During the 19th century, France became intrigued by Mormonism—or rather, by the idea of Mormonism. French citizens found Mormonism so compelling that they produced pop culture media about the new religion in the form of plays, musicals, literature, lectures, periodicals, caricatures, and political cartoons. Professor Heather Belnap (Women in 19th-Century French Art and Culture), Professor Corry Cropper (French), and Professor Daryl Lee (19th-Century French Culture and Literature) partnered to write about this cultural phenomenon in their book, *Marianne Meets the Mormons: Representations of Mormonism in Nineteenth-Century France*. They argue that, when the French imagined Mormonism, they were primarily attempting to use this foreign religion to understand their own shifting culture.

A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT
The impetus for the book began 10 years ago, when the three professors started presenting papers at conferences together on the topic of Mormons in 19th-century France. They combined their different approaches to give their project more depth than a single-authored project would have yielded. Cropper worked on the plays and novels of the era, Lee focused on the political stakes of the period, Belnap brought in her expertise as an art historian, and their combined work grew into a book.

The pandemic forced the trio to move from on-site research into writing and provided them the time to work jointly on their book via Zoom and Google Docs. Lee says, “We wrote so much of this book in tandem, poring over sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph in those sessions. We often rewrote and overwrote each other, one starting a sentence and another finishing it.”

Over the course of the project, they formed close friendships. Lee notes that while the collaborative process took longer than an independent project might have, it created a stronger finished product. He says, “We covered more terrain, avoided more blind spots, refined our interpretations and analysis in concert, shared the logistical burdens of finding images and getting rights more equally, and helped each other get what we wanted from the press by joining forces.” All three professors appreciate how much they learned from each other and plan to continue working together in the future.

MAKING SENSE OF A SHIFTING CULTURE
*Marianne Meets the Mormons* traces how the French attempted to make sense of their shifting culture during the 19th century. The change from a constitutional monarchy to a republic in 1848, the return to an empire in 1852, and the advent of a parliamentary republic in 1870 led French citizens to question their social and cultural norms. Many began asking radical new questions, such as who should regulate marriage: the Catholic Church or the state? Should divorce be legal? Should women be allowed to have a political voice?

“What we’re looking at in the book,” says Cropper, “are the different permutations of the idea of Mormonism in France: how it’s treated and misused and inflated, and why the French needed that.” He suggests that the French viewed Mormonism as equivalent to narrative or folklore, a story that they could use to make sense of the world.

The book title, *Marianne Meets the Mormons*, points to the encounter between the French and a small, far-off religion. Marianne symbolizes France in much the same way that the Statue of Liberty, or perhaps Uncle Sam, symbolizes America. She is seen as a figure who has the responsibility to nurture and protect the French.
Feminism and Mormonism: Unexpected Bedfellows

The religious beliefs, economic practices, family structure, urban theories, and social systems of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints made it the perfect vehicle for French critics to use when debating their own new social ideas.

French feminists pointed out Mormon polygamy as an intriguing and secure lifestyle. The latter led to abandoned children and women while polygamy gave women a status and children were cared for,” French feminists used Mormonism to critique the degradation of the French family.

The French began looking deeper at the lives of Mormon women after seeing that not only was polygamy accepted by the Church but interracial marriage as well. In the cartoon “Docks du mariage: Grand choix d’épouses” (“Marriage docks: Big selection of wives”), women of various ethnicities are presented as suitable wives. The artist invokes the idea of French colonialism through the “quirky” practices of Mormons, who married irrespective of race, just as the French colonized many Asian and African nations to gain access to their resources.

French politics were influenced by Mormon lifestyles, both in their diplomatic relations and relationships between French citizens. For example, women received the right to vote in Utah on August 1, 1870, which concerned French men. One cartoon from the period shows Mormon women armed like soldiers, more bellicose than their feeble, broom-wielding husbands. This cartoon, ostensibly depicting Mormon women preparing for war with the US government, can also be understood as a reflection on the contemporary movements in France that sought to give women access to education, political clout, and financial independence.

Understanding Themselves Through Humor

While many French depictions of Mormons were used humorously, the deeper meaning becomes clear in context. As Belnap says, “Our book exposes certain underlying anxieties about the social order and politics of life.” Cartoons and plays are not just for entertainment; as Cropper says, they “help people navigate their own contradictions and their own challenges.” Belnap reminds readers “to understand the function of wit and satire as a French tradition. It’s a kind of national idiom.”

Endnotes

1. The authors use the term “Mormonism” because that was the term referenced during the historical period in France.