

Francis Bacon
 “Of Marriage and the Single Life”

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was a major figure in the development of the English Renaissance. He became known at court and was knighted in 1603 after the succession of James I. He was later appointed Lord Chancellor in 1618 but fell from power in 1621 after going into debt and being accused of corruption. Bacon is sometimes known as the “father of the scientific method” for publishing the *Novum Organum Scientiarum* (the New Instrument of Science) in 1620. In this work, he advocated using the empirical method (induction) in all enquiries, as opposed to the “old method” (deduction) of the scholastics of the middle ages.

Bacon published the first edition of his *Essays* in 1597. He borrowed the word *essay* from the French writer Michel de Montaigne. It meant an attempt or trial, somewhat like the fragments and proverbs that were popular at the time. He wrote a second edition in 1612 and published an expanded edition in 1625.

Information readily available on the internet has not been glossed. Additions are in brackets [like this].

He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune, for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief. Certainly the best works, and of greatest merit for the public, have proceeded from the unmarried or childless men, which both in affection and means, have married and endowed the public. Yet it were great reason that those that have children, should have greatest care of future times, unto which they know they must transmit their dearest pledges. Some there are, who though they lead a single life, yet their thoughts do end with themselves, and account future times impertinences. Nay, there are some others that account wife and children but as bills of charges. Nay more, there are some foolish rich covetous men that take a pride in having no children because they may be thought so much the richer. For perhaps they have heard some talk, “Such an one is a great rich man,” and another except to it, “Yea, but he hath a great charge of children” as if it were an abatement to his riches. But the most ordinary cause of a single life is liberty, especially in certain self-pleasing and humorous minds which are so sensible of every restraint as they will go near to think women’s girdles and garters to be bonds and shackles. Unmarried men are best friends, best masters, best servants, but not always best subjects, for they are quick to run away, and almost all fugitives are of that condition. A single life doth well with churchmen, for charity will hardly water the ground where it must first fill a pool. It is indifferent for judges and magistrates, for if they be facile and corrupt, you shall have a servant five times worse than a wife. For soldiers, I find the generals commonly in their hortatives [speeches] put men in mind of their wives and children, and I think the despising of marriage amongst the Turks maketh the vulgar soldier more base. Certainly wife and children are a kind of discipline of humanity; and single men, though they may be many times more charitable because their means are less exhaust, yet, on the other side, they are more cruel and hardhearted (good to make severe inquisitors) because their tenderness is not so oft called upon. Grave natures, led by custom, and therefore constant, are commonly loving husbands, as was said of Ulysses, *vetulam suam praetulit immortalitati* [he preferred his old wife to immortality]. Chaste women are often proud and froward, as presuming upon the merit of their chastity. It is one of the best bonds both of chastity and obedience in the wife if she think her husband wise, which she will never do if she find him jealous. Wives are young men's mistresses, companions for middle age, and old men's nurses. So

a man may have a quarrel [reason] to marry when he will. But yet he was reputed one of the wise men that made answer to the question, when a man should marry: "A young man not yet; an elder man not at all." It is often seen that bad husbands have very good wives: whether it be that it raiseth the price of their husband's kindness when it comes, or that the wives take a pride in their patience. But this never fails if the bad husbands were of their own choosing, against their friends' consent; for then they will be sure to make good their own folly.

Topics for Writing and Discussion

1. Bacon raises the question of whether being married and having children is more conducive to happiness than being single. In the US in 2015, there were 109 million unmarried people, many living alone, and the trend is rising. In fact, the third week in September is designated as "Unmarried and Single Americans Week." Families also have fewer children today. Discuss with your group or the class whether you think having children makes for a happier life.
2. The divorce rate in the US has also risen over the last century. Today, almost half of all marriages end in divorce (as well as second marriages). In the past, as well as in many countries today, divorce is not an option. Discuss in your group (and then write a paper) about marriage and having children. Is being married better than being single? Is having children better than not having a family? Of course, you will have to define "better."