Fearing Spouses in Aristotle's *Ta Oikonomika*

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Abstract: One of the surviving chapters of the *Oikonomika* attributed to Aristotle contains one unusual piece of advice: that spouses should fear each other. What could be going on?

The work which the Loeb Classical Library classifies as book 3 of the *Oikonomika* attributed to Aristotle is a curious piece. It has come down to us only via medieval translations into Latin. (I will be quoting the Loeb text and translation except where noted.) It is not certain that it is by Aristotle: and it is not certain whether it is even a part of the work attributed to Aristotle in ancient times. For want of a better name, let me refer to its author, whoever that was, as "Aristotle", and let me refer to this piece as book three of *Ta Oikonomika* – but with the caveats that it may not have been by the Stagirite, and its ancient source may not have even been one typically attributed to Aristole, although it was so attributed at some stage.

For what it is worth I am inclined to think that it was part of a work attributed to Aristotle by the ancients, and it was written by one of the Peripatetics, or at least an ancient Greek philosopher of Aristotle's time or later.[1] If it was not part of Aristotle's *Oikonomika*, it may be part or all of an otherwise lost ancient work attributed to Aristotle on marriage: see Rose 1971 pp 180-182, 644-7. If G.C. Armstrong, the Loeb translator, is right, the writer of our text seems to have knowledge of Xenophon's *Oikonomicos*, which would put the *earliest* date of composition sometime in the generation before Aristotle. I will be taking it to shed light on one ancient Greek ideal of marriage, and so if it did turn out that this book was an ancient Roman or medieval forgery, that would undercut some of the conclusions of this paper. But there is no evidence that it is not a Peripatetic work, at least.

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[1] The origin of this work has not been widely discussed, but the consensus seems to be that it was peripatetic in origin: as well as Rose 1971 cited in the text, see for example Schmitt (1986), who says the work was "at least part of the philosophical culture of Ancient Greece" and "can claim some historical connexion to the peripatetic school" (p 9).

A text on "Economics" was a genre well known in the ancient world, and it typically concerned itself with the proper management of a household: a very rich, often rural household at that. The chapter I concern myself with here is about married life, and addressed, in effect, to the man of the household. It talks about what a wife should be like, and how a man should treat her (and the two topics are connected, since apparently a man must "train" his wife (143)). Much of the picture of the ideal relationship between wife and husband is what we would expect from the Greek and Roman world: if anything, the work promotes the status of women more than one might expect. Wives are to be given control of the household budget, ought to have control and even exclusive knowledge of the running of the household ("it seems not fitting that a man should know all that passes within the house" (141)). And the man's cheating on his wife is not treated lightly as a misdemeanour, but is presented uncompromisingly as shameful to the man and to his sons, suggesting that a man who fails to be faithful is mentally deficient (not "hominem sanae mentis" (144)). In general, he is supposed to honour her "far above all others saving his parents" (143 26-28) – and he is obliged to honour her parents as much as his own (147).[2] They are to treat the estate and household as common possessions (147), which might be surprising given the man's legal control over the property (with perhaps some constraints on what he may do with the dowry).

Still, in large part, the picture painted is of traditional patriarchal domination of the household by the husband. It is up to him to chastise his wife for her faults, while she is to bear his patiently without complaint. It is for her to "hearken to her husband in all respects, and agreeing with him obey his behest" (143) and indeed should treat his wishes "as laws appointed for her own life by divine will" (143), though she is apparently entitled to refuse to do anything "base or unworthy of herself" (143), and she is apparently allowed to try to dissuade her husband from "whatever is evil and dishonourable" (147). It is up to the husband whether he treats his wife in the way he ought, or more like a slave (145). It is clear that in this text the husband is in many ways the master of the wife, which is unsurprising given what we know of ancient

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[2] The man thus faces a minor inconsistency of obligation, but there are several minor inconsistencies in the piece. The various inconsistencies are not surprising in a encomium to the ideal married life, but I have a feeling the Stagirite would have been more careful.

Greek attitudes to the relationship between the sexes: and to the extent that shades of meaning are due to the translator, we would hardly expect our late thirteenth century translator, Guillaume Durand, Bishop of Mende in Languedoc, to have an any less patriarchal view of the appropriate role of a wife.

However, the piece does contain one surprising passage about the appropriate relationship between husband and wife. I think this passage highlights at least one ancient attitude to marriage which is rather different from our own in an unexpected way. The striking peculiarity is about the role of fear in an ideal marriage.

Aristotle claims that "between a free woman and her lawful spouse there should be a reverent and modest mingling of love and fear" ("cum verecundia autem et pudore aequaliter diligere et timere liberae mulieris ad proprium virum est") (144).[3] He also says that a husband "should approach his wife.. full of self-restraint and awe" (144), though the Latin translated by Armstrong as "awe" is "timore", or the state Armstrong elsewhere translates as "fear". As I will detail below, Aristotle also discusses cases where Homer attributes "fear", and Aristotle claims that this fear is fitting between husband and wife.

That the ideal of married life should involve fear ("timere") between the partners is not part of our modern conception of marriage. Many spouses *do* fear their partners, of course: whether because of a history of mistreatment, or general demeanour, or because of the unique vulnerability we often have to those we love, or for a range of other reasons. But we do not typically take this fear to be ideal: perhaps being scared is valued as part of courtship, at least by some, and certainly ideal spouses may be expected to fear *for* their partners in times of danger. Whatever the terrors of marriage, however, one's spouse is ideally not among them.

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[3] An anonymous referee pointed out to me that the Latin here is ambiguous - instead of saying the husband and wife equally love and fear each other, it may be read as saying that the wife should equally fear and love her husband. The translation in the text is Armstrong's reading, and this reading seems to me to fit the context better.

We might expect that fear by a wife of her husband could be included in the ideal depiction of a marriage by a believer in patriarchal arrangements. The picture of a timid and obedient wife, desperate to avoid displeasing her husband, is not a surprising one in a patriarchal account of the way a marriage should be. And we should not be surprised if some element of fear would exist in a marriage like those found in Classical Greece and elsewhere in the ancient world. A husband has a vast discretion for mistreatment, including physical and sexual assault, taking children away from their mother, and almost limitless economic control. We may still find it slightly surprising that fear of one's husband makes it into an account of how a marriage should be ideally run – we might expect to find that in the ideal, at least, these powers of control do not provoke fear because of a mixture of trust that they will not be employed unfairly and of blemishless behaviour on the part of the wife. But given the reality of the great imbalance of power, and a general attitude that fear is appropriate towards one's superiors – Aristotle compares the fear appropriate here to the fear he also endorses of one's virtuous ruler and one's parents, for example – we can see why it might be supposed that wives should fear their husbands. I hope most of my readers do not share this ideal of marriage, but it is at least not alien. Marriages on the patriarchal model are all too common in our history, sections of our own cultures, and appear to remain the norm in several non-Western cultures today.

What is surprising is that Aristotle makes it clear that this "reverent fear" ought to go both ways – not only is a wife supposed to fear her husband, according to this piece, but a husband ought ideally to fear his wife as well. Aristotle cites Homer's Odysseus as fearing his wife Penelope and quotes him expressing wonder and fear in the presence of Nausicaa: and whether Aristotle is right that "Homer believes that this [i.e. wonder and fear] is the feeling of a <good> husband and wife for one another, and that if they so feel, it will be well with them both" (145), it is clear that Aristotle here endorses the sentiment he attributes to Homer. This does seem strange. Why ought a husband, in an ideal marriage, fear his wife?

Perhaps "fear" is not the best, or only, translation of "timor" or "timere", and some alternative shade of meaning might fit better with our conception of how an ideal marriage should work. At one point (144) Armstrong translates this expression as "awe". It is tempting to suppose that we should interpret Aristotle as meaning something like awe or reverence, and leave out the apprehensive aspect of "fear" altogether, let alone any connotations of terror or being scared. Unfortunately this does not fit altogether well with what we know of Aristotle's choice of words. The original Greek of the passage is lost, of course, but Aristotle twice quotes Homer in connection with the sentiment he has in mind, and of course we have the Greek originals for that. For example, Aristotle quotes Homer when talking about Odysseus and Nausicaa, and the quoted passage is *Odyssey* 6.168, "hôs se, gunai, agamai te tethêpa te deidia". Elsewhere in the Odyssey Homer uses "deidô/deida", to describe the sort of feeling Odysseus has towards being punished by the gods, being storm-tossed and attacked by sea-monsters, and being devoured by wild animals while asleep, among other things (see book 5). "Fear", the usual translation of the Homeric term, seems to me just right: it is not just an expression of reverence or awe. Given Aristotle's use of this quote to illustrate what he had in mind, whatever "timor" was in the original Greek, it was presumably intended to intersect in meaning with the Homeric "deidô/deida". Of course, a number of different shades of emotion can fall in the scope of a single expression, and no doubt the attitude Aristotle is recommending is *more* akin to awe or reverence than, for example, the attitude which Odysseus has to being killed in his sleep.[4]

Keeping in mind that the emotion Aristotle recommends seems to have some element of fear or apprehension in it, let us nevertheless consider the suggestion we should understand him as meaning something close to awe. Mutual awe also seems like an unusual recommendation. Well, we do think that it is appropriate that a husband consider his wife "awesome", but this is hardly the same thing. We are told that the kind of fear to be felt is never felt "towards one of baser character" (145) but rather it is among the feelings "towards one another of nobler souls and those by nature good; or of the inferior toward those they know to be their betters." Awe may be appropriate towards the exceptionally virtuous, and perhaps this feeling ought to be felt mutually between two noble souls, though it is a little hard to see why one feels awe or fear (or whatever “timor/timere” is supposed to be here) for all of one’s peers if one is virtuous. There is a kind of fear or awe one has of the virtuous that might be playing a role here: one wants the good opinion of “noble souls”, and does fear that one might do or say something to lose it. Certainly this sort of fear might be appropriate with regard to someone one loves, respects, and admires, and it would make sense to suppose that husband and wife feel it towards each other in an ideal marriage.

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[4] Aristotle also seems to quote Homer's description of Helen's attitude to King Priam as evincing the kind of "fear" he has in mind (136). While Helen clearly has "dread" (deinos) for Priam in Homer, the Latin of the supposed quote bears a loose enough connection to Homer's Greek for it to be difficult to tell exactly which Homeric expression is meant to correspond to the translator's "timore" here.

I find it odd to describe this sentiment as fear or awe, though, especially if it is one that is supposed to be had between people who are by nature good. Are good people really supposed to fear other good people? Is one obliged to be in awe of one’s peers, if one has a “noble soul”? Such awe is appropriate to have for one’s betters, but I would have thought not, in general, towards one’s virtuous peers. It could be argued that a husband and wife are ideally under a certain sort of illusion, in that they both should think the other is their better in virtue. Or perhaps if the author is an Aristotelian about the proper ends of men and women, the thought that the husband and wife ought to have different virtues might make mutual awe easier – she can be in awe of him and his manly virtues, while he is in awe of her and her womanly virtues.

Or perhaps this fear, or awe, is to be understood by the analogy Aristotle draws to the fear that “loyal citizens [feel] towards right-minded rulers” (145). I already alluded to this above: perhaps the husband should see himself as ruled by the wife in a similar way to the way we might have thought the wife was supposed to feel to the husband. This analogy is only of limited help to many moderns – as an Australian, I was certainly not brought up to fear my rulers, and the Americans I know who fear theirs typically do so because they doubt the right-mindedness of the current regime. But at least it is not unheard of for people to suppose that a subject ought to fear his ruler. Perhaps the husband ought to see his wife as being in a position to command him, and ought to fear her wrath if she is disobeyed. But it is a little harder for us to see this as the appropriate model for private affections, and harder still to imagine it as symmetrical – since both the husband and wife fear each other, on this model, presumably both simultaneously see the other as a commander who must be obeyed. Perhaps this strange state of affairs is more manageable if the spheres of command are divided (e.g. she obeys him outside the house, and he obeys her within).

Aristotle gives us one example of a husband that does not show appropriate fear of his wife: Agamemnon's announcement that his concubine Chryseis, "a base captive woman, and of an alien race besides" (145), was the equal of his wife Clytemnestra. Bad mouthing one's at-that-time honourable wife in front of a general assembly is clearly failing in one's husbandly duties. And Agamemnon certainly had reason to regret his lack of respect for Clytemnestra: Clytemnestra, in some versions of the story, retaliated by taking a lover and arranging with him to murder Agamemnon. But presumably the reason to fear a wife is not, in general, that she might kill her husband if he steps out of line. This would be a good reason to fear one's wife, I admit: but it could not be in general that virtuous Greek husbands went in fear of their wives because their virtuous, well-trained wives were in the habit of slaughtering misbehaving spouses. I doubt we can extract much enlightenment from Agamemnon's case.

I think I can at least dimly grasp how this mutual awe or fear might work, but I fear it is still only a dim grasp. What is overwhelmingly likely, I think, is that the Greeks, or at least those of whom Aristotle is a representative, had a quite different attitude to the appropriate emotion in this respect to the attitude I have. (And those of the various Western traditions of which I am representative.) One thing that does strike me as interesting about this mutual fear is that it involves rather more reciprocity in the marriage relationship that we might otherwise expect from a relationship with such an asymmetric power imbalance as ancient Greek marriage often appears. True, there is mutual love, respect, and concern. But these by themselves are not exactly reciprocal if they are dispensed as condescension and an act of virtue on the husband's side but are required from the wife on pain of terrible penalties. (See John Stuart and Harriet Taylor Mill's complaints on this score from a culture that was probably less patriarchal than many parts of ancient Greece.)

However, if the virtuous husband fears his wife and stands in awe of her, then that tends to temper the other de jure and de facto asymmetries. The husband, then, can be expected to do his part not merely in a spirit of gracious dispensation, but to some extent he can be seen as doing what he ought out of compulsion, even if that compulsion is only internal. I am not sure whether intimate relationships should be governed by compulsion like this: but it seems to me that if they are to be, it is better that they be felt on both sides rather than falling entirely on one party, especially if that party is already at a disadvantage. In this somewhat alien way, then, this Greek ideal of marriage approaches our ideal of a union of equals more than we might have expected.

It is important not to lose sight of the differences between ideals and reality. An ideal might have relatively little weight in determining behaviour compared to what a husband and wife respectively can get away with, and what means of recourse either has in the case of transgressions by the other. If a wife lacks remedies for mistreatment, but a wayward wife faces terrible sanctions from her husband and her society, then we might expect the wife is rather more constrained to behave in a way the husband finds appropriate regardless of any theoretical equality. Nevertheless, ideals do have some impact on behaviour, and they typically do not become entrenched as ideals unless they bear some relationship to what people strive to produce in real-life situations.

We should also not lose sight of the fact that Aristotle's *Oikonomika* expressed one view of marriage among many others, and not a very authoritative one at that: whatever the intellectual authority of the Lyceum, it did not have much social impact on the ordinary men and women of Greece. It is valuable as evidence of one strand of opinion about marriage, not as a document that may have produced a shift in that opinion. Fear in marriage is introduced in the work, not as a novel innovation to be argued for, but in the same way that many other commonplaces about good husband-wife relations are recommended, so perhaps it was part of at least one common ideal of marriage. On the other hand, despite some searching, this is the only trace I have come across of *this* sort of reciprocity in Greek ideals of marriage, so perhaps it was idiosyncratic.

The passage I have been discussing leaves us with some challenges: how are we to understand the fear of one's spouse that Aristotle recommends? How might we think this ideal of mutual fear and awe informed the actual marriage relations in Ancient Greece? (Here is where we would most wish for more information about the author and the circumstances of composition: is it written primarily with Athenian conditions in mind? Does it reflect the sensibility of an Athenian, a Stagirite, an Alexandrian, or someone else? At what stage of the author's marriage was it written, if the author was married?) Finally, there is a question for us: what can be said, for us, for and against an ideal of mutual awe and fear in marriage?[5]

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Homer, *The Odyssey*

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