On the Viewing Platform: The Panorama Between Canvas and Screen* (Yale University Press, 2020).

the optical telegraph, and hot air ballooning, all of them specializing in revealing sights that are far off, very big, or remote in time or mystery.⁶³

Panoramas have largely died off, but their stylistic legacies remain. They integrated elements from art, literature, and architecture, and anticipated photography, museum design, and cinema. As Barringer writes, “visiting the panorama formed a paradigmatic viewing experience of modernity.”⁶⁴ Viewers would stand on a raised platform before a 360-degree painted scene, often a landscape, sometimes with “faux terrain” elements such as trees, plants, or grass in the foreground. The medium provided what film analysis would later characterize as long shots or extreme long shots, but the viewer was also a kind of editor, able to pivot at will from one part of the scene to the next. Indeed, movement and selection were essential to the experience, given the impossibility of seeing everything all at once. Note Porter’s description of Thaddeus’s gaze swinging in an extreme long shot of the enemy on the horizon to the “small circumference” of his own camp. Almost as if he were a viewer in a panorama, he ascends the nearest bastion to better survey the enemy.

Porter’s panoramic sensibility is not a mere metaphor. Her younger brother, the artist Sir Robert Ker Porter, a classmate of the great painter J. M. W. Turner at the Royal Academy, was an early specialist in panorama painting, specializing in battle scenes. He became famous for a grand painting, showing a British imperialist victory in India, that was exhibited in 1800 in the Lyceum Theatre in London, the same location as the first phantasmagoria outside of France. None less than Benjamin West, the doyen of English painting at the time, raved, and the crowds flocked, briefly enriching the young man. Jane Porter was granted

63. Francesco Casetti, “Rethinking the Phantasmagoria: An Enclosure and Three Worlds,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 21, no. 2 (2022): 349–373.

64. Tim Barringer, “The World for a Shilling: The Early Panorama as Global Landscape, 1787–1839,” in Trumpener and Barringer, *On the Viewing Platform*, 83.

exclusive sneak peaks of the work in progress and was either the coauthor or ghost writer of the accompanying pamphlet. Robert was soon hired by tsar Alexander I in 1804 to serve as a historical painter of large tableaux. Porter sat at the cutting edge of panoramic culture c. 1800.⁶⁵ Both in its individual scenes and its broad sweep from Poland to England, *Thaddeus of Warsaw* is thoroughly imbued with a panoramic sensibility.

The same might be said for the Book of Mormon. It's admittedly a long trip from Porter's England to Amerindian holy writ, but both books make bold in history and genre. Porter packs historical events into the novel form, inserting a fictional figure into documented events alongside really existing people. The Book of Mormon offers a thousand-year history (and even longer with the record of the Jaredites) consisting of sermons, letters, scriptural exegesis, narrative, battles, and more, with the historical figure of Jesus appearing at its climactic moment. Several of its visionary experiences can only be called panoramic (readers today, raised in a different media environment, might call them cinematic). In 1 Nephi 11, for instance, an angel leads the prophet Nephi on a tour of sacred history, focusing especially on the birth, life, and death of Jesus, punctuating each episode with the command: "Look!" (Panoramic episodes in the Book of Mormon are reminiscent of visionary sequences in biblical books such as Ezekiel, Daniel, Revelation, and Isaiah, the last being the Book's key biblical intertext.⁶⁶)

The Book of Mormon often refers to awful "scenes" of battle and bloodshed. Even in the single case when a scene is meant to be uplifting, as the Lamanitish servant woman Abish gathers a crowd of people in the hopes that they will be convinced of the power of God, what

65. Looser, *Sister Novelists*, 62–66; Barringer, "World for a Shilling," 103–105. Barringer's point that "Porter's work ushered in a new form of immersive Romantic battle painting" (104) fits Jane as well as Robert.

66. Joseph M. Spencer, *A Word in Season: Isaiah's Reception in the Book of Mormon* (University of Illinois Press, 2023).

they end up beholding is not so different from the Book's other scenes: bodies sprawled on the ground (in this case they are alive).⁶⁷ Both *Thaddeus of Warsaw* and the Book of Mormon paint on canvases of the largest size; one makes grand leaps in space as the other does in time. Both make visual spectacle central to their narratives. Both offer views that are impossible to take in all at once. Both require a reader able to keep their bearings in shifting between the large-scale and the personal.

More broadly, the media culture of Mormonism has been robustly panoramic. The media historian Mason Kamana Allred has recently shown the centrality of panoramas to the Church's visual culture.⁶⁸ In 1845 in Nauvoo, Illinois, a man named Philo Dibble first proposed eight panorama paintings depicting the life and martyrdom of Joseph Smith, to be illuminated by candlelight and accompanied by music and lectures. None of them still exist, but each panel took up 128 feet of canvas; a surviving sketch shows a landscape in which Joseph Smith addresses a large crowd of soldiers, hundreds of bayonets tilting toward the large fluffy clouds overhead.⁶⁹ In Utah around 1880, the Danish convert artist C. C. A. Christensen unfurled a large display of twenty-three paintings that came to be known as "the Mormon panorama" spanning from Smith's first vision in 1820 to the arrival of the Saints in the Salt Lake Valley, now held in the BYU Museum of Art.

The *Journal of Discourses* shows how readily the panorama served as a metaphor for sacred history. Here's Orson Pratt in 1875: "After the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled, which period is set in the mind of God, another scene will open up before the world, in the grand

67. Alma 19:17.

68. Mason Kamana Allred, "Panoramic Visions," in *Seeing Things: Technologies of Vision and the Making of Mormonism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 45–72.

69. Here Miranda showed Philo Dibble, *Joseph Smith Addressing the Nauvoo Legion* (1845), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph_Smith_Addresssing_the_Nauvoo_Legion_painting_done_in_1845.PNG.

panorama of the last days.” Wilford Woodruff in 1877: “We have to build Temples—one is almost completed and is dedicated; we have laid the foundations of others, and the work, like a panorama, is before us.” Orson F. Whitney reported in 1885 of John the Revelator that “the events of the seven thousand years of the world’s temporal existence passed before him, like the scenes of a mighty panorama.”⁷⁰ In this he matches the panoramic apocalyptic vision, culminating in John the Revelator, of 1 Nephi 11–14. More recently, Samuel Morris Brown argues, without reference to its media history, that “panoramic vision” was central to the composition of the Book of Mormon.⁷¹

The panorama is an excellent medium for telling cosmic-scale narratives to both outsiders and insiders. In the twentieth century the Mormon penchant for pageants, with their crowd splendor and historical span, carries on a broad panoramic lineage, the Hill Cumorah Pageant (1937–2019) most notably, which staged the story of the Book of Mormon itself with a cast of 700 and nearly twice as many costumes. The now-demolished North Visitors Center on Temple Square in Salt Lake City hosted a marble statue of Jesus Christ amid a surrounding mural 166 feet long in a rotunda portraying the night sky on 6 April 1830, the date the Church was founded. But the immersive approach lives on: Nearby, in the Church History Museum, visitors since 2015 can view a six-minute film recreating Smith’s first vision on a 240-degree semicircular screen. For members only, in turn, the temple endowment ceremony has presented a panoramic journey from before Creation back to God’s presence; in the Salt Lake temple initiates passed through a series of rooms, each one typically featuring floor-to-ceiling paintings depicting the relevant background on all four walls (the Creation, the

70. See also passages in Allred, “Panoramic Visions,” 63–64.

71. Samuel Morris Brown, “Seeing the Voice of God: The Book of Mormon on its Own Translation,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, edited by Brian M. Hauglid et al. (University of Utah Press, 2020), 137–168.

Garden of Eden, the fallen world, etc.). The wonderful art in the Manti temple by Minerva Teichert among others is a crown jewel, thankfully rescued recently from destruction. These intra-temple paintings are more properly murals than panoramas, and yet temple's enviroing visual spectacle and immersive aesthetics illustrating grand historical or theological themes have a clear panoramic affinity.

It would be silly, of course, to suggest that the Latter-day Saint panoramic tradition and sensibility owes to Porter's influence. And yet, the parallel with *Thaddeus of Warsaw* does cast into relief the fondness for panoramic perception both in the Book of Mormon and the religion it founds. Sometimes family history research can reveal inherited traits that we didn't realize we were carrying. I conclude on an elegiac note. Minerva's owl takes flight in the gathering dusk, as the saying goes: History only becomes clear as it is passing away. Right when two key expressions of panoramic culture are ending, pageants and murals, that's when we can see it most clearly. In a bout of disruptive innovation, you can remove those forms more easily than you can drop Nephites or Lamanites. We've sadly never regarded art as beyond dispensable. Here we see the approach of a surgeon rather than a conservationist.

BAUER: Are you speaking ill of the Lord's anointed?

MIRANDA: For surgeons, cutting is part of healing. But every surgery I've ever had has hurt. I think it's okay to feel a bit wistful. Anyway, in conclusion, showing influence on culture is theologically less fraught than on scripture, especially a book with such massive history-binding claims. I suspect my contribution registers here as an interesting footnote at best!

CLEO: It's much more than that. It opens up questions about how worlds come out of books. The cosmos you chart—of Porter, Dibble, Christensen, Teichert, pageants, temples, and visitors centers—is one

that lives outside the Book of Mormon. Its readers have populated the world with paintings, plays, movies, videos, comics, games, films, children's books, even miniature gold plates. Such massive material elaboration from a single holy book!⁷²

BAUER: To say nothing of its spiritual manifestations!

MIRANDA: The great thing, and the terrible thing, about art is that it blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. Art makes worlds. Ontological generation is risky business! The purposes of a given panorama could morph between information, entertainment, and art, but the form imprinted a whole culture's way of imagining history. Art's demiurgic power is subject to abuse—perhaps a reason for the robust anxiety about art in our tradition. What if the wrong people stole the world-making elixir? Some tyranny-curious political leaders live in a constant bubble of what-if. Mao famously thought himself a poet, a rather murderous one at that. Impermeability to factual criticism, even when leaders are demonstrably wrong, drives their critics mad, who correctly believe that a functioning public sphere needs accurate information for its foundation. Such leaders live in a poetic alter-verse of make-believe. Joseph Smith's uncle Jesse, an early critic, complained that he “has eyes to see things that are not, and then the audacity to say they are.” That's the definition of a prophet, or a poet. And of a con artist as well. The world is full of maybes. But when powerful people take art's liberty of fabrication as a political mode, people suffer. Ethics is much less plastic than art. Plato thought poets were liars. I get the nervousness!

72. Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

BAUER: That's why we need a touchstone for testing truth. Religion offers surety beyond art's maybes.

CLEO: So, Miranda, would you see the Book of Mormon as a world-making fiction?

MIRANDA: No, because fiction is far too insipid a category. Strong art bends reality in its image. Probably more boys were named after Porter's Thaddeus than Tadeusz Kościuszko! The Book of Mormon has ontological tractor beams. For the rabbis, the Torah was reality; everything else was a knockoff. The Book of Mormon is also such a fissioning core of world-making energies. Art and scripture both share the awesome ability to displace ordinary reality in favor of something greater.

CLEO: You're certainly right about the relative newness of the concept: The category of fiction is being invented around the same time as the historical novel.

BAUER: For me, Nephi is not a fictional character.

CLEO: I can accept that Nephi was real. So was Hamlet. He's more real than most of my neighbors.

BAUER: That's just the wrong ontology.

CLEO: Sometimes I think that most of the people I see on the street might as well be zombies or automata. I assume they have rich inner lives and are children of God, but I don't know that. Yes, I can meet them and get to know them, but there's a limit on how many can undergo that magical transformation into people for me. We just can't live long enough to know all 8 billion people on earth. Most people are fated to remain phantoms. Becoming acquainted with strangers is one value of

fiction. Hamlet lives and breathes. Haven't you ever felt that you might be a fiction of some author's imagination, as in Borges's haunting story "The Circular Ruins?"

BAUER: Can't say that I have. Your solipsism about other people can be hazardous and imperial—they don't need you to call them into existence! It's unethical to derealize living people into fictions; they are just as real without our knowledge. And putting facts and fictions on the same level is a license to fabricate. I want to build on Miranda's point about danger: To flatten the distinction between fact and fiction is to give a free pass to criminals and fraudsters. No one's going to do temple ordinances for Hamlet! Shakespeare's work has surely already been done, probably several times. Hamlet and Shakespeare belong to different orders of being; works of literature are not the same as historical records. I don't expect to meet Hamlet at the judgment bar, asking me to account for how I liked the play; I do expect to meet Nephi and Moroni.⁷³

CLEO: You're lawyering up again. Our access to Nephi is the same as our access to Hamlet: through a text. Each one is a pile of words and textual traditions. Shakespeare's reality is similar, only his web of traces is more extensive. And there are, of course, the conspirators who insist he didn't really write his work. Even settled history is subject to churning, however silly. That's why we need more and better history. I am sure you can both join me in that wish.

MIRANDA: Yes, the growing tree of being needs pruning. It will otherwise go crazy with leaves and no fruit will grow (even if the poor currant bush hurts in the meanwhile).

SANTIAGO: Hello, everybody! Am I late?

73. 2 Nephi 33:11; Moroni 10:34.

CLEO: I thought you were unavailable!

SANTIAGO: Well, I'm obviously here and have been listening for a while.

CLEO: Welcome! Every symposium needs a party crasher.

BAUER, MIRANDA: [overlapping] What a pleasant surprise!

SANTIAGO: My dear friends, I am charmed by Bauer's passing notion of a "natural artifact" and even more by the question about Hamlet's temple work. Well, no one does proxy work for Laman or Lemuel either. Doesn't the fact that the Church has not yet authorized temple work for Book of Mormon peoples give us license to, as we philosophers like to say, bracket (i.e., suspend) the question of historicity? We can wait for the millennium to sort out who was real. We'll have time then to make all 8 billion living people real—or all 110 billion who ever lived! Historicity is deferred—lucky us! Don't you think you are all being a bit too historicist about the Book of Mormon? Isn't its point to give you access to God? To bring you to the tree of life?

Let me explain. The Book of Mormon is the answer to historicism, a loose term for a wide set of methodological innovations and intellectual commitments that emerge in Europe in the years around 1800. The historical novel is part of it. So is the higher criticism of the Bible. The Book of Mormon almost seems designed to counter the "German madness" from which Mary Moody Emerson hoped her nephews, William Emerson, who had studied the new biblical scholarship in Göttingen in the 1820s, and his brother, Ralph Waldo, would be "cured."⁷⁴ She wrote this in 1824, and in the event, neither brother was cured. Starting

74. Elisabeth Hurth, "William and Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Problem of the Lord's Supper: The Influence of German 'Historical Speculators,'" *Church History* 62, no. 2 (1993): 195.

with Hobbes and Spinoza in the seventeenth century, questions swirled about the authorship, dating, and provenance of the Bible, questions that to many minds threatened its religious authority. Indeed, Hobbes and Spinoza relativized the Bible for explicitly political purposes: To criticize scripture has always been to challenge power. Even though the “madness” was slow to disperse into popular American consciousness and there is little evidence of highbrow critical studies reaching rural upstate New York in the 1820s, the Book of Mormon grasps the nettle of biblical errancy, and offers a book of scripture that is partial, fragmentary, and obviously edited. No one needed to know German, anyway, to know about the many textual problems of the Bible: Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason*, well known in the Smith family, raised all the big questions.⁷⁵ And the Book of Mormon delivered scripture: quilted, dynamic, explicit about its lacks. To quote it: “And it shall be as if the fruit of thy loins had cried unto them from the dust; for I know their faith.”⁷⁶ Note the symphony of tenses and the interesting term, “as if.” There is a lot of philosophy, poetry, and religion there.

CLEO: That’s great, but the Book of Mormon’s origin story suggests something pure and *unzeitgemäss*, out of kilter with and unaffected by its times. Both *Thaddeus of Warsaw* and the Book of Mormon came forth in the heyday of Romantic ideas about authorship as a context-free solitary mind spinning its materials spiderlike out of itself. This is more Romanticism’s PR about itself than its practice, and of course Romantic writers knew very well what they were doing, creatively amalgamating original work from a wider cultural database of sources and experiences. The Book of Mormon, as a book that jumps into history

75. See Robert N. Hullinger, *Joseph Smith’s Response to Skepticism* (Signature Books, 1992); and Jared Halverson, “The Art of Ridicule in the Age of Reason: The Anti-Biblical Rhetoric of Thomas Paine” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2022), chap. 8.

76. 2 Nephi 3:19.

after a fourteen-century interment in the earth, does share something of this virgin-birth mystique. The gold plates are just as good an alibi for source-free inspiration as Coleridge's opium. Nothing marks its precise historical origins as much as its claim to be not embedded in history—its freedom from biblical corruption and loss of plain and precious things! It's just Smith and a few scribes—there's so little we know about the process of its translation.

SANTIAGO: And yet, few books are more candid, even obsessive, about signposting their process of composition. At almost every turn, the reader knows the author's or editor's name, the approximate date, the chain of custody, and the archival source (or set of plates). The Book of Mormon advertises the fallibility of its human compilers while insisting that divine things can be held in earthen vessels.⁷⁷ The Book of Mormon undoes the reader's obsessive hunt for a perfect document, as Jared Hickman argues: The prophetic force of the book may lie partly in its dismantling and reconstitution of our careless expectations about what it means to read holy books. It redefines the very nature of scripture.⁷⁸ It is designed to leave its readers suspended in uncertainty about its ultimate status: that's a problem for the reader to solve.⁷⁹ Like a quantum variable, the book's ontology depends on the approach—God-is-moving-today wave to some, chloroform-in-print particle to others. How cool to have as the keystone of our religion a text of such creative originality! It's a remarkable book of scripture that admits up front it is missing 116 pages, its "phantom

77. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 28–38.

78. Jared Hickman, "The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse," *American Literature* 86, no. 3 (2014): 429–461.

79. Jonathan Sudholt, "Unreadability is the Reader's Problem: *The Book of Mormon's* Critique of the Antebellum US Public Sphere," *Radical Americas* 2, no. 1 (2017): 1–33.

limb” as Elizabeth Fenton nicely puts it.⁸⁰ Scripture comes in versions! 2 Nephi 29 argues for scriptural plasticity and an open canon. Nephi’s building of a ship and the Brother of Jared’s creative solution to the problem of transoceanic lighting both depict inspired improvisers working with extant materials—could they be allegories of or meta-commentaries on the process of translation itself?⁸¹ What about the allegory of the grafting of wild and tame olive branches? Are the many examples of what our friend Sam Brown, who you mentioned, Miranda, calls “transformative agency” in the Book of Mormon trying to tell us something?

CLEO: Maybe they’re saying a female prophet-translator would have found more to work with in volumes 2–4 of *Thaddeus*?

BAUER: I’ve been listening with great interest. Elder John A. Widtsoe said, “Higher criticism is not feared by Latter-day Saints.” Of course he was right. But he insisted that we get our priorities straight: “Higher criticism as an issue in modern thought is essentially concerned with the question of the existence of God.”⁸² Critics of the higher criticism have always sniffed a lurking atheism behind its naturalistic readings. We fight over historicist details because God’s existence is at stake, as well as the truth of the Restoration.

SANTIAGO: Yes, but believers have grasped the nettle of the higher criticism to honor God with the truths of reason and scripture together.

80. Elizabeth Fenton, “Open Canons: Sacred History and American History in *The Book of Mormon*,” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1, no. 2 (2013): 349.

81. Ann Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates,” *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 61, no. 1 (2014): 193–194.

82. John A. Widtsoe, *In Search of Truth* (Deseret Book, 1930).

The higher criticism has certainly eaten away at some ways of reading the Bible, but it has opened up others. Jonah is a more spiritually powerful book if read as a satire of ethnocentric arrogance than as an improbable cetacean rescue. The pruning process hasn't been painless, producing the pathological overreaction of fundamentalist literalism, but the Bible's power remains. The Book of Mormon was born already with a text-critical invitation. It's curious that we've rarely embraced it. The great pragmatist philosopher William James once said of Berkeley's idealist philosophy about the identity of being and perception (*esse est percipi*, to be is to be perceived) that it was *practically* true. We encounter reality as richly bundled collections of perceptions. What else could it be? We have, in other words, no need to decide. I think the Book of Mormon's historicity is the same. Practically speaking, its world is undecidable between fiction and history. Devoted readers lend their realities to the book. It is powered by their faith.

BAUER: You know very well that James struggled mightily, crippling, with religious doubt. He knew you can read Berkeley's idealism as a great vastation, an evacuation or emptying of the universe. All the rich world shrinks to your pitiful little cranium. The subject has to do so much work to maintain the object in its being!

CLEO: Plus Berkeley owned human beings.

SANTIAGO: We can devote another symposium to slavery, but avoiding vastation was why James was ultimately a radical empiricist. Material details blessedly broke through our solipsism, giving us links to the world and other people. Our grasp of reality came in hints and guesses. But language, thought, and culture in his view were not, however, glued to reality at every point. They floated, like a financial currency, on a credit system. Culture was a beautiful tapestry. One nail or two to hang it on the wall of reality was enough to secure its intricately interwoven

threads. Let's call the Book of Mormon that tapestry, and the nail the testimony of Christ. We don't need more than that.

BAUER: The Book of Mormon's scriptural authority needs more than one nail. There's at least Joseph's veracity, the witness of the three and eight witnesses, the clear historical evidence of plates of some kind, the legacy for Indigenous Americans. A lot stands or falls with it.

SANTIAGO: Okay, but we can postpone verifying its anchorage in so-called reality.

MIRANDA: Remember reality is *made*.

BAUER (in mock despair): Help, I am surrounded by postmodernists!

SANTIAGO: Not really. Just people who read the Book of Mormon seriously. Can we please drop the old dualisms of "either divine text or external source," "the most correct book or biggest fraud ever"? Perhaps this dueling apologist-versus-critic mode has obscured a deeper theological lesson. Perhaps the divinity of a text comes from precisely how well it forges alchemical processes of inspiration among its readers. Perhaps the test is the present, not the past. Books teach us how to read them. Mormon hunts among the Nephite library and attaches, last minute, the small plates of Nephi to his abridgment of a thousand years of history. Nephi and all the leading Book of Mormon prophets, as well as the risen Christ, all weave scriptural texts by chunk and snippet. The spirit speaks in fragments—"groanings" as Paul called them (Romans 8:26). Is historicist fidelity the best proof of scriptural power? Nephi certainly didn't think so: Look at how aggressively he ignores the letter of Isaiah, twelve chapters of which he laboriously copied onto the scarce real estate of his plates, and yet with what grand results! The spirit of prophecy bowled over pedestrian questions about what Isaiah really

meant. Laman and Lemuel got their sure proof—and it was spiritually worthless. Hard evidence would deprive us of the difficult and soul-making task of fording the abyss with faith. Why don't we embrace the Book of Mormon's invitation to curious workmanship? Are we fussy philologists embarrassed and compensating for Joseph Smith's speculative majesty and time traveling? Our embalming scriptural methods are not his. We historicists are priestly rather than prophetic.

BAUER: I think you'll agree that not everyone can be a prophet. God's house is a house of order. What if each culture, each person wrote their own scripture?

SANTIAGO: Doesn't 2 Nephi 29 kind of encourage that? We are invited to be coauthors.

BAUER: Doesn't your cavalier attitude to the received text risk undermining Book of Mormon studies?

CLEO: I can agree to the need to shore up scholarship's fragile status in our culture, especially critical.

MIRANDA: And art's status, especially boundary breaking.

SANTIAGO: Scholarship, like art, has many modes. Why should we impose the impossible standard of "ex nihilo" creation on the Book of Mormon when Joseph Smith made clear that standard doesn't apply even to God? Doesn't spirit join with preexisting elements to make a tabernacle and take joy therein? Could that be a hint about the interpretation and composition of scripture and the nature of revelation? What if bricolage occurred on both ends of the chain of communication? Have we historicists missed the boat? Out of the textual shards of this strange book emerges the voice of God, talking to you, today!

Does anything else matter? The Book of Abraham depicts the council of the gods gathering before the Creation of the world, where one pre-eminent among them says “We will take of these materials, and we will make an earth.”⁸³ What if that were our motto for understanding the creation and creativity of the Book of Mormon? Could even *Thaddeus of Warsaw* be such material?

BAUER: A whirlwind of hypothetical questions! One after the other!

SANTIAGO: Yes, holy things work best in the subjunctive.

CLEO: We’ll close with the whirlwind. So good to see you all, if only by screen. Let’s do this again!

Exeunt: waving, overlapping cacophony of goodbyes. “This meeting has been ended by host.”⁸⁴

83. Abraham 3:24.

84. The symposiasts would collectively like to thank Eric G. Andersen, Samuel Morris Brown, Peter McMurray, Benjamin Peters, Stefan Schöberlein, Joseph M. Spencer, Katie Trumpener, and two anonymous reviewers for help and advice, but blame none of them for claims made here.