

The Fall of Rome and Family Values: Classical Reception and Moral Values in LDS General Conference (1970-1989)

Monographs studying masculinity and the classics have extensively documented how narratives surrounding the Fall of Rome were used in the late 19th century to discuss masculine insecurity and moral concerns surrounding decadence and its negative effects on manliness (e.g. Eastlake 2019). While popular culture around 1900 found ways to reclaim decadent masculinities (e.g., Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw etc. see Orrell 2011, Roynon 2021), Rome never stopped being featured in more conservative religious discourse concerned with strengthening “traditional masculinity” and condemning queerness.

Gibbon’s own theory of Rome’s fall relied upon Rome’s “failed or diseased masculine vigor” (Eastlake 2019) as the lynchpin for the fall creating a normative discourse around masculinity, family values, and success. In the late 19th century, this discourse went mainstream becoming formative for discussions around failed masculinities, e.g., “As in ancient Rome, the manliness and vigour of our nation seems to be gradually giving way before the attacks of luxury and vice.” (Saturday Review 1887).

Another paper for this panel has already discussed how 19th century Mormon discourse mobilized such arguments around the rise and fall of Rome to defend polygamy and attack homosexuality. I will show how discourse around the fall of Rome and proper masculine morality was mobilized once again within Mormonism in the 1970’s and 80’s to condemn homosexuality and the sins of decadence (including socialism, pornography, sexual ‘laxness’ etc.).

Within LDS General Conference talks of the 70’s and 80’s, the fall of Rome features prominently as a clear warning for the decline of the United States (*LDS General Conference*

Corpus: see Hinkley 1970, Tanner 1971, Tanner 1973, Benson 1973 etc.). Negative *exempla* of Imperial Rome (both the Fall and the rule of Nero are prominently featured) are contrasted with positive *exempla* drawn from Republican Rome (e.g., Hinkley 1978 contrasts Cornelia being proud of her sons rather than being proud of her wealth, while Sill 1978 quotes Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*'s "Horatio at the Bridge"). These contrasts reaffirm that Rome rose because of traditional (i.e. normative) masculine virtues but, "the sensuality, orgies, and gradually weakened fibre of a once self-disciplined people brought Rome down" (Tanner 1973). Sill 1973 makes explicit these comparisons in the life of Marc Antony, who became great because of his hard work, dedication, and masculine virtues but who ultimately "became a victim of the soft luxury, perfumed elegance, and immorality of the Egyptian court." Most often Rome's fall and decadent effeminacy is mobilized to condemn homosexuality (e.g. Kimball 1977).

Mormon history contains several well documented moments where Mormon culture moves to adopt a more culturally normative masculinity (see Hoyt 2011 for the adoption of a more normative masculinity after polygamy and Petrey 2020 for a discussion around how acceptance of mixed-race marriage shifted Mormonism towards relying more on heterosexual normativity). In the 1970s and 80s, Rome's rise and fall served as a culturally significant *exemplum* that bridges gaps between conservative Christians and Mormons (such as Jenkin Lloyd Jones, Gibbon, and Macauley). The prominence of such examples positions Mormon discourse firmly in line with normative evangelical discourse.

This narrative, Rome's fall being due to moral decadence, continues to be well entrenched and surfaces regularly in religious discourse. While I have focused on the way these themes have functioned in Mormon discourse (the discourse that I am aware of and was a part of as a student at BYU), it is important for those of us who teach Classics to recognize that this

discourse and these themes are still regularly present in contemporary religious discourse. The prevalence of this discourse means that it regularly enters more mainstream conversations. For example, *The Yale National Initiative to Strengthen Teaching in Public Schools* currently features a unit entitled “Why Rome Fell and is the United States Next?” that features this kind of moral discourse. Without a clear understanding of how such arguments are rooted in normative “family values” that center and promote anti-queerness, it is too easy for us, as educators and researchers, to continue to promote harmful and outdated ideas.

Works Cited

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