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## Representations of Nineteenth Century Mormonism in A Mormon Maid: A Cinematic Analysis

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## Representations of Nineteenth Century Mormonism in *A Mormon Maid*: A Cinematic Analysis

### Abstract

During the first quarter of the 20th century there was a trend in Hollywood to make films about Mormons. Practices such as polygamy created just the kind of sensationalism that attracted filmmakers (even Thomas Edison contributed with his 1902 film *A Trip to Salt Lake*). Many of these were B-pictures, but the 1917 film *A Mormon Maid* stands out because it was produced by a major production company (Paramount) and was backed by top director Cecil B. DeMille. It is often given passing reference, but very little genuine scholarship has been done on the film. A hundred years after its release, *A Mormon Maid* is remembered in name only. This paper is an in-depth analysis of the text as a reflection of and influence on the way the Mormon faith was perceived in the early twentieth century.

### Keywords

Latter-Day Saints, Mormons, Silent films, Orientalism, Racism

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## INTRODUCTION

*A Mormon Maid* (1917) is frequently referred to as a hallmark of social thought regarding the Mormon religion at the time it was made. It was one among several feature-length anti-polygamy films that were made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. *A Victim of the Mormons* (1911) was made in Denmark by August Blom and was highly successful, thus inciting the making of many more anti-polygamy films across the next decade. Many of these were exploitation films, but what is striking about *A Mormon Maid* is that it is a high-quality, mainstream production. It was produced by Jesse L. Lasky with Cecil B. DeMille, directed by Robert Z. Leonard, and starred Mae Murray. While it does still contain exaggeration and spectacle, its presentation is multifaceted with a representation of 19<sup>th</sup> century Mormonism that is neither gratuitously critical nor apologetic. It includes common perceptions of the faith as well as some elements that are consistent with certain aspects of Mormon history.

There is a scarcity of scholarship or even popular criticism of *A Mormon Maid*. It is often cited in articles referring to representations of Mormons in movies, but usually only in passing. A *New York Times* article on *The Best Two Years* (2004) says, “As long as there have been movies, Mormons have been ridiculed in them - - see 'A Mormon Maid' (1917), in which a lecherous polygamist stalks a young woman,” but the description ends there.<sup>1</sup> It also appears in a *Deseret News* article about how Mormons are portrayed by Hollywood, which includes a list of anti-

polygamy films that were made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but which does not even have the correct date (they cite it as being from 1913). In these and other references to *A Mormon Maid* (as well as many of the other films about Mormons), there tends to be a dismissive air. The films are either used for simplistic illustration, or they are dismissed for the way they represent the Mormon religion or culture. For example, *A Mormon Maid* is described as “LOLtastic” on Archive.org, encouraging a poor reading of the text.<sup>2</sup> In all of these examples the film is viewed as being uninformed, leading to the assumption that it is un-informing, which is far from true.

#### Timeline

- 1887 *A Study in Scarlet* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
- 1890 President Wilford Woodruff issues The Manifesto, ending the Mormon practice of plural marriage
- 1905 *A Trip to Salt Lake*, USA
- 1911 *A Victim of the Mormons*, Denmark
- 1917 *A Mormon Maid*, USA
- 1922 *Trapped by the Mormons*, Britain

Within the scholarly sphere, *A Mormon Maid* is often identified as being socially and historically significant, but little more. Gideon O. Burton and Randy Astle call it “the most significant anti-Mormon film of the silent era,” and give some description of its socio-historic relevance in their article “A History of

Mormon Cinema: First Wave.”<sup>3</sup> Burton and Astle (among others) also draw connections between *A Mormon Maid* and D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* released two years earlier.<sup>4</sup> The only article to look in depth at *A Mormon Maid* is Richard Alan Nelson’s 1987 sociological study of the film, “Commercial Propaganda in the Silent Film: A Case Study of *A Mormon Maid* (1917).” In the article he uses *A Mormon Maid* as an example of how films of this genre can act as “a barometer of popular culture attitudes towards minority religious groups.”<sup>5</sup> What is overwhelmingly absent from the academic discourse is genuine cinematic analysis of the film. Though the film is ubiquitously identified as a significant part of social and cinematic history, no material effort has been made to explore that significance through film-based analysis of the text.

A close study of *A Mormon Maid* reveals that it is hardly the unilateral “anti-Mormon” film it is so often marked as. It does not merely use film as a platform for broad distribution of anti-Mormon ideology; it instead embraces the powers of the cinematic medium to express complexities in America’s socio-religious history. While it does use sensationalism as an attention-grabber, it also exhibits tight storytelling, cinematic craft and artistry, nuanced acting, and conceptual sophistication.

There are three principle areas in which the film depicts 19<sup>th</sup> century Mormonism: Mormon leadership, Mormon marriage practices, and Mormons as a non-white minority group. These are common points of focus for outsiders looking in, but *A Mormon Maid* is unique in the way it approaches its coverage of these

topics. It is for that reason that filmic deconstruction is so critical to fully appreciating the value of *A Mormon Maid*.

## SYNOPSIS

*A Mormon Maid* centers on the members of the Hogue family, who live on the outskirts of civilization. A young Mormon man named Tom Rigdon (Frank Borzage) encounters their house and he and the Hogues' daughter, Dora (Mae Murray), begin talking. When Dora's parents, John and Nancy (Hobart Bosworth and Edythe Chapman) learn that Tom is Mormon, they ask him to leave. He warns that there are "Redskins" around and that he and his people could protect them, but John says he'll "take his chance with Indians – not with Mormons." Soon after Tom leaves, Indians attack the Hogue household. Tom finds out, and he and a group of Mormon men ride to their rescue. One of the apostles, Darius Burr (Noah Beery), takes an interest in Dora. The family is protected, but their home burns down, so they go with their Mormon saviors to "The City of the Saints." There, the Hogue family prospers and gains a good reputation. Tom begins courting Dora and they plan to marry when she turns eighteen.

Meanwhile, the Mormon leaders—a group of bearded men who roam the city in a pack overseeing the community's affairs—agree that Dora's father, John, needs to enter into Celestial marriage as an example. They call him to a council and force him to marry an unnamed woman. His daughter is brought in for the ceremony

also. The Lion of the Lord, who is performing the ceremony tells John that he can be relieved of his obligation if he will marry off his daughter. He says he will marry instead, but Dora interjects that she will marry so that her father does not have to. The committee responds by requiring both of them to marry. John marries the unnamed woman in that moment while Dora is promised to Darius Burr.

When Nancy learns that John has married a second wife, she shoots herself in the head. After Dora, John, and Tom bury her, they try to flee the “City of the Saints,” but are followed. John is shot and left for dead. Dora is brought back and a ceremony is held for her marriage to Darius. Just before, she reads the scripture on plural marriage, which says that a man is justified in espousing a wife if she is a virgin. At the ceremony, Dora says that according to Mormon law, she cannot marry Darius because she is not a virgin. She leaves and Tom meets her at her house, where she tells him that it was a lie to get out of marrying Darius. They are interrupted by an Avenging Angel, who drags Dora to Jordan Rock, where Darius waits to punish her for lying. Another Avenging Angel comes up behind Tom and whispers in his ear, then the two go to Jordan Rock. Tom fights one avenging angel while the other (strangely) aids Dora in fighting off Darius, whom she eventually shoots. The Avenging Angel takes off his hood—it is her father. John, Dora, and Tom ride away to safety, and the film ends.

### **MORMON LEADERSHIP**

*A Mormon Maid* focuses on two primary groups: those who are in leadership positions—the Lion of the Lord, the Avenging Angels, and Darius—and those who are new to the community—Tom and the Hogue family. Largely underrepresented are those who have longevity in the Church, but are not in leadership such as Darius’s wives. Far from being an oversight, this underrepresentation of long-time church members is indicative of the perception of the Mormon people, women especially, as brainwashed, submissive, and oppressed. The film exhibits poignant sympathy for the Mormon people, but heavily criticizes Mormon leadership.

The contrasting attitudes toward the Mormon people versus Mormon leadership is established in the opening scene, which shows the Mormons crossing the plains and declares that “their faith never faltered” in spite of sickness, hunger, and injury along the way. After painting them as victims of their situation, the film talks about their leader, whom they “trusted blindly even as they starved.” The Lion of the Lord who strongly resembles Mormon leader Brigham Young stands as that stern overseer of the Mormon people along with the apostle, Darius, and an unnamed group of about fifteen that (with the exception of one scene) is always pictured with the prophet.

As a young Mormon convert, Tom acts as a foil to Darius and the Lion of the Lord. When they are out riding, he breaks away from the group to go to the



Hogues' home in order to warn them and offer protection. He is not motivated by a desire to lure them into the Mormon community, but by a genuine desire to do good. Later, while Darius is ogling Dora, Tom is expressing concern for her well-being and the tragedy of their home burning down.

The scene after the Indian attack is brief and has no guiding intertitles, but the natural and nuanced acting is highly informing. John's relaxed gratitude is contrasted with Nancy's tense disquiet. When Darius first looks at Dora, his stare is intensely possessive and calculating. Beery keeps his face stern, except for a slight twitch in his mouth and quickly licking his lips. He relies primarily on his eyes to communicate Darius's inner monologue. Mae Murray has more dramatic facial expressions which suit the youth and vivacity of her character. Her eyes widen in response to Beery's leering, and she lowers her head under the pressure of his gaze. The significance of this moment is heightened through close-up shot reverse shots between Beery and Murray (Figure 1). This is the climax of the inciting incident—Darius's obsession drives the action through the rest of the film.



Figure 1. Shot reverse shot between Darius and Dora

The leadership is supported by an army of Avenging Angels who “[hold] the settlements in an iron ring.” The term “Avenging Angel” may be borrowed from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who used it as a descriptor of those entrusted with enforcing Mormon practices in his debut Sherlock Holmes story *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). In both the film and Conan Doyle’s story, the Avenging Angels guard entry into and exit from the Mormon community, and violently enforce religious practice as dictated by the religious leaders.<sup>6</sup>

The Avenging Angels in many ways resemble the Danites, also referred to as the “armies of Israel,” which were a historical military society which “sought to protect the God-given rights of the Latter-day Saints and to resist oppression.”<sup>7</sup> The intention of the group was to protect the church members from exterior hostility, but the scope reached beyond this. Very much in line with the behavior of the Avenging Angels, a journal reveals that the Danites were also involved in a kind of militaristic Church disciplinary action: “[W]e have a company...to clense the Church of verry great evils which hath hitherto existed among us, inasmuch as they cannot be put to rights by teachings & persuaysons [sic].”<sup>8</sup> The tone of this entry reflects the enforcing nature of the Avenging Angels, but it also creates tension with the Mormon doctrine of agency, which insists that individuals have the right and responsibility to choose between good and evil for themselves.

Tensions between ideology and practice are acknowledged in Mormon scripture. Doctrine and Covenants 121:39 says, “We have learned by sad

experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.” Unrighteous dominion, which in this case manifests as infringement on individual agency (or choice), is exhibited by every male leader in *A Mormon Maid*. For example, when John is told to take a second wife, he is brought before the council flanked by Avenging Angels like a defendant coming before a tribunal. His fate is being decided: either he will concede to the will of the leadership or else he will be executed.

Another of the ways these social and power dynamics manifest in the film is through the costume design (Figure 2). The Avenging Angels are easily identified



Figure 2. Member of the Avenging Angels.

by their white cloaks with a large all-seeing eye over the belly and a pointed hood covering their faces. The film calls them “400 oath-bound fanatics,” and in many

ways the costume turns them into machines that ruthlessly carry out orders. With faces hidden from view, mob mentality grows exponentially—they exist only as a collective, not as individuals. It is unclear where the costume designers received their inspiration for the Avenging Angels' regalia, though one of the intertitles provides this commentary: "This costume, but with a cross substituted for the 'Eye,' was later adopted by the 'Ku-Klux-Klan.'" There is no evidence that similar apparel was worn by any historical Mormon groups. It is much more likely that the costume designers borrowed the design from the KKK and then the filmmakers created a story to explain it. Without records from the costume designers it cannot be known with certainty, but whatever the motivations were, visual and verbal connection to the KKK effectively marks Mormons (or more specifically their leadership) as a violent extremist group.

There is one element of the Avenging Angel regalia that does have place within Mormon symbolism: the all-seeing eye. This imagery has been used extensively in Mormon architecture. On the Salt Lake Temple, for example, there are carvings of an all-seeing eye on both center towers. The eye can also be found on the Utah stone of the Washington Monument, several tabernacles, and the ZCMI signs. There is debate regarding the true source of this eye. There are those that believe the use of the eye and many other symbols and rituals is borrowed from the Masons (as is the eye on the United States seal). Others say that it comes from the Old Testament.

Perhaps one of the clearest references to God's eye is found in Proverbs 15:3: "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good."<sup>9</sup> Yet in the film, the eye is made sinister. The "angels" that wear it move around like faceless ghosts following the orders of their superiors. The all-seeing eye is also prominently featured in the council room. Far from intimating the verse from Proverbs, which describes God's watchful eye, the eye in the council room reinforces the tyrannical oversight of the council. It is an unusual, and even distracting, piece in an otherwise low-key set design.

The all-seeing leadership creates an uneasy sense of insecurity. With the Avenging Angels enforcing the leaders' mandates, once people are lured into the community they become stuck. There are no Avenging Angels seen corralling the pioneers across the plains to Utah, indicating that the Mormon people were traveling of their own free will, yet once they settle their community becomes almost a prison. This dynamic is critical to the way that Mormon marriage practices are presented.

### **REPRESENTATION OF MORMON MARRIAGE PRACTICES**

While the picture that *A Mormon Maid* paints of polygamy is far from representing the full spectrum of emotions and circumstances that can be found during the period in which plural marriage was practiced, it aptly shows a few of the problems that arose out of polygamy. Though plural marriage is portrayed as

compulsory (which it was not), the motivations that the film identifies for it are much more rooted in Mormon belief than in popular sentiment. For example, many opponents of polygamy condemned it as a product of the uncontrolled male libido. *A Mormon Maid* acknowledges this with the lusty stare that Darius gives Dora when he first meets her, but this is secondary to the film's much more prominent focus on the revelation on plural marriage in Doctrine and Covenants 132.<sup>10</sup> For example, the motivation for forcing John into taking a second wife is to use him as an example of Celestial marriage.

Celestial marriage and plural marriage were used synonymously because 19<sup>th</sup> century Mormons believed that polygamy was essential to obtaining the highest heavenly rewards. For men and women alike, entering into plural marriage was an act of faith. One plural wife wrote, “[N]othing but a firm desire to keep the commandment of the Lord could have induced a girl to marry in that way.”<sup>11</sup> By referencing Mormon scripture, the film acknowledges this act of devotion to some degree, but it also undercuts it by emphasizing obedience to the revelation, rather than obedience to God. In fact, the concept of God is essentially absent from the film (except for the marginal mention in the title “Lion of the Lord”). Without a connection to the divine, the practice of polygamy becomes a human invention that has to be enforced under duress.

The power of the leadership is enough to explain Dora's forced marriage to Darius in spite of being courted by Tom, but this pattern is also historically relevant.

Woven into the idea of Celestial marriage is the belief in dynastic marriage, which basically creates a familial web, linking members of the Mormon community to leaders, who are expected to be exalted.<sup>12</sup> As a result, men who advanced in the ranks of the Church were often particularly encouraged to marry additional wives. Though *A Mormon Maid* does not elaborate on this theology, it is consistent with it: this is why Dora would be betrothed to Darius, who is one of the Church elders, instead of Tom, who is only a recent convert and whose salvation is thus less sure.

A contrast in the ideologies of monogamy and polygamy is made through juxtaposition in the editing. There are two scenes in which the film cuts back and forth between the organic love developing between Tom and Dora and the forced relationships overseen by the leaders. The first instance occurs as Dora and Tom flirt and dream of marriage at her window. This is interrupted by cuts to the pack of Mormon leaders who are observing John and determining that it is time for him to enter plural marriage. The second instance oscillates between the council meeting in which John is being pressured into marriage and Tom and Dora on a date (Figure 3). The tone of one is austere and stifling, while the other is playful and pleasant. The juxtaposition places criticism on the leaders using compulsion to enforce plural marriage. In this scene Dora's ebullience quickly turns to dread when an Avenging Angel appears and separates her from Tom. Little by little the Avenging Angels begin to work their way into the details of the Hogues' lives, and

Dora's liberty to choose how and with whom to spend her time begins to be threatened.



Figure 3. Juxtaposition of Dora and Tom (L) and John and the Council (R)

Throughout the film, a sharp contrast is made between those who are still agents (Dora and Nancy), and those who have lost themselves in submission to the dominating men (the plural wives of Darius and John's second wife). None of the women who are well entrenched in Mormonism is named, and when Darius is in his home, the camera pans around the living room showing the expressionless faces of the women, each looking as if her identity has been stripped from her. By contrast, both Dora and Nancy refuse such a lifestyle—they will not give up their freedom and individuality. In Nancy's case, this comes in the form of suicide. In the context of the agent/subordinate dynamic, Nancy's choice to shoot herself becomes more than an act of despair and depression—it is an act of agency.

Like her mother, Dora also liberates herself. Neither Tom, nor any other man, comes in to save her from marrying Darius as they stand at the altar. Instead



she uses her own intellect and cleverness to escape her fate.<sup>13</sup> After she has escaped the marriage ceremony by confessing that she is not a virgin and therefore cannot marry Darius, she is abducted by an Avenging Angel and taken to Darius. Whatever the laws of the faith are, Darius's obsession with Dora has overridden them. Though Tom and John (also disguised as an Avenging Angel) come to rescue her, it is Dora who takes the kill shot that saves all three of them from Darius. (A previous scene when the Indians attack and Dora shoots a man from her window provides evidence that the shot that kills Darius is not lucky, but a product of her marksmanship.)

Within the context of *A Mormon Maid*, agency is expressed through rebellion against tyranny, but for 19<sup>th</sup> century Mormon women, agency was expressed through religious devotion. The individual as agent is a fundamental doctrine of Mormonism. The Book of Mormon says, "Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself."<sup>14</sup> A few verses later it emphasizes that people are free to choose between good and evil. The reason that "unrighteous dominion" is so problematic is that it infringes upon this power to choose and to act.

Any forced obedience is a form of unrighteous dominion, but sometimes the lines between compulsion and choice were blurred. In the case of plural marriage the choice was often posed as one between good and evil. As a result, women who loved God and wanted to obey Him felt compelled to participate in plural marriage, but for them this was an act of agency. By contrast, the film

strongly implies that women who are agents would not elect to enter into plural marriage, paralleling popular sentiment regarding the practice by outsiders. The degree to which many Mormon women felt that plural marriage was a mark of their agency is expressed in an indignation meeting held in 1870 in which between 3,000 and 4,000 women gathered to decry government officials seeking to eliminate the practice of polygamy in Utah. Though on the one hand the practice was considered by many women to be a kind of Abrahamic sacrifice, on the other they desperately fought for the religious liberty to practice this form of marriage that they viewed as essential to their eternal salvation and exaltation.<sup>15</sup>

In its very poignant condemnation of polygamy, the film redacts women's choice to participate in the practice, but it also captures some of the feelings expressed by Mormon women as they entered polygamy. These women came from a Protestant heritage and when polygamy was introduced it was as foreign to them as it was to the rest of the nation. Ultimately the nuances of the historical situation are acknowledged through *A Mormon Maid's* intertwining of fact and fiction.

#### **REPRESENTATION OF MORMONS AS NON-WHITE**

The leadership and the practice of plural marriage are the most overtly represented aspects of Mormonism in *A Mormon Maid*, but a third element is present that is striking in its historiographic accuracy and in its subtlety: the representation of Mormons as a non-white minority. Whereas some elements of the

film are overwhelmingly blatant, such as the *Avenging Angels*' costumes and forced polygamy, the suggestion that Mormons are separate from the white majority is much more subversive. I suspect that the filmmakers were not even cognizant of the way that the film associates Mormons with minority racial groups. Whereas the commentary on leadership and marriage was deliberate, the commentary on race is a manifestation of deeply entrenched social dynamics and prejudices that were still in force when the film was released in 1917.

In his book *A Religion of a Different Color*, Paul Reeve identifies that this hierarchy is based on socially-constructed (and socially-imposed) race identities. He argues that by associating Mormons with a non-white demographic, the Protestant majority can lower Mormons' social status. Any race would do for this project and as a result Mormons were tied to Natives, Chinese, Arabs, Africans, etc.—anything and everything that would separate them from the white majority. This lack of consistency is common, and is found within the film itself. In the case of *A Mormon Maid*, Mormons are primarily associated with two minority groups: Native Americans and Muslims, or “Muhammadans.”

The film identifies the place of Mormons within the social hierarchy of 19<sup>th</sup> century America by using the Western trope of threatening Natives versus the isolated frontier family. In the exposition, Mormon men ride across the plains like vigilantes protecting their people against any outside threats, which are inevitably Indians. But when Tom meets the Hogue family and offers his protection from the

“Redskins,” John replies, “I’d rather take my chance with Indians than Mormons,” thus identifying the Mormons as something both other and threatening.

John’s preference for Indians over Mormons may be related to the physical anonymity of Mormons. Reeves notes:

The irony, of course, was that 19th-century Mormons were overwhelmingly white and should have easily blended into the racial mainstream. Yet their ability to blend only seemed to exacerbate anxiety among outsiders, so much so that they grew increasingly intent upon seeing a difference where none existed.<sup>16</sup>

For John, Indians and Mormons both constitute a threat, but at least the physical differences of the Indians provided a visual cue that they were enemies. By contrast, Mormons might infiltrate undetected, as Tom did when he first met the Hogues.

There is no direct association made between Mormons and non-white groups, and instead the connection is created subconsciously through film language. Film theorists Robert Stam and Louise Spence note that in the Western, “[T]he attitude toward the Indian is premised on exteriority” created through “images of encirclement . . . The besieged wagon train or fort is the focus of our attention and sympathy, and from this centre our familiars sally out against unknown attackers characterized by inexplicable customs and irrational hostility” (Figure 4).<sup>17</sup> In *A Mormon Maid*, the Hogue household functions like the wagon train, which is first “besieged” by the unfamiliar Tom.

Dora is initially defensive when she sees Tom, but when she realizes that he is a white man, she lets down her guard. When Indians attack the house and some of the Mormon men ride to the defense of the Hogue family, it changes the threat dynamic and creates an opening for the Hogues to adopt the Mormons into their circle and, in turn, they are adopted into the Mormon circle. This process of



Figure 4. Indians circling the Hogues' cabin

adoption, however, does not ultimately redeem the Mormons of their status as other-than-white; instead it contaminates the Hogue family.

Through the rest of the film, the idea of Mormons as non-white is created through association to Islam, or “Muhammadism.” Association with Islam is significant both religiously and racially. From the beginning of the film, Mormon belief in Jesus is obscured by the omission of “Jesus Christ” in the name of the

Church. Though it is not overt, this omission suggests that Mormons are a non-Christian religion, thus separating Mormons from the Protestant majority. Emphasis on the practice of polygamy over other religious practices thematically associates them with Islam, which also has a history of polygamy. Vermont Representative Justin S. Morrill's 1857 remark illustrates this attitude well: "Under the guise of religion this people has established and seek to maintain and perpetuate, a Mohammedan barbarism revolting to the civilized world."<sup>18</sup>

Connections to Islam separate Mormons racially because it is viewed as a non-Western religion deeply tangled in Western concepts of Orientalism. In *A Mormon Maid* this is manifested in the costume design when plural wives are seen shrouded in black veils in the latter part of the film. After an unnamed woman is married to John, she is brought to his home wearing a black dress with a black veil over her face, which is clearly intended to be a mark of her oppression (Figure 5).



Figure 5. John's second wife in black veil.

Since Mormonism was often compared to “Muhammadism” in the 19th century, it is probable that the Islamic practice of wearing a veil, which has been (and continues to be) viewed as a sign of female inferiority, was used as a reference in the costume design for *A Mormon Maid*.

Classifying Mormons outside of the religious and racial mainstream in the 19th century laid a foundation for the very trend that *A Mormon Maid* rose out of. Because Mormons were identified as a foreign and even exotic group, they were prime subjects for sensationalized media. By the early twentieth century the separation of Mormons from the majority seemed to be a subconsciously-held standard that worked its way into the fabric of the film. In many ways this more subtle element is the foundation upon which the rest of the film is built.

## CONCLUSION

Through the quality of filmmaking, *A Mormon Maid* acknowledges some of the intricacies of both the history of Mormonism and the history of its representation. Growing out of that duality, *A Mormon Maid* is both a primary and a secondary document. It is primary because of the way it encapsulates 1917 thought, and secondary because of its attempt to give a fictionalized history of 19th century Mormons.

The opening shot of *A Mormon Maid* is of a book: *The Mormon Pioneers: Early Years of The Church of Latter Day Saints*. Grounding the film narrative in

literature (whether real or not) lends credibility to the story, helping the audience to suspend its disbelief. Though it is fantastical, *A Mormon Maid* actually seems to have been well-researched by the filmmakers. The use of Mormon scripture as a key in the plot development, the accurate depiction of ceremonial clothing in the marriage scene, and the reference to the historical Danites all support the idea that the filmmakers knew their subject and were deliberate in their deviations.<sup>19</sup>

As a film that is self-aware of its own sensationalism, *A Mormon Maid* expects intellectual engagement from its audience in determining what is factual and what is not. Since cinema is as much an industry as it is an art form, it smartly rides on the success of *A Victim of the Mormons* while also presenting a piece of cinema that merits praise for its storytelling and craftsmanship. So while it may fit in with the Mormon exploitation films for those who do not care to engage in the rigor of discernment, in actuality it stands out as a thoughtful presentation that demands the spectator to engage with some difficult elements of both Mormon and American history.

As a film that is often referenced, but rarely studied, it is a frontier for Mormon and film scholarship. This analysis constitutes a gateway for further study. Subsequent research might include a comparative study of *A Mormon Maid* and the other surviving films about Mormons from the era; a comparative study of *A Mormon Maid* and D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*; and research into the production process and release of the film, including letters written between Lasky



and DeMille as well as 1917 newspaper articles about the film. As the film is taken more seriously, the attitude of bemusement will be exchanged for insight into America's religious and cinematic past. Therefore, after more than a century of neglect, it is time for *A Mormon Maid* to emerge as a legitimate part of the Mormon history and film history dialogues.

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<sup>1</sup> Carlene Bauer, "The Cinema of Latter-Saints," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 31, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/31/magazine/the-cinema-of-latterday-saints.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "A Mormon Maid (1917, Mae Murray, Frank Borzage)" Archive.org, accessed July 31, 2018, <https://archive.org/details/AMormonMaid1917MaeMurrayFrankBorzage>.

<sup>3</sup> Gideon O. Burton and Randy Astle, "A History of Mormon Cinema: First Wave," in *Brigham Young University Studies* 46, No. 2, A Special Issue: Mormons and Film (2007): 24.

<sup>4</sup> Burton and Astle, "History of Mormon Cinema," 33.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Alan Nelson, "Commercial Propaganda in the Silent Film: A Case Study of 'A Mormon Maid' (1917)." *Film History* 1, no. 2 (1987): 149-62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815086>. Nelson also wrote two other article about Mormons in cinema: "From Antagonism to Acceptance: Mormons and the Silver Screen," and "A History of Latter-day Saint Screen Portrayals in the Anti-Mormon Film Era, 1905-1936." These provide some production details on *A Mormon Maid*, but once again lack a textual deconstruction.

<sup>6</sup> There are additional similarities between *A Study in Scarlet* and *A Mormon Maid*. Like the Hogue family, Conan Doyle's characters, John and Lucy Ferrier, are in danger and are saved by Mormons who then bring them into their community. Both families live in peace with the Mormons until the leadership determines that someone in the family needs to enter into plural marriage. Like Dora, Lucy is being courted by a young man (though in Lucy's case it is someone from outside the faith). Finally, both families try to escape the settlement and are stopped by the Avenging Angels.

<sup>7</sup> "Danites," *Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed April 9, 2015, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/topic/danites>.

<sup>8</sup> "Journal, March–September 1838," p. 61, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 31, 2018, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-march-september-1838/47>.

<sup>9</sup> Allen D. Roberts, "Where are the All-Seeing Eyes?" *Sunstone*, Vol 10 no 5, (May 1985), 36-48.

<sup>10</sup> The relationship between the Mormon practice of polygamy and sexuality was a complicated one. One reason for this is that Mormons had views on sexuality that reflected the broader culture, namely that women had subdued sexuality and men had more passionate sexuality. Nevertheless, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich notes that Mormons rejected the association of polygamy with male sexuality to the point that “a man who married multiple wives in order to indulge his lascivious impulse was as guilty of adultery as a monogamist who strayed from his marital vows.” In fact, during the Nauvoo period sex appears to not have been a common element of plural marriages. It wasn’t until the Mormons settled in Utah that it became standard for men to have children by several different wives. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 241.

<sup>11</sup> Kathryn M. Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System 1840-1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 116.

<sup>12</sup> Kathryn M. Daynes clarifies that exaltation has a very specific meaning to 19th century Mormons. It is not simply entering God’s Kingdom, but it is “the continuation of the family unit throughout eternity,” meaning that marriage—and more specifically plural marriage—was essential to exaltation. Daynes, *More Wives*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Dora’s self-liberation, in particular, is ahead of its time. One hundred years later mainstream cinema is just beginning to get comfortable with normalizing female protagonists who are agents in their own stories.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Nephi 2:16 (The Book of Mormon)

<sup>15</sup> Ulrich, *House Full of Females*, 233.

<sup>16</sup> W. Paul Reeve. *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Kindle Edition, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Stam and Louise Spence, “Colonialism, Racism, and Representation: An Introduction,” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. (New York: Oxford University, 2009), 759.

<sup>18</sup> Ulrich, *House Full of Females*, xi.

<sup>19</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints only recently released information on ceremonial clothing in the form of a video available on their website. Since the clothing is part of sacred worship practices, wearing and depicting it outside of Mormon temples is considered highly offensive. “Sacred Temple Clothing,” LDS Media Library, accessed July 31, 2018, <https://www.lds.org/media-library/video/2014-01-1460-sacred-temple-clothing?lang=eng>.

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