

Hierocles exalts wedlock

Translated by Thomas Taylor



Marriage à la Mode (c 1743) William Hogarth, National Gallery, London

From the "Ethical Fragments of Hierocles," etc.,¹ in: *Political fragments of Archytas, Charondas, Zaleucus, and other Ancient Pythagoreans, preserved by Strobæus*. Translated from the Greek by Thomas Taylor, 1822; pp. 95-105.

THE DISCUSSION of wedlock is a thing most necessary. For the whole of our race is naturally adapted to society. But the first and most elementary of all associations is that which is effected by marriage. For cities could not exist without a household; but the household of an unmarried man is truly imperfect; while, on the contrary, of him who is married, it is perfect and full. Hence we have shown in our treatise *On Families*, that a life accompanied by wedlock is to be precedaneously chosen by the wise man; but a single life is not to be chosen, except particular circumstances² require it. So that as it is requisite we should imitate the man of intellect where we can, but marriage is with him an object of precedaneous choice; it is evident that it will also be proper for us, unless some circumstance occurs to prevent it from taking place. And this is the first reason why wedlock is most necessary.

But it seems that Nature herself, prior to the wise man, incites us to this, who also exhorts the wise man to marry. For she not only made us gregarious, but likewise adapted to copulation, and proposed the procreation of children and stability of life, as the one and common work of wedlock. But Nature justly teaches us, that a choice of such things as are fit should be made so as to accord with what she has procured for us. Every animal, therefore, lives conformably to its natural constitution, and, by Jupiter, in a similar manner every plant lives agreeably to the life which is imparted to it. Only there is this difference between the two, that the latter do not employ any reasoning, or a certain enumeration, in the selection of things which they explore; as they make use of nature alone, because they do not participate of soul; but animals are led to investigate what is proper for them by imaginations and exciting desires. To us, however, Nature gave reason, in order that it might survey every thing else, and, together with all things, or rather prior to all things, might direct its attention to Nature herself, so as in an orderly manner to tend to her as to a very splendid and stable mark, and choosing every thing which is consonant to her, might cause us to live in a becoming manner. Hence he will not err, who says that a family is imperfect without wedlock. For it is not possible to conceive of a governor without the gov-

¹ C2 Stoic philosopher.

² Viz. Such circumstances as induced Plato, Plotinus, Proclus, and many other ancient philosophers, not to engage in wedlock, because they found that they could give greater assistance to philosophy by continuing single; but Pythagoras and Socrates, though they rank among the wisest men that ever lived, did not find a married life incompatible with the cultivation of philosophy in the highest perfection possible to man. Wedlock, therefore, is never to be avoided from any sordid and selfish motives.

erned, nor of the governed without a governor. And this reason appears to me to be very well calculated to make those ashamed who are adverse to marriage.

I say, therefore, that marriage is likewise advantageous. In the first place, indeed, because it produces a truly divine fruit, the procreation of children, since they will be assistants to us in all our actions (as partaking of our nature), while our strength is yet entire; and they will be good auxiliars, when we are worn out, and oppressed with old age. They will also be the familiar associates of our joy in prosperity, and sympathizing participants of our sorrows in adversity. Farther still, besides the procreation of children, the association with a wife is advantageous. For, in the first place, when we are wearied with labours out of the house, she receives us with officious kindness, and recreates us by every possible attention. In the next place, she produces in us an oblivion of our molestations. For those sorrowful circumstances of life which take place in the forum, or the gymnasium, or the country, and, in short, all the cares and solitudes occasioned by converse with our friends and familiars, do not so obviously molest us, being obscured by our necessary occupations; but when we are liberated from these, return home, and our mind becomes, as it were, at leisure, then these cares and solitudes approach, availing themselves of this occasion, in order to torment us, at the time when life is destitute of benevolence, and is solitary. Then, however, the wife being present becomes a great solace on this occasion, by making some inquiries about external affairs, or by referring to, and considering, together with her husband, something about domestic concerns, and thus, by her unfeigned alacrity, affords him a certain exuberance of pleasure and delight. But it would be too prolix to enumerate particularly the benefit of a wife in festivals, for the purpose of procuring sacrifices and victims; in the journeys of her husband, by preserving the family in a stable condition, and not suffering it to be entirely without a ruler; in paying proper attention to the domestics; and in the aid which she affords her husband when he is afflicted with disease. For it is sufficient summarily to say, that *two things are necessary to all men, in order to pass through life in a becoming manner, viz. the aid of kindred and sympathetic benevolence. But we cannot find any thing more sympathetic than a wife, nor any thing more kindred than children. Both these, however, marriage affords.* How is it possible, therefore, that it should not be most advantageous to us?

I also think that a married life is beautiful. For what other thing can be such an ornament to a family, as is the association of husband and wife? For it must not be said that sumptuous edifices, walls covered with marble plaster, and piazzas adorned with stones, which are admired by those who are ignorant of true good, nor yet paintings and arched myrtle walks, nor any thing else which is the subject of astonishment to the stupid,³ is the ornament of a family. But the beauty of a household consists in the conjunction of man and wife, who are united to each other by destiny, and are consecrated to the Gods who preside over nuptials, births, and houses, and who accord, indeed, with each other, and have all things in common, as

³ Hence Diogenes, in perfect conformity with that dignified independence of character which he so eminently possessed, and which is to be found more or less in the conduct of all the ancient philosophers, when a certain wealthy and ostentatious man brought him to a fine house which he had built, and desired him not to spit, as he perceived he begun to hawk, spit in the man's face, observing at the same time, that he could not find a worse place to spit in.

far as to their bodies, or rather their souls themselves; who likewise exercise a becoming authority over their house and servants; are properly solicitous about the education of their children; and pay an attention to the necessaries of life, which is neither excessive nor negligent, but moderate and appropriate. For what can be better and more excellent, as the most admirable Homer says,

. . . than when at home the husband and the wife
Unanimously live.⁴

On which account I have frequently wondered at those who conceive that the life with a woman is burdensome and grievous. For a wife is not by Jupiter either a burden or a molestation, as to them she appears to be; but, on the contrary, she is something light and easy to be borne, or rather, she possesses the power of exonerating her husband from things truly troublesome and weighty. For there is not any thing so troublesome which will not be easily borne by a husband and wife when they are concordant, and are willing to endure it in common. But imprudence is truly burdensome, and difficult to be borne by its possessors: for through it things naturally light, and among others a wife, become heavy. In reality, indeed, marriage to many is intolerable, not from itself, or because such an association as this with a woman is naturally insufferable; but when we marry those whom we ought not, and, together with this, are ourselves entirely ignorant of life, and unprepared to take a wife in such a way as a free and ingenuous woman ought to be taken, then it happens that this association with her becomes difficult and intolerable. It is certain, indeed, that marriage is effected by the vulgar after this manner. For they do not take a wife for the sake of the procreation of children, and the association of life; but some are induced to marry through the magnitude of the portion, others through transcendency of form, and others through other such like causes; and by employing these bad counsellors, they pay no attention to the disposition and manners of the bride, but celebrate nuptials to their own destruction, and with their doors crowned introduce to themselves a tyrant instead of a wife, whom they cannot resist, and with whom they are unable to contend for the chief authority. It is evident, therefore, that marriage through these causes, and not through itself, becomes burdensome and intolerable to many. It is proper, however, as it is said, neither to blame things which are innoxious, nor to make our imbecility in the use of things the cause of complaint against them. Besides, it is also in other respects most absurd, to investigate on all sides the auxiliaries of friendship, and procure certain friends and associates, as those who will aid and defend us in the difficulties of life, and yet not explore and endeavour to obtain that relief, defence, and assistance which are afforded us by nature, by the laws, and by the Gods, through a wife and children.

With respect to a numerous offspring, it is after a certain manner, according to nature and consentaneous to marriage, that all, or the greatest part of those that are born, should be nurtured. Many, however, appear to be unpersuaded by this admonition, through a cause not very decorous: for they are thus affected through a love of riches, and because they think poverty to be a transcendently great evil. In the first place, therefore, it must be considered, that in procreating children, we not only be-

⁴ *Odyss.* lib. 6, v. 183

get assistants for ourselves, nourishers of our old age, and participants with us of every fortune and every circumstance that may occur in life I say, we do not beget them for ourselves alone, but in many things also for our parents. For the procreation of children is gratifying to them; because, if we should suffer any thing of a calamitous nature prior to their decease, we shall leave our children instead of ourselves, as the support of their old age. But it is a beautiful thing for a grandfather to be conducted by the hands of his grandchildren, and to be considered by them as deserving of every other attention. Hence, in the first place, we shall gratify our own parents, by paying attention to the procreation of children. And, in the next place, we shall cooperate with the prayers and ardent wishes of those that begot us. For they from the first were solicitous about our birth, conceiving that through it there would be a very extended succession of themselves, and that they shall leave behind them children of children, and have to pay attention to our marriage, our procreation, and nurture. Hence, by marrying and begetting children, we shall accomplish, as it were, a part of their prayers; but, by being of a contrary opinion, we shall cut off the object of their deliberate choice. *Moreover, it appears that every one who voluntarily, and without some prohibiting circumstance, avoids marriage, and the procreation of children, accuses his parents of madness, as not having engaged in wedlock with right conceptions of things.* It is easy also to see, that such a one forms an incongruous opinion. For how is it possible that he should not be full of dissension, who finds a pleasure in living, and willingly continues in life as one who was produced into existence in a becoming manner by his parents, and yet conceives that for him to procreate others is one among the number of things which are to be rejected? In the first place, however, as we have before observed, it is requisite to consider, that we do not beget children for our own sakes alone, but for those also through whom we ourselves were begotten; and, in the next place, for the sake of our friends and kindred. For it is gratifying to these to see children which are our offspring, both on account of benevolence and propinquity, and on account of security. For the life of those to whom these pertain, is established as in a port by a thing of this kind, analogously to ships, which, though greatly agitated by the waves of the sea, are firmly secured by many anchors. On this account, the man who is a lover of his kindred, and a lover of his associates, will earnestly desire to marry and procreate children. We are likewise loudly called upon by our country to do so. For we do not beget children so much for ourselves as for our country, procuring a race that may follow us, and supplying the community with our successors. Hence the priest should know that he owes priests to his city; the ruler that he owes rulers; the public orator public orators; and, in short, the citizen that he owes citizens to it. As, therefore, to a choir the perennial continuance of those that compose it is gratifying, and to an army the duration of the soldiers, so to a city is the lastingness of the citizens. If, indeed, a city was a certain system of a short duration, and the life of it was commensurate with the life of man, it would not be in want of succession. But since it is extended to many generations, and if it employs a more fortunate daemon endures for many ages, it is evident that it is not only necessary to direct our attention to the present, but also to the future time, and not despise our natal soil, and leave it desolate, but establish it in good hopes from our posterity.

Food for thought

“ . . . he who condemns marriage, diminishes the glory of true virginity; and he who praises wedlock, does the highest honour to celibacy: for that which is considered as good, on a comparison with evil, may be not eminently good; but that which is better than a blessing of universal estimation, must be supremely excellent; and in this light, we recommend virginity. Matrimony is good; and on this account virginity is marvellous, because it is better than good . . . as much as heaven is better than earth, and angels than men. . . . for the angels . . . neither marry nor are given in marriage . . . ”

— St John Chrysostom⁵



⁵ A Friend to the Sisterhood (nom de plume of William Hayley). *Philosophical, Historical, and Moral Essay on Old Maids*. Vol. II, 3rd ed., 1793, London; ch. ix “On St. Chrysostom and his Panegyric on Virginity,” pp. 265-66. *Note to Students*: For an in-depth look at celibacy vs. marriage, see “Blavatsky on Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy” in our Blavatsky Speaks Series.