

THOMAS MORE AND THEOPHRASTUS --  
AN IDEA PUT TO WORK.

Raphael Hythloday, a « Latin scholar but most learned in Greek » shows himself receptive heir to the ancient and medieval tradition of philosophic misogamy when he describes Utopian pre-marital practice as follows :

In choosing mates, they seriously and strictly espouse a custom which seemed to us very foolish and extremely ridiculous. The woman, whether maiden or widow, is shown naked to the suitor by a worthy and respectable matron, and similarly the suitor is presented naked before the maiden by a discreet man. We laughed at this custom and condemned it as foolish. They, on the other hand, marvelled at the remarkable folly of all other nations. In buying a colt, where there is question of only a little money, persons are so cautious that though it is almost bare they will not buy until they have taken off the saddle and removed all the trappings for fear some sore lies concealed under these coverings. Yet in the choice of a wife, an action which will cause either pleasure or disgust to follow them the rest of their lives, they are so careless that, while the rest of her body is covered with clothes, they estimate the value of the whole woman from hardly a single handbreadth of her, only the face being visible, and clasp her to themselves not without great danger of their agreeing ill together if something afterwards gives them offence.

All men are not so wise as to regard only the character of the woman, and even in the marriages of wise men bodily attractions also are no small enhancement to the virtues of the mind. Certainly such foul deformity may be hidden beneath these coverings that it may quite alienate a man's mind from his wife when bodily separation is no longer lawful. If such a deformity arises by chance after the marriage has been contracted, each person must bear his own fate, but beforehand the laws ought to protect him from being entrapped by guile. <sup>1</sup>.

The learned editors of the Yale *Utopia* comment on the passage : « The Utopians' method of open-eyed selection owes something, but not everything, to several sources » : scantily clothed or nude female gymnasts (*Lycurgus, Republic*), sportive dances in the near-nude

(*Laws*) and, finally, the ceremonial unveiling of girls by the Taxilli (*Dign. Matrimon*)<sup>2</sup>.

While all of these sources may have contributed to the genesis of the passage, the topos, however, belongs to the tradition of philosophic misogamy, for the lack of opportunity for open-eyed selection is one of the standard dissuasive arguments against marriage throughout the Middle Ages. The topos first occurs as a dissuasive reason against marriage in Theophrastus' *Aureolus liber de nuptiis* as quoted by Saint Jerome in *Adversus Jovinianum* :

Notice also, that in the case of a wife there is no careful selection ; you must take her as you find her. Is she is bad tempered, or foolish, or if she has a blemish or is proud or has bad breath, whatever her fault may be -- all this we only discover after the marriage. A horse, an ass, cattle, a dog, even slaves of very small worth, clothes, cauldrons, wooden benches, goblets, and earthenware pitchers are first tried and then bought ; a wife is the only thing that is not shown, for fear she may be found deficient before she is taken in marriage.<sup>3</sup>

The Theophrastus fragment recurs verbatim in Abélard's *Theologia Christiana* (chapter II), John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* (chapter VII), Hugo of Folietto's *Liber de nuptiis* (chapter I), just to name a few, and it is cited by Walter Map, Jean de Meung and Chaucer's Wife of Bath as an authoritative text on marriage<sup>4</sup>.

In fact, both Jean de Meung's Jaloux and Chaucer's Dame Alice elaborate on Theophrastus' topos of marital selection. After a regretful admission that he should have listened to Theophrastus and not married Jaloux says :

Most inconsistent is the wont of men  
When they would marry ; often I'm amazed  
That such a risky custom they should use.  
Whence comes their foolishness I do not know,  
Unless from madness or insanity.  
I never see a man who buys a mare  
Act so unwisely as to close the deal  
Without observing her unblanketed.  
If she is covered, he will strip her bare  
That he may see her parts and try her out.  
But one will take a wife without such test,  
All unaware of solace or regret.

For better or for worse, without a chance  
Of finding faults in her, provided that  
She no displeasure give before they're wed.  
But when the knot is tied, her spite appears ;  
Then first does she reveal the vice she has ;  
Then first the fool perceives her evil tricks  
When late repentance will avail him not<sup>5</sup>.

Similarly, the Wife of Bath comments in her Prologue quoting herself quoting her old husbands :

What eyleth swich an old man for to chide ?  
Thow seyst we wyves wol oure vices hide  
Til we be fast, and thanne we wol hem shewe --  
Wel may that be a proverbe of a shrewe !  
Thou seist that oxen, asses, hors, and houndes,  
They been assayed at diverse stoundes ;  
Bacyns, lavours, er that men hem bye,  
Spoones and stooles, and al swich housbondrye,  
And so been pottes, clothes, and array ;  
But folk of wyves maken noon assay  
Til they be wedded ; - olde dotard shrewe !  
And thanne, saistow, we wol oure vices shewe.<sup>6</sup>

It would be most unlikely, then, had More not encountered the Theophrastus *dissuasio* either in Saint Jerome's works or in any of the derivative texts of misogamy. In the *Utopia*, however, the topos is presented not as a dissuasive argument, but its inversion is shown as common practice among the Utopians. Thus the canonic misogamous argument *in malo* is turned into an exemplum *in bono* ; More is presenting open-eyed matrimonial selection as common Utopian practice, the lack of which philosophers lamented throughout the centuries. Thus, More presents a subtle, ironic commentary both on the wisdom of the Utopians and on contemporary customs as well as on ancient and medieval objections to marriage.

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## NOTES

1. *Utopia*, ed. E. Surtz and J.H. Hexter, *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 4, (New Haven and London : 1965) pp. 187,189.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 480.

3. St. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum libri duo*, PL 23, col. 277 : « Adde, quod nulla est uxoris electio, sed qualiscumque obvenerit, habenda. Si iracunda, si fatua, si deformis, si superba, si fetida, quodcumque vitii est, post nuptias discimus. Equus, asinus, bos, canis, et vilissima mancipia, vestes quoque, et lebetes, sedile ligneum, calix et urceolus fictilis probantur prius et sic emuntur : sola uxor non ostenditur, ne ante displiceat, quam ducatur. »

4. Walter Map, *Dissuasio Valerii Rufini ne ducat uxorem*, in *De nugis curialium*, ed. M.R. James, *Anecdota Oxoniensia*, Medieval and Modern Series, part XIV, pp. 157,158.

5. *The Roman of the Rose*, translated by Harry W. Robbins, (New York : 1962) p. 175 ; lines 8661-8686 :

Et cil qui font les mariages  
 Si ont trop merveilloz usages,  
 Et coustume si despareille  
 Qu'il me vient a trop grant merveille.  
 Ne sai d'ulvient ceste folie,  
 Fors de rage et de desverie.  
 Je voi que qui cheval achete  
 Ja n'iert si fox que rienz y mete,  
 Comment que l'en l'ait bien couvert,  
 S'il ne le voit a discouvert ;  
 Par tout le regarde et descueuvre.  
 Mes la fame si bien se cueuvre,  
 Ne ja n'i sera des.couverte,  
 Ne por gaaingne ne por perte,  
 Ne por solaz ne por mesese,  
 Por ce, sans plus, que ne desplese  
 Devant qu'elle soit espousee.  
 Et quant el voit la chose outree,  
 Lors primes monstre sa malice  
 Et pert s'el a en li nul vice,  
 Lors fait au fol ses meurs sentir,  
 Quant riens n'i vaut le repentir.

6. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson, (Boston : 1957) « Wife of Bath's Prologue », lines 281-92.