A Price Far above Rubies versus Eight Cows: What's a Virtuous Woman Worth?

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Produced by Brigham Young University and presented by the Deseret Sunday School Union of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1969, the short film *Johnny Lingo* is among the best-known texts in the LDS Church, familiar even to people who never made it through more than a few pages of the Book of Mormon. It has been shown for decades in seminary, Institute, and Sunday School classrooms around the world. In fact, because the twenty-four-minute film makes no mention of Mormonism aside from its credits, its audience has not been limited in ways other Church-related texts might be; it was even shown occasionally in secular American classrooms during the 1970s, and missionaries also made use of it from time to time. Released on DVD in 2004 as a bonus feature of the 2003 feature version of the story, the film is currently included on a DVD marketed by Deseret Book of four short LDS films, making home-viewing easy.

Intro music as bouncy, buoyant, and energetic as any surf punk classic, outrageously bad wigs on a couple of actors, a few less-than-stellar performances, and certain memorable lines about the ugliness of the film's heroine—all contribute to an element of camp about the film that has grown more pronounced as it ages. Often the object of considerable nostalgia from people who first saw the film in their youth, the film is not merely an artifact of Mormon kitsch, however. It is also an explicitly didactic

work still used in Mormon classrooms.[1] Thus, it seems appropriate to ask: What is this film actually saying?

Even in the twenty-first century, *Johnny Lingo* is cited as a wise, compassionate story of male sensitivity to female identity, a positive demonstration of how to foster female self-worth. Set once upon a time on an unnamed, idyllic Pacific island, it is the tale of a charismatic young trader whose wealth and good looks make him the desire of every girl on the island. Renowned for his shrewdness in recognizing and driving a bargain, he shocks everyone by inexplicably offering the princely and unheard-of sum of eight cows as the purchase price for Mahana, a homely, cowering wretch no one else wants. But Johnny's true shrewdness is revealed when the notoriously ugly Mahana is transformed into a graceful, poised beauty by the knowledge that she commanded such an extravagant price, and *becomes* an "eight-cow woman."

The website LDSFilm.com provides a synopsis of the movie from a cover of the VHS version, which states: "Johnny Lingo bargains for a bride, paying an exorbitant amount and causing a sensation on the island. Being an expert trader, he knows the value of things—especially self-esteem. Unfortunately, Mahana's neighbors do not acknowledge her great worth until the couple returns to the island later, and the community sees that the marriage has blossomed into a partnership of equals."[2] That's what the copyright holder has wanted audiences to believe the film shows—but is it an interpretation borne out by a close reading of the film? A young woman interviewed in a documentary about the film praises its "good old-fashioned values."[3] I agree that the film's values are old-fashioned, but are they truly *good*?

Viewers learn what other characters think of Mahana before encountering her themselves. Mr. Harris, the grizzled white shopkeeper who, by questioning and assessing the events of the narrative, functions as the audience's proxy, refers to Mahana as "the little shadow who comes in once in a while for a spool of thread."[4] His assistant, Tulu, complains that Mahana "has a face like a stone and she looks as though she missed too many meals. She's not young, either. She's maybe 19, or even 20. [Mahana's father] Moki long ago gave up hope of finding a husband for her."[5]

Moki has little regard for his daughter, grumbling that she is "as foolish as she is ugly." His counselor, Meihai, warns him not to

say such things when his future son-in-law could arrive any minute to bargain over Mahana's purchase price; in the matter of wife-buying, Meihai points out, a man "must *think* he's getting a bargain."

Moki replies that Johnny Lingo "*will* get a bargain. He wants a woman to mend his roof and to fix his supper, and doesn't want to pay more than a three-legged cow for her. You do not know what it means to have an ugly daughter, Meihai. I am ready to *give* him a cow, just to have him take her off my hands. And I will count myself fortunate to be rid of her. She is no comfort, hugging the corners of the hut, speaking only in whispers, and never looking at me. This is what comes, Meihai, of buying a two-cow wife. Look at you: you paid four cows for your wife—"

"Five!" Meihai interjects, before Moki continues "—and she gave you beautiful daughters. Your investment has been doubled."

Let's consider that exchange in detail. It is acceptable in this culture to see a bride as two types of property. The first is essentially slave labor, a body to be purchased as cheaply as possible for a lifetime of hard work. It's perhaps not ideal, but it's acceptable. Preferable, however, is the view of a wife as the bearer and rearer of children, in which case it makes sense to pay for superior genes to pass on to the next generation. Thus, if a woman produces more than one beautiful daughter who can be sold at a similar or higher price than her mother's, the bride-buyer has made a wise investment. In other words, a superior way of viewing the purchase of a wife is to see her essentially as livestock.

Before proceeding, I want to justify my assertion that Mahana is property, and I want to do so not merely through the obvious fact that she is discussed as such—that, for instance, her father deems her inferior goods, a liability he would gladly pay to be rid of. In *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, cultural critic Lewis Hyde offers this definition: "Property, by one old definition, is a 'right to action.' To possess, to enjoy, to use, to destroy, to sell, to rent, to give or bequeath, to improve, to pollute—all of these are actions, and a thing (or a person) becomes 'property' whenever someone has 'in it' the right of any such action. There is no property without an actor, then, and in this sense property is an expression of the human will in things (and in other people)."[6]

Mahana is the property of someone else because of her limited right to action with regards either to her hand in marriage—or the larger entity that a woman's "hand" is synecdoche for: her body. Mahana, evidently—and, one might reasonably assume, any bride-to-be in this society—has no say in the matter of her wedding. She cannot refuse the husband who has bought her on the grounds that she does not like him or that her labor and body have been sold too cheaply. Nor does she have the resources or the right to acquire cows on her own and buy her independence. Her life and body are always to be owned by another, and the bestowal of them is controlled by men.

Thus, it is no surprise that violence against women is something its perpetrators are unashamed of. In fact, when Mahana refuses to come down from the tree in which she is hiding, Moki threatens: "Shall I follow you up there with a stick? Do you want me to put bruises all over you so that Johnny Lingo will see what a disobedient daughter you are?" He would willingly display the results of his brutality to his future son-in-law—and they would be a comment on his daughter's bad behavior, not on his own.

However, there is no time to beat Mahana because Johnny—and a good share of the villagers—shows up for the bargaining. With due gravity, Johnny Lingo announces his reason for coming: "I wish to take Mahana for my wife."

In what seems meant to evoke a culturally scripted dialogue, Moki replies solemnly, "It is hard for a man to give his daughter to another."

"I am prepared to pay," Johnny Lingo states, equally solemn, "How many cows do you wish for Mahana?"

After consulting with his counselor, Moki announces his price: three cows. And everyone erupts into laughter at the audacity of the request.

Johnny Lingo holds up his hand to silence the crowd. He nods meaningfully. "Three cows," he says, underscoring the sum's significance with a pregnant pause, "is many. But not enough for Mahana. I will pay *eight* cows."

The announcement renders the villagers slack-jawed and dumb. Moki, dazed by his good fortune, is scarcely able to reply to Johnny's statements about delivery of the cows and subsequent arrangements.

Mr. Harris, who has not personally witnessed the bargaining, is confounded by the price Johnny offered for Mahana and comments, "Why, for two or three cows, you can buy quite a decent wife on this island. Four or five brings a superior one." Never mind that this market analysis calls into question Moki's assertion that buying a two-cow wife is a mistake. What really matters to Mr. Harris—and the audience he stands in for—is why someone as desirable and shrewd as Johnny Lingo would willfully and perversely insist on paying more for Mahana than her actual market value. The earlier speculation that he was buying Mahana as a wife because he could get her for nothing turns into suspicion that "either he is crazy, or he is blind."

But when Mr. Harris asks him about the matter, Johnny fairly glows with pride and satisfaction at this evidence that news of his offer for Mahana is already making the rounds. Grandly, he proclaims: "Always and forever, when they speak of marriage settlements, it will be remembered that Johnny Lingo paid eight cows for Mahana." Johnny's evident pleasure in stating that fact convinces Harris that Johnny is "neither crazy nor blind—he's just vain. Poor, vain fool."

The action then shifts back to Mahana and her father. Mahana, stung by the laughter that erupted when her father requested three cows for her, is certain that the entire business is an elaborate and cruel practical joke, that Johnny Lingo was mocking her and will humiliate her further by not delivering the cows, despite the fact that no man has ever reneged on a marriage agreement in all the history of the island. However, within moments, Johnny reappears, driving eight cows before him. Having been paid for his merchandise, Moki steps aside and directs Johnny to the hut where Mahana hides. Johnny calls her name and extends his hand. He is tender and kind. The audience sees Johnny's face as he calls to Mahana and reaches out to her. The audience sees Mahana place her hand in his, but we do not see her face. Although this is one of the most important moments in her life—the moment when she begins to accept that someone might actually value her—the film cuts away from her and back to Johnny's smiling face as she accepts his hand. We do not have a sense of Mahana's emotional reaction to this event, aside from

presumed relief that she is not, as anticipated, to be humiliated further—at least, not at that moment.

Instead, the next humiliation occurs at the wedding festival, when a group of boys recite some of the film's most memorable lines:

> Johnny Lingo had a cow,
> trade it for an ugly wife.
> Johnny Lingo's married now.
> He'll be sorry all his life!

Johnny chases the hooligans away, but Mahana bursts into tears and wails, "It's true!" Rather than subject his bride to more mockery, Johnny whisks her down to his canoe, out to sea, and off to "the honeymoon place," as he calls it. And it is months, and months, and perhaps even additional months, before they return.

The fact that their absence is lengthy is substantiated by a couple of brief references in the film. The first is that, when Johnny orders a gift for Mahana, Mr. Harris tells him that it will take several months for the item to be shipped from the states. The second is that, by the time the newlyweds return to the island, the item has been "gathering dust on [Mr. Harris's] shelf for months." But the movie glosses over these months, erasing any suggestion that important events might have occurred during them. Certainly it wasn't until I started thinking about this movie carefully that I began to wonder how Mahana might feel, arriving at a new island as the bride of a young, virile, wealthy, attractive, charming, and well-connected businessman. It's logical to imagine that this association might bolster her self-esteem—provided she didn't suffer too much from a sense of being unworthy of him. And what about sex? After all, they're on a protracted honeymoon. One would hope that they'd managed to establish a mutually rewarding sex life. Could discovering her ability to give and receive sexual pleasure affect the way a woman sees herself? It seems reasonable to think so. Reasonable and logical as these inferences might be, however, the text itself rejects them, as we shall see.

The wedding gift Johnny ordered for Mahana is a lady's hand mirror in an elaborately decorated gold setting, paid for with a shell that, to Mr. Harris's surprise, turns out to be worth a small

fortune. The day after someone spies a candle burning in Johnny's long-empty hut, Mr. Harris decides to deliver the package that has sat so long in his store, happy to provide good service to a reliable and profitable business partner. When he arrives at the hut, only Johnny greets him—Mahana is out of sight in another room. After inspecting the mirror, Johnny enters that room alone to present the gift to her. Mr. Harris has only a partial view of Mahana's reaction. She exclaims that the mirror is the most beautiful thing she has ever seen, then tells her husband, "I wish I had a gift for you."

Johnny kisses Mahana on the forehead and tenderly tells her, "Your gift to me can be seen by all who look at you," a category that Mr. Harris and the audience are about to join.

Mahana, wishing to thank Mr. Harris for delivering the gift, enters the outer room of the hut. And what we see on screen is not a frightened, cowering creature with sallow skin and dull hair, but a vibrant young woman glowing with health and confidence, her sunny, sincere smile revealing teeth so white and straight they could land her a spot in a toothpaste ad.

Mr. Harris is essentially dumbstruck, barely able to utter Mahana's name twice and thank her for welcoming him to her home. Johnny then sends Mahana to fetch water, which allows Mr. Harris to say to him, "Johnny, I can't get over it. She's beautiful!"

"I have loved her ever since we were children," Johnny replies. "She was always beautiful. Tell me: do you think eight cows was too high a price for her?"

"Oh, no," Mr. Harris replies, his admiration for the young woman's beauty obvious.

Johnny Lingo says, "Neither does Moki. In fact, he was just here before you came, to accuse me of cheating him. Mahana, he says, is worth ten cows if she is worth a hoof!"

Mr. Harris laughs, but his humor soon dissolves into confusion: "I don't understand. What happened?"

"It was the cows," Johnny Lingo tells him earnestly. This statement requires explanation, so Johnny elaborates: "Think what it must mean to a woman: her future husband meeting with her father to discuss the lowest price for which he[7] can be bought. And later, when the women of the village gather, they boast of what

their husbands paid for them: three cows, or five. How does she feel, the woman is sold for one, or two? This could not happen to my Mahana."

Penitent, Mr. Harris confesses, "Johnny, I've misjudged you. I thought you were thinking only of how important you would look to your friends, giving eight cows for a wife. I didn't know you wanted to make Mahana happy."

"More than happy, Mr. Harris," Johnny says. "I wanted her to *be* an eight-cow woman."

Harris nods meaningfully, so Johnny continues his sermonizing: "Many things can happen to make a woman beautiful. The thing that matters most is what she thinks of herself."

"I see," Mr. Harris says. "In her father's hut, Mahana believed she was worth nothing."

Johnny gets the last word: "Yes. And now she knows she is worth more than any other woman on the island."

At which point they all live happily ever after.

I won't deny that there are things this movie does effectively. For starters, it's one of the most efficient fairy tales I've ever encountered: Johnny Lingo is not only the handsome prince who lifts the poor abused serving wench out of her undeserved misery, elevating her to her rightful position as princess; he is also the fairy godmother who provides the magic that reveals the error of seeing this girl as nothing more than a lowly servant. He is even the magic mirror who reflects back true beauty and makes clear to all exactly who is the fairest in the land.

But make no mistake: this story *is* a fairy tale. In fact, as one female fan puts it, "*Johnny Lingo* definitely could be the ultimate fairy tale story for LDS women."[8] And fairy tales are often sanitized through repetition and familiarity, their cruelty and brutality seemingly erased by the arrival of an inevitable, eternal happy ending. Once Hansel and Gretel are reunited with their father, it's not so important that he led them into the forest to starve or be devoured by wild beasts, or that a wicked witch connived to roast and eat them. Nonetheless, it is the cruelty and viciousness of other characters that propel the plot in the first place, so ignoring those elements of the story is to miss something profound about how the story functions and what it says about the culture that produced it.

So let's return to the scene where Mahana's transformation is hinted at, revealed, and finally explained, and see what's really happening in this story.

Mahana's reaction upon beholding the mirror that reveals to her how beautiful she has become is to say to Johnny, "I wish I had a gift for you."

Johnny, a kind and generous husband, kisses Mahana tenderly and says, "Your gift to me can be seen by all who look at you." He doesn't say, "Your gift to me can be seen by all who talk to you." Nor "by all who benefit from your sweet spirit." No. He says, "Your gift to me can be seen by all who look at you." In other words, Mahana's gift to Johnny is something about her physical appearance or presence. His gifts to her involve bestowing objects—eight cows to her father, a beautiful and costly mirror to her—but her gift to him is her embodiment; furthermore, it is a gift that others can recognize.

This situation is still a bit cryptic. Mahana is obviously much happier than she was as a scorned, ridiculous spinster; could it be that her happiness is a gift to Johnny? Well, that might be the case if Johnny said, "Your gift to me can be seen by all who observe the transformation you've gone through." But presumably during those many months away from the island, Mahana encountered people who didn't know she had once been the ugliest of ugly ducklings, with little hope of becoming a swan. And these people could nonetheless see, Johnny asserts, Mahana's gift to him.

What people know is that Mahana is Johnny's wife. They share a home and a bed. Mahana's gift to Johnny, visible to all, is that she provides him with an extremely attractive and desirable mate. In other words, Mahana's gift to Johnny is the gift of herself—which he technically already owns. So more precisely, Mahana's gift to Johnny is the pleasure and desire she creates—in him and in others who recognize her as his sexual partner.

This reading is borne out by Mr. Harris's reaction when Mahana parts the strands of beads separating the rooms and greets him. He is struck by her beauty, by her physical presence. Mahana may possess every last trait that makes a woman a good wife in this culture, but we don't know that. Perhaps she makes the best mango milkshake, the finest coconut cream pie, the most de-

licious banana bread, anyone has ever tasted—perhaps she even invented the recipes. Maybe she loves babies and is a competent and caring mother. Maybe she knots the best fishnets. The audience doesn't know, and neither does Mr. Harris. All he knows is that she's pretty, has a nice smile, and can utter basic social pleasantries with appropriate decorum. It is on the basis of seeing her for literally thirty seconds—Mahana enters the room at twenty minutes, twenty-nine seconds into the film, and exits it at twenty minutes, fifty-nine seconds—that he makes a definitive assessment of her worth, agreeing wholeheartedly that eight cows is not too high a price for a wife so lovely.

Johnny's claim that "it was the cows" that caused Mahana's transformation must also be examined. "Think what it must mean to a woman: her future husband meeting with her father to discuss the lowest price for which he [sic] can be bought. And later, when the women of the village gather, they boast of what their husbands paid for them: three cows, or five. How does she feel, the woman is sold for one, or two?" The fact that women are bought and sold in this culture, their thorough objectification, is not open to scrutiny, only the damaging effects of being sold cheaply.

Johnny asserts: "Many things can happen to make a woman beautiful. The thing that matters most is what she thinks of herself." While self-esteem can certainly be an important element of beauty and poise, I'm not sure it's the most important. One might argue that a few basic gifts from nature such as reasonably clear skin or facial features free from major disfigurement might also play a role in helping a woman feel and appear beautiful. Furthermore, if you read celebrity biographies, you'll learn that some of the most glamorous, talented, and admired women in Hollywood suffered horribly from poor self-esteem—Rita Hayworth and Judy Garland, for instance—and were nonetheless considered beautiful.

Still, I admit that there is something magical and affirming about being loved. We have all experienced—at least, I hope we have—the thrilling, enchanting enhancement of our vision of ourselves when we are reflected in the gaze of someone who loves us and values our finest qualities. This is what Maria is getting at in *West Side Story* when she sings about feeling "pretty" and charming and wanting to dance for joy because she's loved "by a pretty won-

derful boy." The sensation is not unique but that doesn't make it any less valuable or special.

So I must wonder why Johnny, who claims to have loved Mahana since they were children, waits until she is a despised, scorned spinster before demonstrating his regard for her. What if, when she was seven, Johnny had told her, "I like you, Mahana. You're special. Others might not see it, but I do"? What if he had found ways, such as giving her gifts she could show her materialistic father, of letting those around her see how he valued her? Could she have become an "eight-cow woman" long before reaching age "nineteen or maybe even twenty"? Given that, as Mr. Harris notes, "In her father's hut, Mahana believed she was worth nothing," why would a man who had loved her all along not do what he could to spare her years and years of misery and suffering?

One answer is that the movie doesn't acknowledge that very real part of a human being's sense of self. According to Johnny Lingo, Mahana turns into a graceful, self-assured beauty not because someone loves her, or because she loves someone, or because she is treated with respect and kindness, but because she knows she is the most expensive commodity on the island.

Another answer is: This film is not about female empowerment and worth; it's about male identity and power—the power to assess and determine female worth, the power to claim or create a desirable mate, the power to see what others do not, the power to manipulate less insightful people around one, the power to acquire what one truly desires. Remember, when Johnny analyzes the meaning of a bargaining session for Mr. Harris, he says, "Think what it must mean to a woman: her future husband meeting with her father to discuss the lowest price for which *he* can be bought." A bridal bargaining is really a contest of wills between two men; female self-esteem here is contingent on the quality of male relationships.

Furthermore, the film is called *Johnny Lingo*—it is not called *Mahana*. This is not a minor detail. How would our sense of the story of "Cinderella" be different if the tale were actually called "Prince Charming"? *Johnny Lingo* is not about its passive heroine; it is the story of its active and powerful hero. Furthermore, of the six characters important enough to have both names and speaking

roles, five are male: Harris, the shopkeeper; Tulu, his assistant; Moki, Mahana's father; Meihai, Moki's counselor; and Johnny Lingo himself. The lone female, outnumbered five to one, is Mahana. There are other bit parts, both male and female, with minor lines, and Mr. Harris and Tulu discuss a certain Lani, an unseen woman who has waited months for a few bolts of poplin. But the interactions that truly matter occur between Johnny and other men: bargaining with Moki, ordering the mirror from Mr. Harris, and explaining to Harris how Mahana was transformed into an eight-cow woman. Johnny's interactions with Mahana get very little screen time, to the point that they seem unimportant. As for Mahana's interactions with women—well, we know what they will be: boasting and gossip about who was the most expensive bride.

As I developed this analysis, I tried to think of other stories in which women are transformed by men; one that came to mind is George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Particularly relevant is the scene in which Alfred Doolittle bargains with Henry Higgins for Higgins's access to Doolittle's daughter, Eliza:

> DOOLITTLE: Well, the truth is, I've taken sort of a fancy to you, Governor; and if you want the girl, I'm not so set on having her back home again but what I might be open to an arrangement. Regarded in the light of a young woman, she's a fine handsome girl. As a daughter she's not worth her keep; and so I tell you straight. All I ask is my rights as a father; and you're the last man alive to expect me to let her go for nothing; for I can see you're one of the straight sort, Governor. Well, what's a five pound note to you? And what's Eliza to me? *(He returns to his chair and sits down judicially).*
>
> PICKERING: I think you ought to know, Doolittle, that Mr. Higgins's intentions are entirely honorable.
>
> DOOLITTLE: Course they are, Governor. If I thought they wasn't, I'd ask fifty.
>
> HIGGINS *(revolted)*: Do you mean to say, you callous rascal, that you would sell your daughter for fifty pounds?
>
> DOOLITTLE: Not in a general way I wouldn't; but to oblige a gentleman like you I'd do a good deal, I assure you.
>
> PICKERING: Have you no morals, man?
>
> DOOLITTLE (*unabashed)*: Can't afford them, Governor. Neither could you if you was as poor as me. Not that I mean any harm, you know. But if Liza is going to have a bit out of this, why not me too?
>
> HIGGINS *(troubled)*: I don't know what to do, Pickering. There can be no question that as a matter of morals it's a positive crime to

> give this chap a farthing. And yet I feel a sort of rough justice in his claim.[9]

In this scene, Doolittle violates one of *our* society's rules regarding transfer of the rights to women: A "father may be able to give [a daughter] away, but he may not sell her."[10] Although initially revolted by Doolittle's demand that he be given five pounds in exchange for his claims on his daughter, Higgins is eventually so amused by Doolittle's idiosyncratic and contingent morality that he tries to persuade Doolittle to accept ten pounds for Eliza—in other words, just like Johnny Lingo, he offers a father more than his asking price in the sale of access to his daughter. Doolittle, however, unlike Moki, refuses to take more than the price he himself named, on the grounds that "ten pounds is a lot of money: it makes a man feel prudent like; and then goodbye to happiness," whereas five pounds is a sum that may be easily and cheerfully squandered.[11]

After becoming acquainted with a modern bathroom and receiving a new wardrobe, and after months of training with regards to speech and behavior, Eliza is transformed from a foul-smelling, grimy, rude, crude, flower-selling guttersnipe into a cultured, elegant woman whose speech and manners are so refined that she can pass for a duchess. However, Eliza understands something important about this transformation: it has made her unfit to take care of herself; it has made her so refined that she can no longer earn a living through her work. Instead, she must earn a living through her self and person; her best course of action, as Higgins points out, is to marry. The following exchange then ensues:

> ELIZA: We were above that at the corner of Tottenham Court Road.
>
> HIGGINS *(waking up)*: What do you mean?
>
> ELIZA: I sold flowers. I didn't sell myself. Now that you've made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else. I wish you'd left me where you found me.
>
> HIGGINS (*slinging the core of the apple decisively into the grate*): Tosh, Eliza. Don't you insult human relations by dragging all this cant about buying and selling into it. You needn't marry the fellow if you don't like him.[12]

Higgins is offended when Eliza "[insults] human relations by dragging all this cant about buying and selling into it," but don't

forget that Higgins *did* buy Eliza, a fact he asserts when her father appears and gloomily acknowledges that he has become wealthy enough to provide for her: "Nonsense! [Her father] can't provide for her. He shan't provide for her. She doesn't belong to him. I paid him five pounds for her."[13]

And although Higgins has suggested that Eliza marry, he is indignant at her plans to wed the genteel but poor and unambitious Freddy Eynsford Hill, responding, "Rubbish! You shall marry an ambassador. You shall marry the Governor-General of India or the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, or somebody who wants a deputy-queen. I'm not going to have my masterpiece thrown away on Freddy."[14]

In other words, part of what Shaw points out in his play is that, while it is unseemly in our culture for men to buy and sell women, it nonetheless occurs. Something society finds more unseemly is women's recognition and criticism of this fact. But what society finds most unseemly of all is women who market themselves, as it should be up to men to determine a woman's value and see that she is properly bestowed. In the world of Johnny Lingo and Henry Higgins, women's self-esteem is dependent on their value as a commodity in exchanges between men. The more highly a woman is prized as a commodity, the greater her corresponding self-respect and dignity. Without external valuation by men, she has no worth. And any worth she has must not be something that she herself arranges to benefit from financially, or she is a "bad" woman.

A woman who traffics on her beauty and desirability to secure an advantageous marriage is a gold digger, which is at least a step up from a whore, or a woman who sells access to her body outside marriage. Now, if Mormon culture is really going to embrace and approve *Johnny Lingo* as a narrative of a woman's self-worth enhanced by her position as the most expensive commodity in a community, we must consider carefully our response to the actions of one Natalie Dylan, a pseudonymous twenty-two-year-old who arranged to auction off her virginity online. As of January 23, 2009, the highest bid she had received was $3.8 million—though, it should be said, the winner of the auction would be decided not merely by the amount of the bid but by Dylan's assessment of the overall offer and likability of the bidder. Is this act objectionable or admirable?

Before you answer, let me present a passage from Dylan explaining her decision:

> Like most little girls, I was raised to believe that virginity is a sacred gift a woman should reserve for just the right man. But college taught me that this concept is just a tool to keep the status quo intact. Deflowering is historically oppressive—early European marriages began with a dowry, in which a father would sell his virginal daughter to the man whose family could offer the most agricultural wealth. Dads were basically their daughters' pimps.
>
> When I learned this, it became apparent to me that idealized virginity is just a tool to keep women in their place. But then I realized something else: if virginity is considered that valuable, what's to stop me from benefiting from that? It is mine, after all. And the value of my chastity is one level on which men cannot compete with me. I decided to flip the equation, and turn my virginity into something that allows me to gain power and opportunity from men. I took the ancient notion that a woman's virginity is priceless and used it as a vehicle for capitalism.[15]

If Mormons teach their youth that it's admirable to boost a woman's opinion of herself by buying and selling her for exorbitant amounts, then we can object to Dylan's auctioning of her virginity only in those aspects where the transaction differs from the one between Johnny Lingo and Moki. One is that sex outside marriage will occur. Second, limited access to a woman, rather than the woman herself, is for sale; this seems to me a positive distinction. In sales like the one in *Johnny Lingo,* buying and selling control of a woman's sexuality is fine as long as that control lasts a really long time; in Dylan's auction, a single act or episode of sex, rather than a lifetime of it, is for sale—a third difference and one which seems a way to minimize spousal abuse. Fourth, the woman is not obligated to labor henceforth for the man, "to mend his roof and fix his supper" as he commands, which also doesn't seem so bad. Fifth, the transaction acknowledges the importance of a particular sexual act, the deflowering of a virgin, which goes politely unmentioned in tales like *Johnny Lingo*, though you can be sure that a girl who is not sexually pure—the proverbial "damaged goods"—would not command so high a price on the marriage market. Sixth, the virgin herself controls the transaction, and seventh, she is the primary financial beneficiary of the transaction.[16]

As sex outside of marriage is generally objectionable to Mor-

mons, let's consider an alternate scenario. Let's say that Dylan agrees to marry the man who will pay to deflower her. Let's say she agrees to donate the price to charity. There will be no sex outside of marriage, there is the potential for a lifetime of sexual congress, and Dylan will benefit from the transaction only insofar as she becomes the wife of a man with enough spare cash to buy a bride. This is essentially Mahana's situation, and auctioning off the right to a virgin's sexuality online is merely a more high-tech, modern version of what Moki does on mats outside his hut. The biggest difference is that Dylan controls the transaction, whereas Mahana cannot. Should knowing that she can command the price of $3.8 million for access to her person bolster Dylan's self-esteem in the same way those eight cows paid for Mahana bolstered hers?

Let's return to Johnny and Mahana and imagine their future. Let's say that, after ten years of marriage, Johnny dies, leaving Mahana a wealthy and attractive widow. Suppose someone else wishes to marry her. The man who "owned" her is gone. Moki, her father, has been paid for his interest in her already. Who then could sell the right to Mahana's hand in marriage? Can she demand that a suitor provide her with eight cows before she agrees to marry him? Will her value have appreciated or declined? Can she demand ten cows, the amount her father claims, after seeing the new and improved Mahana, that she is really worth? Suppose she has several daughters as lovely as she. How will she determine their worth? If the girls have no father, can their mother sell them? Or must ownership pass to another man: a grandfather, uncle, brother, or stepfather?

Questions like these regarding the legal rights of a piece of property—a woman—to own or control property (including herself), have actually required answers in western societies, but they have been sidestepped by societies who refuse to see women as objects that can be bought or sold. In a chapter titled "A Female Property," Lewis Hyde discusses the Uduk Tribe of Ethiopia, which had marriages more unstable than those of certain other tribes in its area, as anyone in an unhappy marriage could leave it. To make marriage contracts inviolable, therefore, in 1963 the government of Ethiopia introduced "a system of bridewealth payments. . . . In consultation with tribal elders, the government de-

cided upon a cash sum to be given by a man to his wife's kin at the time of their marriage."[17]

> Problems sprang up immediately. As [Hyde demonstrated when he] first introduced the Uduk, any property transferred from one clan to another among these people must be treated as a gift. All transactions between clans are therefore accompanied by the need to clarify their nature and to make sure that the received wealth is consumed as a gift, not converted into capital. But bridewealth confounded the Uduk, and for the obvious reason: their brides are not in fact given. Therefore, the conundrum: if the bridewealth was a gift, then it was one that had not been reciprocated—and yet the name itself implied that it *had*. And it if was *not* a gift, then the bride had apparently been purchased, an even more onerous interpretation.
>
> Some of the Uduk treated the bridewealth as a gift, inventing newfangled gift institutions to deal with the moral complexities that it raised. But most settled on the other side, deciding that bridewealth was really cash purchase, and refusing to pay it. They spoke of it in the language of the marketplace, says [researcher Wendy] James, using "the ordinary word for buying and selling, an action which has no moral content and which only takes place between unrelated people." Bridewealth payments did nothing to change the underlying structure of the Uduk kinship and by that structure women are not gifts. When asked why they refused to pay bridewealth, the standard cry became, "Are we to sell our girl as if she were a goat or something?"[18]

The view of gifts and their role in marriages has been very different in Uganda, however. Traditionally, marriages there have been recognized and formalized partly through a system of "bride gifts," which functioned "to bring two families together, to unite them through the love of two young people following a long courtship." But recently these gifts have been replaced with flat-out "bride prices," and the results have been devastating for Ugandan women. Bartering over brides is now "fiercely negotiated" and has

> reduced young women to commodities and has made families see their daughters as a source of income. Today bride price isn't a bag of potatoes, it's a list of demands for money, animals or clothing made by fathers and older brothers, who might want to throw in requests for new shoes or school fees. The mother gets nothing because she was more or less purchased herself, and the sisters are ignored too as they are all set to be exchanged for commodities when they reach 12 or 13. . . . Because they have been "bought," many teenage girls are forced to accept polygamous marriages, mul-

> tiple pregnancies and have no right to deny their husbands sex even if they suspect he is HIV positive. . . . Girls are being removed from school to be married off as young as possible so the families can get a few cows or sacks of rice—the younger the bride, the higher the bride price paid.[19]

In light of such circumstances, Hyde's general analysis of bridewealth actually seems to understate the dangers of these practices:

> If we take property to be a right to action and therefore an expression of the human will, then whenever a woman is treated as property, even if she is a gift [as when she is given away by her father in marriage], we know that she is not strictly her own person: her will is somewhere subject to someone else's. . . . If . . . a woman does not receive the right of bestowal in herself, then she can never become an actor in her own right, and never an autonomous individual. This last is what is onerous to us in the idea that a woman may be given in marriage—not, I think, that people are sometimes treated as gifts [as when a baby is bestowed by its parents to another family through adoption], not even that there is such a thing as "the right of bestowal in persons," but that that right passes to the son when he comes of age, but not to the daughter. For where men alone may give and receive, and where women alone are the gifts, men will be active and women passive, men self-possessed and women dependent, men worldly and women domestic, and so on, through all the cliches of gender in a patriarchy.[20]

Mormon society, which actively advocates a world where "men will be active and women passive, men self-possessed and women dependent, men worldly and women domestic, and so on" does not view the buying and selling of women as property as essentially or inherently wrong—instead, it's cute, as long as women are not direct beneficiaries of any transaction and the price is appropriate. This conclusion is borne out by interviews in the documentary *8 Cows–Millions of Hearts*, which explores the frequency with which *Johnny Lingo* is referenced or mimicked in Mormon culture.

Kurt Hale, writer and director of the LDS films *The RM* and *Singles' Ward*, discusses meeting with his future father-in-law to "barter" over the price of Jamie, the woman Hale wants to marry. Hale asks his fiancée's father, "How many cows do you want for your daughter's hand in marriage?" Jamie's father asks in return, "How many cows do you think my daughter's worth?" Hale counts up the tiny plastic cows he has brought with him; he has fourteen.

As this is more than Johnny Lingo paid for Mahana, it seems to both men an appropriate price. Neither considers the possibility that they might instead see this woman as either priceless or simply unsellable, the way one can't sell a father or grandmother—the notion is absurd.[21]

More grotesque is an anecdote told by Stephen M. Weber, an LDS Institute of Religion instructor. Weber relates events at a restaurant the night before his oldest son, Jake, married his fiancée, Megan, in the Oakland Temple. Weber arrived at the restaurant carrying a gift bag, "certain that Jake and Megan thought it was for them." However, Weber gives it to his son's future father-in-law, Dave, who lifts, one by one, eight beanie baby cows out of the bag, along with a note reading "Payment in Full." A few years later, after the birth of Jake and Megan's first child, Dave sends a cow to Weber along with a notice reading "Interest Payment."[22]

As Megan's father is not interviewed in the documentary, it's hard to judge his precise feelings about the cows exchanged as payment and interest. Weber, however, beams gleefully at his own cleverness and cuteness. Neither man seems to understand or care that the symbolic import of their exchange of cows turns Megan into a brood mare (or cow), a creature sold and bought to be impregnated and to bear offspring. But Megan doesn't seem to matter in this business. The transaction is really about the relationship between the two men. What it might mean to Megan, what it says about her, is of secondary importance to what it says about the men—which is to be expected, for as I already pointed out, the story their interaction mimics is a reinforcement of male, not female, power and identity.

Having read the Old Testament, every last word of it, having encountered stories like the one in Judges 19 of the Levite who dismembers his concubine after she is gang-raped, or Amnon's rape of his half-sister Tamar, or Dinah's brothers' refusal to allow her to be married after she is raped, or Lot offering to let the men of Sodom and Gomorrah rape his daughters if they will refrain from raping the angels sent to visit him by God, or the elders of Israel who arranged to let the daughters of Shiloh be kidnapped, raped and married off against their will to the outlaw tribe of Benjamin (whose own women had all been murdered already in a

nasty war against the rest of Israel) as part of a subterfuge to protect the men of Israel from violating their oath never to "give" their daughters in marriage to Benjamin, etc., etc., I don't generally consider the Old Testament a likely source for worthwhile information on admirable ways to treat women. But Proverbs 31, the chapter that asks the question "Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies"—or, to use the currency of *Johnny Lingo*, greater than an entire herd of cattle—actually gets some things right. Initially I included the phrase "a price far above rubies" in my title for its precious, limitless, and metaphorical valuation of women as contrasted to the concrete specificity of eight prosaic cows, but the verses that follow contain substantive ideas about female identity.

While I must quibble with the notion that particular traits rather than personhood itself make a woman priceless, I can't fault the worthiness of the attributes that Proverbs 31 suggests women cultivate, including trustworthiness, generosity, honesty, resourcefulness, industry, shrewdness, strength, wisdom, kindness, courage. The chapter points out that "favor [or charm] is deceitful, and beauty is vain [and insubstantial]," and closes by suggesting that the best way to honor a great woman and reveal her worth is to "give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates" (Prov. 31:31).

In other words, the best way to foster self-esteem and reveal the inherent worth of women is to educate them. Help them develop their talents and acquire skills—not just domestic skills valuable at home, but skills that command respect in the world at large. Do not tell women that their worth is determined by the wealth spent by their husbands to purchase or pamper them. Instead, let women retain the fruits of their hands, the results of their work. Make women's personal achievements, rather than personal beauty, the foundation of their self-worth and their worth in the communities to which they belong. And retire completely the notion that it's affirming or "cute" to buy or sell women for *any* sum.

Notes

1. Christopher A. Jensen, director, *8 Cows–Millions of Hearts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), DVD; copy in my possession.

2. "Johnny Lingo" (1969), LDSFilm.com, March 15, 2003, http://www.ldsfilm.com/BYU/JohnnyLingo1969.html (accessed July 26, 2009).

3. Ibid.

4. A full consideration of the film's treatment of race is beyond the scope of this paper. It must be noted, however, that Mr. Harris's ethnicity and race—an American of European descent—are crucial to the film. His curiosity and confusion as an outsider enable him to pose the questions that allow the film's moral message to emerge. His character is so necessary to making the story's meaning intelligible to its intended audience that he is something of a stock figure: the white man whose experience mediates a colonized culture for an audience composed of domestic members of the colonizing culture. In other words, like Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Mr. Harris is a sort of tour guide to exotic locales and narratives and "comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but [as] one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English [and American] liberal tradition." Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," http://kirbyk.net/hod/image.of.africa.html (accessed September 3, 2009).

5. For this statement and all other dialogue from and descriptions of scenes in the film, see *Johnny Lingo* (1969), directed by Wetzel O. Whitaker, screenplay by Orma W. Wallengren, based on a story by Patricia McGerr (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), DVD in my possession.

6. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, 1983), 94.

7. Unable to locate a copy of the original script or a copy of the film with captions or subtitles, I have had to rely on my own ears to transcribe the dialogue of the film. I have listened to this particular speech by Johnny dozens of times, and although people have suggested that I must have misheard, I am confident that the actor (whose enunciation is quite crisp) actually says, "Think what it must mean to a woman: her future husband meeting with her father to discuss the lowest price for which *he* [not *she*, which seems more logical] can be bought." As I will discuss below, this particular choice of pronoun suggests that what is really being negotiated is the terms of a relationship between two men, rather than a relationship between a man and his wife.

8. *8 Cows–Millions of Hearts.*

9. George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion* (1913), (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), Act 2. This play has no scenes, only acts.

10. Hyde, *The Gift*, 94.

11. Shaw, *Pygmalion,* Act 3.

12. Ibid., Act 4.

13. Ibid., Act 5.

14. Ibid.

15. Natalie Dylan. "Why I'm Selling My Virginity." *The Daily Beast*, January 23, 2009, http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-01-23/why-im-selling-my-virginity/ (accessed July 26, 2009).

16. I have been unable to locate further information about Dylan's auction. As far as I can tell, although she wished to explain her decision to auction off her virginity, she felt no obligation to inform the world whose offer she accepted, how much it was for, or when the transaction was completed.

17. Hyde, *The Gift*, 100.

18. Ibid.

19. Evelyn Shiller, "Paying the Price for Marriage," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2009, http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/katineblog/ 2009/aug/18/money-women (accessed August 18, 2009).

20. Hyde, *The Gift*, 100–102. This passage also reveals what is onerous in the supposedly divinely authored idea that "if any man espouse a virgin, and desire to espouse another, and the first give her consent, and if he espouse the second, and they are virgins, and have vowed to no other man, then is he justified; he cannot commit adultery for they are given unto him; for he cannot commit adultery with that that *belongeth unto him* and to no one else" (D&C 132:61; emphasis mine). The sense of male ownership and entitlement expressed here is one of the most disconcerting elements of this revelatory document authorizing Mormon polygamy and should also be disconcerting now that the same revelation is deemed to describe eternal marriage. That sense of ownership is not only difficult to reconcile with doctrines proclaiming the inherent worth of each individual soul; it is also, in comparison with more egalitarian views of humanity, absolutely vile.

21. *8 Cows–Millions of Hearts.*

22. Ibid.