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- Abstract** In the context of Latter-day Saint uses of Moroni 9:9 to teach chastity, this article uses the Roman story of the Rape of Lucretia to examine the implications of treating virtue as something of which one person can deprive another. Roman sexual mores treat the sexual encounter as a debate between two people who are both gendered according to a masculine ideal of domination, until one person compels the other to feminized submission. Lucretia thus consents against her will and bears the blame for Tarquin’s action, and she commits suicide to clear her name, even though her husband and father absolve her of wrongdoing. The gendered dynamic at work in this story only allows for an understanding of agency in domineering male terms at odds with Doctrine and Covenants 121. Similarly, Moroni 9:9 produces an understanding of female sexual agency at odds with teachings on agency elsewhere in the Book of Mormon. Mormon wrote to deplore the actions of men, and women should not be made to bear the blame for those actions.
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Notes

“Virtue” in Moroni 9:9

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LATTER-DAY SAINT DISCUSSIONS OF CHASTITY often include Moroni 9:9 because of its suggestion that “chastity and virtue” constitute “that which is most dear and precious above all things.” The verse also says, however, that people can be “deprived” of chastity and virtue by the violence of rape. For the prophet Mormon, the Nephites’ actions in Moriantum exceed “this great abomination of the Lamanites,” which involved “feed[ing] the women upon the flesh of their husbands, and the children upon the flesh of their fathers” (Moroni 9:8). Mormon’s strong language aims to condemn the rapists, not their victims. Using the verse to teach about chastity, though, invites interpretation from the perspective of the victims, which raises the question of what it means to understand chastity and virtue as something of which a person can be deprived, passively, by another.¹ Such passive loss of virtue runs strongly contrary to LDS teaching about agency, including those rooted in Book of Mormon passages like 2 Nephi 2, with the consequence that victims of sexual abuse or assault can be made to feel guilty for sins that are not their own.

1. As of 25 September 2016, Moroni 9:9 no longer appears in the chapter on virtue in the online version of the *Young Women Personal Progress* booklet, a salutary change that undercuts some of the harmful ideas discussed in this note. See <https://www.lds.org/young-women/personal-progress/virtue?lang=eng>

In trying to understand a worldview in which it makes sense to say that virtue can be taken away, the Roman story of the Rape of Lucretia provides a useful intertext, and this note will examine that story to show the implications of using Moroni 9:9 to teach about chastity. I am not proposing that the Lucretia story influenced the verse in Moroni; rather, I am using it to illustrate the pitfalls of interpreting that verse as LDS discussions of chastity often do.

This note will focus on virtue, treating it as a synonym for chastity on the basis of popular tendencies to read the text's "chastity and virtue" as a hendiadys, even though virtue is better understood as a category of moral goods, with chastity as a subset. Other scriptural uses support this latter understanding. For instance, in Proverbs 31:10, "virtuous" renders a form of the Hebrew *chayil*, which indicates strength or ability rather than sexual purity, even though the verse gets used alongside Moroni 9:9 in discussions of chastity. Similarly, in the three passages from the Gospels where Jesus describes virtue going out of him (Mark 5:30; Luke 6:19; 8:46), "virtue" translates forms of the Greek *dynamis*, which denotes power or energy, rather than anything having to do with sexuality per se.

The Rape of Lucretia affords a good platform for understanding the idea that virtue can be taken away. The Book of Mormon itself provides a rather slender basis for understanding the sexual mores of its culture: the sermon in Jacob 2, the people of Noah's proffering their daughters to appease a Lamanite army, the subsequent rape of the Lamanite daughters by the priests of Noah, Alma's talk with Corianton, and the verse in Moroni. With the possible exception of Jacob's sermon, none of these episodes understands women in terms other than as sexual objects for men. Consequently, the Book of Mormon affords few to no opportunities for thinking about female sexual agency in positive terms.

The Lucretia story provides an apt analogue in part for linguistic reasons. The nearest translation to the original language of the Book of Mormon is in English, and the word *virtue* sends us back to the Latin, where it comes from the word *vir*, meaning "man" (in the male sense, not the generically human sense). Associating virtue with masculinity

raises complex questions of gender, given that the people deprived of it in Moroni 9:9 were women. What might it mean for women to have this masculine trait in the first place? That requires looking at Roman sexual mores, which center on the concepts of *pudicitia*, or the proper inviolability of any freeborn Roman (male or female), and *stuprum*, or the violation of *pudicitia*.²

Even though both men and women can have *pudicitia*, a gendered difference remains. As Craig Williams explains, “According to the prime directive of masculine sexual behavior, a Roman man who wished to retain his claim to full masculinity must always be thought to play the insertive role in penetrative acts, whether with males or females; if he was thought to have sought the receptive role in such acts he was liable to being mocked as effeminate.”³ Thus, Roman virtue—acting like a man—depends on “control and dominion, both of others and of oneself.”⁴

Enter Lucretia, whose story appears in Livy’s history of Rome and in the section of Ovid’s *Fasti* for 24 February, titled “Regifugium.” Rome in its early days was governed by kings, the Tarquins. One king, Tarquinius Superbus (Tarquin the Proud) had a son, Sextus Tarquinius. Sextus, after seeing Lucretia, the wife of his kinsman Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus, decided to rape her. She resisted until Sextus threatened to kill both Lucretia and a slave and leave them naked together in the bed, suggesting in Livy’s words “adultery of the lowest kind [*sordido adulterio*],” at which point “his lust prevailed as the victor over her resolute chastity [*vicisset obstinatam pudicitiam velut victrix libido*].”⁵

Livy’s language presents the pre-rape as a debate in which Sextus prevailed by making an argument that Lucretia could not counter. Chastity, in these terms, is a form of eloquence, and Lucretia’s proved insufficient. (Never mind that Tarquin relied on a threat of violence

2. Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 104–9.

3. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 137.

4. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 139.

5. Livy, *The History of Rome: Books 1–5*, trans. Valerie M. Warrior (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 80. Livy, *Titi Livi Ab Urbe Condita*, ed. Robert Seymour Conway and Charles Flamstead Walters (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), I.58.5.

and not reason alone.) The contest was one of virtue, understood in masculine terms of dominance. It ended when one party forced the other to assume the feminine position, which in this case fell to Lucretia. The debate was a test designed to evaluate whether or not Lucretia truly possessed chastity, understood as the impenetrability of *pudicitia*. Tarquin, in other words, took away her claim to masculine virtue, which Ovid explicitly assigns her when he describes her as a "matron of manly courage [*animi matrona virilis*]." ⁶ She failed to control what happened to her body, which means she could not possibly have virtue.

The chilling consequence of understanding the contest as a debate is that it ended in Lucretia's consent. "Consent" comes from the Latin verb *consentire*, which means "thinking or feeling with." In other words, when Lucretia could not come up with an argument to counter Tarquin's threat, she is understood as having agreed with his reasoning. Faced with the prospect of murder and implied adultery, she agreed to be raped, and the very fact of her having been penetrated suggests that her chastity was never all she made it out to be. (To be clear: I am explaining this, not approving it.)

The next day, Lucretia called her husband and father, accompanied by another kinsman, Lucius Junius Brutus, to her chamber and explained what happened. In Roman understandings of the family, the *paterfamilias* acted as a judge over his household, so Lucretia was submitting herself to a kind of family court, in part because the rape was an affront against Collatinus's *pudicitia*, too, because his household had been penetrated. Collatinus and Brutus concluded that she was not at fault in what happened. She, however, refused the pardon and killed herself. In Livy's version, she sets herself up as a moral martyr, refusing to allow that her example might excuse future adultery. In Ovid's version, she seems driven by posttraumatic despair.

Augustine, writing about this story in *The City of God*, identifies Lucretia's double bind: "If she is adulterous, why is she praised? If chaste, why was she put to death [*si adulterata, cur laudata; si pudica,*

6. Ovid, *Fasti*, ed. Sir James George Frazer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 118–19 (line 847).

cur occisa]?”⁷ The tension emerges because, on the one hand, it was clear that Tarquin forced Lucretia against her will, but, on the other, the powerful cultural assumption that chastity means invulnerability to unwanted penetration casts an inevitable shadow on Lucretia’s character. She killed herself either as a way of trying to throw the shadow off (Livy) or out of despairing resignation to it (Ovid). Lucretia is the paradigmatic example of the mindset that thinks death preferable to unchastity (and expressions of that idea in late twentieth-century Latter-day Saint discourse are not hard to find).

I am not suggesting that these assumptions are normative in Mormonism. The Family Proclamation, with its talk of equal partners in marriage, is probably irreconcilable with Roman family values, and the only people who go around thinking in terms of *pudicitia* and *stuprum* are classics professors. They, of all people, are in a position to recognize the distance between those ideas and modern life.

Even so, I think that church members import those assumptions whenever they suggest that virtue can be passively taken away. When they make these assumptions, they frame masculinity in terms of domination (contrary to Doctrine and Covenants 121) and deny women full access to the agency that is near the heart of LDS theology. More troublingly, this may imply that rape victims, by the mere fact of having been raped, cannot be chaste, because they must have consented in some way, whether by dressing a certain way, by staying out past curfew, or simply by having been penetrated at all. This mindset can suggest to both victims and their ecclesiastical leaders a need for confession and repentance when the situation more properly calls for reassurance that the victim has not sinned, together with the gentle work of finding healing through a loving Savior.

Certainly Mormon, in writing about the experience of these women, only meant to deplore what happened. He was focused on the negative effects of male agency, not on anything having to do with female agency, with the possibly unintended consequence of treating women as wholly

7. Augustine, *The City of God* I.19, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 30. Latin from the Brepols *Library of Latin Texts—Series A*.

passive victims. Reading the verse as an admonition to female chastity assumes an agency that the text does not grant and does so in a way that imputes to women the blame for male actions. Such a reading does not comport with the powerful teachings on agency elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, and we would do well to look there, rather than to Moroni 9:9, in our thinking about female sexual agency.

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