

## **PREFACE FOR SPECIAL ISSUE OF *CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE REVIEW*: MORMON CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE**

TOM MOULD

This special issue on the study of children's folklore among Latter-day Saints signifies an important contribution to the study of Mormon folklore. It is from this perspective—Mormon folklore rather than children's folklore—that I first approached these papers when I served as a discussant at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in New Orleans in 2012 when Brant Ellsworth, Spencer Green and Jared Rife first presented their work. It is with that same lens that I introduce their articles here.

The study of Mormon folklore has been fairly consistent over time but inconsistent in its attention to certain topics, genres and groups. The supernatural has received more attention than the mundane, oral genres more than customary or material, and white U.S. westerners more than non-white, international or east of the Mississippi Mormons. In terms of the most commonly studied folklore genres, legends have dominated, with The Three Nephites and J. Golden Kimball serving as the poster children of LDS folklore. I use that cliché intentionally if ironically. Neither the Three Nephites nor J. Golden Kimball are ever depicted as children. And a survey of the verbal, material and customary lore of Latter-day Saints reveals a similar vacuum when it comes to children.

To be fair, J. Golden Kimball could be accused of treating many of his fellow Saints as children in his frequent chastising, and occasionally, he unleashed his wrath on young as well as old, as when he was discussing the worth of an individual and turned his attention to his son: "Kimball said that he had a son—the finest son in the world—really a marvel—and that he wouldn't take a million dollars for him. And, he added, he wouldn't give ten cents for another like him" (Eliason 2007, 114). In fact, his critiques regularly treated youth and adult indistinguishably, as in the story Boyd K. Packer related in his book *Teach Ye Diligently*: "The story is told that someone stopped Elder J. Golden Kimball on the street on one occasion. There had been a little difficulty in Elder Kimball's family that had become publicly known, and whoever it was who stopped him, no doubt with a mind to injure, said, 'Brother Kimball, I understand you're having some problems with one of your children.' His answer was, 'Yes, and the Lord is having some problems with some of his, too'" (1975, 287).

In this story, J. Golden Kimball suggests that the category of children is dynamic and contextually defined, a reminder that defining children, and children's folklore is not as easy as it may first appear (Sutton-Smith 1999, 3). More obviously, but in some ways more interestingly, Kimball also references common imagery of mortals as God's children, an image understood as literal rather than metaphoric in Mormonism. It is this constellation of beliefs in a pre-mortal life, a god of flesh and blood, and spirit children waiting to become mortal in order to achieve the status of gods themselves that has, perhaps not surprisingly, received significant scholarly attention from folklorists, providing grist for some of the few

studies of Mormon folklore that address children explicitly. Consider, for example, the study of spirit children narratives, stories that describe revelatory dreams about unborn children (see Brady 1987, Mitchell 2004, and Mould 2011, 268-79). All of these studies have examined the impact of the experience and the subsequent narratives on the adults involved. Importantly, these studies also address how children are viewed by both narrator and audience. Accordingly, we are afforded a glimpse of children through folklore, if not of the folklore of children.

It is within this line of inquiry—children as a topic in folklore rather than children as producers, consumers and performers of folklore—that Spencer Green situates his study of the Wise Child in the LDS church discourse. Green's work goes one step further towards traditional folklore analysis, however, by considering children not only as a concept within LDS theology, personal belief and public performance, but also as a specific motif found in folk traditions around the globe. How, Green asks, might our understanding of the widespread motif of the Wise Child (J120) as it appears in official Mormon discourse inform our understanding of Mormon worldview? His answer sheds light on how children are viewed and used in religious discourse in ways that highlight paradoxes in church hierarchies.

Where Green follows LDS scholarship conventions but diverges from those of most children's folklore scholarship, Rife and Ellsworth do the reverse, bringing long overdue attention to younger members of the LDS faith by examining the folk traditions and performances of children. The lack of attention to the folklore of children is ironic since theologically, doctrinally and ideologically, children are such a central part of LDS religion and culture. Further, children are incorporated into church services and service at a very early age. Many young children bear their testimonies during Fast and Testimony meetings long before the still young age of eight, the "age of awareness" among Latter-day Saints when children are assumed to be mature and competent enough to make at least one choice of their own free will: the choice to be baptized. Not all children born into the covenant—that is, born of Mormon parents whose marriage has been sealed at the temple and raised in the church—make this choice at age eight, but many do. By age twelve, young men are typically ordained into the Aaronic priesthood and help serve the sacrament, and by eighteen, into the Melchizedek priesthood, having the full powers and duties of adult men in the church conferred upon them. Young women cannot hold the priesthood, but they move through the ranks of young women's organizations until at eighteen, they too join the ranks of full adult members of the church by becoming members of the Relief Society. In other words, young people in the LDS church are granted responsibility and authority from a fairly young age. Yet despite what may seem an accelerated trajectory into adulthood, as Rife and Ellsworth show, LDS children find ample time to play, both outside and inside church meetings.

Jared Rife takes us into Sacrament meeting—usually the first hour of a three hour block Sunday mornings that comprises the formal church service—to explore both how adults devise activities for children to keep them entertained, and how children devise their own play to stave off boredom. In his survey of these games, Rife examines the range of types, origins and functions of games played by toddlers to

teens. While his focus is on how these games function, his work opens up fruitful avenues for analysis in structural taxonomies of LDS games, theological cultural constructs of play within the LDS church, gender differences, and shifting social norms of sanctioned and unsanctioned behaviors within formal church spaces.

Brant Ellsworth, on the other hand, takes us *outside* these formal church spaces and into the homes of LDS children to consider how “playing the piano” differs from “piano play.” While Green and Rife provide glimpses into LDS culture through children’s folklore, Ellsworth provides glimpses of children’s culture through LDS folklore. Ellsworth notes that while his participants were all Mormon, the performances and patterns he observed are likely indicative of children in the U.S. more generally. That said, he does wonder whether the role of the piano in LDS church services both domestically and internationally impacts piano play among LDS children differently, if perhaps only in scope, than non-LDS children where the piano may not have as clear and widely shared symbolic meaning.

While these articles are not the first to examine the performances and folklore of children in the LDS Church—Elaine Lawless for example takes a brief look at how children’s testimonies compare to adult ones in order to highlight the well-worn patterns recognized and performed by even the youngest members of the church (1984)—they are some of the first to do as their focus. Further, many of the themes and topics engaged within these studies of folklore of and by LDS children can be read into larger bodies of LDS scholarship. Spencer Green’s work should be read within the deep and rich body of scholarship of LDS oral narrative and discourse by authors such as Margaret Brady (1987), Eric Eliason (1999), Carolyn Gilkey (1979, 1994), Tom Mould (2011) and George Schoemaker (1989). Jared Rife’s work on games and play can at least partially be understood in the context of LDS humor by authors such as Jan Harold Brunvand (1970), Ed Geary (1999), Steve Siporin (2009) and William Wilson (1982 and 1985), as well as in the context of the creative dating invitations of young men and women as studied by Kristi Young (2005). And Brant Ellsworth’s study of piano play, while most obviously relevant to children’s folklore scholarship rather than LDS scholarship, can nonetheless be understood as part of a deep musical tradition within LDS culture, righted noted by Ellsworth when he argues that “From their earliest existence, Mormons have been a musical people.” Folklorists of LDS musical traditions have focused primarily on song and ballad—Thomas Cheney (1968), Austin and Alta Fife (1947), Austin Fife (1953), Gustive Larson (1971), Jill Terry Rudy (2013), Barre Toelken (1959); one can only hope that the attention Ellsworth pays to the music, not just the lyrics, will encourage other folklorists and ethnomusicologists to do the same. With the publication of this special issue, the same can be hoped for the study of LDS children’s folklore more generally.

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