Faithful Transgressions In The American West

Bush, Laura

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Chapter 2

DEFENDING AND CONDEMNING A POLYGAMOUS LIFE

It was just a coincident that the doctrine of polygamy was abandoned on my birthday [September 24, 1890]. My first birthday was an event made possible by it; my whole life had been shaped according to it; and my faith that it was Divine and everlasting was so strong that I compared it with the faith of the three Hebrews who were to be cast into a fiery furnace for their convictions.

—Annie Clark Tanner, A Mormon Mother

. . . the act of writing one's autobiography is a way to find again that aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part of one's life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present.

—bell hooks, Talking Back

Why did some nineteenth-century Mormon women choose to become polygamous wives on the western frontier? One Mormon woman, Annie Clark Tanner, tries to answer that question in her twentieth-century autobiography, written when she was seventy-seven years old, half a century after the official church “Manifesto” that ended Mormon plural marriages (see appendix B). In her 1941 autobiography, Tanner is critical of her polygamous husband, Joseph Marion Tanner, and of Mormon polygamy in general. However, the manner in which she shapes her life story intends to prevent readers from making simplistic judgments about this controversial marriage practice or about her choice to enter such an arrangement. Tanner’s 336-page book is, in fact, one insider-woman’s lived experience and researched critique of Mormon “plural marriage.”

Despite Tanner’s pointed criticism of polygamy, her writing differs markedly from an early exposé autobiography such as *Tell it All* (1874), written by Fanny Stenhouse, a dissenting Mormon woman. Different from Stenhouse, who refers to herself as a “heretic” (vii), Tanner writes her autobiography as a still practicing member of the Mormon Church. Thus, she rarely identifies church leaders by name, protecting specific individuals from direct criticism. Stenhouse, on the other hand, feels no qualms about naming and supplying minute details about the many church authorities, Mormons, and religious practices that, according to Stenhouse, oppressed her and Mormon women in general. In effect, Stenhouse’s autobiography intends to satisfy the curiosity of outside readers, who, she claims, have repeatedly asked her to unveil the secrets of the Mormon Church and Mormon polygamy (xiii). Her express purpose for writing an autobiography is to deny her former Mormon faith; Tanner’s purpose, on the other hand, is to affirm her faith, even though she also criticizes Mormons’ practice of polygamy.

Restraining herself little when criticizing her husband and polygamy, Tanner’s motives for writing are not overtly vindictive toward the church. Instead, she constructs herself as a loving Mormon mother, who remains true to her personally revised faith. Writing with both an inside and outside readership in mind, she works to satisfy her reader’s curiosity about Mormon polygamy from the perspective of an actual plural wife. By writing her life story, Tanner aims to prove that she began life as a naive, obedient Mormon girl, who, too quickly, entered into a plural marriage with an appealing university professor but then grew up to become an independent, self-educated American woman—not a passive, weak-minded individual or, worse, one of the unwitting dupes to lustful male tyranny that she imagines many readers believe Mormon plural wives to be.²

Official Mormon doctrine such as that concerning polygamy has always been the strict domain of male church leaders. As a Mormon woman living in the nineteenth century and writing about her experiences in the mid–twentieth century, Tanner’s best option for condemning polygamy is to write an autobiography, a seemingly innocuous and institutionally sanctioned medium of public speech, especially for Mormon women. Tanner’s life story intends to elicit sympathy and respect from readers by detailing the sincere religious motivation that guided her decision to become a plural wife. She wants readers to understand the difficult consequences that followed her marriage to a neglectful
husband and to recognize the accomplishments she and her ten children achieved despite her early religious dogmatism and naiveté.

One literary critic, Lynn Bloom, has analyzed Tanner’s autobiography from an outsider’s point of view. After studying numerous Mormon women’s autobiographies, including Tanner’s, Bloom argues that these autobiographies “make a case against [polygamy] through the example of [Mormon women’s] own lives.” While few would deny the detrimental effects of polygamy on plural wives (as are often illustrated in their autobiographical acts), Bloom’s claim overlooks the empowering independence Mormon women autobiographers such as Tanner and Hafen insist on with regard to their plural marriages. By dismissing their diverse polygamous experiences and their religiously motivated defenses of the practice, Bloom’s criticism echoes nineteenth-century moral reformers’ stereotyped images of Mormon women. Her literary criticism tends to reduce these women’s religious beliefs and lived experience to the awful effects of a reprehensible patriarchal institution that “oppressed and suppressed a host of innocent, benign victims—its own women and children” (137).

In an effort to account for Tanner’s “paradoxical devotion” to a church that burdens her, Bloom argues that Tanner’s autobiography exhibits a “double voice” quality: one, an “overt voice,” which is “integrative, reinforcing the values and behavior of her husband and of the frontier culture”; and two, a “covert voice,” which is “contradictory, subversive—and necessary to maintain her dignity, sanity, and sense of self” (138). While Bloom correctly identifies the subversive nature of Tanner’s covert voice, she too easily dismisses the allegiance to religious beliefs that Tanner’s overt voice repeatedly insists on from the beginning to the end of her life story. Bloom also too readily concludes that Tanner lacks awareness of her own “covert voice.” On the contrary, evidence from the text demonstrates that Tanner is well aware of her religious subversions. In fact, she purposely writes them into the text, hoping to appeal to the sympathies of both insiders and outsiders to the Mormon Church. Furthermore, Tanner employs a “double voice” in order to maintain integrity toward her own value system and to mediate between her individual conscience and the pressures of her Mormon belief. She lives and writes, for instance, as someone who works to offer readers honesty and truth telling, tempered by kindness and forgiveness. Moreover, her writing demonstrates a desire to foster personal freedom, but she expects her own and others’ freedom in life and in writing to be
curbed by self-restraint and societal rules. Finally, Tanner’s autobiography celebrates individuality, but not at the expense of family and community ties. This value system, informed by Puritan, Mormon, and American ideals, necessarily complicates the way she chooses to tell the story of her life. Therefore, Bloom’s analysis of the double-voiced quality of Tanner’s text too narrowly limits the intentionality of this Mormon woman’s autobiographical act.

Margo Culley argues that “the dominant tradition of American women’s autobiography has roots in Puritan beliefs about the self and the Puritan practice of conversion narratives” (10). Like Puritan conversion narratives, Mormon “personal histories” such as those by Tanner or Hafen are a written legacy of their lives and religious beliefs. Among Mormons, publicly sharing stories of trial, conversion, and testimony with a church congregation, either over a pulpit or in writing, is an acceptable, even encouraged activity meant to strengthen and edify fellow saints. Mormon women autobiographers intend to pass on testimonies of faith and endurance for the benefit of family members and their Mormon community. Just as Puritans testified of their faith and expected to be judged by their peers, Tanner, too, expects her narrative to be judged by Mormon family members and friends who might read the story she writes about her life as a polygamous wife and mother.

Rather than affirming the Mormon doctrine of polygamy, however, Tanner’s narrative argues against it. After much consideration, she reasons—using the story of her life for evidence—that it is a religious custom that subordinates women. “Polygamy is predicated on the assumption that man is superior to woman,” she asserts (60). Proving that she has thoroughly examined polygamy as it has been practiced by the Israelites of the Old Testament, by “Mohammedans,” and by her own Mormon community, Tanner concludes that all three polygamous cultures oppress women and privilege men (61). Expecting many in her Mormon audience to resist these criticisms of Mormon men’s privileged position, Tanner employs various rhetorical and narrative strategies to bolster her position. She works to gain credibility, for example, with her multiple audiences by demonstrating her knowledge of both Mormon and non-Mormon scholarship on the subject of polygamy. In one instance, she defends her criticism by citing an “eminent psychologist,” Dr. Mortimer Adler, a well-known American philosopher and educator, who says, “All our institutions, our traditional attitudes, our laws, our morals, our customs give evidence of the fact that they are determined
and maintained by the privileged males for the glory of male domination” (qtd. in Tanner 61). Tanner's reliance on an authority figure outside of Mormonism is a rhetorical tactic not likely to persuade many Mormon readers. However, she voices an esteemed outsider expert's opinion alongside her own belief to strengthen her contention for those who would listen that the institution of polygamy discriminated against plural wives. After a life of learning and hard experience, the allusion to Adler provides evidence for Tanner's new willingness to value, when necessary, secular and individual authority over religious authority.

Such explicit denunciation of a doctrine held "sacred" by Tanner's fellow Mormons makes for an explicitly transgressive autobiographical act within her Mormon community. As a woman, with little to no religious authority, she understands how her critical position will appear to many in her Mormon audience. According to Culley, any reading of the “self” within a religious community such as that among Puritans or, in this case, among Mormons occurs as an “intertextual event.” In other words, Tanner knows that many Mormons then and in the future would “gather” together and “read” her subversive life story to compare their own experience with a "scriptural metatext" and with other members' experiences (Culley 10). In order to maintain her good standing with Latter-day Saints, Tanner shrewdly sandwiches her criticism of polygamy between equally compelling accounts of continuing religious faith and devotion to God. While criticizing a doctrine of the Mormon Church, to which she maintains ties, she expresses gratitude for God's continuing role in her life. She structures the autobiography, however, to illustrate her evolving relationship with God and Mormon doctrine as well as to affirm her own individual authority and personal faith: “Our [Mormons'] concept of God, then, was taken largely from the ancient Hebrew and the Book of Mormon. It has since changed in some measure as the New Testament has become more influential. He is now a God of love; not of jealousy and arbitrary punishment” (229). Here Tanner demonstrates that, regardless of her criticism, she is a religious person whose life, now captured and formulated as a published text, could be “read for evidence of God's dealings with the soul” (Culley 10).

Tanner writes her autobiography from a Mormon tradition of personal record keeping. Not only does she record her own birth date, birthplace, and her parents' marriage date within the first paragraph, but throughout her life story, she also meticulously documents the birth dates, places, and full names of all her children and several grandchildren.
Compiling her autobiography and recording the genealogies of family members are central to Mormon doctrine. Another key tenet of Latter-day Saint faith is the “sealing” of couples in sacred marriage ceremonies performed in Mormon temples. Such “sealings” ensure that ancestors as well as descendants are bound together through both earthly and heavenly life. Written records such as Tanner’s autobiography intend to establish genealogical relationships and pass on Mormon values from generation to generation. In the preface to Tanner's autobiography, Sterling McMurrin claims that Tanner writes “in simple, direct, and unadorned prose, not for publication but simply as an intimate memoir for her family” (x). Obert C. Tanner, Annie Clark Tanner's son, concurs with McMurrin, asserting that “[s]he intended this account of her life to be only for her children and grandchildren” because, he explains, “[t]oward the end of her life she became increasingly aware that her descendants would have difficulty understanding her unusual marriage and family life” (xvi).

Although Tanner admittedly writes the autobiography for her descendants, evidence from the narrative suggests that she also targets a readership beyond the obvious family members that McMurrin and her son, Obert, identify as her primary audience. In fact, I would argue that she constructs her life story for the benefit of three key audiences: her posterity, her Mormon community, and the non-Mormon public. Recognizing herself as belonging to a subgroup of Americans in the United States who were “making history” (76), she recounts her personal life story as a Mormon polygamous wife in order for her individual voice to be heard among the many inside and outside voices that make up a larger, national history about the subject of Mormon polygamy. The purposeful argument that Tanner constructs demonstrates her desire to speak beyond the confines of home and church, especially when it comes to explaining her plural marriage. She often prefaces Mormon religious tenets with information that Mormon readers would likely know already. She also uses language directed toward those who are unacquainted with anything about Mormon beliefs other than the practice of polygamy, which titillated the public’s imagination. In addition, her autobiography’s elevated style with its formal English, numerous literary and historical allusions, her rehearsal of official church doctrine on Mormon polygamy, and her inclusion of outside scholarly accounts of the practice suggest that she intended her writing to become more than just a homey life story.
Tanner’s account of life in polygamy transgresses the boundaries of Mormon tradition by arguing against church doctrine, even though she herself remains an otherwise faithful Latter-day Saint. In effect, she selects and arranges evidence from her life experience and personal study to take readers on a developmental journey that begins with youthful naiveté, rigid religiosity, and unwavering obedience and ends with mature womanhood, religious tolerance, and self-determination. Furthermore, she constructs her narrative to gain favor with multiple audiences, to educate them about Mormon polygamy, and to create space for a woman to speak as frankly as her Victorian upbringing would allow about a controversial subject that profoundly affected her life.

Critiquing Mormon Polygamy

Tanner’s narrative begins, like most conventional Mormon autobiographies, at her childhood home. “I was born in Farmington, Utah, September 24, 1864” (1). Then within this first paragraph, she establishes her credibility to write about the history and doctrine of polygamy by discussing her own parents’ polygamous relationship and their devotion to the “principle of Celestial Marriage.” She notes that her father, Ezra Clark, personally knew Joseph Smith, who is first said to have received a revelation from God instructing Smith to implement the principle of polygamy as practiced by the Old Testament prophet Abraham. Acknowledging that the Clark family was “thoroughly converted” to Smith’s teachings, Tanner implies that they were, thus, also devoted to polygamy. She offers abundant evidence for her early religious convictions and her grounding in Mormon Doctrine. By laying this preliminary groundwork, she establishes her credibility to critique the practice later, working to prevent readers from dismissing her criticism of church doctrine when she will explicitly condemn polygamy as an institutional practice based on the subordination of women. Tanner solidifies her standing with church members by noting that her father was “a Utah pioneer of 1848,” who, during “several” missions for the church, met and later married his second wife, her mother Susan (1). From this first paragraph to the autobiography’s last, Tanner establishes her authority to speak as an insider Mormon and as an accomplished writer.

To demonstrate her language skills, she employs a formal style, not unlike that of Benjamin Franklin’s own quintessential American
autobiography, which Tanner probably read (122). Also similar to Franklin, who wrote his autobiography as an account of the premier American man’s success, Tanner hopes for a broad American audience that will appreciate her woman’s story of personal triumph over difficult odds. By the second paragraph of her autobiography, she begins her deliberate task of describing plural marriage. Using elevated language and passive sentence constructions, she provides evidence to demonstrate that she is well educated. The content of her introduction also seems to address readers who would be unfamiliar with church doctrine, rather than insiders who would understand Mormon beliefs after a lifetime of religious training. She explains, for example, “The principle of Celestial Marriage was considered the capstone of Mormon religion. Only by practicing it could the highest exaltation in the Celestial Kingdom of God be obtained” (1). Her language here attempts to communicate to an audience the grandiose nature of this religious principle from the perspective of early members of the church:

According to the founders of the Mormon Church, the great purpose of this life is to prepare for the Celestial Kingdom in the world to come. The tremendous efforts and sacrifices of the Mormon people can be understood only if one keeps in mind this basic otherworld philosophy. (2)

The implied actors in the passive construction, “can be understood,” must be non-Mormons. In addition, she uses a secular phrase like “otherworld philosophy” to explain for a general reader the Mormon view of the “Celestial Kingdom,” what Latter-day Saints consider the most desirable and highest “heaven.”

Early in her autobiography, Tanner remarks that she is “glad to begin” telling “this unusual part of my story,” although she admits to feeling “some hesitancy.” Her concern, she says, comes “because most people find it difficult to understand a Mormon polygamous marriage. . . . This is the case, to some degree, with my own children; much more must it be true of those still further removed from this social practice” (57). Such a remark hints that she imagines that readers other than her children may make up her future audience. Later, after discussing the lengths to which Latter-day Saints had to go in order to practice polygamy, she writes, “I mention these incidents briefly to give some indication of our tenacity to a religious principle which we were convinced was God-given” (78)—and which early Mormons also assumed was unchanging (130).
Annie Clark marries Joseph Marion Tanner on December 27, 1883, in a service at the “Endowment House,” a makeshift Mormon temple used before the Salt Lake City Temple was completed. “Aunt Jennie,” Joseph Tanner’s first wife, attends the wedding. Tanner writes that after the ceremony, the three of them—Annie Clark, Mr. Tanner, and Aunt Jennie—all boarded a “northbound train.” Tanner then weaves poignancy into her autobiographical tale, working to gain reader’s sympathy for her plight. Rather than enjoy her wedding night with Mr. Tanner, she “got off at Farmington and they [Joseph Tanner and Aunt Jennie] went on to Ogden” (64). Antipolygamy legislation passed in 1882 meant that her marriage had to be kept secret, so Tanner never derives any happiness from a wedding celebration or honeymoon. Instead, she spends her wedding night back at her “dear old home” with “all the uncertainty that the future might bring” (66). Despite believing at the time that she had done the right thing, looking back, Tanner admits to feeling glum over dinner. In retrospect, she shows readers the pain she experienced, but was in denial over, as a young, polygamous bride:

As I sat down to a glass of bread and milk the thought came to me. “Well, this is my wedding supper.” In those few minutes I recalled the elaborate marriage festivals which had taken place in our own family, of the banquets I had helped to prepare and the many lovely brides among my friends. I even began to compare their wedding gowns. I was conscious of the obscurity of my own first evening after marriage. (66)

Tanner then writes about being forced as a nineteen-year-old newlywed into an early life of loneliness and hiding on the “Mormon underground” (101). She explains how she must continue to keep her marriage secret by hiding the first of what would become ten pregnancies. Her condition had to be hidden because it would prove to outsiders that she was no longer “Miss Clark.” Describing this secretive, “single” life as living like a “caged bird” (109), Tanner feels “confined” by pregnancy and forced into moving among sympathizers’ protective care, a “wanderer without a home” (110). Ironically, Tanner notes that she lived this confining life to protect her husband from being imprisoned for bigamy. She describes how her sister, Mary Elizabeth, helps her conceal the pregnancy, finding her homes to lodge in so that Tanner could be “free from all anxiety of jeopardizing [her] husband’s liberty” (emphasis mine 105). Tanner’s early roving life is just the beginning of one woman’s lifelong
search for a secure place to call her own. Her narrative and rhetorical intentions are to demonstrate how sincerely committed she had been to the religious principles guiding her life. By writing, she hopes to prevent non-Mormon readers from faulting her for choosing such a marriage and to prevent Mormon readers from faulting her for criticizing polygamy. After all, according to her account, polygamy had clearly done her much harm.

Long after its official practice, openly initiated in 1852 and publicly ended in 1890, Mormon polygamy has fascinated scholars in history, sociology, psychology, and even law. Unfortunately, the literary community has largely ignored Mormon women’s autobiographies, a wealth of Mormon rhetoric and literature that offers firsthand accounts of the practice. Mormon women such as Mary Ann Hafen and Annie Clark Tanner, who lived as plural wives during the mid- to late 1800s, were highly conscious of the abhorrence and disdain that nineteenth-century America felt toward polygamy. Victorian crusaders who championed various moral reform movements felt indignant toward what they viewed as an aberrant sexual practice and clear subjugation of women. In the preface to Stenhouse’s exposé autobiography, for example, Harriet Beecher Stowe declares, “Shall we not then hope that the hour is come to loose the bonds of a cruel slavery whose chains have cut into the hearts of thousands of our sisters—a slavery which debases and degrades womanhood, motherhood, and the family?” (vi). The melodramatic connection that Stowe makes between slavery and Mormon polygamy was a common one in the late 1800s. Ironically, although Mormons denied that polygamy was anything like slavery, they also used the term “Mormon underground” to describe the phenomenon of plural wives “hiding” in various homes, trying to prevent authorities from imprisoning their husbands.

According to non-Mormon historian Peggy Pascoe, “Mormonism and its polygamous marriage system had been the subject of a loosely coordinated but widespread attack by novelists, home mission workers, Protestant clergy, Salt Lake City Gentiles, and apostate Mormons since the 1850s” (61–62). Pascoe describes the “three images” these female reformers adopted to “symbolize” what activists viewed as “the plight of Mormon women: that of the wronged first wife, the deluded plural wife, and the besieged young girl” (62). In addition to these stereotyped views of Mormon women—which, ironically, mostly added to the burden of polygamy for them—the 1856 Platform of the Republican Party read in
part, “It is both the right and the imperative duty of Congress to prohib-

it in the territories those twin relics of barbarism—polygamy and slavery” (Young, Isn’t One 1). Historian Davis Bitton confirms that the larger society linked slavery with polygamy (“Mormon Polygamy” 107–108), and Tanner herself describes how slavery and polygamy “were commonly referred to by our enemies as the ‘twin evils’ of the nation” (78).8

Due to disparaging images and the connection that Victorian, aboli-
tionist minds made between Mormon polygamy and the human bondage of slavery in America, prominent Mormon women during the 1870s and 1880s wrote passionate defenses of their plural marriages. Eliza R. Snow, a plural wife to Joseph Smith and then, after Smith’s death, a plural wife to Brigham Young, was a principle defender of Mormon polygamy. Arguably the most powerful woman in the early church, she once remarked,

Were we the stupid, degraded, heartbroken beings that we have been repres-

ented, silence might better become us; but as women of God, . . . we not only speak because we have the right, but justice and humanity demand that we should.9 (qtd. in Arrington and Bitton 226)

Helen Mar Kimball Whitney’s pamphlet, “Why We Practice Plural Marriage” (1884), played an equally influential role in defending polygamy (Young, Isn’t One 52). Highly politicized individuals with a cause, hundreds of other Mormon women defended their right as United States citizens to practice a doctrine they considered God given—and moral. Historian Lawrence Foster claims that outsiders’ continued criticism of Mormonism actually strengthened Mormon women’s resolve toward what their detractors viewed as a distasteful religious practice. In short, their biting attacks propelled polygamous Mormon women to increase their “political activism” and, thus, to ben-

efit from a “greater degree of autonomy” than many other American women (From Frontier Activism 10).

Tanner herself worked for women’s suffrage by joining a political club. She writes about presenting the life of Susan B. Anthony during one club meeting. She also notes that this club sent delegates to Congress in sup-

port of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (145). Such details are meant to demon-

strate for non-Mormons that even as a plural wife, Tanner was commit-
ted to women’s autonomy and political power. She argues that polygamy forced her to develop “an independence” that she noticed was lacking in women who enjoy the luxury of monogamous marriages. “The plural
wife, in time,” writes Tanner, “becomes conscious of her own power to make decisions” (269). In fact, women in the Utah territory achieved suffrage in 1870, long before the rest of the country’s women were extended voting rights. Church leaders believed the women’s vote would “aid in constructive reform and strengthening the family” (Foster, From Frontier Activism 11). Many impassioned nineteenth-century Mormon women insisted that becoming a plural wife was a deliberate, fully informed decision. In spite of the difficulties, they claimed their agency to choose such marriages against a barrage of denigrating criticism.

In her autobiography, Tanner records participating as a young woman during several mass meetings held to defend the church’s practice of polygamy. She includes one such story to describe the social atmosphere surrounding Mormon plural wives’ actions and also to demonstrate her own early fervency:

We met in the Salt Lake Theater to draft a memorial of protest against the indignities, persecutions, and sufferings inflicted by the officers of the law in the territory. In some cases women were imprisoned for refusing to answer indelicate questions. (77)

Tanner’s autobiography recalls some of these Victorian Mormon women’s original defenses. One of the most poignant reminiscences occurs when she tells how, as a theological student at Brigham Young Academy, she takes up the role of apologist for the principle of plural marriage. She describes speaking in front of an audience that includes Joseph Marion Tanner, the visiting professor who was so impressed by her speech that he pursues her as a second wife. With irony, Tanner writes, “That little speech did more perhaps to determine my future life than one ever would have dreamed” (48).

This pointed observation about her early enthusiasm for polygamy and its personal consequences intends to evoke readers’ sympathy and understanding about why she accepts a marriage proposal from a man whose intelligence she admired and whose attention flattered her own intellectual ego. “I felt favored above all the other girls in the school” (50). She constructs this past incident with an ironic tone as she writes in the present to show her audience how far she has matured beyond her youthful zeal in defending polygamy. With hindsight, Tanner reexamines Mormon women’s early enthusiasm in light of her own negative experiences as the plural wife of Joseph Marion Tanner. Her twentieth-century perspective affords her the opportunity to examine both the
positive and negative consequences of her past, nineteenth-century theology. She writes, “I am sure that women would never have accepted polygamy had it not been for their religion” (132).

Despite any benefits that Tanner describes resulting from her life as a plural wife—independence, self-directed learning, or even religious enlightenment and greater tolerance—she nevertheless confesses that her marriage experience consisted mostly of disillusionment, frustration, and anguish, despite the early, passionate love she felt toward her older, professor husband. Within the first few months of their unusual wedding, for example, Tanner observes, “while the love and devotion of a trusting young bride was just a coincidence in his life. The fervor of my love was life” (68). She then foreshadows the problems to come from her husband's frequent broken dates and male hegemony:

Already he manifested a consciousness of his right to “Rule.” I, too, seemed aware of the fact that he was “my Lord.” There was no escape from this decree. I must school myself to bide his time and obey him. In time I learned to steel myself against disappointment of his failure to come. However, I learned to dearly love my husband, and I wondered later if anyone was a more ardent lover than myself. (69)

Regardless of Tanner’s pain, throughout the autobiography in moments such as this one, she insists on constructing her self as an active agent, not a passive victim. Even though her writing will likely convince readers that she did, indeed, live a harsh life, she does not shirk responsibility for her deliberate actions or for their negative consequences: “My husband and I were both the product of the ideal of our religion, that man is superior to woman and that he should be obeyed” (169). As an autobiographer, she may seek readers’ sympathy, but she does not seek their pity. She wishes merely to be understood.

In passages where Tanner explains the social circumstances that made polygamy desirable, she adopts a scholarly tone, continuing to use the distancing and formal “one” or the vague and generalized “church” to address her audience and help them understand Mormon women’s position. She also does not mention specific leaders’ names, avoiding any direct accusations of improper motives concerning polygamy:

If one can picture the sociological conditions in Utah territory when the principle of polygamy was openly endorsed by the church in 1852, one can better understand the reason for its development. Hundreds of young
women came from the overcrowded section in the old country. They were thoroughly converted to the Gospel. To be the wife of a fine leader in Israel was the height of their ambition. Perhaps too, the effect of the increase in numbers it furnished to the church was considered of some advantage. (23)

Here Tanner implies a loose identification with the sincerity and religious devotion that motivated immigrant Mormon women’s desire to live the principle of polygamy. She also, however, implicitly chides those who might have viewed it as an efficient way to increase the Mormon population and, thus, to increase Mormons’ political power in the Utah territory.

Another passage that demonstrates her desire to gain sympathy and understanding, especially from a non-Mormon audience, is one in which she explains several negative results for young women who might consider marrying outside the church. These consequences would be already well known and understood by a Mormon readership, but not likely by outsiders.

It must be remembered that the western immigration movement brought to Utah all kinds of people. Concerning some of the men folks, girls comparing their chances for matrimony, often said of a Mormon leader, “I’d rather have his little finger than the whole of a man outside of the church.” It was an extremely serious thing for girls to marry outside of the church, both socially and religiously. It jeopardized their personal salvation, that of their children, and resulted generally in social ostracism. (23)

Passages such as these offer frank admission of the social and religious consequences that arose from her Mormon community’s religious beliefs and controversial nineteenth-century marriage practice. Tanner includes them to explain the reasons that she and others would concede to sharing a Mormon leader in a plural marriage, rather than choose from plentiful and readily available nonmember men.

Historian Jessie L. Embry explains that “two common threads” run through the experiences of polygamous Mormon women such as Annie Clark Tanner or Mary Ann Hafen. First, Mormon women’s “underlying motivation” for becoming a plural wife was that God had commanded them through a modern prophet, Joseph Smith, to do so. This “spiritual incentive” or “religious faith” was the main element that sustained polygamous wives as they weathered the hardships and jealousies brought on by polygamy. Second, Embry points out that unlike ancient Israelite,
Muslim, or African cultures, where people developed “complex traditions” to govern polygamous relationships, Mormon polygamy was a relatively new, short-lived religious practice. This newness resulted in Mormon households patterning multifamily living arrangements according to their nineteenth-century society’s Victorian model of a monogamous, nuclear family unit (57, 60). Rather than the husband living with all his wives together, for instance, polygamous Mormons often established separate households. The husband and father financially supported his several families but would also, when possible, build each wife her own house, moving among his various homes on a regular basis (59).

Tanner’s life story illustrates Embry’s observations. She writes that she became a plural wife because she believed the principle of polygamy was God given. Her autobiography also shows that she tries to live according to the Victorian ideals of female domesticity and family life that permeated her culture at the time. However, like Hafen and many other polygamous Mormon women, she also writes about needing to perform both female and male roles in order to satisfy the domestic and economic necessities of her household. Because of the logistical and emotional demands placed both on polygamous wives and on their husbands or, worse, because of what Tanner depicts in her own case as a husband’s insensitivity, criticism, and excessive number of wives (154), the polygamous-monogamous Victorian model did not work well for her. Although she acknowledges a polygamous husband would “need to be, almost, a superhuman man to help each wife equally with the problems of rearing a family” (270), strain resulting from inequity and neglect explain the narrative tensions over freedom and personal fulfillment that underlie the story Tanner writes about her life.

Promoting Puritan, Mormon, and American Ideals

Besides explaining and critiquing her difficult polygamous experience, Tanner means for her autobiography to inculcate her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren with values inherited from America’s Puritan tradition—hard work, thrift, sacrifice, and devotion to God. In his preface to Tanner’s autobiography, McMurrin notes that “[b]y its cultural inheritance and origins, as well as its moral foundations, Mormonism is a Puritan religion, in numerous ways an expression of the traditional American character” (xiii). These Puritan ideals were compatible with Mormon philosophy and doctrine. “If Mormon philosophy
can be summed up in two words,” writes Tanner, “it is ‘Keep Busy,’ and that applies to every member of the church” (238). Her promotion of Puritan, Mormon, and American values, such as religious tolerance, education, and independent thinking, permeate the autobiography. From the outset, however, she demonstrates that she did not enjoy these same American ideals at home as a child, where obedience and submission were valued more than independence.

The freedom of democratic America was in strong contrast to the traditional ideas of obedience under which my mother was reared and which, for centuries, had dominated European countries. Parental obedience was my mother’s pet ideal and she was exacting. (4)

Tanner portrays her polygamous marriage as equally or more restrictive. Of her husband, she writes, “He was a dictator, and he expected to be obeyed.” Calling her husband a “dictator” is especially damning in context since she is writing her autobiography during the time of World War II and, thus, implies a parallel with Hitler. Briefly discussing the war just two pages before recreating a key scene between her and her husband (265), Tanner writes, “He told me once while we were living in Provo that Germany was the place to rear a family.” Then she recalls their dialogue, as though she remembers verbatim the words that condemn him from his own mouth: “‘They would know the meaning of obedience and discipline in Germany,’ was his remark. ‘That is not my ideal,’ was the only comment I made” (267).

Having settled in at least eight different locations that range from Utah and Colorado to as far away as Massachusetts and Canada, Tanner describes having to build and maintain her homes mostly “unaided” by this dictatorial husband, who, claims Tanner, was often critical of her and distracted by his other wives (271). Without a caring companion’s support, however, she works to prove that through study, sacrifice, hard work, unfailing devotion to her children, and her individual heroism, she earned one version of the American Dream: education, her children’s success, and a stable, God-centered home. “Women left to shift for themselves almost alone,” writes Tanner, “or even to carry the whole responsibility of rearing a large family, are made capable by what is forced upon them” (271).

One of her most compelling reasons for writing an autobiography centers on her belief that personal and institutional progress are made possible by a solid education and independent thinking. “My own children
were not reared under the old tradition,” she insists, “namely, that obedience is the greatest of all virtues” (227). She inscribes her life as initially being ruled by rigid orthodoxy. “[O]bedience was the basis of our religion. Parental authority was Biblical, and obedience to church authority, which proclaimed our modern scripture, was just as binding” (15). Through her narrative, however, she aims to demonstrate that she has come to trust her own authority. Furthermore, she hopes to encourage her posterity to do the same, wanting them to value freedom, embrace learning, and extend greater tolerance for other religious beliefs or philosophies not their own. She constructs her life story as an example of the personal pain caused by what she now views as narrow or backward thinking, coupled with a religious practice that church leaders promised would bring joy and blessings—but mostly in the heavenly kingdom to come (72–73). The book concludes with Tanner asserting that she has gained a broader understanding of how her own faith fits into other histories of religion she has studied: “Strange to say, my faith in the Gospel and my appreciation for the Bible has increased with this added knowledge” (324).

Tanner expects to persuade descendants that the story of her life provides a progressive model of living that fosters advancement, open-mindedness, thinking for one’s self, and living in the present. Her text also illustrates how a Mormon woman may work out her own personal theology through autobiographical writing. In Tanner’s case, she displaces an Old Testament God who requires obedience and metes out punishment with a New Testament God who promotes progressive-minded, individual choice and offers unconditional love in the present, rather than in some unknown, unrealized afterlife. For Tanner, this means people should enjoy life now, rather than wait for what many Mormons refer to as their “celestial” reward in a life to come. She writes, “[O]ur Savior said, ‘Live more abundantly’” (311). As a Mormon mother, she believes that “each generation should be ahead of the present or past generation.” Her philosophy rests on her stated assumption that “the people of the world evolve in an evolutionary way to higher standards” (269). By encouraging ideals such as these, she works to illustrate the liberal-minded traditions she has come to embrace and write about in her own life, hoping to instill those same values in the lives of her posterity. She even claims that her Mormon family belongs “to a church which has been true in a measure to its ideal of Eternal progression” (310).
To demonstrate how she has “progressed” personally and, thus, how her life and opinions differ from her own mother’s and even from those of her professor husband, she offers instances when her children display the American ideal that learning, religious faith, freedom, and independent thinking can reside together. Recreating a scene when a Mormon bishop compliments her on the manner in which she has raised her sons, she writes that the bishop told her, “Your boys are not like the ordinary boys” (227). In her account, Tanner agrees unabashedly with this leader’s assessment, calling her sons “extraordinary” because, she points out, “they were encouraged to think things out for themselves. I never would or could believe that the institutions of learning would produce a lack of faith in our young people” (227). By relating praise from a leading male church member, Tanner validates her parenting skills and indirectly boasts about the balance she and her children have achieved between religious and intellectual pursuits. This and other anecdotes throughout the autobiography intend to demonstrate her progressive views. She implies that her liberal-mindedness differs from other narrow views (such as her mother’s or husband’s) concerning obedience, religious faith, and secular learning. Tanner provides additional indirect evidence by including a flyleaf dedication from her tenth child, Obert, who was asked to write New Testament Studies textbooks for high school seminary students. The dedication reads, “To my Mother: Whose armor is her honest thought, / And simple truth her utmost skill” (316).

Interrupting her own academic education for a plural marriage, Tanner never earns a formal degree, in spite of what she describes as her academic promise at Brigham Young Academy—one of legendary professor Karl Maeser’s “few leading [theological] students” (47). To prove that her own dedicated self-study has compensated for her lack of a formal education, she includes numerous references to prominent American or British writers and thinkers. Aiming to show that her ideas and arguments in the autobiography are grounded in both religious and secular learning, she bolsters her personal account of polygamy by quoting both a Mormon historian, B. H. Roberts (114), and a non-Mormon historian, Hubert Howe Bancroft (98). Including excerpts from both an insider’s and an outsider’s study of polygamy enables her to offer readers more than one scholarly point of view and also demonstrates that she is well read on the issue.

To prove further that she is well educated, even if that education was obtained through self-study, she sprinkles allusions to numerous books
and famous American or British figures, real or literary, throughout the autobiography. Her allusions document an array of canonized male thinkers and characters: Charles Dickens and Sir Walter Scott (100), Robinson Crusoe (103), Benjamin Franklin (122), Abraham Lincoln and General Grant (139), John Stewart Mill (158), and James Fenimore Cooper (283). Tanner never admits to reading a single sentimental novel, although she occasionally uses conventions of the genre, such as direct addresses to “the reader,” who, at one point, she hopes will “appreciate my situation” (74). This phraseology would be familiar to anyone acquainted with these widely read and very popular nineteenth-century texts. Ironically, she also adopts the genre’s narrative plot using romantic elements of courtship, marriage, and a “happy ending” (333), despite a marriage relationship that became more about disappointment and pain than love.

Some of Tanner’s greatest intellectual growth occurs when she moves to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her husband has been studying at Harvard and living with his third wife, Josephine, for a year and a half before Tanner insists on joining them. In Massachusetts, Tanner writes that, rather than live with Joseph and Josephine, she is forced to rent an apartment “in the slums” so as not to “jeopardize [Mr. Tanner’s] reputation” (135). She portrays herself as living a relatively lonely life with two babies, a new pregnancy, and a husband who visits every alternating Sunday for dinner (136). Yet Tanner lets readers know that, in Cambridge, she filled up her loneliness by reading and, occasionally, educational sightseeing. “Mr. Tanner often brought me books from the library—historical accounts of the early settlers in New England and novels by the famous New England writers. He hired a carriage and we visited places of historical interest in and around Boston.” Tanner includes many letters in her autobiography to give readers a sense of authenticity and immediacy about her life at a particular historical moment. For example, in an 1892 letter to her brother John, meant to depict her life and activities in Cambridge, Tanner provides more evidence for her self-education, especially in the traditionally androcentric versions of American history and religion that her training has taught her to value.

One of the most interesting books I read is Abraham Lincoln. I admire him more than ever, and have learned so much regarding the history of his time. To continue United States history, I am reading of General Grant, or Grant in Peace. It is also interesting and instructive. I read two religious books, as
much for curiosity as for anything. They were *The Material Dawn* and *The Romance of Two Worlds*. (139)

Later, Tanner shows how her son Obert continues a tradition of bringing her books to read on history and religion, including *The Modern Use of the Bible* (1926) by Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Literature of the Old Testament in Its Historical Development* (1926) by Julius August Bewer, and *Literature of the New Testament* (1936) by Ernest Findlay Scott (324). Tanner meticulously records titles and authors such as these throughout her autobiography, documenting her own reading history and implying the value of self-education. She also alludes to the biographies she wrote about her mother and father. In order to avoid boasting too directly about this accomplishment, she includes a letter, dated January 10, 1934, written by Heber J. Grant, then president of the LDS Church, praising the merits of her father’s biography. A key sentence from the letter, written to Tanner’s brother Edward, who sent President Grant the biography, reads, “I congratulate your sister upon having written such a fine account of your father’s life” (323).

Although Tanner provides readers evidence of her independent intellectual pursuits, one of her disappointments in life is that she never gets to serve a Mormon mission, despite her early desire to do so (47). forfeited opportunities in her own life, such as a formal education and a Mormon mission, explain why Tanner writes extensively about her children’s accomplishments. Early in the autobiography, for example, she tries to console herself about the importance of missions for girls, observing that as women and mothers, “we can prepare the rising generation for that purpose, and we can become sufficiently acquainted with the principles of the Gospel to converse with strangers, that come into our midst, and lay down to them the Plan of Salvation” (53).12 Later on, however, she remarks that Obert’s mission to Germany fulfilled her own thwarted mission dreams. “I would never have felt that my life was complete without a missionary experience for, at least, one of my sons” (309).

Besides this desire to teach Mormon doctrine and promote education, independence, and personal authority, Tanner advocates open-mindedness toward other world religions. She emphasizes this value by relating a story about how she supports Obert on his mission:

In common with many people, my own religious concepts had gone through some evolutionary development, and I was anxious for Obert to have an understanding of religion in its broader sense, so I sent him a great many
books written by many religious teachers. In religious thought, I reasoned to myself, why not be a citizen of the world and learn what other people are thinking and teaching. (309)

By promoting the study of world religions, Tanner passes down her own awakened appreciation for other systems of belief. She hopes that her posterity and others will learn from her example and shun what she now views as religious intolerance. “I sometimes think that to boast about one's religion, and at the same time belittle that of another’s, is poor taste and almost unkind. Especially since, in the final analysis, circumstances of birth and environment often determine our membership” (310).

Tanner wants her children and grandchildren to cultivate appreciation for the world’s religions by obtaining a well-rounded education that includes other philosophies or beliefs attained by reading and traveling outside the confines of their Mormon community. In order to authorize her personal position on religious tolerance, Tanner invokes the ideological weight of Joseph Smith, Mormonism’s first prophet, who, she writes, implored his followers to “seek knowledge from all good books” (qtd. in Tanner 310). Learning about world religions includes Tanner’s resistance to American and probably Mormon isolationism. She argues, instead, for becoming a “citizen of the world.” While writing about the need for the United States to support England during World War II, she says, for example, “My religious thinking has been changed too. I do not believe now that ‘any’ condition is better than war. I account for my different attitude by the fact that I feel myself a citizen of the world and must share a responsibility for the welfare of peoples beyond our boundaries” (265).

Ensuring Her Children’s Education and Success

A Mormon matriarch such as Tanner writes her personal history first and foremost for her posterity. Like many women autobiographers, she cares deeply about her children and their success, as is emphasized in the autobiography’s title, A Mormon Mother. She relishes her role as life giver. Moreover, she believes her life story is inseparable from the life stories of her sons and daughters. Spending the second half of her autobiography chronicling the lives and deaths of those ten children, she maintains, “I could not write my biography without telling about my family. Their struggles and successes are all there is to write about”
(291). Since Tanner spends the first half of her autobiography focusing on her own personal background, not on her children’s lives, this claim is somewhat exaggerated. However, the remark demonstrates that like many other women autobiographers, who “pattern their life stories to reflect their sense of relationship with others” (Holly 226), Tanner feels that her own identity is uniquely tied to her children’s identities. Their struggles are her struggles; their successes are her successes. In fact, by meticulously recording those successes in her autobiography, she attains vicarious status herself as the mother of accomplished, well-educated children. “I remember of earnestly telling one of my boys after another of his escapades,” she admits, “my hope for success depended on him” (239). Then, her most startling admission: “If you should go wrong, I felt compelled to say, ‘my whole life would be a failure’” (239).

Each of Tanner’s ten living children achieves some form of academic or career success. Her autobiography works to prove that she facilitates their accomplishments, mostly alone and forced into poverty after being abandoned by their father (236). She writes, “I mention [the children’s] commonplace achievements, perhaps ordinary to the reader, but so important to me at that time, for they were the things I lived for. The children’s success was my single source of satisfaction. I lived and worked to give them every available opportunity. Their success was all I had” (250). Illustrating the many times she sacrificed such things as new underwear (250) or a coat (253) for herself, Tanner writes, “I felt that my hope of maintaining my dignity was to keep our poverty concealed” (250). With unwavering devotion, however, she claims her “dream” is finally realized “to have an educated family” (290). Later she boasts, “All of my children were equal to college work” and twice offers a string of paragraphs that list various children’s names and accomplishments (307–8). In particular, she writes that Herschel “has a prosperous business in the insurance department of the Brotherhood of the Railroad Trainmen,” LeVinz “teaches in the high school at Salt Lake,” Kneland “is an eminently successful lawyer,” Sheldon “is a full professor,” Lois “travels widely” and has a daughter who “attends College,” and Obert “graduated from law school and later studied philosophy at Harvard and Stanford. He is now teaching at Stanford University” (331). Her lists are mainly meant to document and also impress readers with the degree of learning that each of her children has achieved in the past and will likely continue in the future.

Toward the end of her autobiography, Tanner writes about one incident in particular that demonstrates the personal benefit to her from
having (seemingly) resigned herself to her own unfulfilled dreams but, nevertheless, having committed to her children’s education and success. Writing about the time she attended a university president’s reception with Sheldon, her seventh child and a professor of music, Tanner reminisces, “I had a delightful time and one of the reasons may have been that I had a vague consciousness of the contrast in being a ‘Nobody’ when a professor’s plural wife, and a ‘Somebody’ as a professor’s mother” (321). Here she reminds readers, once again, about the neglect of her husband, especially in contrast to the attention of her son. Furthermore, from this admission, it seems clear that her emphasis and “delight” in the second half of her autobiography over her children’s success is another strategy for supplying indirect evidence of her own personal success, especially as a mother.

Despite Tanner’s criticism of polygamy as oppressive to her and to other Mormon women as well, the autobiography’s introduction and conclusion frame her commitment to a personally revised and more “progressive” Mormon faith. In her first chapter, “Girlhood Homes,” she describes her early religious fervor, even as a child. “Religion . . . was responsible for most of the serious reflections of my childhood” (17). At the time, she says she did not see her “religious training . . . as a deterrent to our pleasures” (18). Likewise, in the autobiography’s final chapter, she mentions the “thriving branch of our church” that she continues to attend. Then, with religious overtones, she foregrounds the importance of her children, a rhetorical move that would speak directly to the sympathies of her Mormon, family-oriented audience. “My life has been simple, full of love, devotion, and service for my family” (335). This expression of “love” and “devotion” is sure to stave off any lingering criticism she might incur from some Latter-day Saints for criticizing the subordinated position of polygamous women in the early church.

Tanner concludes her autobiography, not in abject defeat or bitterness under the weight of a deprived life, but with a quaint homily that expresses her own brand of triumph: “Life is good to us all most any time if we ‘Catch the Sunshine’” (334). On her autobiography’s final page, she adds yet another seemingly simple verse that she claims to have patterned her life by. The verse’s first stanza hints, once again, that she believes people “shape” their own destinies and choose the attitude they will adopt toward the circumstances of their lives. “We shape ourselves, the joy and fear / Of which the coming life is made; / And fill our future atmosphere / With sunshine or with shade” (336). Her carefully shaped autobiography demonstrates that she wants to be viewed by all readers
as a person of hope, intellect, and action. In retrospect and with the painful past behind her, she purposely recreates the difficult struggles of her life story with an attitude of forgiveness and optimism, not bitterness and tears. Rather than darkness, her emphasis on simple “sunshine” is the legacy of hope, progress, and personal liberty this Mormon matriarch wants to pass on to family members, her Mormon community, and the American public. Yet no degree of optimism or faith can cover over the condemnation of polygamy she writes into her text. In effect, this courageous transgression is the most powerful and enduring aspect of her autobiographical act.