

# Distorting Polygamy for Fun and Profit: Artemus Ward and Mark Twain Among the Mormons

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To many nineteenth century readers, in America and abroad, Mormonism and its "peculiar institutions" were blatant affronts to decency, serious moral blemishes on the Christian escutcheon of the United States of America. To the majority of such readers, as Richard Bushman asserts, Mormons, as they were portrayed in popular literature, became "a foil, . . . the picture of what a good American was not."<sup>1</sup> As such, it was inevitable that Mormonism and things Mormon would become an important part of the standard bag of tricks of every American humorist from Josh Billings and Mark Twain to Max Adeler and Artemus Ward.

The Mormons were excellent targets for reform and exposé, as well as all types of humor. Sufficiently remote from the East and West coasts, isolated in the fortresses of the Rocky Mountains, and virtually independent of outside influences, the Latter-day Saints and their Territory of Deseret quickly became more than a gathering place for the faithful; they became, as well, a gathering place and focal point for a myriad of jokes, myths, and distortions which would long go uncorrected by the schooling hand of familiarity and first-hand knowledge. The very remoteness which protected the Saints from their enemies also allowed those same enemies (and even the apathetic) to fan the coals of ignorance into bright flames of bigotry.

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<sup>1</sup>Richard L. Bushman, "The Historians and Mormon Nauvoo," *Dialogue*, V (Spring, 1970), 58.

Indeed, as Leonard J. Arrington, Latter-day Saints Church Historian, has postulated, numerous popular ante-bellum anti-Mormon novels, together with the well-attended public lectures and writings of eminent nineteenth-century humorists, probably did much to influence national attitudes, and, consequently, national policies regarding the Mormons.<sup>2</sup>

But to the humorist the truth (at least the *truth* with a small "t") was not important, for he saw in the myths which grew up around Mormon doctrines and customs, especially around polygamy with Brigham Young as its prototype practitioner, an opportunity for a literary bonanza which would allow him to mine, unchallenged, the ubiquitous anti-Mormon claims of Mormon licentiousness, as well as the nebulous gothic horrors of death by Danite murderers and mysterious and secret Mormon ritual in forbidden temples. All of these fascinations would receive humorous attention, but the focus would remain on that which seemed to most of the humorists a chance to explore an apparently funny anachronism—a Turkish harem in the American Far West. The Mormon situation gave the humorist unlimited opportunity to exploit mock envy, ridiculous exaggeration, and wild hyperbole, as well as a chance to jab at what the non-Mormon world saw as a startling discrepancy between claims of religious piety and the apparent sensuality of polygamy.

Of course they knew better. At least Artemus Ward and Mark Twain, the two leading humorists of their decades, knew better. Twain, in *Roughing It*, admitted begrudgingly that Mormon society looked decent and hard-working, and Artemus Ward (the pseudonym for Charles Farrer Browne, 1834-1867), who made so much capital from his world-famous lecture, "Among the Mormons," had to admit soberly that "Apparently, the Mormon women are happy. . . . I saw plurality at its best, and I give it to you at its best." Then, fearful of popular opinion, he hastens to add, "I have shown the silver lining of this great social cloud. That back of this silver lining the cloud must be thick and black, I feel quite sure."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>See Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt, "Intolerable Zion: The Image of Mormonism in Nineteenth Century American Literature," *Western Humanities Review*, XXII (Summer, 1968), 243-260; also, "The Missouri and Illinois Mormons in Ante-Bellum Fiction," V (Spring, 1970), 37-50.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Farrer Browne (Artemus Ward), *The Complete Works of Charles F. Browne* (London: Chatto and Windus, Publishers, c. 1870), p. 235. All references to Ward's works cited in the text are from this edition.



It was not, however, "plurality at its best" that made for laughter on page or stage, and, consequently, Twain and Ward turned from the facts as they had learned them firsthand, to the myth which fascinated and delighted millions. Thus an anonymous reviewer in the *London Times* favorably reviewed Ward's Mormon lecture because it was "utterly free from offence, though the opportunities for offence given by the subject of Mormonism are obviously numerous." (p. 391) The myths which surrounded Mormonism were at once repelling yet titillating, and Artemus Ward and, to a lesser extent, Mark Twain seized upon this tension to excite wide reading and listening audiences by speaking with poker-faced solemnity about the perils of going, unattached, among the marrying Mormons. The laughter which the pair aroused in their writings and their lectures reverberates into the present at the same time that it sheds new light on the past.

A look, then, at Mark Twain's and Artemus Ward's humorous use of their popular Mormon material shows not only their own adherence to the anti-Mormon myth, despite their own experience to the contrary, but it also reveals clearly that despite Mark Twain's literary supremacy, it was Artemus Ward who realized and utilized the Mormon material to greater advantage. Such an examination also suggests that Mark Twain probably learned a great deal about handling his Mormon material from Ward and reveals that both of them, lionized as they were at home and abroad, hit very near the sensitivities of the English-speaking people regarding world opinion about Mormonism. The Mormon materials become, then, for literary and historical reasons alike, a fascinating prism on the past.

#### THE DIFFERENCES: TWAIN'S GENIUS VS. WARD'S BRILLIANCE

It is important here to establish the obvious: that regardless of Twain's relative failure to utilize with much success the Mormon material, he was, nevertheless, superior in his artistry to Artemus Ward. Ward was a lecturer who could understand and then shape his audience; but he had little patience with writing. Twain, also a fine lecturer, became a great writer, plumbing to its depths a well of natural genius. The differences are seen clearly in their handling of another mutual topic—Horace Greeley's unforgettable ride to Placerville.

As Artemus Ward told it to rollicking audiences it must have been a classic recountal. The story tells how Greeley, while making a celebrated progress through California, became impatient one late afternoon with the California Stage Company, which had been chartered to carry him the forty miles from Folsom to Placerville, in time for a 7 p.m. festivity in his honor. The Stage Company, writes Ward, said to Henry Monk, its crack driver, "Henry, this great man must be there by seven to-night." Monk accepted the charge. However, soon after departure, the great Greeley became impatient at the slow progress over rough roads and shouted to Monk, "Sir . . . are you aware that I must be in Placerville at seven o'clock tonight?" To which Monk drawls "I've got my orders," and continues his slow pace. In response to numerous similar protestations, Henry Monk merely repeats, "I've got my orders." Greeley becomes more and more upset. Then, suddenly, Henry Monk cuts loose and the horses begin a furious run, achieving, under the cursings and whippings of Monk, "a rate of speed never before achieved by stage horses." Bouncing about miserably, Greeley becomes furious and manages to scream "Do—on't—on't—on't you—u—u—think we—e—e—e shall get there by seven if we do—on't—on't—on't go so fast?" To which Henry Monk replies, "I've got my orders."

Frightened at the breakneck speed, Greeley begins to insist that Henry slow down, just as earlier he had urged him to speed up. Again, "I've got my orders" was the only response. Finally, irritated by Greeley's vociferous cries, Henry yells down to Greeley in astonishing democratic irreverence for the great:

I've got my orders! I work for the Californy Stage Company, *I* do. That's wot I *work* for. They said, "Git this man through by seving." An' this man's goin through. You bet. Gerlong! Whoo-ep!

The stunned Greeley roars, "Stop, you—maniac!" To which Monk answers "I've got my orders! *Keep your seat, Horace!*"

The story concludes with Henry Monk's driving determinedly through a welcoming party of soldiers, brass band and wagon-load of lovely damsels in milk-white dresses, refusing, with an "I've got my orders," to allow Greeley to disembark until he reaches Placerville, at "seving." Again he shouts to his nose-bleeding and bedraggled passenger, "Whoo-ep! KEEP YOUR SEAT, HORACE," and finishes the drive. Keeping



his emphasis on the exploitation of the genteel-vernacular tension and the resultant humor, Ward concludes the tale by pointing out that Monk enjoys a modest fame because of the adventure, and that Monk himself concludes always by noting, democratically that he "yields to no man in his admiration for Horace Greeley." (pp. 206-210)

Though undoubtedly exciting and hilarious when told orally, this tale lacks the finesse of Twain's similar tales. The genteel-vernacular tension is well drawn, as is the mock-heroic tone which characterized the frontier single-mindedness and brashness of Henry Monk. But Ward's tale has few of those literary touches which spring Mark Twain loose from his coterie of humorous friends and associates to launch him into orbit with the greats of American *belles-lettres*. In Ward's rendition there is no sense of narrator, no attempt to use the frame story, with its comments on the teller of the tale, no real attempt to deal in the subtleties which generally differentiate Twain's written yet oral humor from the oral yet written humor of Artemus Ward.

The point is made clear when one turns to *Roughing It* (1872), and to Twain's rendering of the same Greeley tale, a tale well-known in the Nevada Territory in the 1860s and one which Ward might well have heard from Twain himself during the week-long carouse in Virginia City in December, 1863. Writes Twain, relating the story as supposedly told to him by a stage driver.

I can tell you a most laughable thing, indeed, if you would like to listen to it. Horace Greeley went over this road once. When he was leaving Carson City he told the driver, Hank Monk, that he had an engagement to lecture at Placerville and was very anxious to go through quick. Hank Monk cracked his whip and started off at an awful pace. The coach bounced up and down in such a terrific way that it jolted the buttons off of Horace's coat, and finally shot his head clean through the roof of the stage, and then he yelled at Hank Monk and begged him to go easier—said he warn't in as much of a hurry as he was awhile ago. But Hank Monk said, "Keep your seat, Horace, and I'll get you there on time," and you bet you he did, too, what was left of him.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1959), pp. 137-138; 139-143, *passim*. First published in 1872 by The American publishing Company. All references to *Roughing It* in the text are from this edition.

Clearly, Twain's version of the story is abbreviated, told without any of Ward's details, and told by a vernacular teller. The tale has more of a drawl to it, and the "head through the roof of the stage" and the "what was left of him" conclusion heighten the drama of the "Keep your seat, Horace" punchline. Even this brief rendering seems, at least on paper, a better rendering than Ward's tale.

But Twain is not finished, and in his additional treatment of the tale we see clearly what Bernard DeVoto meant when he claimed that the chief difference between Twain and Ward was that Twain had the ability to borrow an inspiration and improve upon it. Thus Twain devotes nearly a whole chapter to the tale. After the above recounting, Twain relates how his persona hears the exact tale, repeated word for word, from a Denver man, from a calvary sergeant, from a Mormon preacher, and, finally, from a "poor wanderer who had lain down to die." The wanderer is revived and determines to show his thanks by remarking, "I can tell you a most laughable thing indeed. . . ." Twain promptly stifles the story in a marvelous, hyperbolic denunciation:

Suffering stranger, proceed at your peril. You see in me the melancholy wreck of a once stalwart and magnificent manhood. What has brought me to this? That thing which you are about to tell. Gradually, but surely, that tiresome old anecdote has sapped my strength, undermined my constitution, withered my life. Pity my helplessness. Spare me only just this once, and tell me about poor George Washington and his little hatchet for a change. (pp. 141-142)

Even then Twain is not finished. He adds, "We were saved. But not so the invalid. In trying to retain the anecdote in his system he strained himself and died in our arms." In a soaring conclusion, Twain then comments that he had heard "that deathless incident four hundred and eighty-one or eighty-two times." He insists that most men of letters, ancient and modern, real and imaginary, have utilized the same anecdote, and he adds that "I have heard that it is in the Talmud. I have been told that it is employed in the inquisition in Rome; and I now learn with regret that it is going to be set to music." The real grandeur of the Pacific Coast, he adds, is not the redwood trees of Yosemite, but, after all, "Hank Monk and his adventure with Horace Greeley." (p. 143)

Twain's four-fold repetition of the story, his exaggeration



of the effects on the wanderer when he is forbidden his telling, his hyperbole about the numerous repetitions he has endured demonstrate Samuel Clemens' genius triumphing dramatically over the performing brilliance of Charles Farrer Browne, just as DeVoto claims.

#### ARTEMUS WARD'S INFLUENCE ON MARK TWAIN

So Bernard DeVoto, a major American critic and devotee of Mark Twain, was right when he praised Twain's superiority as *the* humorist of the American nineteenth century. But when DeVoto, in his landmark defense of Twain in *Mark Twain's America* (1932), concludes his too-brief dismissal of Artemus Ward's influence on Twain by saying that the pair's "methods and their effects were antipathetic," he is wrong. And when he adds that "Their minds were disparate, their intentions antagonistic, their methods incommensurable,"<sup>5</sup> he is wrong again. In fact DeVoto's criticism, motivated primarily by Van Wyck Brooks' and others' attacks on Mark Twain, is often guilty of too much heat in defense of Twain, of feeling he must enhance Twain's reputation at any cost, in this case at the cost of Ward's already diminished reputation.

Since DeVoto made his vigorous declaration in 1932, few have ventured to contradict the results of his "conscientious study." Nevertheless, looking at Twain and Ward's treatment of Mormonism reveals that, in Twain's early writing at least, their minds and methods were not disparate; their intentions were not antagonistic. Working out of the same tradition, both of them saw Mormonism as a popular, humorous topic capable of yielding a great deal of low-grade ore, which they had the ability to mine effectively. Though Twain was clearly the native genius who was fast becoming an exciting writer, and though Artemus Ward was an exciting lecturer who had little respect for the written word, Twain's written yet oral humor and Ward's oral yet written humor were often similar. Moreover, in treating the Mormons at least, Twain's genius was often bested by Ward's brilliance.

Twain confessed that he had been influenced by Artemus Ward. Indeed, as Paul Fatout notes, Twain wrote and delivered a popular though condescending lecture on Ward in

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<sup>5</sup>Bernard DeVoto, *Mark Twain's America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1932) pp. 219, 221. Further references to DeVoto in the text are from this edition.

which he used Ward's life and humor for a pegboard on "which to hang jokes by Ward and by Mark Twain." So heavily dependent was Twain upon Ward's earlier lectures and humor that he "once introduced himself as Charles F. Clemens," and one reporter called Twain's lecture on Ward "Mark Ward on Artemus Twain."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, in his essay "How to Tell a Story," Twain acknowledges his admiration for Ward as a master lecturer, story teller, humorist, and master of the pause, that literary device so central to Twain's own writing and lecturing. And Twain's platform manner capitalized on the same deadpan seriousness, the pregnant pauses, folk logic and related absurdities, exaggerations, and not-so-innocent belch-in-the-parlor irreverences which made Ward immensely popular in the United States and England.

A significant area of Ward's influence on Twain is seen in their similar yet disparate handlings of Mormon materials. When Twain began writing *Innocents at Home*, which was to become *Roughing It*, his two-day experience among the Mormons was already over ten years old, and even later when he came to write the Mormon chapters as part of his overland journey, he wrote to his brother Orion "Do you remember any of the scenes, names, incidents or adventures of the coach trip?—for I remember next to nothing about the matter,"<sup>7</sup> and asked Orion to jot down some notes of reminiscence.

At the same time he had become familiar with Ward's then published lecture on the Mormons; and he knew of his late friend's enormous success with the lecture. He was aware of the literary potential of humorous jabs at what Artemus Ward had called "Bigamy, Trigamy, and Brighamism" (p. 515), was aware of the tide of anti-Mormonism which had emerged as a kind of popular anti-semitism in a country which delighted in attacking Irish-Catholics, Catholics in general, Masons, Mormons, and scandal-ridden administrations. It was natural, then that in writing the Mormon chapters in *Roughing It* Twain would turn to Ward's lectures and commentary on life among the Mormons—and he did.

Certainly in Ward's Mormon material, written shortly after his month-long stay among the Saints, Twain recognized a

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<sup>6</sup>Paul Fatout, *Mark Twain on the Lecture Circuit* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 152. Fatout gives a number of instances of Ward's influences on Twain's lecturing.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Henry Nash Smith's introduction to *Roughing It*, p. xiii.



freshness and interest which his own general inattentiveness and youthful nonchalance had prevented him from enjoying on his visit to Salt Lake City in 1862. Seizing the potential of Mormons as the target of humorous barbs, Ward had written a fictitious but wildly farcical account of a visit to Brigham Young which was published in the 1 November 1860 *Vanity Fair*. In that sketch he struck the pose he would take in 1864, when he wrote his popular lecture, "Artemus Ward Among the Mormons," following his real visit to the Saints.<sup>8</sup> In 1860 he writes, for example, that it takes Young "six weeks to kiss his wives. He don't do it only onct a yere & sez it is wuss nor cleanin house." After several fantastic experiences among a lot of "femaile Mormonesses," Ward "girdid up my Lions & fled the Seen. I packt up my duds & left Salt Lake, which is a 2nd Soddum & Germorrer, inhabited by as theavin & on-principled a set of retchis as ever drew Breth in any spot on the Globe." (p. 76)

This farcical jab at Brigham Young and his followers would return to haunt Ward, for in January 1864, he visited Great Salt Lake City, despite joshing warnings by Gentile friends that the Danites would get him. The Danites didn't get him, but the "Mountain Fever," a variety of typhoid fever, nearly did. On the evening following a real visit to President Young, Ward was felled with an attack of fever which nearly

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<sup>8</sup>In October, 1863, Ward, with E. P. Hingston as his manager, began a lecture tour of the Far West. It was a successful and important tour. He lectured to thousands in San Francisco and other West Coast communities, then moved inland to lecture to the miner circuit. At Virginia City, Ward struck up a friendship with Mark Twain. Later, Ward was influential in getting Twain's "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" published in a New York newspaper. At the conclusion of the mining circuit lectures Ward flipped a twenty dollar gold piece, exclaiming, "If it comes down eagle we'll go to the Mormons." It did and they did. Somewhat uncomfortable about the "Destroying Angels," Ward became even more uncomfortable when at one way station he asked a pretty Mormon wife, who said she was from Kirtland, Ohio, if she knew "a crazy old rascal there of the name of Martin Harris." "I did," the girl replied; "he was my father." In Salt Lake City, Ward registered at the Salt Lake House, where they were hosted by James Townsend, the landlord. In his illness, Ward was attended by Dr. Jonathan H. Williamson, post surgeon at Camp Douglas, but was so gravely ill that Hingston began making arrangements for transporting the body back home. Mrs. Townsend, James' second polygamous wife, cared for Ward, as did Mrs. Battershall, an elderly Englishwoman. Ward recovered and finally delivered his lecture on "Babes in the Woods" to the Mormons, on 8 February 1864. The Salt Lake Theater was packed, but receipts were only \$490.00, for many prominent Saints were admitted free. Returning to New York, Ward wrote his Mormon lecture, toured the East and the South, with two tours in New York. He left on 2 June 1866 for England, lecturing there until 23 January 1867. He became ill with tuberculosis, failed steadily, and died at Southampton on 6 March 1867, at thirty-four.

killed him, weakened as he was by excesses. Ironically, Ward, who had been reminded by Elder T. B. H. Stenhouse that Young had Ward's book in his library and that the humorist "ought not to have made ridicule of our Church," was nursed back to health by Mormon Relief Society women, and inquired after daily by Stenhouse who was sent by Brigham Young with gifts of wine and fruit. Ward would write to Twain on 21 January 1864, that "the saints have been wonderfully kind to me. I could not have been better or more tenderly nursed at home. God bless them all." (p. 158)

Ward's blessing on behalf of the Saints was short-lived, for even as Ward and his manager, E. P. Hingston, left Salt Lake City by sleigh, Ward countered Hingston's suggestion that Mormonism was a blend of Swedenborgianism and Mohammedanism with a terse "Petticoatism and plunder." Ward returned to New York, penned his Mormon lecture and his notes and essays on his stay among the Saints, and commissioned panorama to be painted about life among the polygamists, an idea which was to prove popular and make Ward the first humorist on the circuit to utilize the popular panorama device to illustrate his lectures. But, most important, Ward, unlike Twain, was able to utilize his firsthand experiences in a fresh and vivid way; the difference such freshness made in the treatment of the Mormon material is significant.

#### TWAIN AND WARD ON BRIGHAM YOUNG AND POLYGAMY

Artemus Ward's handling of the Mormons, in *Artemus Ward (His Travels) Among the Mormons*, in *Artemus Ward, His Lecture*, in *Artemus Ward: His Book*, and in *Essays and Sketches*, is much fresher than is Twain's in Chapters 13-16 of *Roughing It*. A study of these materials demonstrates the incisive freshness of Ward's material as opposed to the often strained nature of Twain's humor regarding the Book of Mormon (which he had apparently not read<sup>9</sup>). Such a study demonstrates as well that Artemus Ward, while not a genius or even a very good writer, was capable of brilliant humor and rich imagination. It also reveals Ward as a man from whom Twain, contrary to DeVoto's claim, took some important lessons. At no place is this so clear as in the Mormon

<sup>9</sup>See Richard H. Cracroft, "The Gentle Blasphemer: Mark Twain, Holy Scripture, and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies*, XI (Winter 1971), 119-140.



materials, and, more particularly, in their treatments of Brigham Young and polygamy.

Mark Twain's treatment of Brigham Young is generally disappointing. Most of his lines about the Mormon Prophet fall flat, as does his strained and irrelevant passage about Brigham Young patting Twain on the head and asking Twain's brother "Ah—your child, I presume? Boy or girl?" (p. 97)

Twain's best humor regarding Young occurs in the long recitation by a Gentile named Johnson concerning Young's difficulties with his wives. In the mock Exaggeration-of-my-Plight treatment already established by Artemus Ward, Twain has Brigham Young recite his woes: the breastpin given to his favorite which will have to be duplicated with every wife, costing him thousands of dollars; the money spent on papa's watches; the money spent on bedsteads—which Young attempts to regain by converting seventy-two bedsteads into one bedstead seven feet long and ninety-six feet wide; the resultant problem, of course, that the breathing of the slumbering wives caused the walls of the bedroom to suck in and push out. Brigham Young concludes this section with a remarkable piece of advice in which he urges Johnson not "to encumber yourself with a large family. . . . In a small family . . . only, you will find that comfort and peace of mind which are the best at last of the blessings this world is able to afford us. . . . *Take my word for it, ten or eleven wives is all you need—never go over it.*" (p. 108; italics added)

Ward is better than Twain on Brigham Young. In Ward one finds the origin of the Sage-Counsel-to-a-Young-man-from-an-Old-Polygamist which Twain uses. In a solemn (fictional) interview with Ward, Brigham Young says, "Artemus, my boy, you don't know how often a man marries against his will. Let me recite one case out of a hundred that has happened to myself." He then recites *his* woes: how he approached a family from Hoboken comprised of four lovely daughters, a mother, and two grandmothers, one with teeth, the other without. "I took," confesses Brigham, "a fancy to the youngest of the girls, and proposed." After reflection the girl replies that "I can't think of marrying you without you marry my three sisters as well." Brigham tells Ward that he agreed and approached their mother for consent. "No objections to your marrying my four girls," says she, "but you'll have to take me as well." After reflection, Young consents and goes

to the two grandmothers for their approval and receives a similar response. Young finally agrees, writes Ward, "to swallow the two old venerable antiques as a sort of sauce to the other five." (p. 517)

The same story recurs in Ward's work. On seeing one Mormon polygamist, Ward writes the man's marital history of his nuptials with several sisters, their mother and their grandmothers, and he concludes:

The family were in indigent circumstances, and they could not but congratulate themselves on securing a wealthy husband. It seemed to affect the grandmother deeply; for the first words she said on reaching her new home, were, "Now, thank God! I shall have my gruel reg'lar!" (p. 236)

Twain renders the same story, apparently heavily influenced by Ward, but he treats it briefly, cursorily, and with little imagination, though it is still funny. Twain writes how it is interesting to sit among the Gentiles and hear them tell how,

. . . some portly old frog of an elder, or a bishop, marries a girl—likes her, marries her sister—likes her, marries another sister—likes her, takes another—likes her, marries her mother—likes her, marries her father, grandfather, great grandfather, and comes back hungry and asks for more. (p. 102)

But while Johnson the Gentile is, in Twain, fascinated with Brigham Young's domestic arrangement, Ward is even more concerned. After quips about how "in Utah all the pretty girls mostly marry Young," or that Brigham "loves not wisely—but two hundred well," Ward ladles in such tidbits as the menu at the Young home which is comprised mostly of delicacies such as "Matrimonial Stews," Brigham's Lambs," "Domestic Broils," "Little Deers," with a choice for dessert of "Apples of Discord" or "Mormon Sweet-Hearts." (p. 144) He fusses at several places about Brigham's clothesline, noting that "I undertook to count their long stockings on the clothesline in [Young's] back-yard one day, and I used up the multiplication table in less than half an hour. It made me dizzy." (p. 236)

Ward's mock concern for Young's domestic confusions continues in another piece of advice from Young to Ward, again prefiguring Twain's treatment of Young's work about papa's watches and teething rings. Ward has Brigham complain to him that though he had recently married again "he says he



shall stop now." All he wants, claims Ward, on the authority of the Mormon Prophet, "is to live in peace for the remainder of his days—and have his dying pillow soothed by the loving hands of his family." But, Ward worries, "if *all* his family soothe his dying pillow—he'll have to go out-doors to die." (pp. 377-378) These and other such absurdities as Ward's showing a picture of Young surrounded by manifold wives and multiple children and adding drolly, "Ah, what is a home without a family," remind the attentive reader very much of Mark Twain, but also remind him that Ward predates Twain's treatment of the Mormons by nearly ten years and that Twain never wrote so well about Brigham Young.

Mark Twain's best Mormon humor occurs when he confesses, mockingly, that he had proposed to write the usual expose of polygamy—until he saw the Mormon women. Then, he soars:

I was touched. My heart was wiser than my head. It warmed toward these poor, ungainly, and pathetically homely creatures, and as I turned to hide the generous moisture in my eyes, I said, "No—the man that marries one of them has done an act of Christian charity which entitles him to the kindly applause of mankind, not their censure—and the man that marries sixty of them has done a deed of open-handed generosity so sublime that the nations should stand uncovered in his presence and worship in silence. (p. 101)

This is probably the best literary and humorous moment in Twain's three Mormon chapters, and its humor, like charity, never faileth.

Unfortunately, however, the few really successful moments in the Mormon segments of *Roughing It* are offset by the dreary and too frequently non-humorous attempts to convert the Book of Mormon into literary wealth. Twain, who prefigures his own rather feeble attempts to do the same thing in *Christian Science* (1907), with Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health*, finds himself in the dilemma of having to explain the book's contents before he can make fun of it—and the attempt falls flat, despite a few good lines. Again, Twain may have got the idea from Ward, who publishes in his book the whole Section 132 of The Book of Doctrine and Covenants, commenting: "The Book of Mormon is ponderous, but gloomy, and at times incoherent [he hadn't read it either]. . . .

But the Revelation of Joseph Smith in regards to the absorbing question of plurality or polygamy may be of sufficient interest to reproduce here." (p. 237) Twain had not read the Book of Mormon with anything like attention or concentration<sup>10</sup>—and it seems Ward was likewise guilty, but it was Ward who wisely overcame the temptation to use the book and Twain who stumbled into transgression.

In fact, it is Ward who again and again demonstrates a better sense of humor and audience, in regard to the Mormon materials at least, than Twain. Whether commenting that Heber C. Kimball, counselor to President Young, had "one thousand head of cattle and a hundred head of wives" (p. 378), or refusing Kimball's supposed offer of a turn on the dance floor with one of his wives, "a thing," Ward wrote, which makes "a Mormon ball more spicy than a Gentile one" (p. 235), or noting irreverently that Heber C. Kimball will "wear the Mormon belt when Brigham leaves the ring," Ward demonstrates a keen sense of the incongruity between Mormon life and mainstream American life, and he capitalizes on his sensitivity.

He capitalizes especially on the Poor-Gentile-in-the-Midst-of-the-Harem accounts, and delights in relating a farce of how he fought off seventeen Mormon widows, and was forced to refuse their proffered hand. When they responded with "O—cruel man! This is too much—oh! too much," he parries with "I told them that it was on account of the muchness that I declined." (p. 380) And to another group of imploring widows who cry that he must not "dash . . . the cup of happiness from [his] life," he retorts that "I have no objection to a cup, but I cannot stand an entire hogshead." (p. 515) And again he shows his sense of the humorous incongruity of Mormon polygamy amidst gentile monogamy when he relates how an irate Saint and his twenty-four wives left the Salt Lake Theater during a romantic play, *The Lady of Lyons*, because the polygamist patriarch couldn't stand to "see a play where a man made such a cussed fuss over *one* woman." (p. 222)

A final example will suffice in demonstrating Ward's ability to render the Mormon situation humorously. In a *Mormon Romance*—*Reginald Gloverson*, a fractured sketch in the condensed novels tradition of Bret Harte, Ward describes the

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid.



parting of Reginald, a Mormon mule-skinner, from his wives, prior to his trip East. Says Reginald to his assembled lovelies:

I know that every night as I lay down on the broad starlit prairie, your bright faces will come to me in my dreams, and make my slumbers sweet and gentle. You, Emily, with your mild blue eyes; and you, Henrietta, with your splendid black hair; and you, Nelly, with your hair so brightly, beautifully golden; and you, Mollie, with your cheeks so downy; and you, Betsy with your wine-red lips—far more delicious though, than any wine I ever tasted; and you, Maria, with your winsome voice; and you, Susan, with your—with your—that is to say, Susan, with your—and the other thirteen of you, each so good and beautiful, will come to me in sweet dreams, will you not Dearestists?" (p. 280)

He departs, dies, and causes consternation—especially as his wives are left to debate their relative positions behind the bier—a debate they resolve by walking twenty abreast. Two years later a young Mormon already blessed with twenty-five wives proposes to the group and is accepted, whereupon he says, "we will show the world a striking illustration of the beauty and truth of the noble lines. . . . 'Twenty-one souls with a single thought, Twenty-one hearts that beat as one.' " Concludes Ward, in a mock confusion and illogic worthy of Twain:

Does not the moral of this romance show that—does it not, in fact show that however many there may be of a young widow woman—or rather, does it not show that whatever number of persons one woman may consist of—well, never mind what it *shows*. Only this writing Mormon romances is confusing to the intellect. You try it and see. (p. 284)

#### CONCLUSION: ARTEMUS WARD'S SIGNIFICANCE

If writing about Mormons was confusing to Ward's intellect, it was because writing in general was a thing he professed to dislike. He saw himself as a humorous lecturer who disliked freezing his humor in print—he needed a living and lively audience and he was confident in his ability to enliven them. Yet he was, after all, experienced with the pen. He had served as a contributor and editor on B. P. Shillaber's (Mrs. Partington) *Carpet Bag*, as an editor for several papers, including the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, as a contributor to *Vanity Fair* and London's prestigious *Punch*. In reality, then, his writ-

ing background was similar to Twain's when Twain began to write *Roughing It*. Naturally we might conjecture on Ward's future, had he lived—on whether he would have become, given time and desire, a writer, or whether he would have followed into oblivion the other humorists who quickly blossomed then faded from the scene. His collected works seem to demonstrate that, despite his protestations, he was moving, as would Twain, toward writing as a profession. Still, lacking the South and the River and the vernacular and Twain's genius as the basis for his form and content, Ward may never have succeeded as anything but the "genial showman" he was at his untimely death.

But, as I have attempted to demonstrate, Artemus Ward's work, though rough, should not lightly be dismissed, as it so often has been. His prose and his lecture about Mormons show that his methods and effects were not antipathetic to those of Twain. There are striking similarities. While some of those similarities have sprung from a shared tradition, it appears that, in the Mormon material at least, Twain was strongly influenced by his erstwhile friend. At least he was much more influenced than Bernard DeVoto would claim (whose desire to pontificate led sometimes to careless generalizations) when he wrote that Ward's influence amounted to no more than "fifty words in [Twain's] collected works." (p. 221)

Clearly, Twain's was the greater fictional imagination, and, as the Horace Greeley story demonstrates, Twain's imagination was staggeringly fertile and his prose generally more effective than Ward's, but it does not detract from Twain's safe reputation to add that, in the use of the Mormon materials, which he may well have seen as belonging to his late friend Artemus Ward, Twain seems intimidated and unsatisfying, and, in most places, the lesser artist of the two.

Melville Landon, better known as Eli Perkins, may have overstated when he called his friend Artemus Ward the "father of American humor,"<sup>11</sup> but at least it is time to reconsider Ward's role as a solid influence on the life and art of Mark Twain. It is time to reconsider DeVoto's dismissal of Ward, based as it seems to have been on some fear for Twain's repu-

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<sup>11</sup>Landon, *Eli Perkins: Thirty Years of Wit* (New York: Cassell Publishing Co., 1891), p. 168.



tation. It is time to credit Ward's minor but significant role<sup>12</sup> as an often brilliant and imaginative humorist who not only showed Mark Twain some of the tricks of the writing and lecturing game, but on occasion even bested him. It is, finally, time to look more closely at Ward's (and Twain's) account of the Mormons—at the myths and falsehoods which Ward and Twain knowingly perpetuated about the often misunderstood doctrines of an oft-maligned Church, at the insights their portraits give into late nineteenth century American and British attitudes and misconceptions about the life and culture and doctrines of the Latter-day Saints.

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<sup>12</sup>For further bibliographical information on Ward, see Don C. Seitz, *Artemus Ward: A Biography and Bibliography* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1919); James C. Austin, *Artemus Ward* (New York: Twayne Publications Inc., 1964). Several important articles have been written on Ward, including Stanley T. Williams' "Artemus the Delicious," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XXVIII (1952), 214-227.