
The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love



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Theano

Letter on Marriage and Fidelity

The following letter is attributed to a woman named Theano, a Pythagorean who seems to have lived somewhat before the Christian Era, several centuries later than Pythagoras himself. Theano's letters are not devoted to the topic of love in an abstract, theoretical sense. Instead, they discuss certain practical problems of love, those that women face in married life: for example, what is appropriate behavior for a woman whose husband is unfaithful to her? In such circumstances Theano advises the wife to adhere to woman's unique virtue. The woman's role is to create harmony in the home. Accordingly, women should treat their profligate husbands with justice and moderation, even when they themselves are treated unfairly.

The ideas that the sexes have distinct virtues and that it is the woman's responsibility to maintain domestic tranquility may strike most of us as outmoded and sexist in their implication. It should be noted, however, that Theano's perspective is not one of passive acquiescence to mistreatment. Her admonition to women to be fair and moderate is coupled in the letter with the emphatic point that this is good strategy. A woman, she argues, stands the best chance of getting repentance from an errant husband if she consistently inspires admiration, not resentment.

Theano II

Theano to Nikostrate: Greetings. I hear repeatedly about your husband's madness: he has a courtesan; also that you are jealous of him. My dear, I have known many men with the same malady. It is as if they are hunted down by these women and held fast; as if they have lost their minds. But you are dispirited by night and by day, you are sorely troubled and contrive things against him. Don't *you*, at least, be that way, my dear. For the moral excellence of a wife is not surveillance of her husband but companionable accommodation; it is in the spirit of accommodation to bear his folly.

If he associates with the courtesan with a view towards pleasure, he associates with his wife with a view towards the beneficial. It is beneficial not to compound evils with evils and not to augment folly with folly. Some faults,

dear, are stirred up all the more when they are condemned, but cease when they are passed over in silence, much as they say fire quenches itself if left alone. Besides, though it seems that you wish to escape notice yourself, by condemning him you will take away the veil that covers your own condition.

Then you will manifestly err: You are not convinced that love of one's husband resides in conduct that is noble and good. For this *is* the grace of marital association. Recognize the fact that he goes to the courtesan in order to be frivolous but that he abides with you in order to live a common life; that he loves you on the basis of good judgment, but her on the basis of passion. The moment for this is brief; it almost coincides with its own satisfaction. In a trice it both arises and ceases. The time for a courtesan is of brief duration for any man who is not excessively corrupt. For what is emptier than desire whose benefit of enjoyment is unrighteousness? Eventually he will perceive that he is diminishing his life and slandering his good character.

No one who understands persists in self-chosen harm. Thus, being summoned by his just obligation towards you and perceiving the diminution of his livelihood [he will take notice of you,] unable to bear the outrage of moral condemnation, he will soon repent. My dear, this is how you must live: not defending yourself against courtesans but distinguishing yourself from them by your orderly conduct towards your husband, by your careful attention to the house, by the calm way in which you deal with the servants, and by your tender love for your children. You must not be jealous of that woman (for it is good to extend your emulation only to women who are virtuous); rather, you must make yourself fit for reconciliation. Good character brings regard even from enemies, dear, and esteem is the product of nobility and goodness alone. In this way it is even possible for the power of a woman to surpass that of a man. It is possible for her to grow in his esteem instead of having to serve one who is hostile towards her.

If he has been properly prepared for it by you, he will be all the more ashamed; he will wish to be reconciled sooner and, because he is more warmly attached to you, he will love you more tenderly. Conscious of his injustice towards you, he will perceive your attention to his livelihood and make trial of your affection towards himself. Just as bodily illnesses make their cessations sweeter, so also do differences between friends make their reconciliations more intimate. As for you, do resist the passionate resolutions of your suffering. Because he is not well, he excites you to share in his plight; because he himself misses the mark of decency, he invites you to fail

in decorum; having damaged his own life, he invites you to harm what is beneficial to you. Consequently you will seem to have conspired against him and, in reproving him will appear to reprove yourself.

If you divorce yourself from him and move on, you will change your first husband only to try another and, if he has the same failings, you will resort to yet another (for the lack of a husband is not bearable for young women); or else you will abide alone without any husband like a spinster. Do you intend to be negligent of the house and to destroy your husband? Then you will share the spoils of an anguished life. Do you intend to avenge yourself upon the courtesan? Being on her guard, she will circumvent you; but, if she actively wards you off, a woman who has no tendency to blush is formidable in battle. Is it good to fight with your husband day after day? To what advantage? The battles and reproaches will not stop his licentious behavior, but they will increase the dissension between you by their escalations. What, then? Are you plotting something against him? Don't do it, my dear. Tragedy teaches us to conquer jealousy, encompassing a systematic treatise on the actions by which Medea was led to the commission of outrage. Just as it is necessary to keep one's hands away from a disease of the eyes, so must you separate your pretension from your pain. By patiently enduring you will quench your suffering sooner.

Ovid

from *The Art of Love*

Ovid (43 B.C. - 17 A.D.) lived and wrote in Rome during the reign of Augustus. He was married several times and had a number of serious love affairs, one of which, with a woman named Corinna, he celebrates in his Loves. The tone of his writing is sensuous, playful, even naughty, reflecting the rather unrestrained spirit of a powerful society intent most of all on amusing itself. But following a scandal at the turn of the millennium (2 B.C.) in which the emperor's daughter was caught in an extremely dangerous liaison with the son of Mark Antony (Augustus's old rival), the moral mood of the country changed abruptly. It was at this inopportune moment that Ovid published his Art of Love, a brilliant but intentionally scandalous work which deeply offended the new morality. The book shocked the emperor, and several years later the book was banned and its author exiled. Ovid's continuing fame and importance rests mainly on his vivid bringing to life of the imaginative world of the Greeks, particularly in his Metamorphoses, which had enormous influence not just on subsequent Roman poets and thinkers but on most of the great minds of the Renaissance and the greatest writers of English literature, such as Marlowe, Shakespeare, Milton, and Pope. But The Art of Love too has endured through the ages, perhaps as an exemplar of the quality to which pornography and willful perversion can aspire. Ovid's sense of humor and his keen practical understanding of all too human vanities and temptations has kept him a beacon for writers on love—at least those who also have a sense of humor and a concern for practical as opposed to merely ethereal matters. The following brief excerpt—just a "taste"—is from The Art of Love, Books II and III.

Love is a kind of war, and no assignment for cowards.

Where those banners fly, heroes are always on guard.

Soft, those barracks? They know long marches, terrible weather,

Night and winter and storm, grief and excessive fatigue.

Often the rain pelts down from the drenching cloudbursts of heaven,

Often you lie on the ground, wrapped in a mantle of cold.

Did not Apollo once, in bondage to King Admetus,