Susanna Morrill argues that the LDS theology of a necessary female deity and the theological elevation of Eve were causal factors in the independent actions of early LDS women.

I am not convinced that these theological tenents can be isolated enough from the general LDS patriarchal system to become greatly influential. Any independence of LDS women would necessarily have been ratified by the permission of the husband, since it was to him that the women were required to give perfect obedience. This fact would dampen the inspirational effect of this theology on the actions of LDS women.

Also while the theology of the female deity and Eve may have accorded the LDS husband to view his women with an eye toward their innate spiritual value, this same valuation could be argued to have also been in practice by Catholic men in their veneration of Mary as the virgin mother of God. Thus for this presence of a venerated female presence to have an impact on the independence of women, there should be some similar independence causing effect in the Catholic quarter on married women.

I would rather put forth the social-cultural theory that it is the relief of maternal and household duties that allows women to exercise greater independance. Within the Catholic system, the sisters who dedicated their lives to service rather than marriage were able to achieve extraordinary independence. And I can imagine that within a polygamous marriage among agreeable LDS wife-sisters there was a sharing of the household and child rearing responsibilities that allowed some LDS women the freedom of pursuing other talents and careers.

Similarly, in the Reformed tradition which has no female venerated role models in its theology; it was the single woman as missionary and free agent who was able to attain a level of independence and self development.

Thus I would advocate for further study of the role of polygamy as a vehicle for independence within the LDS community rather than positive female theological role models.
Whenever I assign readings on Mormonism in my course on “Women and Religion in America,” I always have to spend the first part of class addressing popular myths about both Mormonism and Mormon women. Students are always surprised to discover that early Mormon women, many of whom lived in polygamous marriages, were as independent—or more independent—than other Christian women in the nineteenth century. Before the Nineteenth Amendment allowing women’s suffrage in 1920, Mormon women in Utah could vote in state and local elections. They also attended college in large numbers and worked in typically “male” occupations as lawyers and doctors. Since many of my students have read books such as Jon Krakauer’s Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith, which offers a sensationalistic account of modern-day Mormon polygamy and female oppression, they are confused by these conflicting images of Mormon women as both trailblazing pioneers and passive victims. How, they ask, should we understand the historic place of women in Mormon life and theology? (For the sake of clarification, I should explain that the Mormon hierarchy outlawed polygamy more than a hundred years ago in 1890. Only sectarian groups continue the practice.)

I’m pleased that in future classes, I’ll be able to answer students’ questions by assigning Susanna Morrill’s well-researched essay on early Mormon images of women. Using Mormon diaries, hymns, and periodicals, Morrill argues that nineteenth-century Mormons, despite their patriarchalism, “accorded women and femaleness great power and respect.” Because of their belief in a physical God who fathered spirit children, they developed a complementary belief in a “Mother in Heaven.” (As Morrill explains, the Mormon belief in a female deity was not the result of a self-consciously feminist theology, but an anthropomorphic conception of God. Mormons logically assumed that God the Father would need a “female partner in procreation.”) Mormons also reimagined the figure of Eve, emphasizing her important role in forging the path to human godhood. Rather than condemning Eve’s quest for divine knowledge (as Protestants and Catholics did), Mormons celebrated it. Although Eve had brought sin into the world, she had also “initiated the process whereby humans could become as Gods.”

Morrill’s essay is full of important insights about Mormon theology—a topic which few American religious historians study. Given the polemical treatment of Mormons in many books, her balanced treatment is especially welcome. But I’m not entirely convinced that we can attribute Mormon women’s independence to their theological understandings of womanhood, especially their conception of a “Mother in Heaven.” Because Protestant and Catholic feminist theologians have insisted that God should be understood as a “mother” as well as a “father,” Mormon language sounds revolutionary to modern ears. Yet as Morrill notes, Mormons imagined the “Mother in Heaven” according to nineteenth-century, Victorian stereotypes of mothers as inherently nurturing and domestic. Without more evidence of how ordinary Mormon women imagined the “Mother in Heaven,” it is hard to know whether they felt empowered by her existence, or constrained by the knowledge that women’s subordination to men was an eternal reality. It seems clear that in recent years, perhaps because of the growing influence of feminist theology, Mormon leaders have been concerned about how the figure of the “Mother in Heaven” might be interpreted. But in the nineteenth century, did the Mother in
Heaven appear revolutionary? Did she inspire women to challenge gender norms, or did she reinforce them?

I’m looking forward to reading more of Susanna Morrill’s work in the future so that I can learn more. Given the fact that the Mormon hierarchy has forbidden believers to speak publicly about a female deity, Morrill’s work is especially valuable—not only for scholars, but for ordinary Mormon women.