

Aristotle: On a Good Wife, from *Oikonomikos*,

c. 330 BCE

A good wife should be the mistress of her home, having under her care all that is within it, according to the rules we have laid down. She should allow none to enter without her husband's knowledge, dreading above all things the gossip of gadding women, which tends to poison the soul. She alone should have knowledge of what happens within. She must exercise control of the money spent on such festivities as her husband has approved – keeping, moreover, within the limit set by law upon expenditure, dress, and ornament – and remembering that beauty depends not on costliness of raiment. Nor does abundance of gold so conduce to the praise of a woman as self-control in all that she does. This, then, is the province over which a woman should be minded to bear an orderly rule; for it seems not fitting that a man should know all that passes within the house. But in all other matters, let it be her aim to obey her husband; giving no heed to public affairs, nor having any part in arranging the marriages of her children.

Rather, when the time shall come to give or receive in marriage sons or daughters, let her then hearken to her husband in all respects, and agreeing with him obey his wishes. It is fitting that a woman of a well-ordered life should consider that her husband's wishes are as laws appointed for her by divine will, along with the marriage state and the fortune she shares. If she endures them with patience and gentleness, she will rule her home with ease; otherwise, not so easily. Therefore not only when her husband is in prosperity and good report must she be in agreement with him, and to render him the service he wills, but also in times of adversity. If, through sickness or fault of judgment, his good fortune fails, then must she show her quality, encouraging him ever with words of cheer and yielding him obedience in all fitting ways – only let her do nothing base or unworthy. Let her refrain from all complaint, nor charge him with the wrong, but rather attribute everything of this kind to sickness or ignorance or accidental errors. Therefore, she will serve him more assiduously than if she had been a slave bought and taken home. For he has indeed bought her with a great price – with partnership in his life and in the procreation of children...Let her bethink herself how Alcestis would never have attained such renown nor Penelope have deserved all the high praises bestowed on her had not their husbands known adversity. To find partners in prosperity is easy enough; but only the best women are ready to share in adversity.

Such then is the pattern of the rules and ways of living which a good wife will observe. And the rules which a good husband will follow in treatment of his wife will be similar; seeing that she has entered his home like a suppliant from without, and is pledged to be the partner of his life and parenthood; and that the offspring she leaves behind her will bear the names of their parents, her name as well as his. And what could be more divine than this, or more desired by a man of sound mind, than to beget by a noble and honored wife children who shall be the most loyal supporters and discreet guardians of their parents in old age, and the preservers of the whole house? Rightly reared by father and mother, children will grow up virtuous, as those who have treated them piously and righteously deserve that they should; but parents who observe not these precepts will be losers thereby. For unless parents have given their children an example how to live, the children in their turn will be able to offer a fair and specious excuse for un-

dutifulness. Such parents will risk being rejected by their offspring for their evil lives, and thus bring destruction upon their own heads. Therefore his wife's training should be the object of a man's unstinting care; that so far as is possible their children may spring from the noblest of stock. For it is only by this means that each mortal, successively produced, participates in immortality; and that petitions and prayers continue to be offered to ancestral gods. So that he who thinks lightly of this would seem also to be slighting the gods. For their sake then, in whose presence he offered sacrifice and led his wife home, promising to honor her far above all others saving his parents, a man must have care for wife and children.

Now a virtuous wife is best honored when she sees that her husband is faithful to her, and has no preference for another woman; but before all others loves and trusts her and holds her as his own. And so much the more will the woman seek to be what he accounts her. If she perceives that her husband's affection for her is faithful and righteous, she too will be faithful and righteous towards him. Therefore it befits not a man of sound mind to bestow his person promiscuously, or have random intercourse with women; for otherwise the base-born will share in the rights of his lawful children, and his wife will be robbed of her honor due, and shame be attached to his sons.

And it is fitting that he should approach his wife in honor, full of self-restraint and awe; and in his conversation with her, should use only the words of a right-minded man, suggesting only such acts as are themselves lawful and honorable. And if through ignorance she has done wrong, he should advise her of it in a courteous and modest manner. For of fear there are two kinds. The fear which virtuous and honorable sons feel towards their fathers, and loyal citizens towards right-minded rulers, has for its companions reverence and modesty; but the other kind, felt by slaves for masters and by subjects for despots who treat them with injustice and wrong, is associated with hostility and hatred. By choosing the better of all these alternatives a husband should secure the agreement, loyalty, and devotion of his wife, so that whether he himself is present or not, there may be no difference in her attitude towards him, since she realizes that they are alike guardians of the common interests; and so when he is away she may feel that to her no man is kinder or more virtuous or more truly hers than her own husband. And if the husband learns first to master himself, he will thereby become his wife's best guide in all the affairs of life, and will teach her to follow his example.

Source: Aristotle, *The Politics & Economics of Aristotle*, Edward English Walford & John Gillies, trans., (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1908).