

# Barbaro De re uxore

## 1 Introduction

Not only do humanists embellish the Aristotelian kind of economics but they bring Xenophon<sup>i</sup> back on the scene, introduce Plutarch, and on top of that develop a new kind of economics themselves.

In 1415, the Venetian politician, diplomat and scholar Francesco Barbaro (1390-1454) got instance writes *De re uxoria* (*On having a wife*) as a marriage gift for Lorenzo de Medici<sup>ii</sup> in Florence. Barbaro was one of those humanists who had studied Greek. Barbaro mentions his two teachers of Greek in *De re uxoria* explicitly and writes: *If you find something useful in this book, do attribute this (--) to (--) Greek literature* (II, 8, p. F, vi1 ). He rendered two lives from Greek into Latin himself, of the Greek Aristides and of the Roman Cato (The Elder). The *Life* of this military leader and agronomists, who we already have met in earlier chapters, Barbaro uses in *De re uxoria*. From the *Moralia* he uses regularly: *About the education of children* (*De liberis educandis*), *On affection for offspring* (*De amore prolis*), *The advices for bride and groom* (*Coniugalia praecepta*) and *About the virtues of women* (*Mulierum virtutes*).

He defines marriage pregnantly as: *the perpetual connection of man and wife to procreate descendants, or the connection by law instituted to avoid fornication* (p. A, iv1). In other words: the purpose for a man to engage a marriage is to beget children, who are legitimate. His present, written in beautiful Latin, is composed of two parts. In the first one the author elaborates *with what a wife should be equipped*. Here Barbaro determines what to look for in a future wife with regard to virtue, age, noble birth, beauty and wealth. He argues with verve that her virtuousness comes first. In the second part the author deals with *the duties of a wife*. By way of introduction to Part II Barbaro writes that *three things, if they are done well by a wife, make having a wife most praiseworthy and admirable: perfect friendship for her husband, moderation in living and a serious and diligent care for the house* (p. D, ii2) He discusses all three assignments of a wife extensively. About the last one he states that *it is generally accepted that the care for the house essentially revolves around the goods, the servants or also the aides, and the education of children*. (p. M, i1)

The whole book is a very interesting example of a humanist endeavor. As far as original economics is concerned especially chapter 2.7 and 2. 8 of *On having a wife*<sup>iii</sup> are relevant, because they show the responsibilities of a noble house wife in the Renaissance. Only these chapters are summarized here.

## 2. Summary of chapter 2.7 and 2. 8 of *On having a wife* (Lat.: *De re uxoria*) by Francesco Barbaro

### 2.7: *On the matter of the house* (Lat.: *De re domestica*)

Learned men have written much about the care for the house but here I will only discuss the topics of which my experience has taught me that they are vital and which can be discussed summarily and easily. *It is generally accepted that the care for the house essentially revolves around the goods, the servants or also the aides, and the education of children*. (p. M, i1) I will begin with the care for the goods and the diligence with regard to the personnel. *For goods and servants are necessary. Without an affluence and work of them the family property cannot be maintained. With them the government of the house is mainly concerned. When this (government of the house DN) is not secured by the suggestions and prescripts of the wife, it has no foothold and uses to*

wander off in all directions. (p. M, i1-2) Just as nature has made men strong for the activities outside by which the house can be filled it has made women weak in order to guard what is brought inside. *For fear can never be separated from care and care never from vigilance. What is the use of bringing home many goods, unless the wife, once they are brought inside, guards, preserves and distributes them?* (p. M, i2) Is this not proven by the myth of the Danaids<sup>iv</sup>? You, Lorenzo, will certainly gain great benefits from this wifely guarding. Emperor Augustus rightly said that Alexander the Great would have had a better future, if he would have guarded and preserved his acquired territories properly instead of continuing to conquer ever more regions to get more glory. *Therefore wives should not claim glory for themselves, if they have, as is their job, everything what is brought in the house, given its place.*

*Wives should therefore endeavor to stay aware that they are the head of the servants, like Pericles<sup>v</sup> led Athens every day. Moreover they should try hard to be convinced that one is continuously judging them in order to prevent that they do not fail in their care and concern and diligence for the house. To this will contribute tremendously, if they accustom themselves to— as is proper for them- staying at home and going to check everything. It reminds me of the prudent groom who, when asked what makes a horse fit, answered < the eyes of the master >.* (p. M, i2) The statue of Caia Caecilia, daughter of Tarquinius<sup>vi</sup> was equipped with domestic equipment to prove this requirement. *Which negligent owner of an estate can expect to have diligent farmers? Which sleepy general makes his soldiers guard the republic? If she wants that the maids will be at home, she will have not just to give orders by just commanding, but with the matter at hand give directions, explain and demonstrate what should be done.*

*With family property certainly nothing is more advantageous than that everything is given a destination and put in its place, for order, -nothing is more beautiful and more useful - always carries the most weight.* (p. M, ii1) Choirs and armies also have order as their point of reference.

*I would like wives to imitate the bee-queens, who whatever is brought into the beehives know, inspect and store, till the need for these goods reclaims them and who are always present at the honeycombs, in order that they diligently are composed and will end up completely full.*

*Wives should send out assistants and maid-servants, when they know that this will be advantageous. If, however, their use will be at home, wives should follow close, put pressure, command.*

*Wives should also see as their responsibility, that the cellars for victuals, wine and oil do not bring discomfort to their husbands.*

*Like generals very often check the number of the soldiers, in the same way wives should very often and very diligently examine what is stored in the house so that they do not notice late and very much to their disadvantage that only is available for a month what is needed for a year<sup>vii</sup>. That regulation of Pericles, who acquired all fruits from the fields and sold them in one move and then bought every day on the market, whatever at that moment was needed in the house, maximally frustrates the unskillful and often jeopardizes the family property, for this way of daily provisioning with grain, wood and wine is more proper for a traveler or an unsettled soldier than for a citizen and a pater familias and this is not the way to take care of one's wealth in a liberal, splendid or easy way* (p. M, i1-2) I consider this as an absolute truth, however wise Pericles may have been.

*To prevent that the most excellent women are getting involved in the most vulgar matter, I think that the Roman custom has to be followed too. For with the Sabine*

*treaty*<sup>viii</sup> noble married women were at once made exempt from milling and cooking activities and servile tasks. (p. M, ii2)

*She should, however, undertake these tasks in all cases, when the health of the husband or the opportunity to honor guests will intervene. For when something will contribute to the well-being of the man, she should not only grasp any opportunity to do it but we detest omissions.* (p. M, ii2) Homer shows how the love and compassion of Andromache for Hector even went so far that she took care of the foraging of his horse. *If therefore a wife sets her mind on her duty towards her husband and his praise, she will occupy herself with and make herself responsible for all what should be done.* (p. M, ii2 – M, iii1) If he receives guests for dinner it is she, who should do the cooking. Patroclus even did the same for Achilles, on the occasion of the reconciliation of Ajax en Odysseus<sup>ix</sup>. *But enough of this, when the plan for us is to run through the subject summarily and not to teach the details, above all because in the discussion between learned men this domain is more diligently and more extensively treated than I can explain it here.* (p. M, iii1)

*It seems that we have to talk now, as promised, about servants how they, if they are not neglected, bring no little decoration, usefulness and pleasure. This will be achieved if wives will accurately instruct them and not get earlier angry on them than because of an act for which they (the servants DN) earlier have been caught and warned not to commit it again.*

*As more or less with the other matters, I would like here wives to follow the bee-queens, who do not permit anyone of them (the bees) to be lazy or without work.* (p. M, iii1) This prescript regarding the care of the house was so strictly followed by Marcus Cato the Elder that he even sold his slaves, who had grown old.

*Let them convince themselves that from Antiquity onwards it has been their task to accomplish that inexperienced maid-servants become capable ones and let them make that girl guardian of the dormitory, who after having been made accustomed to responsibility in smaller matters has repeatedly proven to be loyal and diligent. Let them also discretely incessantly interrogate the overseer if he is a modest one, approve of him, take him apart for friendly words, and reward him with gifts, so that by this female interest, the diligence of the servants every day becomes stimulated more energetically.*

*Wives should feed their servants in such a way that they do justice as well to the fact they are humans as that they are supposed to work uninterruptedly. They should give them convenient cloths, so that one sees that weather, location and time seem to be taken into account.* (M, iii1-2) They should keep an eye on the servants who cannot enjoy the joint dinner because of children or necessary activities

*Wives should also consider it as important, that with priority will be taken care of some medical attention, when someone of the servants becomes ill. This is definitely humanity, this is a kind of giving permission, by which she makes all (servants DN) dedicated and loyal to the family property. This we can see – if may come back to the same example - at the bees, who never leave their leader because of her care and providence for them and always follow her with a show of great benevolence, wherever she leaves too. This should surprise nobody, because with other animals there is no lack of examples of a kind of gratitude either.* (p. F, i1) The dog of Xanthippus, the father of Pericles, would be the best example.<sup>x</sup>

*It would be most useful, if, as happens in the army, where staff-officers (Lat.: tribuni), generals (Lat.: legati) and captains and in the state where praetors, treasurers and similar officials are put in charge of different matters in order to achieve that by occupying*

*themselves with only a few duties these are performed in the very best way. In the same way wives, when they want to organize the tasks of the servants, separate the job of the overseer from that of the workers, in order that it is clear what should be done by whom and what is expected of everyone. (p. F, i2) In a ship everybody is given his place; in heaven all positions also are perfectly connected and in choir different voices accomplish a beautiful harmony.*

*If wives in this way will have organized the locations and the functions of the goods and servants, they will see that they (locations and functions DN) in a large measure have brought splendor and utility. Wives will also with care, practical wisdom and gratitude, as I have said before, take in, conserve and expend what is brought into the house. (p. F, i2) If they work hard for all this and are diligent they will most cautiously achieve that the dignity of the house of him and her/common becomes consolidated and extended. (p. F, ii1)*

## **2.8: About the education of children (Lat.: *De educatione liberorum*)**

*Still rests the education of children, the part of the wifely task which is most fruit bearing and by far the heaviest one. (p. F, ii1) It has no use to care diligently for the family property, if no efforts are made to educate the children, who are supposed to inherit it. Moreover education connects parents and children, who seem to be left alone if birth is not followed by feeding and educating, which in its turn makes the children grateful. If you carefully look, you will see that nature wants precisely mothers to educate the children, given the love for their children they have and maintain after birth. To make this clear I have to tell what happens before birth, be it in veiled terms, because nature has positioned those body parts also on a hidden place. I will tell what essentially happens.*

*The blood, from which women normally clean themselves in monthly losses, in this period is kept inside on the command of nature, so that it feeds the fetus, keeping it so to say warm, till she has reached the established number (of months DN). (p. F, ii2) Next nature has created all beings that give birth with the provision of milk and with breasts as sources. Women have two breasts so that if need be they can feed twin babies at the same time. If these things are the case as a result of the highest providence, its actions would seem to have been for nothing, if it had not created mothers with some unbelievable love for and generosity towards those, who they brought on the world. (p. F, ii2) Nature also has taken the particular precaution to put the breast of women at the front side, so that women at the same time can feed as well as lull the babies in their arms. This then is how she (nature DN) defines the duty of birth and education for them, not only a matter of necessity but of unique love and benevolence. (p. F, ii2)*

One should look at the female boar, who after birth licks her young clean and this way 'brings her into model'. Look also at all these mother animals that leave their throat and stomach uncovered for their puppies. Or take that bird in Homer.<sup>xi</sup> *Therefore the mothers that neglect the care for their children and live without preoccupations are worth of serious reproaches. They should not refuse any work so that they ascertain in their old day the best partners, assistants and caretakers. (p. F, iii1) Perfect mothers therefore should not only feed and reach their breast to their babies as wet-nurse but also educate them. The wife of Marcus Cato the Elder fed her babies with her own milk and the wives of Rome do so still today. She even took the sons of her slaves to her breast to make them devoted to her own children. We pray the best women to imitate*

them, because no food seems to be more adequate and healthy than the well-known and familiar milk of the mother. *Its power is as strong in achieving virtuousness in the properties of body and soul as the male semen*<sup>xiii</sup>. (p. F, iii2) One need only to look at the soft hide of he-goat fed with sheep-milk and the hard wool of the lambs fed by goats. The influence of moisture and earth on trees is larger than that of their semen, as one knows, and often a strong tree which is transplanted into a new lap, does not grow anymore because of bad juices in this soil. *Therefore noble women should do all they can to feed their babies themselves, so that they do not degenerate by the nourishment with less good and strange milk.* (p. F, iii2) If, what may happen, she is not capable to feed them herself, she should take care for a freeborn, morally outstanding and civilized wet nurse, to prevent that with the milk enter badness, mistakes and illnesses into the baby, which would happen with a wet-nurse of a low status. *For just as the members of a young child are easily formed and corrected the mind is made adequate and regular at the beginning of youth.* (p. F, iii2-F, iv1) That being fed by the breasts of a stranger explain someone's behavior show the poets Vergil and Theocritus,<sup>xiii</sup> when they write that the cold behavior of their heroes is caused by being fed by a wild animal. So wives should feed their babies themselves *or they should trust this part of their duty to honest wet-nurses who treat them with care and love them and do this without any false and commercial intention.* (p. F, iv1)

*When they (her children DN) have passed the years of infancy, mothers should use their ingenuity, care and activities to achieve that they are going to excel in the gifts of mind and body. In the first place they (mothers DN) should teach them respect for god, the immortal, fatherland and parents.* (p. F, iv1) This is the fundament of all virtues and they should get used to them from the first years. Only who respect them have a good future, if they are going to behave properly and friendly towards their fellow men too. *Mothers also should educate them in eating and drinking in such a way that they - so to say - 'lay a basis for moderation in later periods'.*

*Mothers should warn them to flee from those pleasures for which one in any way has to be ashamed. In this regards, mothers should take pains to set their minds and thoughts on what may bring them honor, utility and delight when they will have grown older.* (p. F, iv1-F, iv2) If the mother succeeds in this, it will help them later tremendously with their studies. *Who denies that even a blood- and passionless address of a child by of parent has authority?* (p. F, iv2) That is why Cato the Elder personally taught his children writing and earns Eurydice<sup>xiv</sup> much praise, a foreign woman! She, in later life, made herself acquainted with the monuments of ethics, so that *she would not only be the giver of life to her children, but would leave very many spices of humanity for them (as she did).* (p. F, iv2)

Mothers should also often correct abundant laughing, a sign of stupidity, and bad language – a sign of anger. *Mothers should also be careful that they (their children DN) not become familiar with bad acts by talking about them.* (p. F, iv2) Mothers should suppress therefore obscenities and reproaches and use the whip when they say something untidy. Sometimes mothers have to prevent that they are exposed to poverty, mockery by older people, or other such misfortunes, from which they return with intensive hostile feelings and an attitude of arrogance.

Mothers should give toys, which force them to make efforts, so that they later will possess perseverance.

*I would like mothers in the presence of children to talk with horror about anger, avarice and desires, by which virtue gets extinguished,* (p. F, v1) so that children start to hate them and flee from them. And especially I would like mothers to make sure that

children *honor the holy names and become afraid to desecrate them.* (p. F, v1) What would not happen later? There are therefore many things that for children should get used to before the early youth.

*They are to be warned to refrain from swearing,*<sup>xv</sup> (F, v1) for who easily swears, cannot easily be believed or is not seldom wrong.

*Mothers should get them used to saying the truth.* (F, v1) This was the most important rule for the Persians, who forbid markets, convinced as they were that these were the places of lies and perjuries.

Mothers should learn them to talk little, to prevent that they become irreverent and loquacious. *For it will be an obstacle for their learning, if they want to expose 'wisely' whatever has not yet been broadly explained to them.* (p. F, v1) The mentioned Cato, when one reproached him his taciturnity as a young man, had a nice answer. < *This will not in the least annoy me till I will have learned the matters that do not deserve taciturnity.* >

*When the children, as soon as their age permits, will have learned precisely from the mothers most of this, they will in a happier and easier way be brought to the earnestness of the parents and to schooling.* (p. F, v1)

There is more to say about the responsibility of the parents towards their children, especially because I see mistakes made, but it was not our intention *to discuss what is done, but to show what should be done*<sup>xvi</sup>. (p. F, v2)

[p. F, v2-F, vi2: Barbaro concludes the book with partly a summary of it, partly a congratulation of Lorenzo de Medici with his wife and partly a show of modesty, in which he praises the Greek philosophers and his two teachers of Greek.]

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<sup>i</sup> In 1423 Giovanni Aurispa (1376-1459) came back from Byzantium with all the works of Xenophon, amongst the 238 manuscripts he brought along. Juan Gil, *Xenofonte, economico*, Madrid (Sociedad de Estudios y Publicaciones) --) 1967. p. 141.

<sup>ii</sup> This is Lorenzo de Medici the elder (1396-1440), younger brother of Cosimo de Medici (1384-1464). This Cosimo was the first of the Medici-dynasty (1384-1464) and great-uncle of Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449-1490). In the fifteenth century the Medici are the de facto rulers of Florence.

<sup>iii</sup> This title has been translated in many ways, even as '*The wealth of wives*, because Barbaro argues in *De re uxoria* that the wealth of wives does not consist of their dowry but their moral strength. Often it is rendered as *On marriage*.

<sup>iv</sup> Barbaro refers to the myth of the Danaids in Greek mythology. They were the 50 daughters of Daneus, who were to marry the 50 sons of Aegyptus, his half-brother. They killed their husbands in the marriage night and were condemned to carry water in a sieve for eternity.

<sup>v</sup> Pericles (c 495 BC-429 BC), was a most influential statesman, orator and general of Athens in the heydays of this city-state. He promoted democracy.

<sup>vi</sup> Gaia Cecilia was the wife (!) of the Etruscan prince Tarquinius, whom she - according to the myth - convinced to move to Rome. There he eventually became the fifth king of Rome. (He reigned from 616-579 BC).

<sup>vii</sup> Here Barbaro combines two different sentences of Theophrastus/Ps. Aristotle: (a) The description how the Athenians deal with the harvest, which her is ascribed to Pericles. (the habit to sell the whole harvest at once and later buy every day on the market whatever is needed) (b) The recommendation to keep apart what is needed during the year from what will be necessary on short term. (Fill in locations ) The last recommendation is also found in Xenophon's *Oikonomikos* VII, 32-36, when Critoboulos instructs his young wife.

<sup>viii</sup> In the early history of Rome the wars with their northern neighbors, the Sabines, figure prominently. The first one started with the 'The rape of the Sabine women' by the Romans, which often has often

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been painted. This rather was a kidnap, because the Romans did not have enough women. After an invasion of Rome by the Sabines, a peace treaty was signed between the Romans and the Sabines, in which amongst others the rights of the abducted women became regulated.

<sup>ix</sup> At the end of the Trojan War Ajax and Odysseus fight together against the Trojans to retrieve the body of the dead Achilles. Achilles and Patroclus loved each other.

<sup>x</sup> The story is told by Plutarch. The dog swam, when the Athenians were forced to evacuate, after the Athenian fleet over the Street of Salamis and once arrived at the other end, died on the beach. Xanthippus gave the dog a tomb.

<sup>xi</sup> Homer in his *Odyssey*, XX 14-15 writes how the bird brings to her nestling's 'whatever morsels she can catch, although she fares ill herself.' and this is reproduced by Plutarch in his *On affection for offspring*, 494D.

<sup>xii</sup> I follow here Gothein's translation in German of *De re uxoria* for the Ghent Latin text misses the words 'as male semen' but has 'quam proxime', which seem not to make sense here.

<sup>xiii</sup> Theocritus (fl. 3d century BC) was a Greek poet from Sicily, who is famous for his *Bucolics* (poetic paintings of the rural life).

<sup>xiv</sup> In Greek mythology Eurydice was the wife of Orpheus, who tried to bring her back from the death with his music.

<sup>xv</sup> I render in this small fragment Gothein again.

<sup>xvi</sup> (Lat.: ) *Ne nobis positum fuit quid agit discutere sed quod agi debet ostendere.*