

The Family in Renaissance Florence

Books One – Four

I libri della famiglia

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Giannozzo: Don't take that view when there is a quick and excellent remedy at hand.

Lionardo: What remedy?

Giannozzo: Let the father of the family follow my example. Since I find it no easy matter to deal with the needs of the household when I must often be engaged outside with other men in arranging matters of wider consequence, I have found it wise to set aside a certain amount for outside use, for investments and purchases. The rest, which takes care of all the smaller household affairs, I leave to my wife's care. I have done it this way, for, to tell the truth, it would hardly win us respect if our wife busied herself among the men in the marketplace, out in the public eye. It also seems somewhat demeaning to me to remain shut up in the house among women when I have manly things to do among men, fellow citizens and worthy and distinguished foreigners.

I don't know whether you will approve of my solution. I know some people are always checking on their own household and rummaging around in every nook and cranny lest something remain hidden from them. Nothing is so obscure that they do not look into it and poke their fingers in. They say that it is no shame or harm to a man to attend carefully to his own affairs and to lay down the law and custom in his own house. They point out that Niccolo Alberti, who was a very diligent person, said diligence and universal vigilance was the mother of wealth. I too admire and like this saying, for diligence always helps; but I cannot convince myself that men who are engaged in other concerns really ought to be or to seem so very interested in every little household trifle. I don't know, perhaps I am wrong about this. What do you say, Lionardo, what do you think?

Lionardo: I agree, for you are, indeed, precisely of the opinion of the ancients. They used to say that men are by nature of a more elevated mind than women. They are more suited to struggle with arms and with cunning against the misfortunes which afflict country, religion, and one's own children. The character of men is stronger than that of women and can bear the attacks of enemies better, can stand strain longer, is more constant under stress. Therefore men have the freedom to travel with honor in foreign lands, acquiring and gathering the goods of fortune. Women, on the other hand, are almost all timid by nature, soft, slow, and therefore more useful when they sit still and watch over our things. It is as though nature thus provided for our well-being, arranging for men to bring things home and for women to guard them. The woman, as she

remains locked up at home, should watch over things by staying at her post, by diligent care and watchfulness. The man should guard the woman, the house, and his family and country, but not by sitting still. He should exercise his spirit and his hands in brave enterprise, even at the cost of sweat and blood. No doubt of it, therefore, Giannozzo, those idle creatures who stay all day among the little females or who keep their minds occupied with little feminine trifles certainly lack a masculine and glorious spirit. They are contemptible in their apparent inclination to play the part of women rather than that of men. A man demonstrates his love of high achievements by the pride he takes in his own. But if he does not shun trifling occupations, clearly he does not mind being regarded as effeminate. It seems to me, then, that you are entirely right to leave the care of minor matters to your wife and to take upon yourself, as I have always seen you do, all manly and honorable concerns.

Giannozzo: Yes, you see that's my long-standing conviction. I believe that a man who is the father of a family not only should do all that is proper to a man, but that he must abstain from such activities as properly pertain to women. The details of housekeeping he should commit entirely into their hands. I always do.

Lionardo: You, however, can congratulate yourself on having a wife who probably surpasses other women. I don't know how many women one could find as vigorous and as wise in their rule of the household as your wife.

Giannozzo: My wife certainly did turn into a perfect mother for my household. Partly this was the result of her particular nature and temperament, but mainly it was due to my instruction.

Lionardo: Then you taught her?

Giannozzo: Many things.

Lionardo: And how did you do it?

Giannozzo: Well, I'll tell you. After my wife had been settled in my house a few days, and after her first pangs of longing for her mother and family had begun to fade, I took her by the hand and showed her around the whole house. I explained that the loft was the place for grain and that the stores of wine and wood were kept in the cellar. I showed her where things needed for the table were kept, and so on, through the whole house. At the end there were no household goods of which my wife had not learned both the place and the purpose. Then we returned to my room, and, having locked the door, I showed her my treasures, silver, tapestry, garments, jewels, and where each thing had its place.

Lionardo: All those valuables, then, were assigned some place in your room, I suppose because they were safer there, better secluded and more securely locked up.

Giannozzo: Yes, but primarily so that I could look them over whenever I liked without witnesses. You may be sure, children, that it is imprudent to live so openly that the whole household knows everything. It is less difficult to guard a thing from a few persons than from all. If something is known only to a few, it is easier to keep safe. If it does get lost, it is easier to get it back from a few than from many. For this and for many other reasons, I have always thought it a good precaution to keep every precious thing I had well hidden if possible, and locked up out of the reach of most hands and eyes. These treasures, I always felt, should be kept where they are safe from fire and other disaster, and where I can frequently, whether for my pleasure or to check them over, shut myself up alone or with whomever I choose while giving no cause for undue curiosity to those outside. No place seemed more suited for this purpose than the room where I slept. There, as I was saying, I wanted none of my precious things to be hidden from my wife. I opened to her all my household treasures, unfolded them, and showed them to her.

Only my books and records and those of my ancestors did I determine to keep well sealed both then and thereafter. These my wife not only could not read, she could not even lay hands on them. I kept my records at all times not in the sleeves of my dress, but locked up and arranged in order in my study, almost like sacred and religious objects. I never gave my wife permission to enter that place, with me or alone. I also ordered her, if she ever came across any writing of mine, to give it over to my keeping at once. To take away any taste she might have for looking at my notes or prying into my private affairs, I often used to express my disapproval of bold and forward females who try too hard to know about things outside the house and about the concerns of their husband and of men in general. I used to remind her of a truth which Messer Cipriano Alberti once voiced to me. A most honest and wise man, Messer Cipriano once saw that the wife of a good friend of his was overeager to ask and inquire into the place where her husband had stayed the night and the company he had kept. He was anxious to warn her as best he could and to show her the respect he perhaps felt he owed to his friend. Finally he said to her, "I counsel you, friend, for your own good—be far more eager to learn what goes on in your own house than to find out about what lies outside it. Let me remind you as I would a sister that wise men say a

woman who spies too much on men may be suspected of having men too much on her mind, being perhaps secretly anxious whether others are learning about her own character when she appears too interested in them. Think for yourself whether either of these passions is becoming to a lady of unblemished honor." Thus Messer Cipriano, and thus I too, spoke to my wife.

I always tried to make sure, first that she could not, and second that she did not wish, to know more of my secrets than I cared to impart. One should never, in fact, tell a secret, even a trivial one, to one's wife or any woman. I am greatly displeased with those husbands who take counsel with their wives and don't know how to confine any kind of secret to their own breast. They are madmen if they think true prudence or good counsel lies in the female brain, and still more clearly mad if they suppose that a wife will be more constant in silence concerning her husband's business than he himself has proved. Stupid husbands to blab to their wives and forget that women themselves can do anything sooner than keep quiet! For this very reason I have always tried carefully not to let any secret of mine be known to a woman. I did not doubt that my wife was most loving, and more discreet and modest in her ways than any, but I still considered it safer to have her unable, and not merely unwilling, to harm me.

Lionardo: An excellent lesson. You have been no less wise than fortunate if your wife has never dragged any secret out of you.

Giannozzo: Never, my dear Lionardo, and I'll tell you why. First, she was very modest and never cared to know more than was her business. Furthermore, I made it a rule never to speak with her of anything but household matters or questions of conduct, or of the children. Of these matters I spoke a good deal to her. From what I said, and by answering me and discussing with me, she learned the principles she required and how to apply them. I did this, also, my dear Lionardo, in order to make it impossible for her to enter into discussions with me concerning my more important and private affairs. This was my practice: I always kept my secrets and my notes carefully hidden; everything else of a domestic nature, I thought then and later, could properly be delegated to her. I did not, however, leave things so much in her hands as to be uninterested or not examine the details and be sure all was well managed.

When my wife had seen and understood the place of everything in the house, I said to her, "My dear wife, those things are to be as useful and precious to you as to me. The loss of them would injure and grieve you, therefore should you guard them no less zealously than I do. You have

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seen our treasures now, and thanks be to God they are such that we ought to be contented with them. If we know how to preserve them, these things will serve you and me and our children. It is up to you, therefore, my dear wife, to keep no less careful watch over them than I."

Lionardo: And what did your wife say to that?

Giannozzo: She replied by saying that her father and mother had taught her to obey them and had ordered her always to obey me, and so she was prepared to do anything I told her to. "My dear wife," said I, "a girl who knows how to obey her father and mother soon learns to please her husband. But do you know how we shall try to be? We shall imitate those who stand guard on the walls of the city; if one of them, by chance, falls asleep, he does not take it amiss for his companion to wake him up that he may do his duty for his country. Likewise, my dear wife, if you ever see any fault in me, I shall be very grateful to you for letting me know. In that way I shall know that our honor and our welfare and the good of our children are dear to your heart. Likewise be not displeased if I awaken you where there is need. Where I am lacking, you shall make it good, and so together we shall try to surpass each other in love and in zeal.

This property, this family, and the children to be born to us will belong to us both, to you as much as to me, to me as much as to you. It behooves us, therefore, not to think how much each of us has brought into our marriage, but how we can best maintain all that belongs to both of us. I shall try to obtain outside what you need inside the house; you must see that none of it is wasted.

Lionardo: How did she seem to take all this? Was she pleased?

Giannozzo: Very much so. She said she would be happy to do conscientiously whatever she knew how to do and had the skill to do, hoping it might please me. To this I said, "Dear wife, listen to me. I shall be most pleased if you do just three things: first, my wife, see that you never want another man to share this bed but me. You understand." She blushed and cast down her eyes. Still I repeated that she should never receive anyone into that room but myself. That was the first point. The second, I said, was that she should take care of the household, preside over it with modesty, serenity, tranquillity, and peace. That was the second point. The third thing, I said, was that she should see that nothing went wrong in the house.

Lionardo: Did you show her how to do what you commanded, or did she already have an expert knowledge of these things?

Giannozzo: Do not imagine, my dear Lionardo, that a young girl can

ever be very well versed in these matters. Nor is such cleverness and cunning required from a young girl as it is from the mother of a family. Her modesty and virtue, on the other hand, must be much greater. And these very qualities my wife had in abundance. In these virtues she surpassed all other women. I could not describe to you how reverently she replied to me. She said her mother had taught her only how to spin and sew, and how to be virtuous and obedient. Now she would gladly learn from me how to rule the family and whatever I might wish to teach her.

Lionardo: And you, Giannozzo, how did you manage to teach her these things?

Giannozzo: What things? How to sleep with no other man but myself, perhaps?

Lionardo: You are wonderful, Giannozzo. Even in giving us these holy and austere lessons, you know how to joke and make us laugh.

Giannozzo: It certainly would be funny if I had tried to teach her how to sleep alone. I don't know if those ancient authors you like to read were able to teach that.

Lionardo: Everything but that. They do say, however, how they instructed their wives never, in bearing and behavior, to let themselves appear less virtuous than they really were. It is also described how they tried to persuade women, for this very reason, never to paint their faces with white powder, brazilnut dye, or other make-up.

Giannozzo: I myself, I assure you, did not omit this.

Lionardo: I would like to hear how you handled it. When I have a wife of my own I should like to know how to do something which, it seems, few husbands can manage. For everyone hates to see make-up on his wife, yet no one seems able to prevent it.

Giannozzo: In dealing with this problem, I exercised great discretion. You'll not be sorry to hear my fine method for making her detest the stuff. So, since it will be most useful to you to have heard me, listen carefully now. When I had given the house over to my wife's keeping, I brought her back to our own locked room, as I was saying. Then she and I knelt down and prayed to God to give us the power to make good use of those possessions which he, in his mercy and kindness, had allowed us to enjoy. We also prayed with most devoted mind that he might grant us the grace to live together in peace and harmony for many happy years, and with many male children, and that he might grant to me riches, friendship, and honor, and to her, integrity, purity, and the character of a perfect mistress of the household. Then, when we had stood up, I said to her:

"My dear wife, to have prayed God for these things is not enough. Let us also be very diligent and conscientious and do our best to obtain what we have prayed for. I, my dear wife, shall seek with all my powers to gain what we have asked of God. You, too, must set your whole will, all your mind, and all your modesty to work to make yourself a person whom God has heard and to whom he has granted what you prayed for. You should realize that in this regard nothing is so important for yourself, so acceptable to God, so pleasing to me, and precious in the sight of your children as your chastity. The woman's character is the jewel of her family; the mother's purity has always been a part of the dowry she passes on to her daughters; her purity has always far outweighed her beauty. A beautiful face is praised, but unchaste eyes make it ugly through men's scorn, and too often flushed with shame or pale with sorrow and melancholy. A handsome person is pleasing to see, but a shameless gesture or an act of incontinence in an instant renders her appearance vile. Unchastity angers God, and you know that God punishes nothing so severely in women as he does this lack. All their lives he makes them notorious and miserable. The shameless woman is hated by her whose love is true and good. She soon discovers that, in fact, her dishonored condition pleases only her enemies. Only one who wishes us to suffer and be troubled can rejoice when he sees you fall from honor.

"Shun every sort of dishonor, my dear wife. Use every means to appear to all people as a highly respectable woman. To seem less would be to offend God, me, our children, and yourself. To seem so, indeed, brings praise and love and favor from all. Then you can hope that God will give some aid to your prayers and vows.

"To be praised for your chastity, you must shun every deed that lacks true nobility, eschew any sort of improper speech, avoid giving any sign that your spirit lacks perfect balance and chastity. You will disdain, first of all, those vanities which some females imagine will please men. All made up and plastered and painted and dressed in lascivious and improper clothing, they suppose they are more attractive to men than when adorned with pure simplicity and true virtue. Vain and foolish women are these who imagine that when they appear in make-up and look far from virtuous they will be praised by those who see them. They do not realize that they are provoking disapproval and harming themselves. Nor do they realize, in their petty vanity, that their immodest appearance excites numerous lustful men. Such men all besiege and attack such a girl, some with suddenness, some with persistence, some with trickery, until at last the unfortunate wretch falls into real disgrace. From such a fall she

cannot rise again without the stain of great and lasting infamy upon her."

Thus I spoke to my wife. To convince her still more fully of the danger, as well as of the shame, in a woman's covering her face with the powders and poisons which the silly creatures call make-up, see, dear *Lionardo*, what a nice lesson I gave her. There was a saint in the room, a very lovely statue of silver, whose head and hands alone were of purest ivory. It was set, polished and shining, in the center of the altar, as usual. "My dear wife," I said to her, "suppose you besmirched the face of this image in the morning with chalk and calcium and other ointments. It might well gain in color and whiteness. In the course of the day the wind would carry dust to it and make it dirty, but in the evening you would wash it, and then, the next day, cover it again with ointments, and then wash it again. Tell me, after many days of this, if you wanted to sell it, all polished and painted, how much money do you think you would get for it? More than if you had never begun painting it?

"Much less," she replied.

"That's right," said I, "for the buyer of the image does not buy it for a coating of paint which can be put on or off but because he appreciates the excellence of the statue and the skill of the artist. You would have lost your labor, then, as well as the cost of those ointments. Tell me, though, if you went on for months or years washing and redaubing it, would you make it more beautiful?"

"I think not," she said.

"On the contrary, you would spoil it and wear it out. You would scrape off the finish of the ivory. It would become rough and end up colorless, yellowed, softened by those powders. Certainly. But if those poultices could have that effect on ivory, which is hard stuff by nature and able to last forever if left alone, you can be sure, my dear wife, that they can do your own brow and cheeks still greater harm. For your skin is tender and delicate if you don't smear anything on it, and if you do it will soon grow rough and flabby. Don't deny that those things are poison. You know that all those make-up materials do contain poison. They do you much more harm than they would to ivory. You know, even the least bit of dust or a drop of sweat makes a smear on your face. No, you will not be more beautiful with that stuff, only dirty, and in the long run you will ruin your skin."

Lionardo: Did she seem to agree and to realize you were telling the truth?

Giannozzo: What sort of silly girl would fail to realize this was the

truth? Besides, to make sure she did believe me, I asked her about a neighbor of mine, a woman who had few teeth left in her mouth, and those appeared tarnished with rust. Her eyes were sunken and always inflamed, the rest of her face withered and ashen. All her flesh looked decomposed and disgusting. Her silvery hair was the only thing about her that one might regard without displeasure. So I asked my wife whether she wished she were blond and looked like her?

"Heavens, no," said she.

"And why not? Does she seem so old to you? How old do you think she is?"

To that she replied most modestly that she was no judge of these matters, but to her the woman seemed about the age of her mother's wetnurse. Then I assured her of the truth, namely that that neighbor of mine was born less than two years before me and had certainly not yet attained her thirty-second year. Thanks to make-up, however, she had been left in this diseased condition and seemed old before her time.

When I saw she was really amazed at this, I reminded her of all the Alberti girls, of my cousins and others in the family. "You see, my dear wife," I said, "how fresh and lively our girls all are, for the simple reason that they never anoint themselves with anything but river water. And so shall you do, my wife," said I. "You'll not poison yourself or whiten your face to make yourself seem more beautiful for me. You are white and bright enough complexioned for me as you are. Rather, like the Alberti girls, you will just wash and keep clean with water alone. My dear wife, there is no one but me for you to think of pleasing in this matter. Me, however, you cannot please by deception. Remember that. You cannot deceive me, anyway, because I see you at all hours and know very well how you look without make-up. As for outsiders, if you love me, think how could any of them matter more to you than your own husband. Remember, my dear wife, that a girl who tries harder to please outsiders than the one she should be pleasing shows that she loves her husband less than she does strangers."

Lionardo: Wise words. But did she obey you?

Giannozzo: It is true that at weddings, sometimes, whether because she was embarrassed at being among so many people or heated with dancing, she sometimes appeared to have more than her normal color. In the house, however, there was only one time, when friends and their wives were invited to dinner at Easter. My wife, on this occasion, had covered her face with pumice, in God's name, and she talked all too animatedly

with each guest on his arrival or departure. She was showing off and being merry with everyone, as I observed.

Lionardo: Did you get angry with her?

Giannozzo: Ah, Lionardo, I never got angry with my wife.

Lionardo: Never?

Giannozzo: Why should we let quarrels arise between ourselves? Neither of us ever desired from the other anything that was not wholly right.

Lionardo: Yet I imagine you must have been troubled if in this matter your wife failed to obey you as she should have.

Giannozzo: Yes, yes, true enough. But I did not, for all that, show her that I was troubled.

Lionardo: Didn't you scold her?

Giannozzo: Ha, ha, yes, in the right way. To me it has always seemed obvious, dear children, that the way to correct someone is to begin gently, put out the evil quickly, and kindle good will. This you can learn from me—it is much better to reprimand a woman temperately and gently than with any sort of harsh severity. A slave can bear threats and blows and perhaps not grow indignant if you shout at him. A wife, however, will obey you better from love than from fear. Any free spirit will sooner set out to please you than to submit to you. It is best, therefore, to do as I did and correct your wife's failing kindly but in time.

Lionardo: How did you reprimand her?

Giannozzo: I waited till we were alone. Then I smiled at her and said, "Oh dear, how did your face get dirty? Did you by any chance bump into a pan? Go wash yourself, quick, before these people begin to make fun of you. The lady and mother of a household must always be neat and clean if she wants the rest of the family to learn good conduct and modest demeanor."

She understood me and at once began to cry. I let her go wash off both tears and make-up. After that I never had to tell her again.

Lionardo: What a perfect wife. I can well believe that such a woman, so obedient to your word and so modest by her own nature, could elicit respect and good behavior in the rest of the household.

Giannozzo: All wives are thus obedient, if their husbands know how to be husbands. But some I see quite unwisely suppose that they can win obedience and respect from a wife to whom they openly and abjectly subject themselves. If they show by word and gesture that their spirit is all too deeply lascivious and feminine, they certainly make their wives no

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less unfaithful than rebellious. Never, at any moment, did I choose to show in word or action even the least bit of self-surrender in front of my wife. I did not imagine for a moment that I could hope to win obedience from one to whom I had confessed myself a slave. Always, therefore, I showed myself virile and a real man. Always I encouraged her to love virtue. Always I reminded her to be most disciplined. I kept her always conscious of all that I, myself, knew was right for a perfect mother of a family and wanted her to know also.

"My dear wife," I often told her, "if we want to live in peace and harmony, all our household must be well behaved and modest in their ways. You must gladly take on yourself the task of making them obedient and respectful toward yourself. Unless you yourself are very modest and self-restrained, however, you may be sure that what you cannot do for yourself you can still less produce in others. To be regarded as a very modest and restrained woman, you must be such that all vileness offends you. This will help to discipline the household, for all its members will take care not to displease you. Unless they have the highest example of chastity and decorum in you, however, do not expect them to show obedience, let alone reverence, toward yourself. Respect is something one must earn. Only character gives a man dignity, and one who wears dignity can gain respect; one who can gain respect can win obedience. One who does not live up to his own standards soon loses all dignity and all respect. Therefore, dear wife, make it your concern to be and to appear in every gesture, word, and deed most modest and most virtuous.

"A great part of modesty, remember, consists in tempering all one's gestures with gravity and a mature manner. One must temper one's mind and every word of one's speech, even within the household and among one's own family, all the more outside among strangers. I shall be truly glad if I see that you disdain the frivolous mannerisms, the habit of tossing the hands about, the chattering that some little girls do all day, in the house, at the door, and wherever they go. They talk now with this friend, now with that one; they ask a lot of questions and say a lot of things that they don't know as well as a lot that they do. All that is the way to get yourself the reputation of an irresponsible featherbrain. Silence is as it always has been, the peak of dignity and the source of respect for a woman. Talking too much has been ever the habit and sign of a silly fool. So be glad to listen quietly and to talk less than you listen. If you do talk, never on any account tell our secrets to others or be too eager to know their affairs. A woman who spends all day chattering and

agitating about things that do not concern the welfare of her household, while neglecting the things that do, indulges an ugly habit and brings contempt on herself. But if you govern the family with proper diligence, you will preserve and put to good use all the resources of the household."

Lionardo: And I imagine you taught her the management of the household as you taught her other things?

Giannozzo: Don't you doubt it. Of course I did my best to make her in every way an excellent mother of the household. "Dear wife," I told her, "you should view it as your job to give the house such an orderly routine that no one is ever idle. Give everyone some suitable job to do. And where you see reliable loyalty and hard work, give all the responsibility that may properly be given. At the same time, keep your eye on what everyone is doing. Make sure that those who are busy with things that are useful and beneficial for the family are aware that you will witness their merit. If someone works more diligently and lovingly at his task than the others, be sure, dear wife, that you do not forget to praise him in their presence. Thus in the future he will long to be still more helpful every day, knowing he can count on your appreciation. The others will want to please you, too, as much as those you have praised most. Together, let us reward everyone according to his merit. In that way we shall make all our servants loyal and devoted to us and our affairs."

Lionardo: But, Giannozzo, we all know that servants and even other members of the household are apt to be persons of small intelligence. Generally if they had more capacity for work and finer feelings, they would not stay with us but would learn some other trade. Did you teach your wife how to handle rough and uncouth persons, therefore, and how to make them obey her?

Giannozzo: The fact is that servants are as obedient as masters are skilled in commanding. Some people as I have observed myself, want their servants to obey them in matters where they themselves can give no direction. Others never know how to be the real master or to convince others that that's what they are. Remember, my children, no servant will listen and obey unless you know how to command. Nor will any resist and rebel if you know how to rule in a spirit of moderation and wisdom.

It is good to know not only how to make your servants obey but how to make them love and revere you. I find that the best way to make the impression of a real master is to do what I told my wife to do, talk as little as possible with her maid and even less with other servants. Too much familiarity kills respect. I also told her to give her orders in detail