

R E V I E W

MORMONS AS STOCK VILLAINS

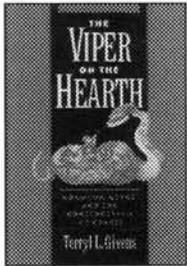
THE VIPER ON THE HEARTH:
MORMONS, MYTHS, AND THE
CONSTRUCTION OF HERESY

by Terryl L. Givens

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Reviewed by Nancy Bentley



Though his claims are at times quite shaky, Givens lucidly describes how popular fiction has helped cast Mormons as aliens who threatened the American home.

WERE EARLY Mormons white? In nineteenth-century America, the changeable category of “white people” consisted merely of all who counted as white people—the French, probably; Italians, just barely; the Irish, first no then yes. Caucasians with one black great-grandparent were deemed white in some states but counted as black people in others. Like these groups, Mormons existed at the border of what nineteenth-century observers called “the family of white nations,” not quite in the promised land of whiteness but not really outside it either. Terryl L. Givens’s *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* documents the way Mormons in that era were represented as

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“ethnically distinct” and thus open to the suspicion and ridicule that mainstream society rarely hesitated to visit upon ethnic and racial minorities. If anti-Mormons felt restrained by the nation’s avowed commitment to religious pluralism, they could get around those scruples with well-practiced habits of ethnic stigmatizing.

Givens’s lucidly written study focuses on the way popular fiction helped to cast Mormons as aliens who threatened the American home. The fact that Mormons as a group were ethnically indistinguishable from most other white Americans made this task of refashioning more difficult—and its achievement more telling. Fiction offered what politics couldn’t: ready-made forms for representing Mormons as threatening foreigners rather than as adherents of a new American faith. The popularity of exotic eastern locales in fiction made it easy to model Mormon polygamy after portraits of the oriental harem. Similarly, authors found

it possible to paint the Mormon prophet and priests as violent despots who resembled the stock villains in imperial romances and anti-slavery novels. American literature had long featured plots of Indian captivity and bondage, and these melodramas supplied conventions for telling the Mormon story as a tale of coercion, peopled with captive wives, sadistic patriarchs, and armed enforcers. For opponents of early Latter-day Saints, then, fiction provided just what was needed to construct the “paradox of Mormon quasi ethnicity.” Novels could transform Mormons’ religious identity into a portrait of cultural difference so extreme as to make these predominantly white Americans appear a separate population whose otherness invited maltreatment. “They ain’t white,” declares one fictional character, “They’re Mormons” (135).

An important question, of course, is why Mormons met with such sharp antipathy in the first place. Givens judiciously acknowledges the multiple roots of anti-Mormon hatred, its complicated mixture of social, political, and religious strains, each exacerbating the others. But he insists that it was finally a religious threat—the danger of a unique “heresy”—that made Mormons such a reviled target. Givens’s argument here, while intriguing, remains overly speculative and in important respects, unsatisfying. Mormonism’s “unflinching primitivism,” Givens asserts, its unabashed claim to have restored Christianity’s original offices and authority, meant that orthodox Christians had to face the erasure of the mystifying distance crucial to their own sense of the sacred. The perception of sacred meaning, according to Givens, is secured only through a temporal or experiential break, some sense of “radical discontinuity” separating the divine from the familiar things of everyday life. But Mormonism disregarded the centuries of tradition and the canons of mystery that structured the Christian understanding of divinity. For nineteenth-century Christians, Givens argues, the Mormon story exposed religion-making as a thing of their own immediate and all-too-accessible world. “Mormonism replicates the process of canon formation, prophetic utterance, communion with supernatural entities—all this without the veil of intervening history, mythic origins, or tradition.”

Givens makes an interesting case for the idea that what was “blasphemous parody” for the orthodox was for Mormons a new worldview in which mortal and immortal spheres were closely joined. His claims are shakier, though, when he argues that orthodox

Christians saw Mormonism not just as parody but as something more fundamentally threatening to their own faith. Because Mormonism reenacted the origins of the Christian church in the contemporary world, Givens argues, because it stripped away "the illusion of religion as timeless self-giveness," Mormonism forced Christianity to confront "the fact of its own construction." The effect was "nothing short of the demystification of Christianity itself." Was the hostility from anti-Mormons really a displaced reaction to this "disabling" of their own faith? Givens's idea relies on a psychological effect that is assumed but not demonstrated. He attributes a great deal to this shock of demystification ("to a Christian world generally, the genie cannot be put back in the bottle") but he offers little evidence for it beyond the anti-Mormon "fury" itself.

Moreover, there are other ways to account for outrage against early Mormons that Givens all but omits. His focus on religious heresy misses the importance of a clash of religious cultures that found its expression in the charged national struggle over polygamy. Even before Mormons began openly practicing plural marriage, the strong patriarchal emphasis of early Mormonism put the religion at odds with the more liberal evangelical culture that took root in many middle-class Protestant churches in the 1830s. Among the most significant features of the liberal transformation was the increased religious and domestic authority accorded to women. For these Christian women, as for their husbands and pastors, Mormon polygamy was an intolerable affront. They saw in it a negation of their deepest self-understanding and a challenge to their newly won status. As Harriet Beecher Stowe and others charged, polygamy's crimes rivaled those of Southern slavery: these "twin relics of barbarism," polygamy and slavery, both destroyed families, eroded the institution of marriage, and degraded wives.

For anti-polygamy activists like Stowe, fiction was an effective weapon of reform. Historian Sarah Barringer Gordon has shown how the legal and legislative campaign against Mormons was fueled by a grassroots anti-polygamy movement whose leaders were often women and whose rhetoric was attuned to a domestic ideology centered on the moral influence of wives and mothers.¹ Recognition of this reform movement is mostly missing from Givens's study. Reading *Vipers on the Hearth*, one would not realize, for instance, that the leading bestsellers that together set the mold of anti-Mormon fiction were all authored by women who wrote ex-

pressly to battle polygamy. Though he gives a brief consideration of the polygamy debate and acknowledges that novelists could be motivated by "moral zeal," the larger picture in Givens's study is one in which authors wrote solely to defame the Mormon people. Givens appears unwilling to consider that the core of this fiction, however distorting of Mormon belief and practice, may still have been motivated by a serious reform movement intended to protect the "national hearth." But political aims of this sort should not seem altogether strange or disingenuous to us. The seriousness with which many today take political movements for the "defense of marriage" should make the force of this nineteenth-century marriage movement easy to acknowledge, even if one rejects the movement's premises and its anti-Mormon hatemongering.

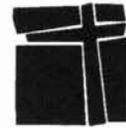
In his last chapter, Givens turns from the nineteenth-century novels to depictions of Mormons in twentieth-century arts and media. Givens asserts that hostile portraits of Mormons have endured, not because they are a minority group at odds with established society, but precisely because they are associated with a centrist conservatism. "It is now because Mormons occupy what used to be the center that they fall into contempt." The idea that Mormons today are viewed with widespread "contempt" at all comparable to nineteenth-century hostility seems distinctly wrongheaded. It contradicts any number of measurements, from opinion polls to the highly visible success of many Mormons in business and politics (examples of which are acknowledged in the chapter). Accordingly, this line of argumentation makes sense only if we accept Givens's contention that it is now mainstream Americans, those with centrist beliefs and mores, who have become a "beleaguered, fading majority," under attack from "a politics of the periphery" that is "working to devalue the center." I find Givens's examples here less than persuasive. He cites film and television programs that include jabs at Mormons, for instance, but the examples tend to be images that Mormons themselves embrace unapologetically—Utah as a land "where all parents are strong and wise and capable," or clichés about "Mormon cleanliness." A factual error about Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* raises doubts about how closely Givens has examined the purported evidence. He states that "the sanctimonious American piety that the play berates is found in one 'Harper Percy, Utah Mormon'—and closet homosexual." But Kushner's character, Harper Pitt, is actually a heterosexual woman married to a gay

man and a complex Mormon figure of considerable sympathy.

Though unflattering stereotypes of Mormons no doubt persist, Givens's suggestion that such images make Mormons subject to "cultural violence" seems to me quite simply untrue. White is still the color of privilege, and it is probably no coincidence that in our present era, when the Church enjoys a great deal of political and financial power and public acceptance, Mormons are commonly perceived as white people. The irony, of course, is that Church membership has never before been as ethnically and racially diverse as it is today. The nineteenth-century caricature has been inverted: Mormons are now deemed a church of white people when in fact they no longer are. ☐

NOTE

1. See, for instance, Sarah Barringer Gordon, "Our National Hearthstone: Anti-Polygamy Fiction and the Sentimental Campaign against Moral Diversity in Antebellum America," *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 8 (Summer 1996): 295–350.



IN HIS ABSENCE

In the morning light,
 from the porch of the emptied house,
 what she sees is not
 the rust flames of the scrub oak
 flickering its worn apologies
 nor the sage,
 gray-green and aromatic,
 but the genius of forgiveness
 in the saffron sunflowers,
 the generous rug of rabbitbrush.
 And, on the limbs of the cottonwoods
 in the scrawl of sparrows,
 a marriage of balance,
 pause,
 the sudden lift.
 She sees them pass
 into the blue,
 the sky cloudless
 and clean as a slate.

—MARILYN BUSHMAN-CARLTON