

*Polygamy: An Early American History*. By Sarah M.S. Pearsall (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2020). Pp. 416. Cloth, \$38.00.

The history of the rise and demise of polygamy in the United States may seem familiar to many Americanists. It was, after all, the catalyst for the nineteenth-century conflict between the U.S. federal government and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That history has, however, almost exclusively fallen within the purview of historians of Mormonism. In *Polygamy: An Early American History*, Sarah Pearsall offers an important intervention. She argues that conflicts over polygamy “preceded the nation, and they also shaped the nation” (293). Debates concerning the appropriate shape and form of intimate ties in Early America, Pearsall contends, exposed enduring anxieties regarding the heterogeneity of the people that called North America home. As colonizers sought to establish control over the continent, marriage served as an arena where power, race, and gender were hotly contested. As Pearsall traces the triumph of one marriage regime over another, she recovers the myriad ways in which polygamous North Americans have lived and loved on the margins and, in turn, confounded the normalizing impulses of colonial power.

Pearsall begins by examining how European colonizers’ attempts to eliminate polygamy among indigenous groups shaped contestations of power and intimacy in global encounters. Polygamous marital ties emerged and transformed as a response to colonialism during the Guale Rebellion and the Pueblo Revolt in New Spain, shaped Jesuit and Algonquian interactions in New France, and influenced household diplomacy during King Philip’s War. Pearsall interrogates these episodes as domestic encounters. She explores how polygamy performed various functions for indigenous groups, including establishing diplomatic ties to other territories, forging extensive kinship networks, and expanding the economic power of individual households—all attributes desirable to powerful men. In the face of encroaching colonial forces, “orthodox practices of marriage continued to be a way of establishing and maintaining authority and old world order” (26). Domestic life, in turn, became an increasingly volatile arena for colonial and indigenous encounters.

Perhaps one of most striking sections of Pearsall’s work is her examination of polygamy among enslaved people in early eighteenth-century colonial Virginia. Polygamy was a common practice in some African cultures, but slavery fundamentally reshaped its form and function. For instance, among the Igbo people of West Africa, polygamy had largely been a privilege denoting advanced age and status. In colonial Virginia, polygamy occasionally operated as a reward system. Pearsall examines instances of enslavers permitting favored enslaved men to take additional wives as a reward for the productivity of their labor. Among enslaved men, Pearsall writes, having multiple wives “became a statement of power among those stuck in a system actively trying to render them powerless” (141). However, these unions further commodified enslaved bodies and were routinely formed and broken by the whims of enslavers.

Pearsall notes astutely that how people wrote about polygamy exposed eighteenth century imperial anxieties concerning race, power, and gender. During a time when domestic order was understood to directly inform the proper function of the state, the specter of the Turkish harem loomed large in travel literature as a site rife with sexual excess and domestic chaos. White travelers imagined a practice that not only enslaved women, but also fueled

tyranny and despotism. By contrast, arguments on both sides of the Atlantic arose during the revolutionary era in defense of polygamy amid broader calls to reorganize society. Some advocates of marriage reform embraced polygamy as a radical alternative to monogamy, which some argued led to the widespread exploitation of women, namely “female ruin,” illegitimacy, and prostitution.

These intellectual developments would shape subsequent colonial encounters with indigenous people in new ways during the eighteenth century. They recast polygamy as a barrier to “civilization” and a tangible manifestation of “deviance” and inherent racial difference. According to Pearsall, “Colonial and missionary presence, as well as rising American national power in the wake of the American Revolution and its attendant unleashing of the violent energies of settlers, changed older systems of polygamy into newer, meaner systems, ones to be aggressively defended from outside interference” (217). While some groups retained the marriage system, others strategically abandoned polygamy. For instance, Cherokees outlawed polygamy to demonstrate their own “enlightened” nature and negotiated relations with the United States as the new nation inexorably encroached on their land.

Pearsall ends her study of polygamy in North America where most begin, with an examination of plural marriage as practiced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The anti-polygamy campaigns against Mormon plural marriage were, Pearsall demonstrates, part of a much longer process. During a period when the state inserted itself into intimate lives with increased precision and progressively narrowed its legal definitions of marriage, Latter-day Saints struggled to define domestic and intimate ties on their own terms. Early feminist writers were particularly vocal participants in debates regarding shifting gender roles and alternate forms of marital ties. For instance, Belinda Marden Pratt--plural wife of Parley P. Pratt--became one of the most fierce and articulate defenders of plural marriage. Hers was one of many voices that outlined the appeal of plural marriage: it tempered a husband’s sexual advances, operated as a natural form of birth control, and offered an extended kinship network that, through sealing ceremonies, were eternal and everlasting. While anti-polygamy literature cast plural wives as deluded and degraded victims, its female participants asserted their agency by embracing a marriage system that forged an indelible link between the temporal world and spiritual salvation.

Pearsall has provided a vital text for those seeking to understand the enduring conflict over marriage, gender, and sexuality in North America. The scope of her analysis provides a unique lens to further interrogate assimilation as a deeply violent and intimate process. Much like Nancy Cott’s *Public Vows* and Hendrik Hartog’s *Man and Wife in America*, Pearsall’s book reveals how interventions into intimate lives of North Americans have repeatedly served as a means to affirm colonial and national power. Her thorough exploration of polygamous unions among indigenous peoples and the anxieties they provoked among white European observers locates many of the antecedents of racist nineteenth-century anti-polygamy discourses examined in Sarah Barringer Gordon’s *The Mormon Question* and W. Paul Reeve’s *Religion of a Different Color*. While some may find Pearsall’s engagement with the historiography of Mormon plural marriage somewhat brief, the depth with which she recovers women, enslaved, and indigenous voices provides a vital contribution to the field. Ultimately, this study is a welcome and long-

overdue contribution to the historiography of polygamy in North American. Her work is an engaging and provocative text for both undergraduate and graduate courses in sexuality, gender, and legal history.

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