

Emma Hale Smith on the Stage:

The One Woman Play

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For well over a century, Emma Hale Smith was the arch-apostate of the Latter-day Saint imagination. She had betrayed her husband, lied about plural marriage, refused to go West, and encouraged her son to take the lead of a rival church. Fast forward to the late twentieth century and the faithful had thoroughly embraced Smith as a key figure among the early righteous. Emma's redemption began slowly as Latter-day Saint writers took care to emphasize her contributions to the faith while paying less attention to what had been considered her mistakes. While historians and church leaders paved the way for this reorientation, it was the arts that resurrected and reformed the Elect Lady in the Saints' imagination. Beginning in the 1970s, there were a series of theatrical performances, multiple works of art, and a handful of popular books devoted to presenting Emma Hale Smith in a kinder light. Thom Duncan's *The Prophet* and later Buddy Youngreen's *Yesterday and Forever* brought the story of Emma and Joseph's love affair to the stage in the mid-1970s. These productions were part of what scholar and playwright Mahonri Stewart has called the "'boom period' of Mormon drama in the 1970s."¹

In this essay, I turn our attention in a different direction to the burgeoning genre of theatrical monologues – the solo performance. Specifically, I document the one-woman plays that brought audiences face to face with a sympathetic Emma Hale Smith who beckoned for their understanding. There is, of course, something very "Mormon" in the four women I will discuss

¹ Mahonri Stewart, ed., *Saints on Stage: An Anthology of Mormon Drama* (Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2013), xxi.

here taking on the identity of Emma Hale Smith—becoming her “proxy”—in order to provide her with redemption.

Emma Monologues

The last quarter of the twentieth century saw the rise of the solo performance in American theater. The popularity of Hal Holbrook’s *Mark Twain Tonight!*, which premiered in 1954, proved the genre’s ability to draw an audience and by the 1970s there were a number of historical solo performances throughout the country. Some of the more popular plays featured Emily Dickinson, Clarence Darrow, and Oscar Wilde – each appearing on stage as if they were lecturing before their contemporaries. The historical characters offered personal philosophies, humor, and anecdotes from their lives. If the setting did not suggest a public lecture hall, it was a parlor or personal quarters. For example, in William Luce’s *The Belle of Amherst*, Emily Dickinson, famously portrayed by Julie Harris, reflects on her life from her home in Massachusetts. At the same time the historical biographical solo performance was gaining steam in the nation, the Utah stage too brought forward historic personalities Brigham Young, Joseph Smith, J. Golden Kimball, Willard Richards, and numerous others. The format was particularly suited for a Latter-day Saint audience who desired intimacy with figures from their past.

The solo performance was also well suited for the travelling act, which could benefit from Utah’s plentiful Church programs and LDS clubs. Mamie Hjorth may have been the first playwright-actress to place Emma Hale Smith on the stage in a one-woman play, and not surprisingly, she made use of just such networks. In the first two years of her play, local newspapers reported her performances before the Olympian Club and the Liahonian Club in Lehi, the Mothers Study Club in Pleasant Grove, the Mutual Improvement Association and

Relief Society in Panguitch, and the Jeune Mere Club in Springville.² Hjorth had already made connections in these Latter-day Saint circuits from previous monologues on Latter-day Saint women Eliza R. Snow and Aurelia Spencer Rogers, as well as presentations on drying flowers.³

In a 1978 interview, Hjorth detailed her process for devising the play. She had begun her research with the official seven volume History of the Church and “then enhanced her study with numerous other volumes and papers, to give her the information she felt was worthy of this woman. After her studies, she compiled 70 pages of manuscript of her own doing, to come up with the script she uses in her 45 minute presentation.”⁴ A number of newspapers briefly reported on the play’s content. Hjorth wore a simple costume of a bonnet and shawl, which she had likely based on what Emma wore in surviving photographs. As one report noted, “She dressed for the occasion, as Emma did long ago.”⁵

As Hjorth took the stage, she first spoke as herself. “Her opening remark was, ‘Emma Hale Smith was a tremendous woman.’” She then “adopted the personification” of Emma and “spoke of the events of her life from the time she was a young woman living with her parents in Harmony, Pa. until her last days spent in Nauvoo, Ill.”⁶ These later details must have initially been scarce based on the historical sources then available to Hjorth. Nevertheless, one report stated that “She gave some interesting and little known facets of Emma’s life, and eased some of the controversial questions on her strenuous life, and the lives of the early saints; and on her

² “Olympian Club Holds Guest Night,” *Lehi Free Press*, November 21, 1974; “Liahonian Club Reports Activities,” *Lehi Free Press*, April 17, 1975; “Jeune Mere Club hears Mamie Hjorth,” *Springville Herald*, April 21, 1977.

³ “Hafen – Dallin Club to Hold First Meeting,” *Daily Herald*, September 30, 1973.

⁴ “Woods X,” *Davis County Clipper*, February 3, 1978. The earliest report of Hjorth’s performance called it “a book review” recited “totally by memory,” suggesting she may have referred to this manuscript. (“Olympian Club Holds Guest Night,” *Lehi Free Press*, November 21, 1974.)

⁵ “Liahonian Club Looks Back on Year Filled with Activities,” *Lehi Free Press*, December 31, 1975.

⁶ “Orem Women’s Club Meets,” *The Daily Herald (Provo)*, January 7, 1979.

devotion and testimony of the work to which Joseph Smith was called.”⁷ Which “controversial questions” Hjorth tackled was not reported. It was not plural marriage, but it could have been Emma’s departure from the LDS Church. Whatever it was, Hjorth handled it in such a way that the play was still considered “heartwarming” and “moving.”⁸ Hjorth’s play was designed to uplift with the example of a noble Saint, rather than to challenge her audience. As one report described the play, it was the story of “the love[,] hardships, and joys Emma experienced in her role as wife of the Prophet Joseph Smith.”⁹

In 1978, Hjorth’s play received an apostolic endorsement. On October 4, LeGrand Richards attended “Emma Hale Smith” and was deeply impressed by Hjorth’s performance. Hjorth often recalled her conversation with the 92-year-old apostle. Richards had told her, “Emma Smith is without a doubt the most deeply misunderstood woman in all history. She has been far too long maligned. It is time now for her true story be told.” He committed Hjorth to “accept as her ‘mission and calling’ the responsibility of never turning down the opportunity to tell the true story of Emma.”¹⁰ Richards gave Hjorth a blessing and invited her to meet with him at his office on several occasions.¹¹ She recalled Richards’s desire for “every member of the church to hear her presentation.”¹² Importantly, he also commended her for her decision not to include any references to plural marriage in the play.¹³ The absence of polygamy was not unusual for official representations of Church history at the time.

⁷ “Ilene Beck New President of Mothers’ Club,” *Pleasant Grove Review*, May 13, 1976.

⁸ “Golden Gleaners Hold Annual Luncheon Event,” *American Fork Citizen*, May 10, 1979; “Mother, Daughter Tea Held at Alpine Care Ctr,” *Pleasant Grove Review*, May 22, 1980.

⁹ “We Have Lost Another Great Lady,” *Springville Herald*, September 27, 2007.

¹⁰ “Mamie Hjorth to present ‘Emma Hale Smith’ live,” *Daily Spectrum*, September 29, 1996.

¹¹ Interview with Lee Hjorth, September 11, 2020.

¹² “Mamie Hjorth to speak about Emma Smith at Kolob women’s meeting,” *Springville Herald*, February 19, 1997.

¹³ Mamie Hjorth, *My Story of Emma Hale Smith*, June 25, 2000. Private recording for the Hjorth family.

That Richards pronounced Hjorth's performance as Emma's "true story" is significant. This was Hjorth's project. She was trying to produce an accurate recounting of the past, rather than a creative interpretation. It was a correct history—a defense of an innocent woman who had been victimized by misrepresentation. She had been able to do so by historical research but she would also meet with Richards on several occasions to discuss the details of the presentation.

With a sense of personal mission, Hjorth took her performance on tour. By 1991, she had reportedly "made over 2,000 presentations in Utah and throughout the nation."¹⁴ Locally, Hjorth had acquired a celebrity for her one-woman show and spent years performing it at Brigham Young University events. After her death in 2007, an admirer who knew Hjorth only from a distance wrote to the local Springville newspaper lamenting the news. She described the elderly woman who gave so much of her life to impersonating Emma Hale Smith. "Mamie went everywhere, to meeting after meeting for many years, dressed in pioneer costume and portraying the life of Emma Smith, wife of the LDS prophet. Mamie love[d] Emma; she became Emma. And in the process you also learned to love and appreciate Emma."¹⁵

This eulogy stressed Hjorth's impact among women. "There aren't many women in this community who have lived here awhile who haven't been audience to Mamie's Emma."¹⁶ Since the beginning of her career Hjorth performed for women's groups of various sizes. Her grassroots campaign gained momentum as the years went on and eventually encompassed larger audiences that included men as well. Yet, even after forty years of performances, the Elect Lady still belonged primarily to the women of the Church. Hjorth's portrayal of Emma's hardships and

¹⁴ "Hjorth to speak at historic society," *Daily Spectrum*, September 26, 1991.

¹⁵ "We Have Lost Another Great Lady," *Springville Herald*, September 27, 2007.

¹⁶ "We Have Lost Another Great Lady," *Springville Herald*, September 27, 2007.

devotion emphasized the contributions of Latter-day Saint women who had often been neglected in the telling of church history even as it functioned as a defense of the Elect Lady herself.

Beginning in March 1978, a second one woman show, “Portrait of Emma” debuted at the Valley Center Theatre in downtown Provo. It would appear periodically for the rest of the century. Jody and Keith Renstrom had opened the theater three years previously and had used their venue to host locally directed LDS plays. Jody Renstrom was then in her mid-40s and was the mother of six children. In 1969, she had relocated to Utah from northern California and quickly became active in various causes in the community. When the Valley Center Theatre (later renamed Valley Center Playhouse) opened, she directed plays and “filled in as a performer when necessary.”¹⁷ Renstrom’s decision to write a one-woman play on Emma came after seeing James Arrington’s “Here’s Brother Brigham” and Bryce Chamberlain’s “Joseph, The Man, The Seer.” Her patriarchal blessing had encouraged her to “study faithful LDS women” and she wanted to demonstrate the “struggles” and “dedication” of these women on the stage.¹⁸

Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate a script for Renstrom’s *Portrait of Emma*. Based on descriptions in newspapers, the play “begins at her birth in 1804 and follows ‘the elect lady’ through childhood, young womanhood and into her courtship with Joseph. The story continues with her marriage, loss of her first four babies, experiences with Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery and the Whitmers, and the tarring and feathering of her husband. The show tells about her time in Nauvoo and ends with the martyrdom of Joseph Smith.”¹⁹ Another states, “This one-woman drama takes Emma from early childhood to the grieving young widow of the martyred Prophet. The portrait includes Emma’s feelings, her joys, her sorrows, and the often terrifying

¹⁷ “Emma Smith One Woman Show Slated in Provo by Jody Renstrom,” *Daily Herald*, December 17, 1978.

¹⁸ “Portrait of Emma’ Returns,” *Daily Herald*, March 25, 1979.

¹⁹ “Emma plays six nights,” *Daily Herald*, April 8, 1992.

and tense events that shaped her life.”²⁰ Reviews for performances in the Valley Center Theater also note that the play began and ended with hymns written by David Hyrum Smith.²¹

We are particularly fortunate to have excerpts from an interview in which Renstrom explained her own motivations.

I guess I play her sympathetically ... but all I tried to do was not misrepresent her in any way. She encountered many difficult trials such as losing her first four babies. I've tried to portray her as a woman who loved and longed for a family but waited years before she had that blessing. She also did not have a home of her own for years. Because of persecution she was forced to move often and live with friends. Under these circumstances ... she would have had to have been a congenial person to put up with such hardships. She was loved dearly by both her prophet husband and her mother-in-law. In addition, I realize that during the difficult days prior to Joseph Smith's murder, Emma did more for the LDS Church than most of us women today are asked to do. How can I judge such a woman[?]"²²

The content of Renstrom's performance seems to have shared much in common with Hjorth's – both focused on the relationship between Emma and Joseph and ended in 1844. Emma's redemption was brought about through emphasizing the romantic – depicting Emma as unwaveringly devoted to her husband. By not covering the post-martyrdom period in detail, the extent of controversy between Emma and the apostles was limited.²³ While Renstrom acknowledged that Emma could have made mistakes, they were not given attention and certainly the audience was expected to refrain from judgment.

²⁰ “Portrait of Emma’ at VCP this Weekend,” *Lehi Free Press*, September 4, 1986.

²¹ “Portrait of Emma’ at VCP this Weekend,” *Lehi Free Press*, September 4, 1986.

²² “Portrait of Emma’ Returns,” *The Daily Herald* (Provo, Utah), March 25, 1979.

²³ See Steve Taysom...

Within a year of Renstrom's first performance, she had "appeared throughout Utah at Relief Society birthday commemorations, in ward and stake events and high school auditoriums." Renstrom brought the show to Pocatello, Idaho, and Cheyenne, Wyoming, and already had plans to perform in other locations including Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Independence, Missouri.²⁴

In the 1992 season, Renstrom's *Portrait* faced a critic in Claudia Harris, then a professor of theater at Brigham Young University. Harris conceded it was a potentially important project. "Any reconstruction or reassessment of Emma's life should be applauded. To love the Prophet Joseph Smith requires an understanding of his quite evident love for Emma... [and] many Mormons not only are confused about Emma Hale Smith's life events but also are divided in their opinions about her motivations." Yet, Harris had little positive to say about the script. She claimed that "despite the title," *Portrait of Emma* was "more the story of Joseph Smith than of his wife, Emma." Renstrom merely told "Joseph's story through Emma's eyes." The problem was that she offered "nothing to supplement the readily accessible information, nothing to counter popular assumptions." Harris called it "oddly undramatic" and "highly romanticized." "Anyone seeking a fuller understanding of Emma would be disappointed. Many of her difficulties, including polygamy, are simply glossed over." Renstrom's performance, likewise left much to be desired. "With so much conflict and real pathos in Emma's life, Jody Renstrom's performance has a strange sameness. The unwavering pace, the single intensity, the t[o]o sweet voice cause the portrayal to lack emotional power." Harris concluded by praising the costume and set with a caveat. "Renstrom does look like Emma's picture; the costuming is effective. The

²⁴ "Portrait of Emma' Returns," *The Daily Herald* (Provo, Utah), March 25, 1979.

set is also fine, although Renstrom repeatedly stood too close to the fireplace; her costume would have caught fire if the fire had been real.²⁵

A third one-woman play was first performed in 1981 by Wendy Cope Top. Top had first become acquainted with what she would call the “Emma Hale Smith ‘dilemma’” as a high school seminary student. Her teacher had given the class an early version of Edwin Wirkus’s *Judge Me, Dear Reader*, then a two page “story in the first person, as if she [Emma] were pleading for understanding and consideration for all she had been through.” While Top had never heard Emma openly criticized previously, she recalled this moment as the “first hint I had that Emma Hale Smith was a remarkable woman – ‘an elect lady.’”²⁶ A few years later, in 1977, still moved by Wirkus’s paper, Top wrote her own research paper while taking a course at Brigham Young University. Her goal was to add “insight from a woman’s perspective.”²⁷

In 1981, she adapted her paper into a monologue for an event put on by the Church of Jesus Christ in Snowflake, Arizona, called “education days.” She would go on to perform the one-woman play about forty times over the next 25 years. Top’s performance differed from the other acts. While Hjorth and Renstrom dressed in period costumes, Top performed in a simple white dress, the kind worn in contemporary Latter-day Saint temples. Instead of a living Emma speaking to the audience, Top performed as a post-mortal Emma recalling her life on earth.²⁸ In this way, she was able to directly comment on how people had understood various aspects of Emma’s life. In addition to recounting Emma’s noble deeds, her sacrifices, and her heartbreaks, Top paid particular attention to how Emma had been criticized. Top’s Emma defended herself

²⁵ “Portrait of Emma’ recalls familiar history,” *Daily Herald*, April 25, 1992.

²⁶ Wendy C. Top, “A Deep Sorrow in Her Heart,’ : Emma Hale Smith,” in eds. Barbara B. Smith and Blythe Darlyn Thatcher, *Heroines of the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 17.

²⁷ Top, “A Deep Sorrow in Her Heart,” 18. `

²⁸ Interview with Wendy C. Top, 2019.

from popular claims that after Joseph Smith had fled Nauvoo to avoid incarceration at Carthage, she had influenced her husband's return by sending word that she believed he was acting out of cowardice.²⁹ Emma had grown wiser and more aware of her own actions in death. Her refusal to go West was a product of her grief. Her relationship with Brigham Young and other Church leaders had deteriorated due to "misunderstandings and ill feelings" brought on by confusion surrounding her husband's property and debts.³⁰

Top was the first performer to fully take on these issues, as was also the case with plural marriage. She not only mentioned Joseph Smith's plural marriages as a trial that for Emma "far surpassed anything I had yet been called upon to face," but she explored the complexity of Emma's experience with Nauvoo polygamy. Plural marriage "was in total opposition to every moral law ingrained in me since my childhood." Emma was incensed that others would claim the title of Joseph Smith's wife after she alone "had given up everything for Joseph." From the afterlife, Top's Emma claimed victory over "every other obstacle which man or devil had thrown into my path... but the doctrine of plural marriage was a stumbling block which I never completely conquered."³¹ Yet, she had tried to fulfill this commandment. The moments in which she had pushed back against plural marriage, such as the burning of the revelation that commanded its practice, had colored "how the world knows Emma, but what they have forgotten, or ignored, is that many times I did conquer my feelings. I did live the law of plural marriage!" Top's Emma recounted teaching the practice to "our young hired girl" and granting permission for Joseph to marry Eliza and Emily Partridge in 1843. Yet, ultimately, the defense of Emma was leveled by turning the tables on the Emma's critics. "But who can say that they have

²⁹ Wendy C. Top, *Emma Hale Smith: A Woman's Perspective* (Orem, Utah: Keepsake Publishing, 1991), 37.

³⁰ Top, *Emma Hale Smith*, 42.

³¹ Top, *Emma Hale Smith*, 34.

not had a similar struggle over some tribulation in their own life? Oh, the agony of trying to live that principle! It was not easy for any woman!”³²

Top’s presentations were sponsored by Latter-day Saint venues, so were not reviewed in local papers; however, she recalled that the general response was positive. One negative experience at a gathering of Church Education System employees in Palmyra, New York, seemed to prove this rule. The night before her presentation, she met with a group of the faculty, who expressed their belief that “Emma had her chance and failed, and she would have to face her punishment—being cut off forever. They seemed to subscribe to Brigham Young’s heated sentiments that Joseph would have to go to hell to find her. They strongly hinted that any attempt to ‘rehabilitate’ her would be purely sentimental.” Top recalled spending the evening in self-doubt. “My presentation was as historically accurate as I could make it, but I began to feel that perhaps my interpretations of those facts were on shakier ground—clouded by my own imperfect inspiration and my love for Emma Smith.”³³

In the moments after her performance the following night, she rushed off the stage assuming their reaction would be the same as it was the night before. However, what happened demonstrated just how powerful the new representation of Emma was for even a reluctant Latter-day Saint audience. “Instead [of disapproval], an unusual silence filled the room. No one stood up to speak. The silence became more awkward, and I began to hear muffled sobs coming from the room.” The response left her with a conviction that “the Lord approved of my effort to bring Emma Smith the recognition and understanding she deserves. In spite of my stumbling, unemotional delivery, the Spirit still carried its message into the hearts of those present.”³⁴

³² Top, *Emma Hale Smith*, 35.

³³ Top, “A Deep Sorrow in Her Heart,” 19.

³⁴ Top, “A Deep Sorrow in Her Heart,” 20.

Wendy Top did not profess to tell Emma's "true story." She recognized the creative dimension of her efforts. She had only sought to relay an "interpretation of how Emma might have felt." She had tried to use historical sources when possible, but did "not claim that [her monologue was] totally correct." However, she had become convinced from "many experiences," such as the one above, "that the Lord is pleased with its intent."³⁵

In 1984, Valeen Avery and Linda King Newell's *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, Prophet's Wife, Elect Lady, Polygamy's Foe* appeared to much praise and criticism throughout the Latter-day Saint community. *Mormon Enigma* presented a version of Emma Hale Smith that was not well known previously. Emma was a feminist figure protesting in her own way the introduction of plural marriage and opposing the leadership of the Twelve after her husband's death. *Mormon Enigma* also employed new documents on Emma's life that were little known outside of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. While not everyone approved of Avery and Newell's depiction of Emma, there is no question that it impacted representations of Emma Hale Smith thereafter. Wendy Top continued to develop her monologue to build on the new information made available in *Mormon Enigma*. Hjorth began to regularly denounce the book as a part of her presentation. Finally, a fourth playwright, Carol Lynn Pearson, embraced Avery and Newell's Emma with her paradoxical power and submission.

In 1989, Pearson first performed her one woman-play, *Mother Wove the Morning* at a local theater in Walnut Creek, California. At the time, she was known among Latter-day Saints for the musical, *My Turn on Earth* and her memoir, *Goodbye I Love You*. Unlike the other representations of Emma discussed here, Pearson's play was not intended specifically for a Latter-day Saint audience. *Mother* was a series of monologues in which women throughout

³⁵ Top, *Emma Hale Smith*, ii.

history spoke on their pursuit of the female divine. Emma came on stage—or rather Pearson became the Elect Lady—right after “Phoebe the Shaker” and before Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

The scene was set sometime during the summer of 1843, after the sealings of Emily and Eliza Partridge to Joseph Smith, when however briefly Emma did not oppose plural marriage. Pearson became Emma through a simple wardrobe change, putting on a shawl, which the audience learned was a gift from Joseph. “You will not find another shawl like this in all the city of Nauvoo.” There was a dignity in being the prophet’s wife, but Pearson’s Emma was also conscious of the audience’s judgment, accusing them of seeing her as “downtrodden.” They were like those who stared at her during a recent trip to St. Louis and whispered among themselves “there goes Mrs. Smith, the wife of Joe, the Mormon Prophet. Why do you suppose she stays with him?” She told the audience not to “bother turning away your eyes.” She knew what they were thinking. “‘Poor degraded, mindless Mormon woman,’ you are saying.” Emma set in on a defense, declaring “the gospel that Joseph restored is for the women as well as the men.” He had even “ordained and set apart many women to lay on hands, anoint with oil, heal the sick” - a reference to the ordinances that Smith had performed for women in the Anointed Quorum in 1843. “He tells us that we, like Miriam and Deborah, may have the gift of prophecy, receive revelation for ourselves, become queens and priestesses.”³⁶

Pearson’s Emma confessed that women had not been allowed in the Kirtland Temple only a few years before. She was aware that “we [speaking of women in the church] are *always* after the brethren.” Emma acknowledged having had “my fill of Brigham,” who she said frequently taught that “women were made to be led and directed and to submit cheerfully, for we have not the degree of light and intelligence that our husbands have.” In spite of this, Emma was

³⁶ Carol Lynn Pearson, *Mother Wove the Morning* (Walnut Creek, CA: Pearson Publishing, 1992, 79

optimistic that things were improving for women in Nauvoo. “I say all in good time, and for now let us count our blessings.” It is at this point that Pearson’s Emma turned to the subject of the play. “Joseph has even taught that in the heavens there is not only a Heavenly Father, there’s a Heavenly Mother, as well... And he tells us that we might someday become – like them! Imagine! In some eternity – I might become a Goddess!”³⁷

Turning back to the audience, she chided them. “You are judging him harshly. Yes, you are.” She envisioned their ongoing skepticism:

“How can a man who so exalts women,” you are saying, “subject his own wife, whom he claims to love, and the wives of his followers, who are good and tender-hearted women, to the monstrous evil of polygamy? How can he claim this comes of God?” That is what you are saying, isn’t it? But no, you are wrong.”³⁸

At this point in her monologue, Pearson’s Emma recounted her own previous doubts about polygamy. But in the setting of the summer of 1843, she assigned such a view to Satan. Emma professed her love for Joseph and her assurance that “no better man, save Jesus, ever walked this earth.” Yet, in this moment, it became clear that Pearson’s Emma remained conflicted. “He is a very [pause] loving man.” In the silence, we are left to imagine Emma doubting the purity of her husband’s love before again declaring, “No, that is not it! God commanded it [plural marriage] that righteous seed...” Emma trailed off while beginning to quote from Jacob’s justification of plural marriage in the Book of Mormon.³⁹

³⁷ Pearson, *Mother Wove the Morning*, 80.

³⁸ Pearson, *Mother Wove the Morning*, 80.

³⁹ Pearson, *Mother Wove the Morning*, 81.

She emotionally described having personally taught Emily and Eliza Partridge “the beautiful principle of patriarchal marriage.” Then, seemingly reassuring herself, Pearson’s Emma pats her shawl: “But no other woman in Nauvoo has a shawl...!”⁴⁰

Pearson’s Emma reflected twentieth-century feminist engagement with the Latter-day Saint past. This Emma embodied the depiction of the Elect Lady from Valeen Tippetts Avery and Linda King Newell’s writings a decade earlier, capturing the same contradictions they saw in the early Latter-day Saint tradition. On one hand, there were liberating ideas in teachings of a Heavenly Mother, Joseph Smith’s establishment of the Relief Society, and bestowal of temple rites that seemed to suggest female priesthood. On the other hand, plural marriage—polygyny—reeked of patriarchy and male dominance.

At the conclusion of the monologue, Emma revealed her ongoing struggle to cope with the new system of marriage. Pearson revealed the extent of Emma’s loneliness as she pondered how other women were able to handle sharing their husbands. She asked how Sarah was able to give Hagar to Abraham. She asked how Muslim women—millions of them—handle it. The audience was reminded that polygamy was a larger experience not confined to early Latter-day Saints. As in other depictions of Emma, Pearson portrayed Emma’s struggle with plural marriage as unique—different from other Latter-day Saint women—even other first wives in Nauvoo.

Pearson’s Emma’s final moments on stage turn again to her Heavenly Mother, realizing that if Joseph was correct about plural marriage and the deification of mankind, “then God our Father must have numerous wives, more even than Joseph!” In this case, she could turn to the first of these women. Impassioned, Pearson’s Emma declared: “I would like to speak to Father’s

⁴⁰ Pearson, *Mother Wove the Morning*, 81.

first wife! She must not have been so rebellious as I.” Her voice taking on a desperate tone, “And I would say to her, ‘How did you do it?’”⁴¹

Pearson had originally included Emma Hale Smith as one of the sixteen historical women in *Mother Wove the Morning* to bring her own tradition into the larger conversation on the feminine divine. “As for how I determined to place Emma in “Mother Wove the Morning,” she (and Joseph) created my obvious personal doorway into the history of God the Mother. And, while the play--which I performed over 300 times--was geared to a general audience, I wanted to invite my LDS community into the conversation to see how we fit in with the flow of history.” While the Emma monologue in *Mother* was less a traditional defense of Emma Hale Smith in the vein of Hjorth or Top, Pearson sought to humanize a misunderstood figure. She wanted “to feel the pain in the heart of Emma. ... Emma deserves a significant amount of our attention, our appreciation and our compassion.”⁴² While Emma was so crucial to her own story, Pearson had misgivings about Emma’s presence in the play. After having “performed the play a number of times, I asked numerous (non Mormon) people who had seen it if they felt Emma belonged in the lineup of women or if I should take her out. I always received the answer that they loved seeing her there and hearing her story.”⁴³ Emma remained. Recently, Pearson has returned to envisioning a post-mortal encounter with Emma Hale Smith in her 2016 book, *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy*. There she relates Emma’s story to her own life and the modern Latter-day Saint experience.⁴⁴

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⁴¹ Pearson, *Mother Wove the Morning*, 81.

⁴² Carol Lynn Pearson, Personal Correspondence, February 12, 2019.

⁴³ Carol Lynn Pearson, Personal Correspondence, February 12, 2019.

⁴⁴ Carol Lynn Pearson, *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy* (Walnut Creek, CA: Pivot Point Books, 2016).

These four first person re-imaginings of Emma Hale Smith shared much in common. They shared a perspective that Emma had been misunderstood and maligned by her contemporaries, and misrepresented in later narratives. They pled for the audience to withhold judgment as they weaved Emma's character of devotion and sacrifice. While each playwright made use of historical sources available to her, they also depended on creative additions that humanized and justified the "Mormon Enigma's" deeds. Obviously, representations of Emma varied. While Renstrom and Pearson had worked extensively in the theater, Hjorth and Top were amateurs. Hjorth and Renstrom seem to have followed the usual pattern in Latter-day Saint representations of Emma in that they avoided the controversies of the Nauvoo period. Both Top and Pearson took on that period head first—acknowledging the deep pain Emma suffered from plural marriage—but for different purposes and to different audiences.

Looking back on her early performances, Wendy Top came to see her work as part of a larger movement to redeem Emma. "Unbeknownst to me at the time, several other women in the Church felt moved upon to do similar creative projects favorable to Emma. There seemed to be a scattered but simultaneously inspired movement stirring within the membership of the Church to reclaim the reputation of Emma Smith."⁴⁵ This creative movement did not end with Pearson's *Mother Wove the Morning* or Mamie Hjorth's last performance six months before her death in 2007. Theatrical and film interpretations written by women and men have continued until the present. In fact, works coming to terms with Emma Hale Smith's life after the martyrdom have only appeared on stage or screen in the past decade. The year 2018 would see both Melissa Leilani Larson's *Jane and Emma* and Brittany Wiscombe's *In the Footsteps of Emma*, both groundbreaking interpretations of the Elect Lady.

⁴⁵ Top, "A Deep Sorrow in Her Heart," 18-19.

The first play to wrestle with the entirety of Emma Hale Smith's life was Mahonri Stewart's *Fading Flower*. For a brilliant monologue performed by Kathryn Laycock Little, start watching this clip at 13:45 to about 20:30.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urqJgA8uGcQ&list=PLbFdPLTAz5pVB9qAv9aVSuPRnTQVwcHXC&index=6>

Perhaps the video cannot capture the power of this performance the way I experienced it from the audience of the Provo Theater Company in the summer of 2009; however, I am convinced it remains one of the most heart wrenching and beautiful scenes in Latter-day Saint theater.