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Plutarchus



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Plutarch's Views on Love

by

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Abstract

Plutarch was an innovator concerning the attitude to the woman and to love. In his view, love is almost to be defined as conjugal love. He was a spokesman of reciprocal and egalitarian relations between man and woman. The woman shall receive an education and thus be fully responsible for her way of living and be entitled to demand respect and regard on the part of her husband.

Plutarch's views on love led him to a radical reevaluation of the Platonic concept of Eros. Not pederastic love primarily but conjugal love is the guide to the vision of the Form of the Beautiful.

Plutarch has much to say about love. This is certainly what we would expect to find in a writer so deeply interested in psychology and different kinds of relations between human beings. The vast number of essays and treatises collected in the *Moralia* provide us with a lot of information about Plutarch as a person. Consequently, Plutarch is one of those writers of antiquity, of whose thinking we are in the position to get the most reliable understanding.

It is well known that, in Plutarch's view, love is virtually identical with conjugal love. He regarded marriage almost as a sacred institution, protected and furthered by Aphrodite and Eros. There is thus good reason to begin our study by having a look into his own

experiences of matrimonial love. We shall see that there is clear evidence indicating that Plutarch and his wife, Timoxena, lived in a very happy and harmonious marriage.

One of the best known and most widely read of Plutarch's essays in the *Moralia* is his letter of consolation to his wife. In this short writing, improvised at a moment of depression and sorrow, he openly discloses his tender feelings toward his wife and his affectionate concern for her and their children. We here have a look into a happy family. Husband and wife no doubt lived in a loving relation, and both parents obviously were deeply committed to their children. It is thus no surprise to find in this short text frequent words expressing feelings of this kind. For example, there are four instances of each of two of Plutarch's favourite

words, φιλανθρωπία /φιλάνθρωπος and φιλοστοργία /φιλόστοργος.

Plutarch's letter is part of the literary genre of consolation, and he certainly meets the rhetorical demands of this genre. He writes in his elegant literary style, as always¹, but the context of this letter is more personal and engaged than what is usually the case in works of this kind. He uses topics of the genre in a way of his own so as to express his personal thoughts and affections, and he gives many insights into his home life, so that his letter receives a quite personal character.

Plutarch tells of the circumstances and the situation existing when he writes this letter to his wife. He is on his way home to Chaeronea and takes the opportunity to visit his niece at Tanagra. From her he gets to know that his little daughter, two years old, has died. He then writes the letter and probably sends it in advance to his wife.

He commences his letter by mentioning that he has been told that the funeral has already taken place, and he wishes that it was held in a way that caused his wife least pain, both in the present time and for the future. And he promises that, if she has postponed something while awaiting his decision, this will be done, but he is certain that

she does not desire any excessive or superstitious procedures. By this remark he makes it clear directly at the beginning that he knows the character and thinking of his wife very well, and he strikes the tone of familiarity and intimacy that is to characterize his letter of consolation as a whole.

Plutarch's first commonplace (608 C) is the traditional appeal not to become entirely absorbed in sorrow but try to set a measure to the magnitude of the loss. He even states that, if he finds his wife entirely lost in distress, this will be even more grievous to him than what has happened. After this rather stern statement, however, he immediately adds that he himself is not made of oak or rock, and he emphasizes that they have both been equally committed to bringing up their children at home under their own care. And Plutarch recalls how happy they were when finally, after four sons, a daughter was born to them, and how this made it possible to call her by his wife's name, Timoxena, and he confirms how extremely beloved the little girl was. He also observes the universal fact that our affection for children so young implies a special delight that is quite pure and free from all anger or reproach, and that this involves that we feel a particular bitterness if the child dies.

¹ The text may have been revised afterwards, but the fact that the quotations are very few as compared with the abundance found, for example, in *Consolatio ad Apollonium* indicates that it has not.

After this general psychological observation Plutarch gives a few examples of the lovable character of the child. He writes (608 C-D): “She had a surprising natural gift of mildness and good temper, and her way of responding to friendship and bestowing favours gave us pleasure while it afforded an insight into her kind character.” He then tells of how the child used to invite the nurse to offer her breast and feed with it not only other infants, but even the inanimate objects and playthings she took pleasure in, dispensing in her kindness from her bounties and sharing her greatest pleasures with whatever gave her delight.

In this short characterization of the child Plutarch uses his favourite concept *φιλανθρωπία* /*φιλόανθρωπον* twice, and *φιλόστοργον* once, thus attributing to her one of the ethic qualities he held in the highest esteem. The details of his description reveal his genuine interest in the character of the child and his deep affection for her. It is certainly significant of his own character that he mentions her ethic qualities in the first place. A bit further on (608 E) he reminds his wife of how the child was the most delightful thing in the world (*πάντων ἡδιστον*) to embrace, to look at, and to listen to, and he exhorts his wife to preserve these impressions in her memory and not allow the sorrow to prevail over them.

Plutarch praises (608 F) his wife's strength of mind, and tells her that the messengers have reported to him that they were amazed as they noticed that she had not put on mourning dress and did not admit crying women of the neighbourhood to be present and make the burial an uncomely ill-usage, nor a sumptuous display. Instead she arranged everything with decorum and in silence, in the company of the nearest kin. Plutarch remarks that it was not a surprise to him that, in the hour of sadness, she preserved her blameless simplicity of manner, seeing that she had always regarded extravagance as useless even for amusements.

Plutarch (609 D) also reminds of how she lost her eldest child² and later was again hit by sorrow, when the fair Charon left them. At that time too Timoxena preserved her self-control and kept her household in order, and yet she had nursed him at her own breast and even submitted herself to surgery when her nipple was bruised. “Such conduct was noble”, says Plutarch (609 E), “and it showed true mother love. But we observe”, he continues, “that most mothers, after their infants have been cleansed and prettied up by other women, receive them in their arms like pets; and then, at their death, they give themselves up to an unwarranted and ungrateful grief, and

² Plutarch nowhere calls this child by name. This indicates that it died early, possibly before it received a name.

make their mourning wild, frenzied, and difficult to calm.”

Plutarch further (611 C) admonishes his wife not to lament that the little girl has departed unmarried and childless, seeing that she has thus escaped much concern and misery. He writes (611 D): “Your Timoxena has been deprived of little, for what she knew was little, and her pleasure was in little things; and as for those things of which she had acquired no perception, how could she be said to be deprived of them?”

These arguments and many more are commonplace topics that can be found in other writings of similar kind, but in this consolation there is a personal and affectionate and sometimes intimate tone throughout. Moreover, Plutarch’s praise of his wife’s steadfast self-control and the simplicity of her way of life, though being a topic, is of special interest because it shows a profound affinity in thinking and feeling of Plutarch and his wife. He himself shared the same ideals and attitudes to life. We may conclude that this spiritual affinity was a result of common interests in philosophical questions, especially themes of ethics and religion. Plutarch was convinced that women should receive an education³ and participate with the men in the study of philosophy and literature. We know that both girls and young men were studying at his school in Chaeronea. One piece of

evidence to show this fact is found at the beginning of his essay entitled *Coniugalium praecepta*, which he directs to the newly married pair, Eurydice and Pollianus, who had both been studying philosophy, no doubt under his guidance.

Plutarch writes (138 B-C): “Of the many admirable themes contained in philosophy, that which deals with marriage deserves no less serious attention than any other, for by means of it philosophy weaves a spell over those who are entering together into a lifelong partnership and renders them amiable toward each other.” He expressly declares (138 C) that he is sending this essay as a gift for both to possess in common, and he adds that he prays to the Muses that they may lend their co-operation to Aphrodite, and that they may feel it no more fitting for them to provide a lyre or a lute well attuned than to provide that the harmony which concerns marriage and the household shall be well attuned through reason, concord, and philosophy.

It seems that in giving such prominence to the study of philosophy as a basis for a happy married life, Plutarch wishes to offer a new approach to the question how to establish a lasting relation of love and co-operation of husband and wife. One thing above all is to be noticed: The woman ought to partake of knowledge as well as the man, and she is equally capable of apprehending

³ Evidence is, e.g., the lost essay entitled *That the woman should also get an education*.

and internalizing the wisdom contained in philosophy. Plutarch, as maintaining a basically Platonist outlook, was convinced that knowledge of righteous behaviour regularly leads to good conduct, and that lasting experience in morally righteous acting establishes an optimal ethic character, a moral virtue, in the individual. In Plutarch's view such an internalized, refined ethos is a strong support of conjugal love, presupposed that both parties have acquired it. It was therefore natural for Plutarch to regard education as in principle equally important for women as for men. This idea of the basically equal status of husband and wife in this respect had never been maintained so clearly before Plutarch. He regards the wife as a fully responsible part in the development of a solid and well-established loving relation in the marriage. This means, then, that both parties alike are obliged to take pains to fulfill the demands of moral virtue. Plutarch is fully aware that assigning equal responsibility to the wife involves increased demands on the husband to show respect for her⁴.

Plutarch's conception of ethics implies a strong demand for actualization of the ethic principles. He maintains that the virtue of the individual ought to manifest itself in activity, in the daily life. Through such repeated actualization the emotional part of the soul is trained and conveyed a habitual, internalized ability of following the

guidance of reason. Plutarch dedicated a particular essay, *De virtute morali*, to his theory, and in a sequel to it entitled *De profectibus in virtute*, he describes how one can observe one's own steps of progress in virtue.

It is probably on the basis of this thinking that Plutarch, at the beginning of *Coni. praec.* (138 E-F), warns the newly married to be on their guard against clashes especially in the beginning of their married life. Their marriage is like such household vessels as are made of sections joined together; these are easily pulled apart by any fortuitous cause, but after a time, when their joints have become set, they can hardly be separated even by fire or steel.

Plutarch continues with another image: Just as fire catches readily in chaff, fibre or hair, but goes out rather quickly, unless it gets hold of some other thing that can retain it and feed it, so also the keen love between newly married people, which blazes up fiercely as the result of physical attractiveness, must not be regarded as enduring or constant before it attains a state of vitality, by being settled in the character, in the ethos of the young pair, and gains a hold on their rational faculties.

From this admonition it becomes clear what Plutarch means by love in the proper sense of the word: The strong erotic mutual attraction prevailing at the

⁴ See *Coni. praec.* 140 B, 142 B-C, 144 F.

beginning is not in itself true love. The erotic emotion must be ennobled and stabilized through the establishment of a gradually more and more steadfast combination with reason. After this process has taken place, the loving pair, having both been trained in holding each other in respect and esteem, will live together in a virtually unbreakable harmony.

The evidence we found in the letter of consolation is itself sufficient to show that Plutarch and Timoxena themselves lived in such a happy marriage, loving one another and their children. In other writings, particularly the *Table talks*, there are frequent indications that this family also cherished close relations to relatives and friends and neighbours. Their home was obviously distinguished by great hospitality and generosity. The family was presumably quite wealthy. This can be seen in numerous passages in the *Moralia*. To take one example, there is an indication at *Coni. praec.* 139 E-F where Plutarch emphasizes that wealth is not in itself sufficient for a happy life nor is it capable of bringing about true love in a marriage. Plutarch remarks that a rich wife is no advantage to a man unless she makes her way of living similar to his own and brings her character in accord with his. A wife ought not, then, to rely on her dowry or birth or beauty, but on qualities by which she gains the greatest hold on her husband, namely conversation, character, and comradeship (141 A). A wife becomes irresistible, he says, if she makes everything, dowry, birth and

charms, to be inherent in herself. For it is by character and virtue that she succeeds in winning her husband's love (141 B-C).

Plutarch establishes (140 E-F) that the economic resources of a married couple should be common property. It is a lovely thing for a wife, he says, to sympathize with the concerns of her husband, and the husband with those of his wife. They should be intertwined, like ropes, and so get strength from each other. For Nature unites us, he says, through the commingling of our bodies, in order that, by blending together a portion derived from each of us, the offspring may be common to both. Such a copartnership even in property is especially befitting married people. They should pour all their resources into a common fund, and combine them, and each should not regard one part as his own and another part as the other's. Plutarch continues (142 F-143 A): The marriage of a couple in love with each other is an intimate union. As the mixing of liquids extends throughout their entire content, so also in the case of married people there ought to be a mutual amalgamation of their bodies, properties, friends, and relations.

These descriptions give an impression of practically total equality of the married couple. The fact that Plutarch calls marriage a union of a pair in love with each other indicates that he does not regard marriage as a formal alliance arranged by the parents of two families, but rather as a completion intended and

accomplished by the young people themselves. It appears that Plutarch considers this course the ideal one. In his view, the prospects of a happy development of the union are better if the young people are already in love with each other from the beginning, before the wedding. Such a spontaneous and optional connection initiated by the young people themselves presupposes the free choice by both parties alike. Shall we think, then, that in Plutarch's time young girls were generally free to choose their sweethearts themselves? Certainly not, but it no doubt sometimes occurred. There were certainly others than Plutarch who supported it. There is evidence, in the first place in the romance, which flourished in the time of the second sophistic, that there was a great interest in, and a positive attitude to, romantic stories of erotic passion between young unmarried people.

Now, if actually the young woman could herself—at least in some cases—decide whom she wanted to marry, this does not, of course, mean that she was to live on equal terms with her husband in all respects. In the Greek society, as in every other—in antiquity as in modern times—, there existed traditional norms and conventions designed for the conduct of women, while the men had to follow their special rules. The existence of such a difference is a banal and natural fact.

Thus, Plutarch describes some restrictions and differences between husband and wife as regards formal standards and personal freedom. As to the amalgamation of the property, Plutarch once more (140 F) compares with the mixing of liquids, namely wine and water. This mixture is called 'wine', although the larger of the component parts is water. Similarly, the common property of married people should be said to belong to the husband, even in case the wife contributes the larger share. This is a typical example of an arrangement due to convention, and should not be regarded as evidence of inequality.

In regard to personal freedom of the wife, Plutarch offers numerous examples of adherence to traditional views and norms: The wife ought to be subordinated to her husband. He compares (142 E) their relation with that of soul and body: The man ought to exercise control over the woman, not as the owner has control over his property, but as the soul controls the body. Plutarch points out that as the soul's control over the body implies attention and care, so the husband should govern his wife, and at the same time delight and gratify her.

Plutarch (139 C) also uses an illustrative image taken from music: Whenever two notes are sounded in accord the lower one is predominating;⁵ and in like manner every activity in a virtuous household is carried on by both

⁵ Cf. *Quaest. conv.* IX 9.741 B, with comm. by S.-T. TEODORSSON.

parties in agreement, but discloses the husband's leadership and preferences.

A wife ought to adjust herself to her husband in practically all respects. Plutarch (139 F) even bothers to make the banal claim that she should put her state of mood in accord with her husband's, and not put on a gloomy face when he is sportive and merry, and again not be cheerful and mirthful, when he is serious. He says nothing about how the husband should react to the moods of his wife.

More far-reaching are the claims he makes (140 C-D) when he warns that a wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends in common with him. And he adds that the gods are the first and most important friends. It is therefore becoming for a wife to worship only the gods that her husband believes in, and to keep the front door closed to all queer rituals and foreign superstitions.

It is clear from a further passage (145 B-D) that Plutarch is concerned about the strong contemporary tendency toward superstition and beliefs in magic charms and fantastic doctrines. He thus admonishes that the husband who possesses sufficient knowledge of philosophy should impart it to his wife and discuss it with her, and make the most valuable philosophic doctrines her favourite and familiar themes. Then she will laugh at the ignorance and stupidity of those women who believe in false ideas.

Plutarch preserves, basically, the traditional attitude towards women; they were regarded as emotional and easily influenced and thus in need of guidance. This means that the husband has a great responsibility for the superintendence of his wife. Plutarch repeatedly lays stress upon that. He ought to serve as a model for her. For example, Plutarch affirms (140 C) that a man fond of his personal appearance makes his wife altogether paint and powder; and a man fond of pleasure makes her meretricious and licentious, while a husband who loves what is good and honourable makes his wife self-controlled and well-behaved.

The fact that Plutarch regarded the responsibility of education and guidance as lying with the husband does not mean that he did not consider both parties responsible for the development of their married life. As we have already observed, he admonishes the newly married that they should be especially on their guard against disagreements and clashes during the initial stage of the marriage. This advice implies that he presupposes a basically equal ability on the part of the wife from the beginning to be self-controlled and prudent.

This apparent inconsistency of Plutarch's views on the nature of women is probably due to a discrepancy between his basically conservative and conventional attitude on the one hand, internalized through standard education and study of philosophy,

especially that of the Platonist and Peripatetic tradition, and, on the other hand, a modified, innovative view, perhaps influenced by Stoic and Cynic thinking, represented by, for example, Musonius or Dio Chrysostomus, who in his *Chrysaïs* represents an intellectual woman who displays a quite independent way of thinking and arguing, not at all subordinating herself to the men. Plutarch appears as a man who was willing to consider and critically examine all existing doctrines and opinions, but his sober and cautious personality prevented him from taking any radically different positions from the established ones, either in philosophy or society. However, the modifications of the traditional views about the woman displayed by Plutarch are considerable indeed. We shall look at some further examples of that.

One is found in *Coni. praec.* 144 A-B where Plutarch expresses in a very plain manner his demands for faithfulness, of man and wife alike, in marriage. He mentions that the Athenians commemorate and observe three sacred mythic ploughings. "But the most sacred of all ploughings", he continues, "is the marital ploughing and sowing for the procreation of children. Therefore man and wife ought especially to indulge in this with circumspection, keeping themselves pure from all unholy and unlawful intercourse with others, and not sowing seed from which they are unwilling to

have any offspring, and from which, if any issue does result, they are ashamed of it, and try to conceal it."

As an example of discord in a family due to such acts Plutarch adduces the known case of Gorgias, who had a love-affair with the maid-servant, which caused jealousy on the part of his wife.

Plutarch then (144 C-D) illustrates his thesis: If it happened that women, similarly to what is said about cats, were excited to frenzy by the odour of perfumes, it would be a dreadful thing for their husbands not to abstain from perfume, but for the sake of their own brief pleasure to permit their wives to suffer in this way. Now, inasmuch as women are affected in this way, not by their husbands' using perfume, but by their having connection with other women, it is unfair to pain and disturb them so much for the sake of such a trivial pleasure.

Plutarch thus expressly condemns extra-marital connections. Now the question arises: How does he look upon the convivial customs? It appears that he, true to his habit of mind, takes an intermediate position between extreme opinions and actions, namely on the one hand the opinion that the wives might be present revelling together with the men not only at the dinner-party proper (δείπνον) but also at the drinking-party (συμπόσιον / πότης), a practice that occurred at Roman banquets⁶, and on the other hand

⁶ E.g., at the *Cena Trimalchionis*.

that they were not allowed to be present at all in either part of the banquet.

Plutarch criticizes (140 A-B) those who do not like to see their wives eat in their company and thus are teaching them to stuff themselves when alone. And he continues: "Those who are not cheerful in the company of their wives, nor join them in sportiveness and laughter, are thus teaching them to seek their own pleasures apart from their husbands."

Having stated so much, however, Plutarch illustrates his opinion of how the convivial customs should be modeled. He takes as an example the practice prevailing at the Persian court⁷. There the wives sit together with their husbands and eat with them. But then, when the men want to be merry and drink wine, they send their wives away and send for their music-girls and concubines. Plutarch approves of this practice, with a certain reservation, though. He commends it especially to those men who are by nature incontinent and dissolute in regard to pleasures. If such a man commits some slip with a paramour or a maid-servant, his wife should not be indignant or angry, but she will reason that he out of respect for her shares his licentiousness and wantonness with another woman.

Several questions present themselves: What does it mean that Plutarch appears to hold so divergent opinions,

even in the same essay? How rigorous is his condemnation of extra-marital connections? What kind of intercourse with paramours and maid-servants at drinking-parties was acceptable in Plutarch's eyes? Did he allow for greater lasciviousness on the part of some participants of drinking-parties than on that of others?

In order to give an answer to these questions we will have to investigate and evaluate what Plutarch says about love and pleasure in general and what attitude he had to these matters. It appears that here as always he takes an intermediate position between extremes. On the basis of his mainly Platonist outlook he is aware of the fact that erotic desire is a sort of manic passion that ought to be kept in control by reason. In his pedagogical essay with the title *How to study poetry* he warns (31 B-C) the young man to be cautious and keep his passions within limits and not allow his propensities to get the best of him. Anyone who is quick-tempered, he says, must be on his guard against possible grounds for anger and prevent them by reason long beforehand. Similarly, a young man who is fond of wine should be on his guard against drunkenness, and he that is by nature amorous ought to be cautious with regard to love. In the essay called *How to listen to lectures* Plutarch admonishes (43 B) the young to get rid of

⁷ See also *Quaest. conv.* I 1.613 A.

self-opinion and pretention, love-affairs and nonsense talk, and instead acquire an ennobled character by the study of philosophy. Philosophy, he says (47 C), inspires a passionate love for virtue.

We observe that these warnings and admonitions are directed against excesses and bad practices, not against love and pleasure as such. This he expressly states in a passage in *De virtute morali* 451 E where he warns not downright to condemn certain psychic reactions that are good and useful, on the ground that they are sometimes found to have a bad side. For example, he continues, those who discard love entirely, because love may bring madness, are wrong, just as those are wrong who blame commerce because it may beget avarice.

Any trait of asceticism is alien to Plutarch. What he condemns is only the bad use of good things, not the things themselves. The leading principle and lodestar for a good conduct and avoidance of exaggerations is reason. In his famous dialogue entitled *Dinner of the seven wise men*, 158 E Cleodorus states that anything distant from reason is bad and should be avoided. He says: "To cling to every form of pleasure is utterly irrational, but to avoid every form of pleasure is utterly insensate."

Plutarch's attitude to literature clearly illustrates his position. While Plato banned the reading of the poets, Plutarch recommends it, but with the reservation that what one reads should be edifying. Consequently, he rejects

Aristophanes, and praises Menander. In *Table talks* VII 8, where the theme under discussion is what kinds of entertainment are most appropriate at the banquet, Plutarch's friend Diogenianus condemns (711 F-712 D) the Old Comedy as being entirely unsuitable as entertainment for men who are drinking. Its language is shockingly indecent and overloaded with words and phrases that are improper and obscene. In contrast, Menander is the ideal entertainer. He is so completely a part of the *συμπόσιον*, he says, that we could even do without wine more easily than without Menander. His style is pleasant and unadorned, and even the erotic element in Menander is appropriate for men who after their wine will soon be leaving to repose with their wives. For in all these plays, Diogenianus observes, there is no one enamoured of a boy. Moreover, when virgins are seduced, the play usually ends with a marriage. And affairs with casual women, if these are shameless, are cut short by some chastening experience or repentance on the young man's part. It is only natural, then, he says, that Menander's polished charm exercises a reshaping influence on us over the wine-cups and helps to raise morals to a higher standard of fairness and kindness.

In his reply (712 E) Plutarch repudiates certain mimes as being improper for drinking-parties, especially farces which are so packed with scurrilous and low comedy that they should not even be seen by slaves if they have prudent masters. But vulgar people, even when women

and children are present, enjoy such performances as are more disruptive of an orderly mind than any intoxication.

Plutarch is speaking here of the large contemporary interest in licentious, pornographic entertainment which in his time had invaded the pantomime, mainly due to Roman influence⁸.

In *Table talks* IX 14, where the Muses are the subject of discussion, Plutarch offers an interpretation of his own of the action of Erato, the Muse of poetry and dance, who was thought to inspire erotic passion. In Plutarch's conception the opposite is true. When our sexual urgencies enjoy the presence of Erato, he says (746 EF), as she possesses the power of rational, apposite persuasion, she eliminates and extinguishes the mad, frantic element in the pleasure, which then reaches a conclusion in friendliness and trust (εἰς φιλίαν καὶ πίστιν), not rape and debauchery.

The evidence is unambiguous. There can be no doubt that Plutarch was firmly opposed to debauchery and licentiousness. He was certainly against such lascivious intercourse with mistresses as was of old part of the tradition of the Greek συμπόσιον. Plutarch was a devoted spokesman and promotor of the refined sort of symposium where exchange of thoughts and ideas, brilliant

speech and kindly company with friends and relatives are essential parts and more important than the wine itself, and of course more important than any kind of entertainment. The restrictions which we find that Plutarch sets to the use of entertainment is part of his demand for the ennobled, intellectualized form of συμπόσιον which he insistently argues in favour of throughout the *Table talks*. The concession he makes especially to those men who are by nature incontinent and dissolute in regard to pleasure to commit some slip with a paramour or a maid-servant is probably to be looked upon as a restricted concession to tradition and custom and not as a general acceptance of that behaviour as proper or even desirable⁹.

It is naturally not possible to treat of Plutarch's views on love in anything like an adequate way without including in the study his great and admirable *Dialogue on love*, the *Amatorius*. This veritable *tour de force* resembles a drama, as Plutarch himself notes at the beginning (749 A). The elaborated form indicates that he attached great importance to the theme, the conflict between the adherents and the opponents of pederasty.

The story is narrated by Plutarch's son, Autobulus. He tells us that the debate took place on Helicon, where the

⁸ See L. FRIEDLÄNDER, *Darstellungen*, p. 115; M. WISTRAND, *Entertainment*, pp. 30-40.

⁹ L. GOESSLER, *Plutarchs Gedanken*, pp. 63-64, is certainly right in concluding that it cannot be doubted that at heart Plutarch condemned unfaithfulness.

people of Thespieae were celebrating the Erotidia. His parents who were newly married, were also present. Autobulus mentions that his father has told him of the event many times.

One character of the drama is the young ephebe Bacchon who was called The Handsome (ὁ καλός). There was a common affection for him among the elderly men. Now, there was a woman of Thespieae, Ismenodora (749 D), about 30 years of age and conspicuous for her wealth and breeding and life of decorum. She had been a widow for some time without a word of censure. Bacchon was the son of a woman who was a friend of hers. Ismenodora was engaged in promoting a marriage between him and a girl related to herself. After some time, however, she fell in love with him herself.

Plutarch makes a point of observing that her intentions were entirely honourable: She desired to marry him and be his companion for life. The prospect caused a heated debate among the young man's admirers and other men present. Plutarch and his friends are chosen arbiters, and then the argumentation starts (750 A). A certain Protogenes of Tarsus appears as the principal opponent to the marriage and a vehement defender of pederastic love. On the opposite side we find a young man named Daphnaeus who was present together with his fiancée, Lysandra.

Protogenes denies that love can exist between a man and a woman. Intercourse with a woman is mere base

pleasure and unworthy of a free man (751 B); it is only necessary for producing children (750 C). He describes Eros in Platonist terms by stating that this god attaches himself to a young and talented soul and through friendship brings it to a state of virtue, while the appetite for women never brings about anything but an accrual of pleasure (750 D). Protogenes implicitly maintains (751 B) that friendship, which is a beautiful and courteous relationship, cannot exist between a man and a woman.

At this moment Daphnaeus cuts him short and points out that if a union with males contrary to nature does not destroy or curtail a lover's tenderness, then it is reasonable to assume that the love between men and women, being normal and natural, will be conducive to friendship (751 C-D). And Daphnaeus frankly states (752 A) that boy-love only pretends friendship and virtue as a pretext because it is ashamed and afraid.

Daphnaeus' speech caused anger and indignation against him. Protogenes condemns the relation between Bacchon and Ismenodora especially because she openly declares her love. "In this case", he says (753 B), "a man could only take to his heels in utter disgust, let alone accepting and founding a marriage on such intemperance".

Plutarch, who has been listening to the dispute and has only made short comments, now openly sides with Daphnaeus and the other supporters of conjugal love. "We neither deny", he says, "that we are

devotees of conjugal love, nor do we try to escape from our position". And he confutes all the charges brought against Ismenodora. Her age is no problem; she has no grey hairs as some of the gentlemen who frequent the company of Bacchon (754 B-C).

At this point of the conversation a messenger suddenly arrives galloping up from the city in the highest speed bringing the astonishing message that Ismenodora has abducted her sweetheart Bacchon. One of the pederasts, Pisias, jumps up and shouts (755 B): "Good heavens! What end will there be to the licence that is subverting our town and reducing self-government to anarchy? The very laws of Nature are transgressed when women take over the power. Our city is by now completely emasculated!"

Then he rushed off together with Protogenes and the other pederasts, leaving the opponent group alone. Among them there was no strong reaction at all to the issue. Incidentally, what had happened in reality was that Ismenodora had summoned a couple of men who were sympathetic with her passion, and as Bacchon passed along in the street she ordered them to snatch him away into her house. There the women put a wedding garment on him and prepared him for the marriage.

Plutarch makes it entirely clear that he and his friends received the report of this event with great ease. They obviously looked upon it with a sense of humour and were in agreement on how

to explain it, namely simply as a good example of the force of Eros. One of them, Anthemion, says (755 C): "Such a bold stroke is certainly a strong action. It shows the hand of a woman very much in love."

In the peaceful state of things prevailing after the pederasts have rushed off the discussion among the friends of conjugal love continues. Now, in the absence of aggressive opponents, the company enjoys an agreeable conversation in which various aspects on the nature of love are brought forward. The reasoning is basically Platonic, but the Eros discussed here is conjugal love. In his long concluding speech Plutarch uses a Platonic vocabulary throughout in his description of the nature and function of Eros. He is the soul's divine, chaste physician, saviour and guide. Eros comes to the soul through the medium of bodily forms; he is the divine conductor to the truth. Eros conducts the soul to the Plain of Truth, where Beauty, concentrated and genuine, has her home (764 F-765 A). Plutarch expressly broadens Plato's narrow scope as regards the use of a bodily medium by Eros in helping the soul to attain the realm of the Forms. He says (766 E): "And those beautiful and sacred passions which we call recollections of the divine, the true, the Olympian beauty of the other world, by which the soul is made winged - why should they not spring from maidens and women, as well as from boys and youths, whenever

a pure and disciplined character shines through from within a beautiful and charming outward shape?"

What Plutarch does here is no less than propounding a new conception of the nature of Eros and its relation to the Form of the Beautiful: not pederastic but conjugal love - this seems to be what Plutarch actually suggests - is the best way to the vision of this Form and thus to the knowledge of the realm of Forms as a whole. This marked deviation from the stand-point of Plato makes Plutarch appear as a rather original thinker¹⁰. There is good reason to assume that this radical revaluation was due to this own positive experience of conjugal love¹¹.

In his description of the action of Eros Plutarch attaches greater importance than Plato to friendship. Plutarch regards friendship as a profound and lasting emotion that develops through continuous influence from Eros. In Plutarch's view such a well-established relation of friendship is the result of conjugal love specifically. He says (769 A): "In the case of lawful wives, physical union is the beginning of friendship, a sharing, as it were, in great mysteries. Pleasure is short; but the respect and

kindness and mutual affection and loyalty that daily springs from it verify the opinion of the Delphians when they call Aphrodite 'Harmony'."

To sum up this investigation of Plutarch's views on love, we may observe that in these matters, as always, he takes a well-balanced position, carefully avoiding anything that might be called extreme or radical - except precisely his new interpretation of the nature of Eros. Plutarch marks a distinct difference as against Plato in his conception of Love; it is not a one-way communication lover-beloved but a mutual relation and interplay between two parts that are on an equal footing with each other. Both parts are equally much contributing to the establishment, further development, and continued permanence of the friendly interrelation (φιλιανθρωπία, φιλοστοργία) of the two parts.

Plutarch maintains his view that such an interrelation is most likely to develop successfully in married life. We observe, however, that he nowhere condemns homosexual love. In the *Table talks* there are many questions that touch upon these things, and in the *Amatorius* he and his friends are

¹⁰ F.E. BRENK, "Plutarch's *Erotikos*", p. 457 argues that the real originality of *Erotikos* "consists not so much in the aspect of reciprocal egalitarian love, as the incorporation of this type of love into the Platonic goal of the vision of the Beautiful, and a new concept of what the Form of the Beautiful is."

¹¹ Perhaps the case of Plutarch himself can be looked upon as parallel to that of R. Flacelière who was probably inspired by his outstanding love for his own wife to regard Plutarch as a pioneer of feminism in antiquity; see BRENK, *o. c.*, pp. 458-459, with references.

amused when listening to the furious attack by Protogenes on conjugal love. For Plutarch to utter a similar denunciation directed at homosexual love would be inconceivable and totally incompatible with his tolerant character.

As regards his attitude to women, opinions are widely divided among the commentators. Different scholars have arrived at quite opposite positions. Flacelière¹² regarded Plutarch nearly as a founder of feminism in antiquity, while Le Corsu, Sissa, and other scholarly women¹³ have lately laid stress upon the fact that his general outlook is traditional and conservative. They underline that this is also true as regards his attitude to women and his opinions about the relations between men and women. As we have seen above, Plutarch certainly preserves much of the traditional way of thinking, which naturally also affects his views on these questions. But his innovative thinking

in this field is much more conspicuous, and his general sense of humanity (φιλανθρωπία) is decisive of the position he takes. Unfortunately, however, in the treatises of these scholars the approach to Plutarch is negatively biased to a large extent. One may even hit upon some grotesquely wrong and unfair judgements, as, for example, the statement that Plutarch maintained a contemptuous attitude to women¹⁴.

I believe I have demonstrated in this short study that such a judgement is diametrically opposite to the truth. We must beware of adopting an unhistorical approach and expect Plutarch to deviate radically from contemporary attitudes and opinions, especially considered that he was a basically conservative and cautious personality. In fact, Plutarch appears in his writings as the main advocate in his time for the human rights and dignity of the woman¹⁵. It

¹² R. FLACELIÈRE, *Le féminisme*; ID., *L'Amour en Grèce*; and his introduction to *Amatorius*.

¹³ F. LE CORSU, *Plutarque et les femmes*; P. SCHMITT PANTEL, "Introduction"; G. SISSA, "Philosophie du genre"; K. BLOMQUIST, "From Olympias to Aretaphila".

¹⁴ See K. BLOMQUIST, *o.c.*, p. 74 citing LE CORSU, *o.c.*, p. 274. K. BLOMQUIST, *o.c.*, p. 89 rightly takes a moderate position in establishing that "it is hardly constructive to define our philosopher in terms as blunt as 'feminist' or 'misogynist'".

¹⁵ A similar conclusion was reached in 1992 by R. M. AGUILAR in her valuable study "La mujer, el amor y el matrimonio"; and in a recent comprehensive and substantial study, A. NIKOLAIDIS, "Plutarch on women and marriage", p. 27 rightly censures the distortion of the historical realities that is committed by many feminist scholars "by retrojecting - perhaps unwittingly -", he kindly admits, "conditions and understandings of our era to an ancient culture more than two millennia back". NIKOLAIDIS (p. 87), citing M.R. LEFKOWITZ in his foreword of E. CANTARELLA, *Pandora's Daughters*, asks: "Can we 'really blame [Plutarch] for not being able to imagine a system in which

was certainly quite natural for him to take this position. It is true that in Plutarch's time there existed tendencies toward a higher estimation of the woman and the assignment of a higher degree of equality to her¹⁶. Plutarch's thorough knowledge of the Roman society and his study of the position of the Roman *matrona* during the Republican period may have influenced him to a considerable extent¹⁷, but the great respect and appreciation of the woman that he shows no doubt derived its origin mainly from his own genuinely human character, from his own typical and ideal ethic quality, his *philanthropia*¹⁸.

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women could be completely independent'?" And he adds: "The system which he failed to anticipate came to pass almost two millennia after his death in a fraction of the world's societies."

¹⁶ See, for example, Musonius, Dio Chrysostomus, *Chrysaïs*, and others. FLACELIÈRE, "Rome et ses empereurs", p. 47 emphasizes the radical opinions of Musonius concerning the position of the woman.

¹⁷ R. AGUILAR, *o.c.*, p. 323, would reduce the part played by Roman influence. She points out that at Plutarch's time there was a crisis in the traditional Roman institution of family. The Roman wife was no more like the *matrona* of the Republican epoch. The marriage was in a stage of decomposition in Rome, and this tendency may be supposed to be propagating even in Greece. R. Aguilar rightly suggests that contemporary Stoic thinking was more decisive for Plutarch's concern for the institution of marriage than Roman customs.

¹⁸ L. GOESSLER, *Plutarchs Gedanken*, p. 143 expressly gives Plutarch credit for having himself arrived at his innovative conception of love and the new attitude to marriage.

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