

*SENSATIONAL VIRTUE:
NINETEENTH-CENTURY
MORMON FICTION
AND AMERICAN POPULAR TASTE*

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BEFORE 1900, novels about Mormons ranged from the amateurish to the slick, from the scurrilous to the rather even-handed, from the realistic to the wildly imaginary. Their one common thread was that almost all of them condemned Mormons for their greed, their violence, their vulgarity and particularly, of course, for their marriage practices. Leonard Arrington and Jon Haupt conclude their article, "Intolerable Zion: The Image of Mormonism in Nineteenth Century American Literature," with a list of no fewer than fifty Mormon novels published before the turn of the century, several of which went through more than one edition.¹ The length of this list—and it does not include plays, short stories, or travelers' accounts—may seem surprising: every year of the last half of the nineteenth century brought forth an average of one novel set in Nauvoo or Salt Lake.

For Mormon readers today, the subject-matter of Mormon novels lends them a peculiar under-the-counter fascination. We search them out, isolate them as curiosities in special lists, and even read them, with a certain smug and smiling amazement. At the same time, of course, we derive valuable historical and sociological information as to how Mormons were perceived. But it is important to realize that these novels do not really constitute a unique literary sub-genre. The more familiar one is with the kind of novel the vast American reading public demanded during these decades, the easier it is to understand the allure that Mormon subject matter held for the novelists who aimed to satisfy this demand.

This discussion will show the place of Mormon novels in the mainstream of American popular fiction in the last half of the nineteenth century. Though their religious and geographical setting may distinguish these fifty novels,

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theme and technique do not; they are simply a small, typical sampling of predictable fictional models. The authors who turned out fiction according to these models were glad for a new locale, a new set of exotic themes supposedly based on fact, and a chance to dust off such stock characters as the brutal husband, the suffering wife, and the innocent child. While Mormons for their part rejoiced in the divine origins of their religion, the novelists, too, welcomed Mormonism as their own kind of godsend: a combination of mysterious doctrines, incredible iniquities, and pathetic human interest that perfectly answered the tastes of millions of nineteenth-century Americans, mostly female, who loved nothing better than to escape into the romance, adventures, and implausibilities of popular fiction.

Most of these novelists, of course, would have had us believe that it was not popular taste that guided them, but rather their moral and Christian duty. When word spread that Mormons were practicing a marriage system that defied centuries of Christian moral sanctions, the antipolygamy cause—and polygamy is the main focus of more than half of these fifty novels—set off an explosion of energy among reform-minded writers. In the East and Midwest were groups of Protestant women organized in what Nancy Cott has termed the “nineteenth-century women’s voluntary movement,” groups that “institutionalized the idea that women’s pious influence . . . could reform the world.”² Since these women were already mobilized on behalf of the poor, the drunk, the fallen, the heathen, and the orphaned, why not add a new set of unfortunates—the wives and children of polygamy—to the list of those who needed rescue? Particularly after the Civil War, when reformers could no longer rally around the cause of Abolition, the second of the twin relics of barbarism became a welcome target for their zeal. Nancy Cott has pointed out the overlap in the personnel of the various reform movements,³ and Arrington and Haupt have commented that “women who wrote anti-polygamy novels were often leaders in the temperance movement.”⁴ Evidently the choice of the particular evil that needed to be stamped out was a secondary matter. More significant, for female writers especially, was the opportunity to do something of consequence, to function in an approved non-ornamental and non-trivial way by writing a novel to arouse the conscience of America.

So every novel, no matter how sensationalist, could claim a social and moral justification. After all, if the Christian community was to realize the enormity of the horror that threatened them on their very continent, then the public must be informed and aroused. Some books carried elaborate endorsements of the writer’s high-minded intentions. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote a preface to Mrs. Stenhouse’s widely-read *An Englishwoman in Utah: The Story of A Life’s Experience in Mormonism*: “May we not then hope that the hour is come to loose the bonds of cruel slavery whose chains have cut into the very hearts of thousands of our sisters . . .”⁵ Press notices included in *The Fate of Madame LaTour* expressed the hope that this book would expose polygamy as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had exposed slavery,⁶ and another novel by the same author, *In the Toils*, carried a prefatory note of approval by John Greenleaf Whittier.⁷

Only a cynic would wish to discredit the motives of all of these writers.⁸ But the American public adored the clichés of second-rate fiction, and the fact remains that even the best-intentioned of the Mormon novels falls unmistakably into these clichés. A novel with a Mormon setting was well suited to the requirement of any one of the major sub-genres of the nineteenth-century popular novel, and could even offer the attractions of all these sub-genres in one volume. For gothic preferences, the motifs of pursuit, murder and banditry were well supplied by the Danites, for example; the requisite oversized, gloomy gothic setting was of course the Nauvoo or Salt Lake Temple, or in some instances the caves and canyons of Utah; abduction and imprisonment, secret rites and priestly orders—all these hallmarks of gothic fantasy the Mormons could provide in splendid abundance. The second popular fictional mode, the domestic novel, centered on the triumph of womanly work and devotion amid personal and family trials. What more tragic adversity than polygamy, the antithesis of the hearthside ideal of single-minded romantic devotion and moral example?⁹ And we have already noted the relationship to the third major category of popular fiction, the stepping-heavenward or the exposé-of-wickedness novel. The Mormon novel was, or at least pretended to be, a novel of social and religious betterment. If fiction could fight slavery, liquor, and Catholicism, surely it could fight Mormonism too.

It is not only in their overall fictional type but also in their more specific incidents that the Mormon novels fulfill the well-established popular expectations. Herbert Ross Brown has suggested a "triune of beauties" that lay behind the sentimental attraction of popular fiction: "seduction, suicide, and sensibility."¹⁰ A Mormon setting provided endless opportunities for variations on these themes. The mere mention of polygamy, of course, suggested all sorts of possibilities for seduction. And the isolation and entrapment of desperate Mormon wives led them frequently to think of the second of the "triune of beauties"—suicide. Women in the Mormon novels often threaten suicide and sometimes carry it out. In *Salt-Lake Fruit: A Latter-Day Romance*, the desperate Mrs. Berry leaps with her little son into a well.¹¹ But usually the brave heroine's sense of womanly responsibility prevails, and she comes to realize that she can't just call things off. Helen Woodford, in *The Fate of Madame LaTour*, finds the stream too shallow to drown in after her husband arrives at her door with his two new wives.

'There are other ways,' she said aloud, remembering the pistol that was lying in a corner of her trunk. But at last her trance was broken by a voice that she knew—the voice of her first-born. 'Mother! mother!' the boy called, in accents of agony and terror. Of what had she been thinking? Was her life her own to end when it became unbearable? No. It belonged to her children, and for them she would live it out.¹²

The third of the "beauties"—sensibility—is perhaps the most interesting and complex of these conventions with regard not only to the Mormon novel



“HAVE MERCY ON US, POOR SINNERS!”

From *Salt-Lake Fruit: A Latter-Day Romance*. By An American.

but also to the popular view of female character. Sensibility was the belief in instincts and sentiments as a guide to truth and conduct. Women, particularly, were expected to feel an innate, infallible attraction toward what was refining and good, and a repulsion toward all that was wicked and low. So even though it may have been her very womanliness (given women's "natural" and proper inclination to trust men and submit to them¹³) that originally led her into polygamy, this womanliness would eventually whisper to her that her situation and her surroundings were unconscionable. The laws of God and nature could never sanction polygamy. Many of the novelists seized the chance to describe the heartbreaking contrast between the crude, callous, insensate Mormon society and the pathetic heroine of sensibility suddenly thrust into its midst. After Margaret Fletcher marries Richard Wilde in *Lives of Female Mormons*, we learn that she tries to accustom herself to life in Salt Lake.

She was very much disappointed in the character of the community generally. She was a stout republican, and yet she felt it impossible to fraternize with some who claimed her friendship. . . . "I cannot forget my Puritan education, Richard, far enough to associate with those women without a shudder."¹⁴

Even her deathbed utterance refers to the tragic gulf between her own well-bred refined sensibility and her uncivilized surroundings: "She prayed for the whole of that polluted city, as Christ prayed upon the cross—Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."¹⁵

Virtually any cliché that can be drawn from popular fiction can be duplicated repeatedly in Mormon fiction. Over and over again, women in these novels sacrifice their happiness upon the altar of duty;¹⁶ little children speak holy truths from their innocent mouths;¹⁷ an unsuspected blood relationship (certainly a strong fictional possibility, given the irregular conduct and multiple marriages of Mormon men) is discovered at the last moment.¹⁸ And the mesmeric influences or "Animal Magnetism" that wove the downfall of so many heroines seemed to be part of the arsenal of any holder of the Mormon priesthood.¹⁹

And what sort of fictional woman was this who found herself the wife of a Mormon polygamist? In discussing images of Mormons in fiction, Arrington and Haupt limit themselves to images of Mormon men. There is not much variety: the abusive and drunken husband, the white slave procurer, the seducer, the lustful Turk, the slaveholder. And a look at the Mormon woman adds up to a stereotype even more uniform. Her most important attribute is that she is blameless. We would surely not expect to see the heroine of our novel enter this nefarious marriage system willingly; how could a reader identify with and weep over the lot of a woman who had done something so contrary to the inner dictates of true, sensitive womanhood? And American readers expected their heroines to be virtuous. In her study *All the Happy Endings*, Helen Papashvily points out that for more than a century

the fallen woman vanished from the novel of native origin. In England and Europe a frail creature might still stoop to folly, but not a popular American heroine. *She* had to be drugged, tricked, coerced, mesmerized, hypnotized, or otherwise ensnared, for never of her own free will and knowledge would a trueborn daughter of the Republic accept a relationship outside of marriage.²⁰

But a blameless heroine is not an invincible heroine, and for the sake of novelistic interest the heroine must be vulnerable to something; she must get into trouble somehow. The guileless woman in a Mormon novel might begin as a trusting young bride who naturally expects to be the first and only wife; perhaps she and her husband have never heard of Mormonism as the novel opens. After the husband takes another wife, having succumbed first to the baleful doctrines of Mormonism and then to the threats of Mormon vigilantes, the heroine is trapped by geographical isolation, by the pressures of Mormon society, and most of all by an obligation every monogamous wife could understand—her duty to her children. Or, less frequently, an innocent woman might find herself married to a Mormon because her helpless and trusting nature has yielded to some mysterious, compelling power. When Richard Wilde announces in *Lives of Female Mormons*, "Maggie, I have had a vision. It has been revealed to me what I must do. But before I tell you, you must promise me to be reconciled to the will of the Lord, as revealed by the Spirit to me,"²¹ he represents just another manifestation of the mysterious power of the magnetic male personality over the naturally submissive female.

Popular fiction almost always takes for granted a benevolent universe, an order of things that will punish wickedness, reward innocence, and restore losses. The erring husband returns to his wife and begs her forgiveness, the patient and industrious orphan marries into wealth, a woman through her unflinching example and devotion reforms an atheistic or alcoholic husband or brother. But the fate of a polygamous wife is an exception. Almost always she meets a tragic death in the final pages of the novel, without justice or restitution, at least in terms of her earthly life. She is not restored to a proper monogamous marriage, or even to the decent "Christian" society that she has so tragically been severed from. Hers is the perfect passive, female triumph, the testimony of her integrity, the only retaliation available to her. The metaphorical statement clearly is that there is no place in society for a woman stained by polygamous associations, innocent though she may have been of any evil motive.

And the heroine's death carried with it a second metaphorical implication. While the reader may have enjoyed identifying with the pathetically attractive heroine, pretending to *be* this wronged and sensitive woman, she also must have enjoyed *not* being that woman. She could enjoy a feeling of superiority; *she* was not in such a fix; *she* had not blundered into the camp of the Mormons. The message was that though her monogamous responsibilities might be difficult and unglamorous, still they earned her a place in life and in society. As popular fiction must do, the Mormon novel validated her world and reinforced the norms and principles that society expected her to follow.



OVER AT LAST.

From *An Englishwoman in Utah: The Story of a Life's Experience in Mormonism* by Mrs. T. B. H. Stenhouse.

Almost invariably, writing that appeals to middle-class tastes will ultimately reinforce accepted values. The novel must finish by exalting and approving right behavior in the framework of religious and ethical beliefs, and so popular fiction does not overtly seek to undermine the social order. But the whole point of popular fiction is to take the reader on a temporary escape from this framework of everyday values,²² to set awry the givens in order to provide wish-fulfillment and fantasy stimulation.

One of the givens often dispensed with in nineteenth-century fiction was that of monogamy. The widespread "multiple spouse" theme was not by any means limited to Mormon novels; polygamy, in both its polyandrous and polygynous varieties, was a mainstay of popular fiction.²³ The mass-market novels, like literature of much higher quality, suggested that "polygamy" of one sort or another might occur for many reasons. In a repetition of the Enoch Arden motif, a shipwrecked husband might return after a long absence to find his wife happily married to another man; in the Rochester motif, the husband of a hopeless and diabolical maniac might be driven to seek a second wife; in the Heathcliff motif, a man might be legally married to one woman but united forever, through what one writer called "Psychological Twinship," to another. Amnesia was always a convenient explanation for unwitting bigamy, or an unscrupulous man could dupe an innocent woman into poly-

gyny through mesmerism, drugs, or a sham wedding ceremony. And of course, wicked Turks or Algerians could always abduct the heroine for a sultan's harem in a type of novel popular long before the Mormons made it possible for writers to set a "harem" story on the North American continent.

Certain of the more shocking of the anti-Mormon novels include descriptions and illustrations of women undergoing various kinds of humiliation and torture at the hands of savage Mormon men. Someone with the necessary training in psychology might wish to investigate fully the really dark side of wish-fulfillment in Mormon fiction. To ask a question about matters not quite so subterranean, how did polygamy itself relate to female wish-fulfillment? It is easy enough to understand why a woman would enjoy wish-fulfillment in reading about polyandry; given the Victorian repression of female sexuality, what more wonderful fantasy than the fantasy of multiple husbands? "Marriage," in some sense, could sanction (at least temporarily) sexual experience with more than one male, a fantasy far removed from any real-life possibility for the average nineteenth-century American housewife.

But polygyny as female wish-fulfillment seems to be a greater puzzle. Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel*, suggests that many philosophers began to be preoccupied with polygyny in the eighteenth century because the closing of convents, the surplus of women, and the trend toward individual family economic responsibility made the position of the single woman more insecure and distasteful than it had ever been.²⁴ For a woman, *any* kind of marriage was preferable to single life, and therefore, according to Watt, she might find fantasies of polygyny very satisfying. But strong though these pragmatic economic and social currents may have been, I feel that it is more likely that polygyny became an attractive fantasy simply because it was a logical Victorian alternative to the rape fantasy. Rape, for a writer or reader with any pretensions to respectability, was a little too bizarre a wish-fulfillment; but marriage, even if it is a forced or pretended marriage, helped to legitimize the fantasy.

Certain similarities are evident between polygyny fantasy and rape fantasy. In both, the woman is brutally used by men; she is wronged, physically helpless. She has no chance of escape or retaliation. Both rape fantasy and polygyny fantasy represent the dichotomy between what Susan Brownmiller, in her discussion of rape fantasy has called "male ideology . . . (the mass psychology of the conqueror)" and "mirror-image female victim psychology (the mass psychology of the conquered)."²⁵ Both are located somewhere on a spectrum that she terms "a masochistic scale that ranges from passivity to death."²⁶ Given the woman's role as a mere victim whose direct agency never could have contributed to such a happening, both rape and polygyny, as fantasy, provide sensation without responsibility. When a nineteenth-century woman's tastes in fantasy tended toward helpless victimization, then it was accounts of polygyny that could feed them.

As we note that articulate Mormon writers answered the opponents who blasted polygamy on social and moral grounds, we have to ask why no faithful member of the Church took up his pen, or more likely *her* pen, to write a pro-

polygamy novel. After all, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was answered with *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* and with *Uncle Robin in his Cabin in Virginia* and *Tom Without One in Boston*; and American Catholic novelists wrote pro-Catholic fiction to counter the novels of Catholic wickedness. (It seems that only a pro-liquor novel, in answer to the temperance novels, was not a real possibility.) Arrington and Haupt have suggested that Mormons were too busy to write novels and that in Mormon society strong moral misgivings surrounded the whole genre of fiction.²⁷ Both these reasons are undoubtedly important. But Mormons did find time to write other things, including non-fiction defenses of polygamy, and Mormons used fictional forms for in-house purposes—stories published by the *Juvenile Instructor* office about a sturdy young fellow nobly declining the offer of a cigar, for example, I feel that instincts toward this kind of creativity probably ran very high among Mormon women, especially when articles in *The Contributor* and elsewhere betray an undeniable, blue-stocking interest in such figures as Felicia Hemans and Lady Montagu.²⁸ Why didn't one of them write a novel exalting the comforts, advantages, and spiritual rewards of the polygamy that they so often asserted in their expository writings?

I would like to suggest that a Mormon woman capable of such a novel, whatever the other reasons may have been for her reluctance to write it, might also have sensed instinctively that any novel of this sort would inevitably have fed into the wish-fulfillment and fantasies of the readers, simply because it was about polygamy. No matter how sincere the writer, no matter how strong her testimony of polygamy and how spiritual her description, she was defeated before she began; the effect of her novel would not have been to educate and convince, but to titillate and astound. No Gentile reader could have distinguished her work from the already-familiar clichés of popular fiction. How would a Richard Wilde in *her* novel, having had a *real* revelation that he was to take a second wife, have spoken differently to Maggie than he did in *Lives of Female Mormons*? Though the writer might have claimed an extra dimension of fulfillment and joy for a devoted polygamous wife, the already-overworked domestic novel themes of self-sacrifice, duty, and reconciliation could hardly have convinced a reader of anything unique about the supposed rewards of polygamy. Most readers, as I think a thoughtful Mormon woman might have realized immediately, would have enjoyed such a novel as just another behind-the-curtain peep at a shocking lifestyle, a peep that in fact had an additional titillating dimension—that it failed to redeem itself by ultimately condemning what it revealed.

So the Mormon novels stood unchallenged. They intrigue us today because of their subject matter—they are about us. But otherwise their distinction is minimal. They sit comfortably beside their thousands of companion volumes of popular fiction. They are not a distinctive sub-genre, not examples of literary craft, perhaps not even profound shapers of public opinion or raisers of public consciousness, but simply representative indicators of widespread popular taste.

NOTES

¹Leonard Arrington and Jon Haupt, "Intolerable Zion: The Image of Mormonism in Nineteenth Century American Literature," *Western Humanities Review*, XXII (Summer 1968), pp. 243–260. The few novels originally published in England, France, or elsewhere usually appeared soon thereafter in an American edition.

I have read three novels that need to be added to Arrington and Haupt's list: Henry J. Latham (pseudonym Ring Jepson), *Among the Mormons* (The San Francisco News Company, 1879); Charles Brewer, *Retribution at Last: A Mormon Tragedy of the Rockies* (Cincinnati: Editor Publishing Co., 1899), and Jeanette Y. Walworth, *The Bar-Sinister: A Mormon Study* (New York: The Marshon Company, 1885, 1900).

²Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (Yale University Press, 1977), p. 149.

³Cott, pp. 144–145.

⁴"Intolerable Zion," p. 246.

⁵Mrs. T. B. H. Stenhouse, *An Englishwoman in Utah: The Story of A Life's Experience in Mormonism* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1880) p. vi.

⁶Cornelia Paddock (Mrs. A. G.), *The Fate of Madame LaTour: A Tale of Great Salt Lake* (New York: Fords, Howard, & Hulbert, 1881), p. 4.

⁷Quoted in Paddock, p. iv.

⁸But in many cases, the insistence on altruistic purposes is ludicrous. "This little story. . . is told with a nobler motive than usually accompanies the issuing of a book," claims Henry Latham as he begins *Among the Mormons* (The San Francisco News Company, 1879); "its object is not a mercenary, but a purely humanitarian one. It seeks only to disseminate a few truths in reference to the institution of Mormonism (p. 5)." The novel, more nonsensical than really disgusting, then goes on to tell of Kendallton and D'Orsay, two young Wall Street brokers who decide to go to Salt Lake to see for themselves the "gushing young damsels." They meet Mr. Robbins, who describes how amusing it is to watch his wives fight, scratching and biting and throwing one another's false teeth out the window. "I wrote a letter to Barnum last week, asking him if he didn't want to exhibit us around the country as 'The Celebrated Happy Family,'" he tells the visitors (p. 19). He doesn't know the number of his children, but he plans to engage a clerk soon to take inventory. The two young men each marry eight young women, divorce them almost at once, return to New York, and the purely humanitarian novel is over.

⁹The immensely popular domestic novels of Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth centered frequently on the plight of the deserted wife. The taking of a second wife by a Mormon man is, of course, a form of "desertion" and betrayal of the first wife.

¹⁰Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789–1850* (New York: Pageant Books, Inc., 1959), p. 166 (note).

¹¹William Loring Spencer, *Salt-Lake Fruit: A Latter-Day Romance. By An American* (Boston: Franklin Press, 1884).

¹²Paddock, pp. 44–45.

¹³For an interesting discussion of beliefs surrounding the female character, see Barbara Welter's chapter "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1800–1860," in *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976).

¹⁴Metta Victoria Fuller, *Mormon Wives: A Narrative of Facts Stranger than Fiction* (Philadelphia: G. G. Evans, 1859), pp. 118, 126.

¹⁵Fuller, pp. 242, 243.

¹⁶Jessie LaTour, in *The Fate of Madame LaTour*, "did not believe in the divinity of the system which called for the cruel sacrifice she was about to make; she felt. . . that Mormonism was a foul superstructure of tyranny and crime, resting upon a foundation of lust and blood; and yet, for her husband's sake, for the sake of the man she had worshipped with a blind devotion since the day he first won her girlish heart, she consented to the last, the most barbarous rite enjoined by his religion (not hers), and went with him to the Endowment House to place in his hand the hand of the bride chosen for him by the prophet" (p. 193; italics appear in the original).

¹⁷In Jennie Switzer's *Elder Northfield's Home; Or, Sacrificed on the Mormon Altar* (Boston: B. B. Russell, 1895), tiny Marion says, "Papa, please don't get another wife; it makes mamma feel so bad. We don't want another mother, and you can't be mamma's husband and hers, too. Isn't mamma a good enough wife, papa?" (pp. 164–165).

¹⁸After little Marion Northfield grows up, she discovers that her fiance, a New York physician named John Saxon, is her half-brother, their father having been the notorious Elder Northfield.

¹⁹The narrator of *Female Life Among the Mormons* begins her tale with an account of a carriage ride with the man who was soon to ensnare her as his polygamous wife: "I became immediately sensible of some unaccountable influence drawing my sympathies towards him. In vain I struggled to break the spell. I was like a fluttering bird before the gaze of the serpent-charmer;" Maria Ward (pseud.), *Female Life Among the Mormons* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter and Company, 1866), p. 12.

²⁰Helen Waite Papashvily, *All the Happy Endings* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), p. 32.

²¹Fuller, p. 211.

²²Tania Modleski gives an interesting analysis of the escape process in terms of modern popular fiction in "The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances," *Signs*, V (Spring 1980), 435–448.

²³For an interesting treatment the question of polygamy in popular writing, see Bette B. Roberts, "Marital Fears and Polygamous Fantasies in Eliza Parsons' *Mysterious Warning*," *Journal of Popular Culture*, XII (Summer 1978), pp. 42–51.

²⁴Jan Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957) pp. 147–148.

²⁵Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), p. 324.

²⁶Brownmiller, p. 324.

²⁷"Intolerable Zion," p. 256.

²⁸Maria M. Miller discusses Felicia Hemans in *Contributor*, I (July 1880), 223–225. Emmeline B. Wells, under the pen name of "Amethyst," writes on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu as an "Eminent Woman" in *Contributor*, I (May 1880), 175–177. She faults Lady Montagu only because she "held romantic sentimentality in contempt."