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## Out of the Best Books: Mormon Assimilation and Exceptionalism Through Secular Reading

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*Out of the Best Books: Mormon Assimilation and Exceptionalism*  
Through Secular Reading

Lauren Ann Fields

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### *Out of the Best Books: Mormon Assimilation and Exceptionalism Through Secular Reading*

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This thesis seeks to explore the relationship between Mormon assimilation, exceptionalism, and their endeavors in secular reading by analyzing *Out of the Best Books (OOBB)*, a 1964–71 five-volume reading guide and reading program on secular reading established by the Mormon Church for its women’s organization, the Relief Society. Examining the approaches to secular literature in the *OOBB* program suggests that Mormons can respond to their competing desires to separate and assimilate by making efforts that fulfill both aspirations simultaneously rather than moving exclusively in one direction. Yet *OOBB*’s efforts to achieve both objectives did not amount to an entirely seamless navigation of this paradox. The program’s attempts to incorporate texts that might challenge Mormon notions of morality as well as their efforts to introduce world literature and fully address their female audience raised additional tensions particularly relevant to contemporary Mormonism, suggesting the complexity of Mormons navigating this identity paradox both within the context of the *OOBB* program and today. Furthermore, this examination of *OOBB* offers a venture at fleshing out the history of Mormon reading, confirming Mormons’ relationship to literature as central to their conception and expression of identity and situating Mormon reading endeavors in the broader context of American reading practices.

Keywords: Mormonism, Mormon assimilation, Mormon literature, Relief Society, Great Books

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*Out of the Best Books: Mormon Assimilation and Exceptionalism*  
Through Secular Reading

Mormons have long been considered a peculiar people by those outside the faith tradition. According to many scholars of Mormon history and sociology, part of what renders them a distinctive cultural group are the unique tensions or paradoxes that permeate their doctrines and practices. For instance, in *People of Paradox*, literature and religious studies scholar Terryl L. Givens notes that Mormons paradoxically celebrate both rigid hierarchical structures and individual agency and also emphasize the possibility of both epistemological certainty and eternal learning, creating a mix of “intellectual certitude and intellectual instability” (xv). Yet one of the paradoxes that scholars have deemed most formative and prevalent is what Givens refers to as “exile and integration” (xv), or Mormons’ perpetual desire to assimilate comfortably into mainstream American society while also retaining a sense of cultural distinctiveness and separateness from the world around them. Many have commented on this specific cultural tension, but sociologist Armand Mauss’s *The Angel and the Beehive* offers the most comprehensive and oft-cited model of Mormon separation and assimilation.<sup>1</sup> Mauss notes that Mormons experience ever-present pulls toward both the *angel* (symbolic of the impulse to separate by clinging to uniquely Mormon doctrine and practice) and the *beehive* (representing the impulse to integrate with mainstream society). Yet he and those scholars who affirm his model suggest that, throughout their history, Mormons have primarily oscillated between periods of greater separation and assimilation in a pendulum fashion.

This struggle is reflected in many aspects of Mormon culture, yet it has been especially observed in Mormon literature, that is, in texts by Mormon authors. Mormon Church leaders have often urged Mormon writers to create a literary tradition that is both distinctly Mormon yet

still worthy of acclaim by non-Mormon readers, thus allocating a cultural space for Mormons to explore and express their competing desires to separate and assimilate. At the same time, church leaders have also repeatedly admonished Mormons to immerse themselves in literature by non-Mormon authors (what I will call *secular literature*) from founder Joseph Smith's earliest discourses to those from contemporary leaders. A scholarly examination of Mormons' approach to secular literature has yet to be endeavored, but Mormons' sustained involvement with it suggests that exploring Mormons' secular reading habits could also reveal valuable insight into the way they define their identity in relation to others.

A comprehensive survey of Mormons' secular reading, though instructive, would necessitate a book-length project; however, *Out of the Best Books (OABB)*, a 1964–71 five-volume reading guide and reading program established by the Mormon Church for its women's organization, the Relief Society, offers a useful starting point. In order to help immerse Relief Society women and their families in literature, editors Bruce B. Clark and Robert K. Thomas curated this collection of classic texts by primarily non-Mormon authors and also provided specific direction on how their Mormon readers might interpret and discuss these selections, creating what Clark himself considered the first official Mormon anthology of classic literature. Examining the approaches to secular literature in the *OABB* program indicates one way that the Mormon institutional structure suggested church members could navigate the competing pulls to separate and assimilate by making efforts that fulfill both aspirations simultaneously, rather than moving exclusively in one direction. In the case of this program, participants attempted this by embracing mainstream interpretive methods and secular texts while approaching them from a privileged perspective informed by their distinct worldview. In so doing, these Mormon readers

sought to assimilate by immersing themselves in popular reading culture while also retaining separateness through their particular interpretations.

By directing their readership through this pattern of reading, Clark and Thomas ultimately attempted to reconcile two fundamental Mormon doctrines that perpetuate the paradox of assimilation and separation: 1) Mormons have always been and must always remain separate from the world around them; but 2) the ontological truths Mormons embrace are universal, meaning they can be found and should be sought outside the boundaries of Mormonism.

Although Mormon identity was founded on the concept of peculiarity and Mormons have been repeatedly counseled to avoid worldliness, Mormons also uphold the idea that truth can be found beyond the borders of their faith. One of Joseph Smith's "Articles of Faith," or central tenets of Latter-day Saint theology, urged Mormons to seek after anything "virtuous, lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy." Moreover, Smith explicitly stated that "one of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth, let it come from where it may" ("Sermon of Joseph Smith," 229). Smith's successor as church head, Brigham Young, exhibited a more proprietary attitude toward these external truths, insisting that Mormonism "embraces every principle pertaining to life and salvation, for time and eternity. No matter who has it. If the infidel has got truth it belongs to 'Mormonism'" (375). Thus, he concluded that "there is no truth but what belongs to the Gospel" (375), emphasizing the notion that Mormons can and should look beyond the church to find (and perhaps claim) truth.

Although Clark and Thomas sought to retain Mormon particularity while immersing their readers in secular literature, their efforts to achieve both objectives did not amount to an entirely seamless navigation of this paradox. On the one hand, the editors did present an interpretive lens that professed participants could discern unique Mormon truths in individual texts and detect a



narrative of universal truth compatible with Mormon principles present throughout secular literature. They claimed that these conclusions would allow readers to feel confident in the privileged insights their Mormonism provided while still seeking and embracing truths outside their faith tradition. On the other hand, the editors' attempts to incorporate texts that might challenge Mormon notions of morality, as well as their efforts to introduce world literature and fully address their female audience, raised additional tensions. These tensions included how Mormons might determine what they should welcome and what they should avoid when exploring "truth" beyond Mormonism and also how they might acknowledge diversity of opinion and experience when focused on a singular narrative of universal truth. Thus, *OOBB* demonstrates the many nuanced obstacles Mormons faced in one particular effort to navigate this cultural paradox, exposing the complexity of simultaneously navigating assimilation and separation. Moreover, *OOBB*'s wrestle with Mormon identity poses several unresolved questions—questions particularly relevant to contemporary Mormonism with its increasing diversity and expanding global presence. And finally, this examination of *OOBB* offers a first foray into fleshing out the history of Mormon reading, confirming Mormons' relationship to literature as central to their conception and expression of identity and situating Mormon reading endeavors in the broader context of American reading practices.

### **Assimilation and Separation in Mormon History and Literature**

Delving into the ways *OOBB* explored Mormon identity and staked out its boundaries first requires an understanding of Mormons' historical efforts to assimilate and separate, as well as these efforts' effects on Mormon reading. According to Armand Mauss, Mormons' emphasis on their particular, "chosen" status characterizes early Mormonism's focus on cultural separateness. Terry Givens reiterates this notion, suggesting that "the Mormon emphasis on

exceptionalism is traceable to the first recorded spiritual experience of the young Joseph Smith” (54). Givens points to Smith’s assertion that he was instructed by God to avoid all existing Christian denominations, arguing that “long before Smith ever heard the word Mormon, or had an inkling of what his life or ministry would stand *for*, he learned what he was to be set *against*” (54). Mid-nineteenth-century Mormons’ efforts to establish Zion in the American West, a physically-isolated utopian enclave, coupled with their polygamy and the vehement social and political backlash the practice received, further ingrained Mormons’ status as cultural other, reinforcing their separateness. Like other American minority groups in the early nineteenth century, Mormons were caricatured in the press and literary fiction, depicted as subhuman threats to the status quo.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, United States legislators passed several laws that sought to end polygamy and diminish Mormons’ political voice.<sup>3</sup> It wasn’t until the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887, which criminalized the practice of polygamy, and the Mormon Church’s subsequent abandonment of it in 1890 that the pendulum began to swing from separation defined by this unconventional practice toward assimilation.

This period of “Americanization” spanned from 1890 to WWII, setting up and providing the foundation for the period in which *OORB* was developed and used. Mauss examines this Americanization period in detail, noting the many ways Mormons sought to prove their WASP status through increased patriotism, adoption of mainstream Christian rhetoric and hymns, and involvement in national programs like the Boy Scouts. However, the trend toward assimilation shifted once again during a mid-century period of cultural retrenchment Mauss and other Mormon history scholars refer to as *correlation*. Mauss argues that faced with decades of effective cultural assimilation, “Mormons have felt the need since the sixties to reach ever more deeply into their bag of cultural peculiarities to find either symbolic or actual traits that will help

them mark their subcultural boundaries and thus their very identity as a special people” (76). As Frank O. May’s entry in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* delineates, among Mormons *correlation* may refer to any unifying process in which “the organization of the Church subordinates limited views to the good of the whole” by “placing each [part of the Church] in proper relationship to the others” (323–24). May, Mauss, and historian Peter Wiley identify the 1960s as an era marked by the emergence of a particularly intensive correlation program focused on streamlining church curricula and placing all auxiliary functions under central leadership. In so doing, the church attempted to safeguard itself against the social tumult of the sixties and prepare simplified, unified curricula fit for increased global missionary work.<sup>4</sup> These efforts resulted in renewed emphasis on unique Mormon doctrines and an overall standardized, more intensely concentrated sense of peculiar and separate Mormon identity.

Many areas of Mormon culture reflect these historical struggles to work out Mormons’ unique identity and relationship to surrounding society; however, Mormon literature offers a particularly fruitful record of this process of self-examination. Beginning in the nineteenth-century, Mormon leaders urged Mormon writers to view literature as a site to both explore and express the church’s identity. In an 1888 address, Mormon bishop (and future apostle) Orson F. Whitney asserted that from among Mormon youth should rise up “Miltons and Shakespeares of our own,” or talented artists who might meet the standards of popular critics (206). Yet Whitney also insisted that “above all things [these writers] must be original,” arguing that because “our mission is diverse from others, our literature must also be” (206). Thus, Whitney urged Mormon writers to self-consciously navigate assimilation and separation—writing in a vein the world might praise but also representing Mormon peculiarity in a way that reinforced their separateness.<sup>5</sup>

In his seminal delineation of Mormon literature's distinct periods, literary scholar Eugene England illustrates that this tension has been present throughout Mormon literary history. He describes the way Mormons navigated self-perception in each era from nineteenth-century didactic fiction that emphasized their unique theology to more erudite twentieth-century writers who courted praise from both Mormon and secular audiences.<sup>6</sup> More particularly, Mormon literature scholar Scott Hales traces this tension during a distinct period of Mormon literary history, arguing that the rise of the Mormon novel in the late nineteenth century provided Mormons a cultural site for mediating their desire to both separate from and participate in mainstream American society. By suggesting that Mormons assimilated into mainstream American culture through adopting conventional novelistic tropes, yet still retained particularity by writing about Mormon-specific subject matter, Hales further demonstrates Mormon literature to be a space in which Mormon authors explored and expressed a dynamic sense of self in relation to the world around them.

While identity exploration and expression in Mormon literature has been fairly well observed by scholars, there has been virtually no examination of the way Mormons' study of secular literature informs their self-definition and relationship to larger society. Aside from Brigham Young's well-documented abhorrence for novels, which several scholars trace to his disdain for any distraction from faith and industry rather than distaste for literature in particular, no scholarly examinations of a Mormon approach to secular literature has been endeavored.<sup>7</sup> However, Mormons have been repeatedly admonished to seek out literature beyond the boundaries of their faith tradition, which suggests investigation of a prescribed approach to these texts to be warranted and likely revealing of further insight into the way Mormons construct their identity.

Joseph Smith first directed early Saints' attention to secular literature, recording in an 1833 revelation (now canonized in Section 88 of the Mormon book of scripture, *Doctrine and Covenants*) that the Saints were to study and "seek learning" "out of the best books" (118). Moreover, Smith confirmed that the "best books" should come, at least in part, from outside of Mormonism by recommending in that same passage that Mormons explore "things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms" (88:79). Admonitions for Mormons to immerse themselves in secular literature can also be found in various articles published over the years in the church's official magazines. While leaders acknowledge the need for Mormons to read broadly from the "best books," they seem to have little faith in the Saints' abilities to read both widely and selectively. Thus, many magazine articles include general guidelines for choosing appropriate literature and even detailed book lists appropriate for a Mormon reader, promising careful readers the rewards of individual improvement and even strengthened families.<sup>8</sup>

While a discussion of the *OORB* program cannot provide a comprehensive history of Mormons' approach to secular literature or illustrate the broad swings toward assimilation and separation of Mauss's pendulum model, its limited scope does allow for a deep and focused examination of one particular instance of secular reading prescriptions and their implications for Mormon culture. Moreover, it offers a discrete case study in which one can probe the dual presence of pulls toward both poles—a reality Mauss himself acknowledges but he and most other scholars fail to study in any significant detail. Thus, *OORB* offers an entrance into the

study of Mormons' approach to secular literature and lays a solid foundation for further examinations of Mormon reading.

### **Assimilation, Exceptionalism, and Secular Reading in *Out of the Best Books***

As Clark describes in his unpublished autobiography, *OORB* first began in the spring or early summer of 1962 when Alice Wilkinson, wife of then Brigham Young University (BYU) President Ernest Wilkinson and member of the Relief Society's administrative General Board, called him on the phone to ask if Clark, as a BYU English professor, might have any suggestions for improving the Relief Society's current literature program.<sup>9</sup> Clark responded by suggesting that one might make the lessons more interesting and meaningful for class members by focusing "on the literature itself rather than on the background history or the lives of authors" (as had heretofore been the case) and by ensuring "that the selections studied should be short enough that copies could be made for women to have and to read, preferably in advance of the class so they could participate in better discussions" (*Clark Autobiography* 1:473). Whereas the current program involved the women discussing a particular work in general terms but never actually reading it, Clark proposed that women be more directly immersed in the texts themselves.

Accordingly, Wilkinson invited Clark to take responsibility for compiling an anthology of literature (which, with the enthusiastic reception of the first volume, ultimately turned into five) that Relief Society women could read and discuss in their monthly literature meetings. Overwhelmed yet eager to embark on what he later called "the most influential and most widely studied and discussed writing I ever did" (*Clark Autobiography* 1:473), Clark enlisted the help of fellow BYU literature professor, Robert Thomas. Over the course of the next seven years, Clark and Thomas compiled five anthologies and sold each through the church's publishing house, Deseret Book, for a nominal \$2.95 so that each Relief Society woman and her family could

purchase and retain copies for their home libraries.<sup>10</sup> Although Clark was never told an exact figure, he estimated that over 100,000 copies of each volume were sold to tens of thousands of Relief Society women and their families both nationally and internationally (*Clark Autobiography* 1:489).

While *OORB*'s inception was motivated by church leaders and the program's title alludes to Joseph Smith's scriptural injunction to explore literature, Clark and Thomas clearly drew heavily from the secular Great Books tradition when designing the *OORB* program. Like the twentieth-century proponents of Great Books courses, lists, and anthologies, Clark and Thomas championed the universal applicability of "classic" Western texts for all readers, presented reading as a means of individual and social betterment, and advocated a kind of literary elitism that insisted the "best" literature could be clearly defined in a discrete canon.<sup>11</sup> The editors even included in their volumes several essays on reading by Mortimer Adler, one of the central Great Books advocates and a co-founder of Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World*.

Clark and Thomas clearly built on a broad secular tradition of reading guides, yet *OORB*'s unique focus on a Mormon female audience set the program apart. Although the editors' success at directing the entirety of their curriculum toward female readers is limited, both the presentation and distribution of the *OORB* volumes as well as their description of the program suggest women to be their intended readers. Clark and Thomas designed the program for Relief Society women specifically and announced their intended focus in the first *Relief Society Magazine* article introducing the program, stating that each *OORB* section would be "centered around a womanly attribute" (Thomas 468). Moreover, the editors also incorporated several female authors throughout their volumes, presumably to better consider the unique perspectives of women.

The editors also sought to tailor their program to meet the needs and values of their particularly religious audience. In the introduction to the first volume, Clark explained that “a basic purpose in writing this book has been to discuss works of literature that support principles of the Gospel” and thus “enrich and strengthen our spiritual lives by reading the high-quality literature of the world” (1:ix).<sup>12</sup> He listed three standards that guided their selection of literature that might support this particular focus: “a) that it be literature of high quality; b) that it explore subject matter and convey a theme of value to women of the Church and their families; c) that it be written in such a way as to be understandable and meaningful to most of the readers for whom intended” (1:ix). The editors expressed a desire to include longer selections, yet space restricted them to poems, essays, and short stories centered on these themes. These literary passages primarily included heavily-canonized British and American Romantic and Victorian literature by male authors. However, the editors did slightly expand the canon in ways other reading programs did not: approximately twenty percent of the texts were written by female authors and five percent by non-Western authors.<sup>13</sup>

While *OOBB*'s oft-stated objective was to highlight Mormon principles in secular literature, the editors also hoped to assist readers in exploring and understanding the world on a global scale. Accordingly, Clark and Thomas frequently mentioned their desire to infuse their volumes with “world flavor,” and they did indeed introduce their readers to a handful of non-Western writers. In order to immerse readers in world literature, Clark and Thomas emphasized the global focus of their curriculum throughout the entire series. In the introduction of each volume they reminded readers that while most of their selections would be drawn from English and American literature, a “generous sampling of selections from the great literature of other languages” would always be included (1:x). The editors explained that by incorporating these



additions, they hoped readers might come to understand the world in all its expansive complexity, telling readers that

The “world” we live in is not one world but several—the vast physical world and all its wonders and beauty, the unseen spiritual world and all its powers, the world of people and all their complex types and relationships, the hidden world within each person and all its complexities of feeling and thought, and finally the world of eternal principles that bind all these worlds into harmonious unity. Our goal is to discover all these worlds as fully and as honestly as possible. (5:3)

The editors contended that this intricate understanding of the world surrounding Mormons would prove useful for several reasons. First, they suggested that exploring the many varieties of culture and human behavior would facilitate readers’ civic involvement in their surrounding communities, helping them “work effectively with those who surround [them] daily” (5:vii). Moreover, they argued that the global knowledge imparted through world literature would assist “the world-wide spread of the Relief Society program and the Church” (5:x). Thus, the editors sought to help participants assimilate not just nationally but also globally. By persuading Mormon readers to embrace and connect with texts from cultures beyond their nation’s boundaries, Clark and Thomas made Mormonism’s global expansion and assimilation to societies beyond American borders seem comfortable and even natural.

Despite this emphasis on secular literature and the fact that selections from non-Mormon authors made up ninety-three percent of the volumes, Clark and Thomas did make a clear effort to emphasize their religious focus when selecting texts by choosing literature that centered on Judeo-Christian and moral themes. In her 1969 review of *OORB*, Relief Society General Board member Cherry B. Silver even suggested that “bias toward Romantic and Victorian writings

perhaps occurs because writers in these periods most strongly reflect Mormon truths and moral standards” (140). The editors further underscored these themes by organizing each volume and section under moral and spiritual titles like “Faith in God and Man,” “Right and Wrong Attitudes,” and “The Reward of Persistence.” Moreover, similar to other Great Books proponents, Clark and Thomas guided their readers’ interpretations toward their intended moral focus by prefacing each chapter with an explanatory note, concluding nearly every selection with at least a paragraph of explication, and providing an entire chapter on how to become a critical reader generally and a critical Mormon reader more specifically. While they were quick to state that they “claim no infallibility in literary interpretation” and “encourage readers to explore meanings in the poems and stories that [the editors] may have missed or even misrepresented” (1:xi), Clark and Thomas still exhibited clear intentions to direct their readers in finding uniquely Mormon insight in secular texts, thus helping them both assimilate to popular literary culture and remain peculiar at once.

For instance, Thomas expounded on the exact ways readers might maintain their distinct worldview while adopting conventional methods of interpretation and embracing secular texts in an essay that opened the first volume of *OORB*, thus setting the tone for the entire series and program. In “The Appreciation and Criticism of Literature,” Thomas first introduced readers to the concept of literary criticism, situating their interpretive approach within secular intellectualism. He began by distinguishing between mere “taste” and true “criticism,” echoing New Criticism’s emphasis on evaluative judgment and empiricism. He contended that “taste” was governed by “immediate, highly personal, and emotional reactions” that are hard to defend and discuss with other readers (1:4), whereas “criticism” involved the identification of precise and objective critical standards. According to Thomas, this more objective critical approach was

essential because it allowed for movement beyond “shallow appreciation” and established the framework for rigorous discussion (1:6). In order to acquaint his audience with basic approaches to literary analysis and invite his readers into the world of critical theory, he also outlined four central critical foci a careful reader might adopt: Platonic morality (ultimate, transcendental, philosophical truths), Aristotelian ethics (form of the work itself), Longinian authority (the author’s experience and intent), and Horatian durability (the work’s reception over time). While Thomas’s introduction to literary theory is certainly rudimentary, he summarized in significant detail what he determined to be the four central positions critics have implemented since Ancient Greek philosophy. Though he failed to provide his readers with any context on trends or controversies in contemporary literary criticism, he did invite his Mormon audience into a broad Western tradition of critical theory, rooting their interpretive methods in general practices beyond the boundaries of their faith community.

While Thomas contextualized *OORB* within the general Western tradition of literary criticism, he also took great pains to demonstrate how Mormon readers, due to their particular knowledge and worldview, experienced a special obligation to read literature critically and occupied a prime position to receive unique insights into literature. Thomas claimed that criticism was not merely conducive to more insightful reading and interpretation—he insisted it was also required by Mormon readers’ religious codes. He argued that Mormons were commanded to discern between good and evil, even in regard to literature, noting “the Scriptures help us recognize the responsibility of being a judge” (1:3). Thomas cited Korihor, a deceitful anti-Christ figure in the Book of Mormon, who stressed that “no action itself was to be condemned” and that “whatsoever a man did was no crime” (1:3). Thomas concluded that if Korihor was correct in his reasoning, then Mormons could avoid critical evaluation in any form.

But because the story of Korihor teaches that all individuals must accept accountability for their choices, all Mormon readers must become critics, even literary ones (1:4). He further underscored the necessity of Mormons' "choos[ing] the best in every area of life," arguing that, ultimately "our very salvation depends upon proper choices" (1:3). Therefore, Thomas deemed Mormons particularly excellent judges of literature because of their collective religious obligation to discern the best in all things.

Thomas not only argued that Mormon readers were ideal candidates for literary criticism generally, but he also contended that their religious beliefs primed them to be the best Platonic critics, granting them access to the fullest kind of truth and positioning them as more enlightened than other readers. He attempted to quell any feelings of intellectual inadequacy non-experts may feel, inviting Mormon readers to embrace their religious perspective when approaching literature by insisting that Mormon morals represent a legitimate and highly effective "critical yardstick" (1:7). Pointing to the four critical foci he previously outlined, Thomas explained that although all four approaches would be present in his and Clark's discussions at points, he deemed the Platonic method the ideal interpretive practice for Mormon readers, connecting Platonic ultimate truth with Mormonism's focus on religious truths. Thomas emphasized both the inescapability and value of this approach, asserting that

As Mormons, we are clearly in the Platonic critical tradition, since it is impossible for us to not use the principles of the Restored Gospel as our critical yardstick no matter what we are evaluating. Unfortunately, we are sometimes embarrassed or defensive about this when we have no need to be. Certain themes in modern fiction *will* be offensive to us because they are so directly at odds with the principles which we hold sacred. This is bound to be reflected in our reactions. It

is a little foolish to ask for complete objectivity in such cases. We *do* need to recognize our bias, but we don't need to apologize for it. (1:7–8)

According to Clark, a critical theory focused on “truth” naturally suits a Mormon reader with privileged access to truth. He emphasized Mormons’ distinct position among literary critics by claiming that their unique knowledge would encourage them to find some aspects of modern fiction troubling, thus separating Mormons from many contemporary readers. Nevertheless, Clark ultimately insisted that Mormon readers need not feel inadequate when bringing their particular views into critical discussions of literature, but should instead celebrate the insights their unique perspective affords.

In order to reinforce Mormons’ distinct position in the world of literary criticism, Clark highlighted the superiority of the Mormon approach to Platonic criticism, noting that fortunately “members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are not limited by the relative knowledge of the world” and can therefore see beyond anything that distracts from what should be the ultimate subject of criticism—the moral truths a text espouses (2:vi). Clarke suggested that most contemporary critics were not nearly as adept at this essential practice, lamenting that “modern criticism often blurs the distinction between the ‘skillful’ and the good,” suggesting that a “story that is skillfully presented is usually described as a good story” (2:vii). In Clark’s eyes, Mormons’ particular enlightened views allow them to see beyond this and recognize that “it may be possible to talk about certain literary devices, such as meter or plot, but any consideration beyond these rather mechanical ones must carry overtones of philosophy or theology” (2:viii). Ultimately, Clark and Thomas believed that “in a profound sense all questions are finally theological” (2:viii). Therefore, they contended a Mormon critical reader, above all readers,

would be equipped to avoid the distracting minutiae of literary form and access the philosophical heart of any text, discerning truths other readers might pass over.

A note near the end of Thomas's introductory chapter further emphasizes this sense of separateness, reminding readers that they can and should remain distinct during their assimilative reading acts. In so doing, Thomas underscored *OBB*'s larger effort to assist Mormon readers in simultaneously embracing and resisting mainstream literature and reading practices. When responding to a hypothetical reader who might worry that Mormonism as a critical yardstick could prove "not very meaningful outside the believing group," Thomas acknowledged that because Mormon readers "can never wholly escape [their] religious or philosophical orientation," they must recognize that they limit their interpretive community to those who also share the same values (1:8). Yet he ultimately dismissed this issue as unproblematic, telling readers that "most of us surely have no desire to [escape our religious orientation]" and reminding readers that their particular Mormon views will present the key to unlocking "profound truth" in literature (1:8). While Clark and Thomas certainly hoped critical traditions beyond Mormonism would inform their readers' approaches to secular literature, the editors also explicitly stated their desire for readers to remain separate from the world of literary criticism, thus advocating a simultaneous aspiration toward assimilation and separation.

#### *Discerning Mormon Truths in Secular Texts*

In keeping with their proposed interpretive methods, the editors frequently reminded Mormon readers to maintain their sense of distinction as they embarked on secular reading, using their explicatory comments about Mormons' unique worldview to convince readers that only they could understand the full spiritual implications of each author's message. Thus, their program attempted to position Mormons as the most discerning readers of great literature by

demonstrating how the most talented authors shared certain aspects of Mormon beliefs. For instance, in his introduction to several poems by Robert Browning, “probably the greatest English poet since Milton” (1:71), Clark explained that Browning “does firmly believe that God is in Heaven controlling the universe” and that “the potentiality of man in this life is great and the confidence with which he can look forward to live beyond death is equally great” (1:71). Furthermore, in his explication of Browning’s “Johannes Agricola in Meditation,” a portrait of a self-righteous Protestant clergyman, Clark inferred that “Browning believed just as strongly as do members of the LDS Church that faith without works is dead and that an individual has the responsibility through an exercise of willpower to work out his own salvation” (1:237). Thus, by framing these classic texts as focused on sentiments Mormons were best equipped to recognize, Clark positioned *OORB* participants as uniquely perceptive readers, therein prescribing a particular position for the program’s participants.

Clark further framed Mormon readers’ position in his explications of canonical texts like Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord.” In that reading, he concluded that “a wise student of the Gospel knows, as Hopkins must also have known . . . that the great reward of righteous living, available to all, is not material prosperity and freedom from hardship, but spiritual peace of mind and serenity that comes with a free conscience and a testimony of truth” (1:396). Here Clark radically reads against the poem and its critical tradition in order to model a particular type of reading for the program’s participants. It did not seem to matter to the editors that their readings of these authors’ motives greatly differed from conventional interpretations—Browning was, at least for much of his life, famously atheist (Ward 33–34), and Hopkins’s sonnet is frequently interpreted as an expression of anguished doubt rather than faith (Christ and Robson 1515). Thus, Clark and Thomas established Mormons as a radically different group of

literary critics, ideally suited to discern in great works the religious principles they already embraced.

While Clark and Thomas offered many examples of authors expressing moral truths Mormons might easily recognize, they suggested that William Wordsworth, above all other writers, spoke with a voice Mormons readers are best equipped to hear. In his commentary on Wordsworth's poetry, Clark suggested that Wordsworth discusses truths unique to Mormon theology, making Mormons the most insightful interpreters of his works. *OORB*'s explication of Wordsworth's poems thus offers the program's most overt attempt to distinguish Mormon readers by establishing their superior vantage point for interpreting classic literature. In commenting on his "Intimations of Immortality," Clark connected Wordsworth's explorations of life before birth (latching onto his declarations that "our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting" and that we come "trailing clouds of glory" from "God, who is our home") with "the unique Latter-day Saint doctrine of pre-existence, which extends immortality in both directions, not only forward into post-mortality following death and resurrection, but also backward into pre-mortality before birth" (1:61).<sup>14</sup> While Clark conceded that "all Christian churches recognize life after death and many Christian people have an inherent feeling that there is life before birth," he insisted that "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints alone teaches as an official doctrine that we mortals existed as individual spirit children with God our Father and exercised our free agency for development in a pre-mortal state" (1:61). In so doing, he both authorized and demanded Mormon readers to approach this text in a particular way fitting the series' idea of "Mormon" and "Mormon readership."

Moreover, Clark continued his efforts to distinguish Mormon readers' interpretive abilities by concluding that Wordsworth's "We Are Seven," which features a young narrator who



still cherishes a bond with her deceased siblings, offered an “especial appeal to Latter-day Saint readers because, although among all other people there is a hopeful yearning that the family unit may endure beyond the grave, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is apparently the only Christian church which officially teaches the family unit may so endure” (1:471). Because they felt Wordsworth speaks of truths so specific to Mormonism, the editors held him in the highest esteem, arguing that he represented the “essence of great poetry” (1:54) and insisting that “there is perhaps no higher code of ethics recorded anywhere than Wordsworth’s except in the greatest sermon spoken on a mountain by the Savior of the world” (1:70). By presenting these poems as expressions of uniquely Mormon truths, Clark both welcomed Mormons into the secular canon and located them as privileged readers of these texts, simultaneously illustrating the relevance of classic poetry to Mormon readers while also arguing that only Mormon readers could fully appreciate it.

Clark not only linked Wordsworth’s supposed visions of a pre-earth life and eternal family ties to Mormon doctrine, but he also suggested that Wordsworth may have been inspired by God directly, suggesting that Mormon readers also retain separateness through their particular ability to trace literary truths’ divine origins. In reference to Wordsworth, Clark asserted that the poet seemed to “speak with a voice of divine authority” (1:61) and connected him to the Mormon prophet and founder, Joseph Smith. Clark acknowledged that “Wordsworth was not, of course, a Latter-day Saint and perhaps never heard of ‘Mormonism,’” yet he submitted that the poet “might very well have been an inspired forerunner of the Gospel” when he wrote the “Immortality” ode in 1805—“the very year of Joseph Smith’s birth” (1:61). It did not matter whether or not Wordsworth was privy to the origin of his message or that his work sometimes contradicted Mormon theology—Clark noted the poet’s early “strong Pantheistic leanings”

(1:64). Clark still suggested that the best poets, of whom Wordsworth was his representative, unwittingly experienced and transcribed moments of divine inspiration that Mormons were best equipped to distill, thus strengthening the program's claims of Mormon readers' supreme ability to comprehend great literature and its implicit prescription that such is only possible when the editors' methods are followed.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, by encouraging readers to view secular texts as the products of divine inspiration, despite them being written by non-Mormon authors, Clark and Thomas proposed a means of reconciling Mormons' obligation to remain separate from the world with their recognition of universal truth. By suggesting that secular texts contain wisdom directly from God that Mormons are best equipped to uncover, the editors offered a means by which *OORB* readers could embrace truth outside their faith tradition yet still enjoy privileged access to it.

#### *Crafting a Narrative of Universal Truth*

Clark and Thomas also suggested Mormon readers' particular insight allows them to perceive and construct a narrative of "universal truth" present in all great literature. While Clark and Thomas certainly took great pains to extract specific ideas that aligned with Mormon doctrines in many individual texts, they also frequently stated that literature in general tends to reflect a particular moral arc. In so doing, they contended that most classic literature actually mirrors Mormon beliefs, including doctrines unique to Mormonism, but also principles found more broadly in Christian values, and an optimistic attitude toward life. By drawing out this narrative of universal truth, the editors proposed another way Mormons could remain separate in their assimilative act of reading secular texts, claiming that Mormons are not only privileged in their ability to discern individual truths and their origins but that they also have the unique capacity to define a pattern of truth present in all literature. Moreover, by telling readers that

truth could be found outside of Mormonism, the editors presented secular reading as safe and comfortable, easing the process of assimilation. Throughout the volumes' introductions and chapter headings, Clark and Thomas emphasized that literature as a whole exhibited this concept of morality. Clark suggested that a "major concern of literature, and of religion, is with right and wrong attitudes that men and women may hold" (1:111), and he also stated that "probably literature has been concerned with no other subject so much as with the relationship between good and evil in the universe" (1:283). The editors elaborated on some of these specific moral themes, suggesting that "at its best, literature is concerned with building faith and championing spiritual values [of which they specify integrity, humility, and sincerity]—and with opposing and exposing selfishness, materialism, shallowness and all things harmful to human personality or destructive in human relationships" (3:viii).

The series' editors frequently underscored the religious aspects of these commonly found themes in their introductions and explications, claiming that Mormon readers' had privileged insight into literature as a whole. Clark asserted that literature has traditionally "been the bulwark of men's faith and the guardian of his spiritual ideals" (1:51) and concluded that ultimately, "the goals of religion and the goals of literature are the same, and the methods tend to be the same" (1:111). While the editors repeatedly insisted that these familiar moral ideas could be found in nearly all secular texts, they were still careful to remind Mormon readers of their unique access to these truths. After introducing readers to the widespread consideration of philosophical and moral concerns in secular literature, Clark explained that "as members of the Church, we are fortunate to have special insight into these problems through the inspired writings of our modern prophets" (1:283), thus reminding readers that Mormonism allows *OABB* participants more complete answers to questions of morality. Therefore Clark and Thomas set Mormon readers

apart from general readers by molding the entire concept of Great Books into a canon universally preoccupied with questions of moral behavior and philosophy, positioning Mormons as the constructors of this narrative as well as those best equipped to respond to it.

Moreover, the editors continually explained that the ubiquity of these moral themes guaranteed their applicability to all *OORB* readers, repeatedly emphasizing this notion in their commentary over the course of the program. In the *Relief Society Magazine*'s introduction to the curriculum, the editors insisted, "creative artists are concerned with the good and the beautiful in a way that finds response universally throughout the human race" ("Lesson Three," 795). Throughout the volumes they repeatedly reminded readers that the purpose of *OORB* was to "emphasize the universal meaning of the principles which were being explored," observing, for example, that "humility . . . has no boundaries and love knows neither time nor place" (4:vii), suggesting that many of the truths Mormons knew were also valued throughout the world, therein emphasizing likeness even as the series advocated a separateness via reading.

While this focus on the universal esteem for values compatible with Mormonism permeated the entire program, this emphasis was particularly prevalent in the volumes' discussions of world literature. Clark and Thomas maintained their Platonic-Mormon lens during their explication of non-Western texts, focusing on how these seemingly exotic selections could be incorporated in a narrative of universal truth defined by Mormon principles. Whenever the editors introduced a passage of world literature, discussed the importance of expanding one's literary taste to include non-Western texts, or explored a specific selection, they reminded readers of the universal truths present in the unfamiliar excerpts. Clark and Thomas explained that by adding literature from other countries, they "hoped to emphasize the universal meaning of the principles which were being explored" (4:vii) and insisted that

whatever the language, whatever the land, whatever the century . . . the same basic problems are shared by all people of the world, as are the same ideals and aspirations.

Some matters are peculiar to certain areas of the world, but most of the things that really matter—at least things that permanently matter—are common to all people of the earth.

(“Lesson Three,” 795)

In their explication of particular world texts, Clark and Thomas consistently demonstrated those “things that permanently matter” to be universal values that could be aligned with Mormon beliefs and sacred texts, thus again illustrating how Mormons might maintain their separateness when immersing themselves in artifacts far beyond their cultural bounds.

For instance, in their discussion of “Giving,” a poem by Lebanese-American poet and mystic Kahlil Gibran that meditates on the virtues of generosity, Clark and Thomas connected Gibran’s celebration of giving and receiving exclusively to Mormonism rather than commenting on the blend of Christianity, Islam, Sufism, and Judaism that often characterizes the poet’s work. The editors tied Gibran’s “rather standard assertion that it is when you ‘give of yourself that you truly give’” to Mormon doctrine, noting that “as these facets of giving and receiving are uncovered, we remember King Benjamin’s address in the Book of Mormon” (3:293). Though Gibran’s poem unconventionally marries the structure of a biblical parable with allusions to Muslim “pilgrims to the holy city” (14) and a broader mystical reference to man’s “free-hearted earth for mother” (84), Clark and Thomas overlooked these ideas. Instead, the editors exclusively focused on explaining how Gibran’s “simple and fresh approach to the so-called problems of life” mirrored their readers’ existing notion of truth (3:292). In so doing, Clark and Thomas emphasized their principal desire for participants to explore concepts from world cultures that aligned with the truths Mormons already understood, thus helping Mormon readers both

comfortably embrace unfamiliar texts and reinforce their position as exceptionally insightful literary critics.

This model of arranging secular literature around ideas compatible with Mormon truths is, in fact, consistent with a larger pattern of Mormon meaning-making, reflecting the Mormon concept of creation, that locates Mormons as privileged organizers of found truths. As Scott Hales has pointed out, “Joseph Smith, in the last decade of his life, came to understand creation not as something *ex nihilo*, but as the organization of existing materials and set in motion through obedience to eternal laws that pre-exist even God.” Like God himself, Smith was also a “great organizer, collecting shards of existing culture to give form to his religious world and kingdom” (278). Hales suggests that Mormon novelists are also “organizers of unorganized cultural matter” (278), and Mormon novelist Jack Harrell agrees, asserting that all Mormons follow this paradigm in their efforts to make sense of the world and discover truth. Harrell argues that for Mormons, meaning-making in any creative capacity, be it science, literature, or art, “aligns ideally through Mormon theology. [Their] desire to make meaning results from seeing the universe as God does. He looks at unorganized matter and envisions order. Then he brings it about. That characteristic defines Him, and it should define [Mormons]” (8). Harrell concludes that it is through this creative process that the common man is truly able to unite with God. Clark and Thomas clearly also adopted this pattern of meaning-making through organization when crafting a narrative of truth from secular literature. In so doing, they helped their readers justify how they might look for truth outside of Mormonism without sacrificing their sense of exceptionalism. This act of constructing a universal truth narrative by sorting truth from pre-existing cultural materials and thus following a pattern of divine creation reinforces Mormon readers’ privileged position, aligning them a little closer to God than the rest of the world.

### *Acknowledging and Incorporating Outliers*

Throughout the *OORB* program, Clark and Thomas doggedly maintained that nearly any text—even those that might seem to challenge Mormon values—could be incorporated into Mormon readers’ narrative of universal truth. From the first volume, Clark and Thomas acknowledged the inevitability of these outliers or texts that departed from Mormon ideas of morality. Yet the editors argued that the majority of these seemingly subversive texts could still be embraced by Mormon readers if they simply viewed them as “negative examples” that heightened the importance of moral actions, allowing Mormons to retain their privileged access to truth while embracing secular literature. For example, in Thomas’s introduction to literary criticism, he acknowledged that readers would indeed encounter many texts that, at first glance, might seem to threaten their beliefs and values. He conceded that it was certainly “possible to object to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* as a tale of adultery” (1:8). Yet he continued, insisting that “to do so [would be] to miss Hawthorne’s real theme—the consequences of sin” (1:8). Thomas concluded his commentary on this example by warning readers of the “temptation to apply our standards without enough thought” and teaching that by reading Hester Prynne as a foil to the chaste Mormon woman, readers would be able to view the text as a “profoundly novel and uplifting story” (1:8).

In the volume’s various explicative passages, the editors frequently underscored this concept of negative examples, noting how particular authors encouraged ethical behavior by painting immoral characters in a negative light. In so doing, Clark and Thomas sought to illustrate just how expansive Mormons’ embrace of secular literature could be. For instance, they observed that readers would likely not connect with the adulterous woman in Thomas Wolfe’s “Dark in the Forest, Strange as Time.” In fact, they insisted that “we as readers rebel against it,

just as the author intended we should,” which allows Wolfe to emphasize the importance of unity and remind readers of the internal battle between good and evil each individual faces (1:299). Moreover, they also explained that Robert Browning’s portrait of the self-righteous and hypocritical Johannes Agricola in “Johannes Agricola in Meditation” could be understood by “turn[ing] Johannes’s beliefs upside down.” They argued that “as satire, this poem exposes the exact opposite of what Browning—and Latter-day Saint readers—recognize as the true principles of Christianity,” highlighting the importance of faith and works by depicting a repulsive individual claiming he is predestined to salvation (1:237).

While Clark and Thomas frequently described how authors self-consciously employ counter-examples of moral behavior as instructive devices, they also suggested that readers could impose this framework on nearly any text that seemed to resist Mormon values in order to remain comfortable reading secular literature in a way that reinforced their particular beliefs and unique access to truth, further emphasizing the broad range of texts Mormons might approach with their privileged interpretive lens. In the first volume’s concluding chapter, called “Facing Death,” Clark and Thomas explained that they included some poems on the subject that were “grimly, brutally, bleakly pessimistic, especially with regard to death and resurrection” and were therefore “completely out of harmony with all Christian philosophy” and “false in their views” (1:453). These included James Thomson’s “From the City of a Dreadful Night” and Robinson Jeffers’s “From May–June, 1940,” which each welcomes the oblivion of death as an end to life’s misery, as well as Omar Khayyam’s *The Rubaiyat*, which denies the certainty of an afterlife and endorses hedonism in life.

Anticipating potential criticisms about these selections, the editors defended their appropriateness by describing how they might “serve as contrasts and heighten the beauty” of



poems that express “affirmative, positive, optimistic views with regard to death and life after death” (1:453), therein attempting to model how nearly any text could be included in a canon appropriate for Mormon readers. These more uplifting explorations of mortality included Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 146,” John Donne’s “Death Be Not Proud,” and Dylan Thomas’s “And Death Shall Have No Dominion,” which all seek to subvert death’s power by emphasizing the reality of eternal life. Thus, readers could supply their own contrast to any ideas that challenged their beliefs when authors failed to provide that juxtaposition for them. Ultimately, the editors concluded that Mormon readers could “come to an appreciation of righteousness by observing its opposite,” insisting that “if we can learn from the plight of others [including literary characters], we can avoid the painful detours along the road to political and spiritual salvation, which need to be understood, but need not be experienced” (5:9). According to this theory, therefore, Mormon readers could approach any text with their beliefs not only intact, but also affirmed and strengthened. Readers could view material that countered their beliefs as lessons of the consequences of unrighteous behavior, or, if characters fail to be punished for immoral actions, then readers could simply view the text as a juxtaposition that only heightened the correctness of their own beliefs. Thus, Clark and Thomas increased Mormon readers’ opportunities to assimilate into mainstream literary culture by prescribing interpretive methods that converted all texts into moral tales that Mormons could read without relinquishing their understanding of those truths separating Mormons from the rest of the world.

### ***OOBB’s Shortcomings***

While Clark and Thomas’s interpretive methods worked to help readers smoothly navigate assimilation and separation in many respects, the editors’ prescribed approach to classic literature was not without problems. They did present a fairly cohesive pattern of reading that

assisted readers in locating unique Mormon truths in literature and distilling from that literature a universal narrative compatible with Mormon beliefs and values. Yet the editors also encountered areas in which their attempts to help Mormons assimilate and separate were not entirely seamless, including their efforts to incorporate outlier texts, embrace world literature, and address Mormon women—the program’s supposed primary audience that went consistently overlooked. These remaining tensions both highlight the complexity of *OORB*’s wrestle with Mormon identity and point to potential difficulties in Mormon attempts to navigate assimilation and separation.

### *Embracing or Excluding Outliers*

While the editors did lay out a pattern of reading that assisted many Mormon readers in preserving their particular worldview while embracing texts that might challenge it, they did encounter some tension when discussing texts that seemed to resist Mormon truths, pointing to the difficult complexity of navigating Mormon identity. Despite the editors’ faith in this inclusive approach to secular literature, the Correlation Reading Committee, the administrative body responsible for reviewing and approving all lesson curriculum for the Mormon Church, was less confident in the editors’ curating standards, indicating remaining tensions in Clark and Thomas’s model of approaching secular texts with a distinct Mormon lens.<sup>16</sup> In the Committee’s view, some *OORB* selections did not fit their vision of suitable literature, no matter how Clark and Thomas tried to frame their discussions of these texts. For instance, the Committee rejected Clark’s proposed section on Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” (*Clark Autobiography* 2:102). Although Clark never specifically explained why the text and his discussion of it were rejected, it is easy to imagine the Committee found its graphic depiction of public stoning disturbing. The Committee also rejected Clark’s incorporation of John Steinbeck’s “The Chrysanthemums.”

When Clark pressed them to know why, he learned that it was because some of the church's leadership had seen *Of Mice and Men* performed at the University of Utah, and they objected to its "harsh realism" (102). The committee then told Clark that Steinbeck had become a "red flag" for them and that none of his work could be included after that point (102).

Unsurprisingly, Clark was very frustrated by these rejections but retained his faith in his interpretive approach to and prescriptions for literature. Unlike the Committee, Clark felt that Mormon readers could assimilate into mainstream reading culture by embracing nearly any secular text while still retaining their distinct views and even reinforcing their particular beliefs. He expressed both his dismay at the Committee's direction as well as his ultimate confidence in *Oobb*'s inclusive embrace of secular texts in a letter to Correlation Committee member Marianne Sharp in 1967. He lamented, "I feel caught between a reading committee that feels the need to protect the women of the Church against selections that might upset them or be controversial and a reading audience that keeps urging me, 'Why don't you give us more material with muscle in it—selections that will face the problems vigorously and make us think?'" (*Clark Autobiography* 2:102). He speculated about the reasons behind the Committee's disapproval, noting that they seemed "suspicious of satire, irony, symbolism, strong realism, and all negative examples, which are traditional tools of literature" (*Clark Autobiography* 2:102). Yet Clark firmly maintained that Mormon readers could benefit from reading more expansively. He sadly concluded that the Committee's standard

only leaves one kind of literature to work with—that which is explicit and openly affirmative. There is nothing wrong with this kind of literature; many excellent examples of it can be found. But a steady diet of it that includes nothing else is very soft and monotonous—like the bland food of an ulcer patient. For literature

to be represented at its best we must offer a variety of approaches. You can see why I am so frustrated. Almost everything I think of that would really illustrate a point or explore a problem with brilliant insight, I feel afraid to submit because I fear it will be rejected. (*Clark Autobiography 2:102*).

Clark's exchange with the Committee exposes significantly disparate views in regards to embracing truth outside of Mormonism. While both the Committee and the editors saw value in reading some secular texts, their views on which texts were appropriate for Mormon readers greatly varied. What seems to have frustrated Clark the most was the Committee's refusal to recognize the expansiveness of his and Thomas's approach to literature. The Committee felt Mormon readers could only be safely exposed to "openly affirmative" texts, or those that were considered uplifting and that espoused a perspective in line with Mormon doctrine and cultural attitudes. Yet Clark firmly believed that those "negative examples," or texts that presented a bleaker and perhaps less moral worldview, could both challenge readers and be easily absorbed into a narrative of universal truth compatible with Mormonism. According to him, even texts like "The Lottery" could be effectively analyzed through his Mormon lens. While these more controversial selections might present ideas that countered readers' beliefs, Clark maintained they could ultimately reinforce general Mormon values by bringing the correctness of readers' own morals into sharp relief. Despite his expression of discouragement, Clark resolved to "keep trying to do the best that I can" (*Clark Autobiography 2:102*) and to find other selections to replace the ones that the Correlation Reading Committee found controversial. However, the root of the disagreement—where *OORB* should draw the line that defined what was and was not appropriate for Mormon readers—remained unresolved.

While Clark and Thomas provided readers with extensive direction on how to reconcile their need for separation from mainstream society with their belief that truth can be found outside Mormonism, they did not directly demonstrate how readers might select texts for themselves. The *OBB* editors were remarkably liberal in their argument that nearly any text could be included in its canon, but even Clark and Thomas implied that Mormons should avoid some texts altogether. Throughout the volumes, the editors tended to speak particularly unfavorably of contemporary literature. They noted that “twentieth-century pessimism and negativism have spread as a dominant force in philosophy and literature, reflecting the fears and frustrations of the modern man” (1:49). And in another section they explained, “We did want to include at this point one brief character sketch drawn from modern literature portraying a twentieth-century woman beautiful because of her personality and character—and we cannot find exactly what we want.” The editors lamented that in modern literature, “we instead find mostly frustrated, neurotic, unfulfilled, rebellious, unhappy women” that they did not deem worthy of inclusion in the series (4:162). Even though Clark and Thomas repeatedly demonstrated how texts that might seem to counter Mormon values could actually be faith affirming, there were still some texts they simply could not embrace, signaling that their “open” canon had its limits.

Thus, *OBB* presents a significant tension that Clark and Thomas did not resolve: when seeking truth outside the Mormon faith tradition, how do Mormons determine what they must reject and what they can safely embrace? Or in other words, how far beyond their borders can Mormons reach in their assimilative attempts without diluting their unique beliefs? While *OBB* does not provide answers to this question, it does offer additional insight into the complexity of Mormon assimilation and separation efforts by bringing this issue to light. These fundamental

disagreements between the editors and the reading committee reveal that this particular Mormon attempt to reconcile assimilation and separation was far less monolithic than Mauss's pendulum model suggests. Not only does *OORB* represent complex movements toward both poles simultaneously, but the individuals involved seemed to harbor varied and even divisive opinions on how assimilation should be carried out. Thus, *OORB* offers one detailed example of the intricacies Mormons might navigate when working out their cultural identity in relation to the world around them.

*Exploring Worlds Abroad and Within: Non-Western Literature, Women, and OORB*

Just as Clark and Thomas struggled to fully reconcile assimilation and separation when marking the boundaries that defined which texts *OORB* could and could not embrace, they also encountered particular tension when seeking to incorporate non-Western literature and tailor their program to women readers. Though *OORB* was remarkably progressive in terms of its inclusion of literature by women and non-Western authors, it still largely failed at assisting Mormon readers in exploring cultural difference and attending to the specific needs and values of the program's female readership. Thus, *OORB* further highlights the nuances of Mormon assimilation and separation, and poses challenging questions all Mormons might face when seeking to embrace difference while maintaining their particular worldview.

While the majority of the *OORB* selections were not drawn from world literature, it is worth noting that the editors did better attend to diversity through representing authors from varied backgrounds than most contemporary Great Books collections or lists. For example, Adler's popular *How to Read a Book* included significantly fewer non-Western and women authors than the *OORB* series. Adler's list of 130 Great Books in the 1940 edition contained only four non-Western (all Russian) authors, while his 1972 list of 137 total texts decreased this

number to only three. And Adler's 1940 edition contained no women authors while the 1972 edition included only two (Jane Austen and George Eliot). *OABB*, on the other hand, incorporated ten Non-Western and thirty-three female writers out of 194 total authors. These non-Western authors were not just Eastern Europeans; texts by Chinese writers Wang Wei and Lin Yutang, Persian poet and philosopher Omar Khayyam, Indian political leaders Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and Lebanese-American poet and mystic Kahlil Gibran were also integrated into the volumes. Moreover, these women writers included the more canonical Emily Dickenson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot but also several more obscure Mormon women authors, such as the nineteenth-century poet Eliza R. Snow and the contemporary poet and playwright Carol Lynn Pearson. Though these selections from world literature and women writers were relatively few in number, they did represent a fairly impressive variety of global and female voices for the time and that type of reading program.

Despite its inclusive literary selections, however, *OABB* largely failed at exploring the variety of beliefs, practices, and perspectives these texts presented. In terms of world literature, the editors' principle focus remained on integrating these texts into a narrative of universal truth inspired by Mormonism. In so doing, they continued to model how Mormon readers might preserve their exceptionalism when engaging with secular literature, keeping readers focused on the themes and ideas in literature that Mormons understood best. However, their approach to non-Western texts fell remarkably short in regards to assimilation. In the area of *OABB* most focused on turning outward and embracing texts and cultures beyond the Mormon faith tradition, the editors maintained a singular focus on the beliefs and practices they already knew, hindering their attempt to integrate with the non-Western cultures they set out to explore. Therefore, *OABB*'s treatment of non-Western literature raises the question of how Mormons might truly

understand and unite with other cultures when solely focused on a narrative of truth defined by Mormon values.

This limiting lens is present in nearly all the editors' explications of non-Western texts, especially in their reading of Gibran's "Giving," but nowhere is this focus on a Mormon sense of universal truth when approaching world literature more apparent than in commentary from *OABB* readers themselves. In order to begin to assess the ways in which *OABB* helped readers assimilate into popular reading culture yet remain separate through their unique perception and organization of truth, I conducted an anonymous online survey of seventy-eight women throughout the United States who participated in this reading program.<sup>17</sup> Many of these respondents praised the program for "giv[ing] women a broader view of the world" (Q16 R14) and "exposing [them] to a wide variety of literature in a comfortable environment" (Q14 R52). Yet these responses also indicate that the primary insights Relief Society readers gained from their exploration of world literature was how each culture mirrored their own sense of truth. One woman recalled that *OABB* "acquainted [her] with some of the great literature of the world and showed [her] how gospel truths are found throughout the world" (Q14 R32), while another explained that the program "helped [her] look for truth and goodness in the world based on gospel standards" (Q18 R52) and another described "being thrilled by discovering humans, real or fictionalized, outside the Bible or Book of Mormon struggled with similar issues" (Q18 R17). Several also noted that because they observed so many similarities between their own beliefs and the beliefs of others around the world, the program helped them envision a global Mormon Church. Following Clark and Thomas's lead, these *OABB* respondents interpreted world literature by fitting these texts into their own preconceived narrative of universal truth.



Thus, Clark and Thomas's approach to world literature presents a remaining tension in *OBB* participants' efforts to look outward. While readers gained some insight into the traits and beliefs they shared with the world around them (although these similarities were certainly exaggerated), they seemed to learn very little about the ways in which they differed. Because *OBB* participants were so focused on understanding truths that aligned with their own sense of morality, they primarily came away with their own ideas fortified rather than accessing new knowledge or discovering new ways of interpreting the world. When asked how the program affected their views on the gospel, three women directly stated that it "reinforced" their beliefs (Q18 R11; Q18 R17; Q18 R25), and many others described how it strengthened their testimony of gospel principles. Clark and Thomas demonstrated how Mormon readers might navigate the pulls toward assimilation and separation, yet the interpretive approach to literature they modeled failed to leave readers with much room for learning. While participants thoroughly studied "things which are at home," they only barely glimpsed "things which are abroad," perhaps not fully meeting the *Doctrine and Covenants*' oft-quoted instruction on comprehensive learning.<sup>18</sup> Thus, *OBB* exposes another area of complexity participants encountered when seeking to negotiate assimilation and exceptionalism and poses an additional unresolved question: if Mormons only embrace external truth that aligns with their existing beliefs, how can they experience or appreciate diverse ideas and practices that might fall outside this category? While *OBB*, again, does not prescribe a remedy for this problem, it does deepen our general understanding of Mormonism's identity paradox by exposing the particular obstacles these *OBB* participants faced when seeking to simultaneously assimilate and retain separateness through their reading practices.

Just as *OORB*'s emphasis on a singular narrative of universal truth in world literature made it difficult for participants to engage with diverse cultural ideas and practices beyond Mormonism, this focus had a similarly flattening effect on the program participants themselves. Though Mormon women were the intended audience and focus of the program, the editors struggled to acknowledge the specificity of their audience throughout the volumes. Because their standardized narrative of universal truth tended to imagine a (male) universal reader, or occasionally, a very narrowly cast general female reader, the unique needs, values, and experiences of female readers were often overlooked by the editors. Thus, when *OORB* turned its focus on universal truth inward, female participants encountered difficulty exploring diversity internally in addition to externally.

Despite notable efforts to tailor *OORB* to their female audience through including texts by women writers, for the most part, Clark and Thomas failed on this front. As a whole, they did not address women nearly as consistently as they purported to or as thoroughly as the General Relief Society board would have liked. Throughout their commentary on over two hundred literary passages, the editors specifically discussed "womanly attributes" only twenty times. While they do on rare occasion mention women, usually connecting the trait of a particular female character to attributes of "good" wives or mothers, the editors used male pronouns far more frequently than female pronouns when referring to their audience, and they mentioned universal roles far more often than gendered ones. For instance, parenthood and marriage were considered far more regularly than motherhood and wifehood. Throughout the majority of the volumes, Clark and Thomas reflected on how general Mormon readers might develop more humility, faith, and honesty and become more cultured and aware of the world around them, rather than how Mormon women in particular might cultivate these traits.

Moreover, on the few occasions when they did address women, the editors' interpretations felt stilted and contrived, in part because they attempted to draw very narrow female-specific conclusions from texts that contained neither female characters nor any particular consideration of female roles. Clark and Thomas's interpretations were not only limited by their near-constant focus on a "universal" reader instead of a female one, but also by a narrowly prescribed definition of womanhood that emphasized housekeeping, motherhood, and the aspiration toward physical beauty. For example, in their explication of Thoreau's "Economy," Clark and Thomas commented on Thoreau's celebration of physical labor and suggested that "the challenge that Thoreau's words present to women everywhere is the opportunity to make daily tasks significant as well as routinely necessary" (2:228). In response to the passage, they asked readers, "Are the daughters who grow up in your home going to be 'resigned' to do housework?" (2:228). Indicating the proper answer to this question, the editors concluded that Thoreau's words should help women celebrate their routine tasks, such as doing the dishes, as "essential discipline for a more creative effort" (2:228). This application of Thoreau's reflection on self-reliance and minimalist living, which does not speak to specific female roles at all, to women's specific obligation to enjoy housework, feels both forced and reductive.

Furthermore, the editors directly acknowledged that women simply did not fit into their explication of Walter Van Tilburg Clark's "The Portable Phonograph," an apocalyptic short story of four men struggling to survive on a barren prairie in the wake of a massive war, further demonstrating their narrow idea of women's roles. Near the end of their interpretive comments, the editors suggested, "only one thing would make [the story] better. A fifth character is needed—a beautiful girl whom they could love and over whom they could quarrel. Shall we

make her blond or brunette?” Though they noted that these remarks were “not, of course, serious,” they did insist “adding a girl” would “spoil” the story, concluding, “if there were a woman in it, there might be a future. Instead there are only four suspicious men—and this is the end!” (1:208–09). According to the editors, female characters ought to be defined by their physical beauty, romantic relationships to men, and reproductive abilities. They did claim that these remarks were at least partially in jest, yet they still failed to present to their readers a textual example of womanhood that extended beyond housework, wifedom, and motherhood. While Clark and Thomas explicitly admitted that women had no place in this short story, their intermittent and incomplete inclusion of women throughout the series demonstrates their limited definition of womanhood as well as their prevailing notion that focusing specifically on their female audience was also largely unnecessary.

A variety of reasons likely account for why *OBB* fell short of its purported focus on female readers. The Western canon has, of course, always consisted of primarily male authors, so it is no surprise that the texts Clark and Thomas curated were written mostly by men. And perhaps Clark and Thomas were accustomed to explicating texts in their professional lives for general audiences (which, at that time, meant mostly men) rather than for women particularly. Or perhaps they felt uncomfortable drawing out a narrative of truth for Mormon women specifically, simply because they were not Mormon women themselves. While each of these reasons may have played a part in Clark and Thomas’s failure to fully tailor the program to women, the primary reason seemed to be simply because they felt a focus on universal truth directed toward a general audience would sufficiently include women. Though none of the women I surveyed seemed to take issue with the program’s lack of emphasis on women, the church’s Relief Society leadership did and pointed this out to Clark directly.

In response, Clark suggested that his inclusion and explication of texts by primarily male authors were more than adequate for Relief Society readers because of their universal applicability. In his autobiography, Clark recorded that in April of 1968, Marianne Sharp of the church's central Relief Society presidency called him to say that the Correlation Reading Committee turned down his chapter on serenity for the fourth volume "because the examples of serenity [he] used were in the lives of men not women and therefore not applicable to women" (122). Clark described feeling "deeply distressed" because he felt the section "seemed to him one of the best [he had] written" (122). After writing a letter to the Committee describing his frustration, Clark received another call from Alice Wilkinson, who agreed to publish his section as written, but "wondered if it might be possible to add a selection or two focusing specifically on women" (122). As it stood, the chapter illustrated "the outward calm of an inner conscience at peace with itself" (4:223) through the speeches of male political leaders who demonstrated great integrity, including Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill, and John F. Kennedy.

Clark reluctantly conceded to the request and added several poems by nineteenth-century Mormon poet Eliza R. Snow, including one aptly titled "What is and What is Not for Women." The inclusion of Snow's poem, however, seems to only emphasize both the editors' narrow idea of women's roles as well as the manner in which the chapter's previous sections failed to relate to female readers. In each stanza, Snow presents a Victorian pattern of family life for women by describing the way in which they should operate in a separate sphere from men. Snow notes that it is not for women to "face the foe / Amid the canon's thundering blaze" (9–10), nor should they be "ensconced in Chair of State, / To legislate 'twixt man and man— / nations and laws to regulate" (19–21). Rather, Snow insists women are better suited to "shield the path of innocence"

(28) and “cultivate the germs / Of all the faculties for good” within the home (30–31). By including a poem that insists women focus on raising children rather than engaging in politics or war—a project completely opposite to the chapter’s primary focus on political speeches by men—Clark’s female-specific inclusion only serves to heighten how women were previously excluded from the majority of the chapter as well as the curriculum as a whole.

Although Clark recounted later sending an apology letter to the Relief Society board for challenging their suggestions, he maintained that even though most of the passages in the serenity chapter involved “incidents in the lives of men rather than women, . . . the section was good enough and concerned enough with high principles that it [would] be valuable when studied in Relief Society groups” (*Clark Autobiography* 2:122). He also emphasized this sentiment in his introduction to Snow’s poems in the volume itself. Clark explained that his inclusion of poetry by a woman was “not to suggest that the selections already used [were] inapplicable to women. Serenity, courage, integrity, peace of mind—these are qualities that may be shared equally by men and women” (4:257). Despite the objection of the Relief Society, Clark still believed that a focus on universal principles (exhibited primarily by men) should be sufficient for Relief Society women to connect the literary passages to their own experiences. Though the editors likely did not intentionally marginalize their primary readership, both the Relief Society leadership’s dissatisfaction with Clark and Thomas’s selections as well as an examination of the *OBBB* texts themselves suggest that the editors’ focus on their fairly narrow, male-centered sense of universalism largely neglected women.

As with their reading of world literature, Clark and Thomas’s attempt to group women into a universal narrative made fully recognizing beliefs and experiences that departed from this narrative difficult. Ironically, the editors’ efforts to universalize and therefore assist their readers

in connecting with diversity abroad prevented the acknowledgement of diversity within their primary audience. While constructing a Mormon narrative of universal truth in secular literature may have helped many readers comfortably embrace extra-cultural materials while retaining their privileged access to truth, this focus ultimately inhibited the recognition of cultural diversity beyond Mormonism as well as the variety of roles and experiences of individuals within the faith tradition. By illustrating how *OBB* participants struggled to embrace difference during their most deliberate attempts to acknowledge it both at home and abroad, *OBB* confirms the difficulty of reconciling assimilation and separation. Through detailing several particular thorny tensions participants faced when seeking to navigate these pulls, *OBB* points to the profound complexity of Mormonism's larger identity paradox.

### **Conclusion: Assessing *Out of the Best Books* and Twenty-First Century Mormonism**

Although the *OBB* curriculum presented internal inconsistencies and raised unresolved questions, in order to get a full picture of the program, it is important to also acknowledge that many *OBB* readers accepted Clark and Thomas's interpretive approach as both coherent and productive. Examining the survey responses, as well as letters to the editors, suggests that many *OBB* readers did indeed embrace Clark and Thomas's presentation of secular literature as reflections of particular Mormon truths and as raw material for constructing a larger narrative of universal truth compatible with Mormon beliefs and values. Many of the respondents described comfortably and eagerly embarking in the secular reading program. They recounted finding familiar religious truths in the unfamiliar texts they encountered and repeatedly emphasized their sense of these concepts' universality. Dozens noted how their reading from the *OBB* volumes "strengthened" or "reinforced" their religious views. One woman described being happily surprised to learn that the texts she read "gave [her] the same message as the scriptures" (Q18

R64), while another reader similarly noted that “there are principles found in literature that have moral values that correlate with our standards” (Q16 R47). Several women even observed that they found spiritual truths more accessible in literature than in other sacred texts. One woman explained that because “the language of scripture is at times difficult to understand,” she appreciated that studying literature “is another way to teach gospel concepts” (Q16 R11). And another argued that “the value of a principle of truth is magnified when you see it applied in the lives of real or fictitious people in literature” (Q16 R43).<sup>19</sup> What appeared to surprise and delight women most about finding these familiar truths in literature was how ubiquitous they seemed. One reader stated that the program “helped [her] appreciate how universal gospel truths are” (Q18 R1) and another concluded that “most good literature” is “sacred” and therefore “complements the scriptures” (Q16 R37).

These survey respondents also acknowledged the existence of truth outside of Mormonism yet saw Mormons as having privileged access to this truth, signaling that the programs’ prescriptions for dual efforts toward assimilation and separation were embraced. One woman asserted that “all knowledge is from God and [OOBB] was a way to help sisters recognize that Heavenly Father wants us to gain knowledge of many different kinds” (Q14 R30). And another woman echoed this idea that divine truths could be found beyond their faith tradition, insisting that

The Lord has inspired men and women from the beginning of time and not just now. Learning from the inspired past has helped us to know what has shaped our lives. One example is our Declaration of Independence. Those men were inspired as they formed what is now our United States. The church hadn’t been restored yet, but it proves that God was answering the prayers of inspired men. In my



opinion, the greatest literature, artists, and poets arrived on the earth before the restoration. God has been watching and inspiring his children since he created the earth. (Q16 R31)

While these women readily acknowledged the universality of truth for which Clark and Thomas's program called, they viewed their unique religious principles and practices as the key to fully interpreting great literature's truths. Many women credited their understanding and appreciation of literature to their knowledge of gospel principles and their direct communication with God. For instance, one woman explained that for her, "beautiful passages of literature invite[d] the Spirit," which allowed her to "recognize truths" (Q15 R52). Moreover, several noted that they gleaned the most from reading when they prayed first because, as one respondent explained, "it is the Holy Ghost who really does the teaching" (Q11 R3). Because they saw "good literature" as inspired by the God with whom Mormons alone enjoyed the fullest and most direct communication and because they believed their privileged relationship with God allowed them to glimpse literature's most profound truths, the OOB participants I surveyed seem to have maintained a healthy sense of exceptionalism when immersing themselves in the secular Western canon. While the interpretive lens Clark and Thomas demanded was certainly unconventional, clearly exaggerating the parallels between Mormonism and secular literature and presenting its own particular tensions, it did offer a fairly coherent and seemingly effective method for many Mormon readers to maintain their peculiarity when assimilating into popular reading culture. Because the approach to secular literature *OOB* prescribes appears to have been adopted by many readers, the program offers a useful case study of how Mormon readers shape their identity through secular reading.

*OORB* represents only one example of Mormons negotiating assimilation and exceptionalism, but it still facilitates useful entrance into a discussion of how Mormons have navigated and continue to navigate this paradox. Though many scholars seem to imagine Mormon history in discrete periods defined by either integration into or separation from the American mainstream, *OORB* complicates this monolithic model in several ways. First, it reveals Mormons grappling with both forces at once, suggesting that Mormons can attempt to move toward assimilation and separation simultaneously. Moreover, examining *OORB* reveals that the tension participants engaged with involved many nuanced issues and questions that accompanied the larger projects of assimilation and separation. Because Clark and Thomas were not successful in guiding Mormon readers through a pattern of secular reading that eliminated tension entirely, participants faced many complex questions such as how to determine which texts to embrace and which to avoid as well as how to incorporate non-Western literature and include female readers in all their multifaceted diversity. While these specific issues are, in large part, unique to *OORB* and cannot be extrapolated to every situation involving Mormon assimilation and separation, their presence encourages us to examine these situations in more detail, looking for the many and complex ways Mormons might negotiate their cultural identity.

While many questions this case study raises can only pertain to *OORB*, several of the larger issues it poses do have broader relevance, particularly to contemporary Mormonism. First, *OORB*'s fundamental engagement with assimilation and exceptionalism is directly relevant to twenty-first century Mormons. As Mauss and others suggest, Mormons today are still seeking to find the ideal balance between assimilation and separation. In a 2011 article reassessing his 1994 pendulum model, Mauss notes that while the end result of Mormonism's oscillations between societal assimilation and religious retrenchment might be a stable, "well-assimilated religious

community in the long term,” Mormons have yet to find the optimum balance between similarity and peculiarity (“Rethinking Retrenchment,” 21). In fact, Mauss contends that in recent decades Mormons have moved again from retrenchment toward a focus on assimilation, pointing to the church’s increased social media presence and public relations efforts like the “I’m a Mormon” campaign that seek to address controversial aspects of Mormon practices and history with greater transparency and to normalize the church’s members in the eyes of non-members (23). Historian Matthew Bowman comes to similar conclusions, positioning the Mormon missionaries of the immensely popular *The Book of Mormon* musical as emblematic of the public image Mormons are now seeking to counteract. He describes these Mormons as “the living image of bland middle-American tedium” wed to both “awkward cultural conventionality” and “strange beliefs” (250) and observes that they have become “a national entertainment, an amusing foil to a satisfied modern and secular society” (251). Though scholars of Mormon sociology are now examining Mormons’ increased drive toward societal integration and normalcy, *OORB* suggests that greater attention to the complexity of these current behaviors might be warranted, thus granting scholars a fuller picture of contemporary Mormon cultural identity.

Furthermore, the questions *OORB* raises about embracing extra-cultural materials and acknowledging diversity both outside and inside Mormons’ cultural boundaries have become even more pressing today. Neither Clark nor Thomas nor any official church leader directly stated why the program came to a close in 1971, but one survey respondent (Q21 R37) and Clark himself (*Clark Autobiography* 1:489) speculated that the church’s growing global presence rendered an English reading program of primarily British and American literature increasingly irrelevant. Since the program’s end, the church’s reach has continued to expand, with the number of members outside North America now surpassing those within. This international expansion

has forced Mormons to confront cultural difference abroad, requiring them to carefully choose which extra-cultural ideas and materials to embrace and also to accommodate a far more cosmopolitan Mormon faith community. Moreover, diversity within the church in this century has increased not only in terms of multiculturalism, but also in the many varied expressions of Mormon thought. From the progressivism of the Ordain Women movement to the many varying opinions on issues of LGBT rights, religious freedom, and even their own history, Mormons today represent a far broader range of political orientations and doctrinal interpretations than ever before. Understanding how Mormons have both failed and succeeded to engage with diversity in the past, as *OORB* allows, would seem to offer useful context for the way Mormons approach their increased exposure to diversity today.

In addition to elucidating aspects of contemporary Mormon culture, *OORB* also helps frame the relationship between literature and Mormon identity, expanding our understanding of Mormon reading and even American reading. Just as Mormon literature has long been considered a reflection of the way Mormons view themselves in relation to others, *OORB* demonstrates that Mormons' reading of secular literature also reveals much about their sense of cultural identity. Secular reading has long been a part of Mormon culture, as evidenced by both Mormon church leaders' directives and Relief Society reading programs dating back to the early twentieth century. *OORB* facilitates productive entry into examinations of this topic yet only represents a brief glimpse into Mormons' endeavors in secular reading, indicating that further examination of this kind of reading throughout Mormon history would be fruitful.

And even more broadly, *OORB* can be added to the many various studies of American reading practices, canon-making, and cultural identity because it intersects a variety of central conversations in the history of American reading. Clark and Thomas's endeavor to construct a

uniquely Mormon canon representing a specific American minority locates *OORB* in the heart of the canon debates, connecting the program to broader conversations about identity politics and the boundaries of the Western canon. Furthermore, *OORB*, as a program centered on communal literary discussion, presents many parallels to American book groups from antebellum African-American reading societies to the more contemporary Oprah's Book Club. Clark and Thomas's program also shares much in common with other American reading programs designed to foster community and cultural literacy like the commercial Book of the Month Club and the "One City One Book" programs promoted by the American Library Association and adopted by many major US cities over the past several decades. And finally, *OORB* should certainly be grouped among American postwar reading guides, from *How to Read a Book* to the *Great Books of the Western World*, that sought to foster a well-read and well-cultured American citizenry. By viewing this case study through the lens of these larger discussions about representation, interpretation, and American identity, *Out of the Best Books* helps flesh out not only the history of Mormon reading but also the history of reading in America.

## Notes

1. As early as 1957, Thomas O’Dea suggested that Mormons’ endeavor to maintain their own values and social structure while still engaging with “modern secular thought” created “sources of strain and conflict” (222). Matthew Bowman, writing in the wake of Mitt Romney’s 2012 presidential campaign as well as the nationwide popularity of Broadway’s *The Book of Mormon*, argued that Mormons have yet to find a cultural identity that balances societal acceptance with the preservation of distinctiveness.

2. See, for example, David Brion Davis’s “Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature.”

3. Most notably, the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act (1862), the Poland Act (1874), *Reynolds v. United States* (1878), and the Edmunds Act (1882) worked to target the Mormon practice of plural marriage.

4. See particularly Peter Wiley’s “The Lee Revolution and the Rise of Correlation” for a more comprehensive survey of the church’s specific programs during this period as well as their motivating forces.

5. More contemporary church leaders echo Whitney’s particular admonition. For an example, see Boyd K. Packer’s 1976 address “The Arts and Spirit of the Lord.”

6. See Eugene England’s “Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects” for a more thorough outline of these distinctive periods.

7. See Richard Cracroft’s “Cows to Milk Instead of Novels to Read: Brigham Young, Novel Reading, and Kingdom Building” and Jonathan Green’s “Brigham Young and the History of Reading in the West” for discussions of Brigham Young’s attitude toward literary fiction.

8. See Marilyn Arnold's "A Look at Popular Romance Fiction," Elliott D. Landau's "Of Books, Children, and Parents," Richard H. Cracroft's "An Aid to Perfection: Some thoughts on Literature and Mormons," and Ann Moulton Johnson's "I Had A Mother Who Read to Me" for examples of Mormon magazine articles that offered reading guidance and extolled the virtues of literature.

9. This program began in 1914 under the direction of Relief Society President Emmaline B. Wells who oversaw the development of uniform lessons for weekly classes. These lessons featured theology during the first week of the month and homemaking, literature, and social science respectively in the subsequent weeks (Cowan 421). Thus, *OORB* is both part of and distinct from earlier traditions of Mormon women reading programs.

10. All selections under copyright were reprinted at no cost to Deseret Book by courtesy of the original publishers, thus allowing the volumes to be sold inexpensively (1:xiii).

11. For more detail on Great Books advocates and programs, see Joan Shelley Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* and Tim Lacy's *The Dream of A Democratic Culture: Mortimer J. Adler and the Great Books Idea*.

12. Clark specified in his autobiography that he wrote the introduction and explication sections in the first volume while Thomas wrote a chapter on critical reading. Clark also noted that he wrote the introductions for the subsequent volumes but never specified which editor wrote which explicatory comments in volumes two through five. In these instances where authorship is unclear, I refer to both Clark and Thomas as authors.

13. See Appendix A for a list of the women and non-Western authors and their respective works.

14. In fact, Wordsworth explicitly rejected this interpretation, noting decades after writing the poem that he mentioned a pre-existence of the soul not to suggest any actual pre-mortal experience, but to merely represent youthful innocence (Stillinger and Lynch 307). The discrepancy between the editors' reading and Wordsworth's stated intention further highlights the peculiarity of the insights Clark and Thomas's proposed Mormon lens affords.

15. Perhaps due to Clark's emphasis on the Romantic period in his own teaching and writing, the editors seem to demonstrate a rather Romantic view of what they deemed the most inspired writers. Coleridge and other Romantic poets often compared the poet to an Aeolian harp, a stringed instrument that plays when the wind passes through it, suggesting that the poet expresses not his own thoughts or insights, but allows divine inspiration to flow through his "indolent and passive brain" (The "Eolian Harp," 42) and translate into poetry. Similarly Clark and Thomas viewed the best writers as unconscious instruments with the capacity to express divine truths.

16. In keeping with the intensive correlation efforts of the 1960s, the church established this special committee to review the purposes and courses of study of each of its auxiliary organizations in order to streamline curricula and place all auxiliary functions under central leadership.

17. See Appendix B for a description and copy of this 2014 survey as well as an explanation of its limitations.

18. See *Doctrine and Covenants* 88:79 for the full scriptural direction to seek wisdom abroad.

19. Clark also described receiving a letter that reflected the same sentiments about literature's accessibility. In it a Relief Society reader insisted, "the material [in the *OoBB*



volumes] is even better than the theology lessons because it deals directly with life” (*Clark Autobiography* 1:60).

## Appendix A

**OOBB Selections from Female Authors (In Order of Appearance)**

1. Elizabeth Bowen: "A Queer Heart" (1:157–65)
2. Katherine Brush: "Birthday Party" (1:176)
3. Sidonie Gabrielle Claudine Colette: "The Sick Child" (1:420–38)
4. Emily Dickinson: "I Never Saw a Moor" (1:93); "Ho Happy Is the Little Stone" (2:111); "They Might Not Need Me" (3:9); "I Like to See It Lap the Miles" (4:7); "A Bird Came Down the Walk" (4:7–8); "He Ate and Drank the Precious Words" (5:70); "To Fight Aloud" (5:18)
5. Katherine Mansfield: "The Fly" (1:372–76); "Marriage a la Mode" (2:62–73); "Life of Ma Parker" (5:229–40)
6. Marianne Moore: "Poetry" (1:42); "Silence" (4:110)
7. Edith Sitwell: "Still Falls the Rain: The Raids, 1940. Night and Dawn" (1:105–06)
8. Virginia Woolf: "The New Dress" (1:167–73)
9. Abigail Adams: "Letters from Abigail to John Adams" (2:243–56)
10. Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Excerpts from "Sonnets from the Portuguese" (2:50–60); "Sonnet 14" from "Sonnets from the Portuguese" (3:233)
11. Willa Cather: "The Sculptor's Funeral" (2:91–105); "Neighbor Rosicky" (5:101–26)
12. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman: "The Revolt of Mother" (2:209–23)
13. Zona Gale: "The Woman" (2:238–40)
14. Sarah Orne Jewett: "The Guests of Mrs. Timms" (2:117–30); "The Flight of Betsey Lane" (3:41–58)
15. Eileen Gibbons Kump: "Bread and Milk" (2:297–302)
16. Edna St. Vincent Millay: "The Plaid Dress" (2:5); "Renascence" (3:237); "On Hearing a Symphony of Beethoven" (4:179–80); "Conversations at Midnight" (4:224)
17. Kathleen Norris: "Mother" (2:133–50)
18. Christina Rossetti: "The Convent Threshold" (2:287–94); "A Birthday" (3:234); "Uphill" (4:80)
19. Jessamyn West: "Sixteen" (2:24–30)
20. Betsey Barton: "And Now to Live Again" (3:110–26)
21. Anne Bradstreet: "To My Dear and Loving Husband" (3:226)
22. Frances Cornford: "To a Fat Lady Seen from the Train" (3:237)
23. George Eliot: "The Tide of Faith" (3:276); Excerpt from "Adam Bede" (4:159–50)
24. Selma Lagerlof: "A Christmas Guest" (3:294–300)
25. Dorothy Parker: "The Waltz" (3:71–75)
26. Sara Teasdale: "Faults" (3:237)
27. Rosemary Benet: "Nancy Hanks" (4:239)
28. Bernice Burton Holmes: "Rain Song" (4:9)
29. Carol Lynn Pearson: "Prayer" (4:17); "Of the Mysteries" (4:82); "The Lord Speaks to a Literary Debauche Newly Arrived in Heaven" (4:82); "To a Beloved Skeptic" (4:82); "Day-Old Child" (4:82–83)
30. Eliza R. Snow: "Some Good Things" (4:261); "The Lord Is My Trust" (4:262); "Immortality" (4:263); "Contentment" (4:263–64); "The Tattler" (4:265–66); "What Is, and What Is Not for Woman" (4:267–68)
31. Gertrude Stein: Excerpt from "What Is Poetry?" (4:174)

32. Hortense Calisher: “A Wreath for Miss Totten” (5:183–91)
33. Jean E. Mizer: “Cipher in the Snow” (5:39–41)

### **OOBB Selections from Non-Western Authors**

From Chinese Literature:

1. Wang Wei: Selected Poems (translated by Arthur Christy) (3:129–32)
2. Li Po: “The River Merchant's Wife” (translated by Ezra Pound) (4:116–18)
3. Lin Yutang: “The Importance of Loafing” (5:220–25)

From Indian Literature:

4. Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Speeches (4:245–47)
5. Jawaharlal Nehru: Selected Speeches (4:247–48)

From Lebanese-American Literature:

6. Kahlil Gibran: “Giving” from *The Prophet* (3:290–93)

From Persian Literature:

7. Omar Khayyam: Excerpts from *The Rubaiyat* (translated by Edward Fitzgerald) (1:450)

From Russian Literature:

8. Leo N. Tolstoi: “Three Arshins of Land” (1:132–43); “Where Love Is, There God Is Also” (2:70–82)
9. Anton Chekhov: “The Lament” (1:365–71); “The Bet” (2:351–59); “The Darling” (3:204–18)
10. Maxim Gorky: “Boless” (1:386–93)

## Appendix B

I prepared the following survey and administered it online using the Qualtrix Survey Software available at <http://qualtrix.com>. In preparing the survey, I submitted an IRB application through BYU's Office of Research and Creative Activities. After review, the Office determined I did not need an IRB application for the type of online, anonymous survey I was administering.

I uploaded the survey to the Qualtrix site in May of 2014 and received seventy-eight completed responses by the end of July 2014. Because the pool of prospective respondents was demographically limited, I made no effort to obtain a random sampling for this anonymous survey. Rather, I utilized Facebook, e-mail, and word of mouth to enlist as many respondents as possible who had participated in the *Out of the Best Books* program sponsored by the Relief Society women's organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I also contacted the LDS Family and Church History Mission, who invited women in the mission who formerly participated in *OORB* to complete the survey.

Despite limitations in randomness, the relatively large number and varied backgrounds of respondents lend credence to and enhance the value of the survey. The survey includes respondents from eighteen states and five different countries (United States, Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and Western Samoa) with significant difference across the pool in terms of age, marital status, employment, and education level.

Because the survey report provided by Qualtrix displays results organized by question and the order the responses were received, I cite evidence from the survey in the thesis by noting the question number (Q#) and response number (R#). For example, citing the eighth response to question number 21 is cited in text as follows: (Q21 R8). Although I have not included a copy of the printed report in this appendix, I have archived a copy with my research materials.

## Invitation to Participate in the Survey

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Lauren Fields, and I am writing to you as someone who might be willing to assist my research by completing a survey. I am a graduate student in BYU's English department writing my master's thesis on the Relief Society's 1964–1971 literature program, *Out of the Best Books*. As you may recall, this program involved a monthly literature lesson included in the *Relief Society Magazine*. This lesson was supplemented with literature excerpts from the five volumes of the *Out of the Best Books* anthologies edited by BYU English professors Bruce B. Clark and Robert K. Thomas. If you recall participating in this program, would you be willing to share some of your thoughts in the following survey?

The survey may be found at the following link:

[https://qtrial2012.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_3I5yPK5ThKsuapL](https://qtrial2012.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_3I5yPK5ThKsuapL). If you have any questions or suggestions, you may reach me at [laurenfields89@gmail.com](mailto:laurenfields89@gmail.com).

Thank you in advance for your help.

## Survey Questionnaire

1. How old were you when the *Out of the Best Books* program began in 1964?
2. Where did you live during this time?
3. During the time of the program, what was your marital status?
4. Did you have children in your home?
5. What level of education did you have at the time the program ended in 1971?
6. Did you work outside the home?
7. If you did work outside of the home, what kind of work did you do?
8. How many volumes of the five *Out of the Best Books* anthologies did you own?

9. How did you prepare for each literature class? Did you typically read all of the assigned literature in the *Out of the Best Books* volumes before coming to class? Some of it? Did you typically read the accompanying lesson in the *Relief Society Magazine*? Or did you typically read these materials after attending the lesson?

*The following four questions apply to those who taught from Out of the Best Books. If you didn't teach in this program, please skip questions 10 through 13.*

10. Did you feel qualified to teach these lessons. Why or why not?

11. How did you prepare for your lessons?

12. What did you do to encourage participation from class members?

13. Do you recall a favorite lesson or teaching experience?

14. Why do you think the Church created the *Out of the Best Books* program for Relief Society sisters?

15. In the beginning of the first volume, the editors explained that *Out of the Best Books* would improve upon previous Relief Society literature programs by asking “the women of the Relief Society to individually read the selections of literature and then in a group discuss them rather than have lectures, however good they might be, on works that most of the women have not read.” Why do you think Church leaders felt it was important to create a program that encouraged women to personally read and then discuss the literature they read?

16. Why do you think Church leaders felt it was important for women to study literature in addition to the scriptures and other sacred texts?

*Questions 17 through 20 deal with how you feel your participation in this program influenced you. As you may recall, Out of the Best Books focused on literature that explored topics such as*

*faith, marriage, families, education, and community involvement. The following four questions will explore how the program might have influenced your thinking on these topics.*

17. Did the program change the way you saw yourself or interacted with others? If so, how?
18. Did it affect your views on the gospel? If so, how?
19. Did it influence your views on womanhood, marriage, and motherhood? If so, how?
20. Did it affect your views on politics or your involvement in your community? If so, how?
21. What did you appreciate most about the program?
22. Were there any aspects of the program that you didn't particularly enjoy or felt could have been improved? If so, what?
23. What are your memories or recollections about these texts? Can you recall a favorite lesson or section of one of the books? A favorite story, poem, or author?
24. Do you have any other memories about the program that you would like to share?

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