Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God

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In 1995–96 when I went up for tenure and promotion, Brigham Young University fired me, ostensibly for preaching doctrine heretical to the Mormon faith. The letter that informed me of the termination of my appointment noted that I had “enervated the very moral fiber” of the university. My “apostasy” was based, mainly, on the charge that I had stated in a talk at a conference organized by Mormons that I found comfort in meditating about Father and Mother in Heaven. Although BYU’s termination letter essentially depicted me as a heretic, it did not release me from teaching my last class in the summer of 1996; neither did my local ward (parish) leader begin excommunication proceedings. Having been hired to begin teaching in the fall of 1996 at a university in another state, I found that the ward I attended there saw me as a worthy, capable teacher of seven- and eight-year-olds, who were being prepared for a crucial Mormon rite, baptism into the church. Thus, in the aftermath of being fired from the flagship university of my church, I was left with the schizophrenic consciousness that mine was both a dangerous and an edifying voice, particularly in terms of teaching Mormon young people, considered the most precious segment of the faith.

One of the ironies of the whole episode was that I had learned of a Mother in Heaven from Mormonism, which professes belief in this deity. The very language I had used to articulate my thoughts about Mother and Father in Heaven came from my immersion in church rhetoric. Like Nightingale when she saw the bust of Juno, I experienced a kind of jouissance when realizing, as an adult, that my church provided a divine horizon or model
for female spiritual perfection, and it was important to me to express my thoughts about this female deity in a meaningful way. Apparently, though, I had made a mistake in thinking that I could publicly comment on praying to both parental deities without some kind of punishment from the Mormon patriarchy. Indeed, after experiencing the wrath of the Mormon male hierarchy, I came to see how appropriate the term “enervate” was to my termination from Brigham Young, for one of the meanings of “enervate” is “to castrate” or “unman.” In using the Mormon rhetoric of personal revelation to describe my experiences with a Mormon Mother and Father in Heaven, I, as a woman, had undermined the male leadership by taking away their absolute power to prophesy authoritatively on church doctrine and dogma. Quite simply, I had not masked my words with palimpsestic metaphors or feminine submission, and the Mormon patriarchs had not learned how to converse with its female members with anything but condescension. It is no surprise, then, that I was captivated by the stories and words of the grandmothers I write about here who conjured numerous ways to articulate their songs.