IN the closing chapter of his celebrated essay on laughter, Henri Bergson remarks that derisive humor is the universal corrective for deviancy in the social order. "By laughter society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it." The humor of malice, he says, has but one function, "to intimidate by humiliating."

The peculiar conduct of Mormon settlers in the Great Basin region invited such James summed up in a dozen words the prevailing sentiment which some 100 anti-Mormon works of fiction and twice as many book-length travel accounts tried to capture: "Mormonism we know to be a humbug and a rather nasty one."

Despite the prevalence of humorless invective, there was a segment of Gentile society which judged Mormonism as more ridiculous than wicked. Jocular ridicule, artistically confected by such notable humorists as Artemus Ward, Bill Nye, and Mark Twain, did much to channel anti-Mormon mockery on a more creative and conciliatory course.

The primary target for derision, understandably, was "that relic of barbarism by which woman is shamefully debased," the practice of polygamy. While the Gentile world had scoffed at Joseph Smith's "peepstones" and visions, it centered its subsequent hostility on the gross licentiousness, imagined or real, underlying Brigham Young's affinity for a plurality of wives, or as one detractor labeled it, his "numerical wifery." Cartoonists had a hey-day with Brother Brigham: his massive caricature, drooling with sensuality, appeared frequently in such prestigious periodicals as the British journal Punch, in illustrations for novels, and even found its way into the delightfully home-razored panoramas Artemus Ward used to illustrate his comic lectures. Brigham's nicknames elicited laughter everywhere: Uncle Brigham, Old Brig, Bigamy Young, King Brigham, The Tycoon of Utah, the Sultan of the Wasatch, The Mahomet of the West, The Great Marrier, The Mormon Bull, The Incestuous Saint, The Salt Lake Sodomite, The Sodom of the Occident, and The Puissant Procreator. Brigham was heralded "the husband to a multitude and father to a nation." Artemus Ward said of him that "he loved not wisely, but two hundred well....He is dreadfully married," said Ward, "he's the most married man I ever saw in my life!" Ward's humorous treatment of Brigham's polygamist capers established a climate of good-natured skepticism, playful irreverence, and sophisticated mirth which had a marked influence on the genial author of Roaughing It. Ward was much quoted in the late 1860s; journalists repeated his witticisms much as we retell those of popular stand-up comedians today. "I saw plurality at its best," claimed Ward. Here are a few examples of his light touch:

The pretty girls in Utah mostly marry Young.
Brigham's religion is singular and his wives are plural.
Out in Utah they practice Bigamy, Trigamy, and Brighamy.
Brigham got distracted and gave two of his children the same name.

This last quip, twitting the Mormon leader for his enormous progeny and short memory, belongs to an
One version of 1864 went as follows:

Brigham has contracted hundreds of wives for eternity through the ordinance of sealing, many of whom he has forgotten, even as to names and faces. He thus looks forward to spending his first years in Heaven in a state of perpetual suspense and twitier at every new arrival from the earth, expecting to hear announced by the celestial usher: “Another Mrs. Young!”

Of the same vintage is this popular story, one of many versions gathered by Austin Fife:

Brigham was walking down the street and met a young boy. “You're a fine lad,” he said, patting the boy on the head, “and whose little boy are you?” “Yours,” answered the boy.

A similar Gentile joke illustrates the conditions of family relationships in the suburbs of Salt Lake City:

Riding in the outskirts of the city one day, Brigham Young came upon two boys fighting. Descending from his carriage, he boxed their ears, and asked them whose boys they were. “Mother says we're Brigham Young’s,” whimpered one of the boys.

This joke is especially poignant because the boys do not recognize their father nor does Brigham know his own sons. It delineates the serious social and family problems which Gentiles and Mormon anti-polygamists alike perceived in the system.

Another version of this same joke cycle, related to me years ago by my grandfather, whose own father was a polygamist many times over, concerns Brigham's encounter of a young boy swearing at his playmate:

“You go to hell, you son of a bitch.” Brigham, exceedingly indignant, cuffed the youngster across the ear. “See here, young man, your father ought to be ashamed of you. Why, if I had a son like you, I'd, I'd…” “And just what would you do, father?” “Say, who in the hell are you, anyway?” “If you'd come around to see Ma a little more often you'd know. I'm your son Jonathan.”

A favorite theme of the Gentile press was Brigham’s reputation for unbridled lust. One example concerns the arrival of a young single girl from the East. She was introduced to Brigham. “How pleased I am to meet you,” said President Young. “Come in to my office, won’t you? I have a good bed there.”

Another story from the early 1860s tells of the visit of a Bishop Watt and his half-sister to Salt Lake.

Bishop Watt called on Brigham Young to know if he could marry his own half-sister. Brigham was not prepared to say; he had not received a revelation on those points. He wished to talk with Miss Watt on the subject. She came to see him, was young and pretty, a Scotch lassie, and Brigham concluded to marry her himself.

Balladry and song also reflect the theme of concupiscence. The best known example is the popular folksong, “Sweet Betsie from Pike,” in which one stanza focuses on Brigham’s lust:

They stopped at Salt Lake to inquire the way,
When Brigham declared that Sweet Betsie should stay,
But Betsie was skeered, run ‘round like a deer,
While Brigham stood pawin’ the ground like a steer.

Thomas Cheney offers this stanza as a variant:

They came down the mountain into old Salt Lake
Where Betsy met Brigham one evening quite late;
He asked her to stay, but Betsy said, “No”;
Brigham said, “If you don’t, to Hell you will go.”

Brigham’s celebrated lustiness rubbed off on his consorts, as exemplified by this anecdote about a polygamous wife who, irritated by the lack of frequent conjugal attention, took the initiative:

Brigham tiptoed down the hallway marking bedroom doors with chalk to remind himself which wife he would sleep with that night. One enterprising member of his harem slipped quietly from her room, erased the mark on her neighbor’s door, and placed it upon her own.

This story, worthy of Boccaccio, may be of Mormon rather than Gentile origin, as Fife implies, but it contains the interesting motif of Brigham’s faulty memory, popular to Gentile humor.

Other stories also depended on the general curiosity about Brigham’s sleeping arrangements. He slept in a mammoth bed, so one story goes, with five wives on each side. Being a heavy man and given to thrashing at night, he decided to protect his more delicate consorts by placing an enormous gong at the head of the bed. This he would strike once every time he shifted to the left and twice to the right. Alas, one aged wife, nearly deaf, failed to hear the gong. The post-mortem read: “She neglected to turn with the tide.”

Artemus Ward, the celebrated American humorist, gained a first-hand acquaintance with the folklore of polygamy in his role as columnist and news editor before turning to stand-up comedy routines. About the time that Artemus Ward was putting together his joking repertory about Brigham Young, drawn principally from obvious gags of Gentile origin, the following anti-Mormon story was being retold by newspaper correspondents:

The Mormon apostle Orson Pratt was about to depart for a mission in Europe. Pratt left behind thirty-seven wives and 128 children. In order not to miss the Overland coach, he commenced kissing his family goodbye the day previous to that set for his departure.

Artemus Ward borrowed the thrust of that story and refashioned it for his delightful lecture before the Queen of England:

Brigham told me confidentially that he shouldn’t get
married anymore. He says that all he wants now is to live in peace for the remainder of his days—and have his dying pillow soothed by the loving hands of his family. Well—that’s all right—that’s all right—I suppose—but if all his family soothe his dying pillow—he’ll have to go out-doors to die.21

A common saying about Mormon polygamy, attributed by Gentile wags to Brigham Young, reads like a scriptural aphorism:

The first principle of Mormonism is, that women air a good thing; and the second principle is, that you can’t have too much of a good thing.22

This brief overview of anti-Mormon mockery reaffirms the notion asserted in mid-Victorian imaginative literature that the Mormon polygamist was both a villain and a threat to human decency.23 That the jokes are factually false should not be troubling. As William A. Wilson has said about folklore, they are “psychologically true.”24 Mormons were seen as a barbarous and wildly hedonistic people.25

Society was angry because Brigham Young and his Mormons preached to the world approved labels of conduct (devotion, self-reliance, freedom of worship) while denying social norms (subjugation of women, plural marriage, lasciviousness). Thus hypocrisy looms as the central message behind anti-Mormon joking.26

The comic ridicule of Brigham Young, “head of the State and Territory of Matrimony,” thus illustrates Freud’s contention that society can take vicarious pleasure in punishing and ridiculing and scolding. Indeed, mockery imposed from without binds the deriding group together. Fortunately, pleasurabilities often emerge from the embers of strife. Derisive humor did little, perhaps, to change the course of human events, but it gave its best run, as Bergson said, at intimidating deviancy through humiliation.

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Notes
3. Bancroft Scraps. UC Berkeley (newspaper clipping of 11 June 1965). Polygamy was bracketed with slavery as the “twin relic of barbarism” in the Republican platform of 1856. The expression thereafter appeared in numerous speeches, editorials, and inflammatory writings.
5. Extracted from Bancroft Library newspaper collection.
8. Miscellaneous comedy material attributed to Artemus Ward, extracted from various biographical and critical studies on the humorist.27
10. USU Folklore Archives, courtesy of Dr. William A. Wilson.
17. Austin and Alta Fife, p. 118.
18. Ibid.
19. This is an example of Brigham Young jokelore of uncertain origin, available in diverse folklore archives (Berkeley, Brigham Young University, Utah State University). See also Richard M. Dorson, American Folklore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 120.
23. Apropos of this statement is the following comment from The London Herald of May 3, 1869: “There is not a week passes by but that the Mormons receive a castigation from the Western press, and they are looked on as fair sport for all kinds of misrepresentation and nonsense.” See Bancroft Scraps II, p. 766.
25. In this connection, Arthur Koestler’s assessment comes to mind, that the ridicule of a social group is easy to discharge when the group’s deviation, self-willed alienation, and distinctive peculiarities make it excessively backwardish. See The Act of Creation (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964), pp. 74-75.
26. Leonard Feinberg states that much of the pleasure of such humor “presumably comes from our consciousness of our own imperfections: it is gratifying to learn that others are also guilty of inadequacy or hypocrisy.” See Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1967), p. 212.