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“All-American Prophet”: Epideictic Rhetoric in *The Book of Mormon* musical

Thesis The artifact I chose to analyze was the song “All-American Prophet” from *The Book of Mormon* musical through epideictic rhetoric. While the musical is a satire of religion, the way in which this song is presented by its characters follows epideictic rhetorical patterns which the main characters believe will convince an audience of the Restored Gospel. A demoralized companionship led by Elder Kevin Price teaches a Ugandan village the difference between Christianity and Mormonism through an epideictic appraisal of Joseph’s humble American stock and the All-American stock of the religion and the accomplishments of its history.

Rhetorical Situation The rhetorical situation is about a missionary explaining to a group of poor and diseased Ugandan villagers, who don’t believe the Bible or Christianity has helped them, what the difference between Christians and Mormons are. The villagers tell them that they’ve already heard of Christianity and that their Bible doesn’t work. Elder Price tells them that’s because those were Christian missionaries, and they are Mormons. A villager asks him “what’s the difference?” to which Elder Price lights up and proceeds to break out into song.

Analysis Elder Price starts his epideictic spiel with an appeal to Joseph Smith and his finding of the Book of Mormon. Elder Price starts with an exordium establishing to the audience that they all know that the Holy Bible is composed of two parts, the old testament and new testament. He then moves on to offer a rhetorical question: What if I were to tell you there was a third testament, that was found by a new prophet? “You all know the Bible / Is made of

Testaments Old and New / You've been told it's just those two parts / Or only one / if you're a Jew / But what if I were to tell you / There's a fresh third part out there? / That was found by a hip, new prophet / Who had a little / Donny Osmond flair.” It is through this introduction that Elder Price levels with the audience and establishes what they already know. By establishing what they have in common, he is able to then introduce what is new to them in order for them to understand why the Book of Mormon should interest them.

This leads into the encomium of Elder Price’s missionary lesson, where Elder Price proceeds to ask and tell the people if they ever heard of Joseph Smith. The way Elder Price does so is by creating and linking Joseph Smith to a certain kind of stock and place of origin. He makes what he sees a positive reference to Joseph Smith’s stock as in his people, country, and ancestors, in accordance with the first principle of an encomium¹. He does this by establishing Joseph Smith as being of white, American stock. He sings aloud the question: “Have you heard of the All-American Prophet? / The blonde-haired, Blue-eyed voice of God / He didn't come from the Middle East / Like those other holy men / No, God's favorite prophet was / All-American!” This first line establishes the whole theme of Elder Price’s argument. That Joseph’s people were white americans. That this is unlike other prophets they would be familiar with who came from the Middle East. The reference to the Middle East is likely a vituperative reference to how Western audiences might associate the Middle East through a post-9/11 Orientalist lens of muslims, who would be equated with bad spiritual stock, not to mention a geographic location associated as being chaotic, backwards, barbaric, and swarthy or tawny. A simple term like Middle East can conjure a stock of villainy in western minds². This comparison is juxtaposed to a white, western American who is also not only a prophet, but God’s favorite

¹ Papworth, Anne, Epidictic rhetoric, page 2, Encomium, step 1 point A

² Papworth, Anne, Epidictic rhetoric, page 3, Vituperation or Invective, step 1 point A

prophet and the voice of God. This would appeal to a western American audience that might have an interest in identifying with a man who is one of their own.

From here, Elder Price proceeds to describe Joseph Smith's upbringing in accordance with the second principle of encomium which is the person's upbringing³ and specifically evokes the humble upbringing of Joseph Smith's youth on the frontier by describing him as an American man living on a farm. "I'm gonna take you back to **Biblical times: 1823 / An American man named Joe** livin' on a **farm** in the **holy land** of **Rochester, New York**." Elder Price outlines the upbringing of Joseph Smith and his implied education through this simple statement. He states that he's going to take them back to "Biblical times," the year 1823, to a farm in the "Holy Land" of Upstate New York. Now while the satire of the musical is meant to of course convey that this is an ironic use of "Biblical times" and "Holy Land" to denote preposterousness the character and setting, this is only one thread interwoven to emphasize the humble and homie upbringing of Joseph Smith. With the setting of 1823, and the aforementioned knowledge that Joseph is an American, we can reasonably interpret that it will take place on the frontier. This is confirmed by Elder Price stating that there was an American man named Joe living on a farm in Upstate New York. Now while the mentioned New York might subvert the meaning of frontier, the use of rochester (or occasionally in the play, simply Upstate) we are made aware that Joseph is on a familiar but unfamiliar frontier, in a time when even New York City itself was not as urban as it was today. A side note is that *The Book of Mormon* musical was performed on Broadway and the reference to Upstate/Rochester New York was in some ways meant to semi familiarize those watching, due to the setting of a location in their same state. Furthermore, Joseph's humble upbringing and stock is accentuated by the use of the shortened nickname Joe. This evokes the

³ Papworth, Anne, Epideictic rhetoric, page 2, Encomium, step 2 point A

“Average Joe,” a North American term that refers to “an ordinary working man.”⁴ The sentence “American man livin’ on a farm” leads to a crescendo of underdog feelings towards someone’s origin story. A comparable use of stock to this is when people refer to Honest Abe being born in a log cabin, it gives

It’s at this point that Elder Price then goes on to explain what exactly Joseph Smith did. Elder Price demonstrates the third principle of encomium which is the description of his excellencies, specifically positive outcomes, benefits, inspirations, and future impact⁵. By laying out that Joseph Smith spoke to God himself and was tasked with retrieving a “part 3” of the Bible in the form of the Golden Plates, that he with the Angel Moroni who reiterated the All-American nephites, then established and led The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints up until martyrdom, “Now, many people didn't believe / The Prophet Joseph Smith / They thought he'd made up this Part Three / That was buried by a tree, on the hill in his backyard / Liar! / But Joe said / This is no lie; I speak to God all the time / And **he told me to head west** / So I'll take my **Part Three**, from the hill with the tree / Feel free if you'd like to come along with me / **To the promised land** / The promised land? / **Paradise, on the West coast** / Nothing but fruit and fields, as far as the eye can see” This leads to the townsfolk deciding to follow Joseph and sing “Have you heard of the **All-American prophet**? / **He found a brand new book about Jesus Christ** / **We're following him to paradise** / **We call ourselves Mormons** / **And our new religion is All-American.**” The people in the song praise Joseph Smith for being a prophet, finding the Book of Mormon, leading the people to Zion, and their overall religion.

⁴ Joe. joe_1 noun - Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com. (n.d.). Retrieved December 10, 2022, from https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/joe_1

⁵ Papworth, Anne, Epideictic rhetoric, page 2, Encomium, step 3 point B

This last part of the song at the end most exhibits the fifth principle of encomium, that is, the conclusion with an epilogue or prayer.⁶ It's actually quite a stirring part of the song for those who have that link to pioneer heritage. Elder Price communicates this conclusion by explaining Joseph's martyrdom and then Brigham Young leading the Saints out west to settle. Then Elder Price cements it by saying he is descended from those very same pioneers, and that he exists to lead you to Zion so to speak. Elder Price states "Now comes the part of our story / That gets a little bit sad / On the way to the promised land / Mormons made people mad / Joseph was shot by an angry mob / And knew he'd soon be done / You must lead the people now / My good friend, Brigham Young" Elder Price continues "The Prophet Joseph Smith died for what he believed in / But his followers, they kept on heading west / And Brigham Young led them to paradise / A sparkling land in Utah they called Salt Lake City / And there the Mormons multiplied / And made big Mormon families / Generation to generation, until finally they made me / And now it's my job to lead you / Where those early settlers were led, long ago." It's at this point that Elder Price not only establishes the good deeds and results of Joseph Smith, but he proceeds to emulate him and Brigham Young in what he says he plans to do. Elder Price's

Conclusion Again, as stated before, while this song is satire, and while there are parts of it I left out because they don't add to the rhetoric and are more adding implausibility to what Joseph did, the overall main message of the song is a positive appraisal of Joseph Smith. The way in which they discuss the encomium of Joseph Smith's origin story is not that different from how I as a missionary would have emphasized Joseph's humble upbringing and eventual martyrdom. All put together, especially toward the end with prayer and epilogue, it demonstrates a real power toward the prophet Joseph Smith's life.

⁶ Papworth, Anne, Epideictic rhetoric, page 2, Encomium, step 5