




VI LETTERS

BY THEANO

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WOMEN'S LEGACY PROJECT

SUBJECT: CLASSICAL CULTURE AND LATIN



I. Letter to Euboule

Theano to Euboule: Greetings.

I hear that you are bringing up your children in luxury. The mark of a good mother is not concern for her children's enjoyment, but training towards moderation.

So watch you do not the work of an indulgent mother rather than a loving one. When pleasure and children are brought up together, it makes them undisciplined. For what is sweeter to the young than accustomed pleasure? So, my friend, it is necessary that the raising of children is not their downfall. And luxury is the downfall of natural character whenever they become lovers of pleasure in their souls, and sweet sensations in their bodies, their souls shunning work, their bodies becoming softer. It is also necessary to exercise the children you are raising in what they fear, even if this inflicts pain and distress; so that they do not become slaves of what they experience, eager for pleasure and reluctant to face pain, but honour what is good above all, holding back from pleasure and standing up to pain. Don't let them become completely full of food nor have their every pleasure gratified, nor be undisciplined in their childhood, nor allow them to say everything and try everything, especially if you are worried if they cry and take pride if they laugh, and laugh if they strike their nurse or abuse you, and if you provide coolness in summer and warmth in winter and every luxury.

Poor children sample none of these things and they are raised well enough, and do not grow any less and become stronger by far.

But you nurse your children like the offspring of Sardanapalus, weakening his masculine nature with pleasure. For what would one do with a child who cries if he does not eat sooner, and if he eats seeks the delights of treats, and if he is hot wilts, and if he is cold collapses, and if someone criticises him responds by unhappy, and wastes his time on mischief for the pleasure of it, and wanders around to no good purpose?

Be careful, my friend, knowing that children who live with no restraint, when they grow up into men become slaves, and keep such pleasures from them. Make their food plain not sumptuous, and allow them to bear hunger and thirst, and even cold and heat, and feel ashamed among their peers or supervisors. For this is how it comes about that they are ennobled in spirit, whether they are being uplifted or downtrodden. For, my friend, labours are a hardening up process for children,

during which virtue is perfected; those who have been sufficiently dipped in this process bear the bath of virtue as something which is natural to them. So look out, my friend, lest, just as vines which have been badly looked after producing little fruit, because of luxury your children produce the evil of hubris and complete worthlessness. Farewell.

II. Letter to Euclides

Theano to Euclides the doctor: Greetings.

Yesterday someone had dislocated his leg and the man sent to summon you came to you (and I myself was present -for the injured man was a friend) but returned immediately in a hurry, saying that the doctor was poorly and physically unwell. And I dismissed the pain of that friend (I swear by the gods) and turned my attention to the doctor and prayed to Panacea and Apollo, the famous archer, that nothing incurable had happened to the doctor. Although I am despondent I write this letter to you, dearly wanting to learn how you are, lest your gastric orifice is bad, your liver has been weakened by fever, or some organic harm has come upon you. So with no thought for the many limbs of my friends, I welcome your own dear health, my good doctor.

III. Letter to Eurydice

Theano to the wonderful Eurydice: Greetings.

What grief is hanging on to your soul? You are upset by nothing other than the man with whom you live has gone to a prostitute and takes his physical pleasure with her. But you should not be like this, you paragon among women. Do you not see that when the hearing has become sated with pleasure from an instrument, it is filled with musical song, but when it has become sated with this, loves again the flute and enjoys listening to the reed-pipe? And what sort of fellowship is there between the flute, musical song and the wonderful echo of the instrument made most sweet for music? It is just the same for the prostitute with whom your husband is living as it is for you. For you husband thinks of you in his habits and nature and thought, but whenever he has too much, he will go and live with the prostitute for the time being. There is a certain love of foods which are not good in those in whom a corrupting humour lies.

IV. Letter to Callisto

Theano to Callisto: Greetings.

Authority to rule the household is granted by the law to you younger women as soon as you are married, but instruction is needed in everything about household management from older women, who always offer advice. For it is good to learn in advance what you do not know, and to consider the advice of older women as best. For in these matters a young soul must be raised from its girlhood. And the primary area of authority in the house for women is over the servants. And, my friend, the most important thing is good will on the part of the slaves. For this is not purchased as a possession along with their bodies. But intelligent mistresses create it in the fulness of time.

Just use is responsible for this, ensuring that they are neither exhausted by work nor made unable to work through lack of food. For they are human by nature. Some women think profitable what is the most unprofitable, treating their servants badly, weighing them down with work, while taking away what they need. Then after making a profit of an obol, they pay the cost of enormous damages: hatred and the most evil plots. In your case, provide an amount of food in proportion to the amount of wool-working done in the day.

This will do for their diet, but for disorderly behaviour, what must serve is what is right for you, not what is advantageous for them. For it is necessary to value your servants at what they are worth. While cruelty will not bring any grace to your soul, reasoning provides control no less than hatred of evil. If there is an excess of vice in the servants which cannot be overcome, they must be sent to market to be sold. Let what is foreign to the needs be estranged from the mistress too. Let your judgement of this be proper. Thus you will balance the truth of the wrongdoing with the justice of the condemnation, and the magnitude of the wrongdoing with the appropriate magnitude of the penalty.

A mistress' forgiveness and grace towards those who have done wrong will release them from the penalty, and in this way too you will maintain a proper and appropriate way of life. Form some women, my friend, through cruelty even whip the bodies of their servants, dehumanised through jealousy or anger, as if they are inscribing a memorial with the excess of their bitterness. Some slaves in time are tired out by work and can do no more; others make their way to safety by running away; and some cease living, making the transition to death with their own hands, and in the end,

the isolation of the mistress, who weeps for her own lack of good counsel, provides an empty change of heart.

But, my friend, imitate musical instruments and think over what sounds they make when they are loosened too much, and how they break when they are over-tightened. For it is just the same with your servants. Excessive slackness creates dissonance in respect for authority, but a tightening always causes a natural break. You must think on this: the right amount is best in everything. Farewell.

V. Letter to Nicostrate

Theano to Nicostrate: Greetings.

I heard about the madness of your husband -that he has a prostitute, and that you are jealous of him. I, my friend, have known many men with the same disease. For they are hunted out by these women, it seems, caught and lose their minds. But you are upset by night and by day, and troubled and plot something against him. My friend, do not do it. For the virtue of a wife is not in watching over her husband, but bearing things in common with him. And bearing things in common with him is to bear his madness. If he mixes with a prostitute for his pleasure, he does so with his wife for his advantage. It is an advantage not to mix evils with evils, nor to add madness to madness.

Some errors, my friend, are made worse when they are condemned, but cease when kept silent -as they say, fire puts itself out when left in peace. In addition, although you seem to want to escape notice, if you condemn him you lift the veil from your own feelings. And clearly you will be making a mistake. You believe the love of your husband is the behaviour of a gentleman. For this is the grace of fellowship. So believe that when he goes to the prostitute he is insincere, but he stays with you to live a shared life, and he loves you in thoughtful reflection, but her in passion.

The moment of time for this madness is short. For it exists at the same time as its satisfaction, and begins and ceases very quickly. For a man who is not thoroughly bad, the time with a prostitute is very brief. For what is more empty than desire that enjoys what is wrong? So he will eventually realise that he is diminishing his own life and slandering his own good reputation -no one keeps up a self-induced injury when he reflects on it. So, summoned to you by what is just, and seeing the diminution of his own life, he will notice you, and soon repent, unable to bear the shame of his condemnation.

But, my friend, live, not responding to prostitutes but remaining aloof from them by your proper conduct towards your husband, by your care for the house, by your compassion for those who work for you, and by your deep love for your children. There is no need for you to be envious of that woman (although it is a fine thing to envy virtuous women), but you should prepare yourself for reconciliation. For a fine character brings high regard even from enemies, my friend, and honour is the outcome of a true nobility. Through this it is possible for a woman's authority to exceed a man's, and for her to be honoured even more, rather than serve her enemy.

So he will be more ashamed if he has been fostered by you, and he will be willing to reconcile more quickly. He will love you deeply, as you will be easier to sympathise with, when he has recognised the wrongs he has committed against you, noticing your care for his livelihood and testing your love for him. And just as physical sufferings make their cessation sweeter, so disagreements between friends make their reconciliation more significant.

In addition, avoid plants that arise from your suffering. For he has a disease and urges you to catch this painful disease too. In harming his own good name he urges you to harm your appropriate behaviour, and in destroying his own life he urges you to destroy what is beneficial for you. By this you will seem to have set yourself against him and in punishing him you punish yourself. And if you separate from him and leave, you will change your former husband only to find another, and if he errs in the same way, yet another (for not having one is not bearable for young women), or you will stay alone without a husband like a spinster.

Or will you neglect the house and destroy your husband? Then you will live with the harm of a painful life. Or will you seek to fight back against the prostitute? She will be on her guard and will get around you, and if she fights back against you, a woman who does not blush is a champion in battle. But is it good day after day to fight against your husband? And what more? For while the fights and reproaches will not stop his licentiousness, as they increase they will increase the disagreements. What then are you planning against him? Do not do it, my friend. Tragic drama taught us to defeat envy, in the meaning of the outcome of Medea's unlawful actions. But just as your hands must not touch your infected eyes, so too you must separate your actions from your suffering. By steadfastly enduring it, you will sooner quench your suffering.

VI. Letter to Timonides

Theano to Timonides: Greetings

What fellowship is there for you and me? Why do you always slander us? Or do you not know that we praise you before everyone, even if you do the opposite? But, again, understand that even if we do praise there is no one who believes, and even if you do slander, there is no one who listens. And I am happy because of this: a god sees it like this and the truth especially judges it so.

- The Greek texts can be found at (retrieved on 24/07/2023): <https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/graeca/Chronologia/S_ante06/Theano/the_epis.html>
- English version from: *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome. An Anthology*. Edited by I. M. Plant. University of Oklahoma Press. Norman