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# **Social stability and mobility through marriage in Metochites' *On Education* and in *Velthandros and Chrysantza*<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Marriage is an institution that can be found in almost every society throughout history. In this paper, I analyse its social functions in late thirteenth and early fourteenth-century Byzantine literary tradition based on a rhetorical text, Metochites' *Ἠθικὸς ἢ Περὶ Παιδείας* (*On Education*),<sup>2</sup> and a romance *Βέλθανδρος καὶ Χρυσάντζα* (*Velthandros and Chrysantza*). I will compare these two works in order to identify similarities and differences, and specify whether marriage may have contributed to social stability or social mobility in the period under consideration. I will also examine the texts with regard to their authors' views on family relationships and gender relations.

## **Introduction**

Marriage is an institution that can be found in many societies throughout history. It has numerous facets, such as biological, psychological, political, cultural, educational and economic. One of its main functions is the formation of a family, which in turn leads to the birth and raising of infants. In this paper, its social function in late thirteenth and early fourteenth-century Byzantine literary production will be analysed, based on texts from different genres, possibly aimed at different

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<sup>2</sup> The text has been translated recently in English: Xenophonos, S. 2020. *On Morals or Concerning Education*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

audiences.<sup>3</sup> The first work is *On Education* (*Ἡθικὸς ἢ Περὶ Παιδείας*) and was written by Theodore Metochites. Metochites (1270–1332) was a statesman and a scholar, a central figure in the Palaiologan Renaissance. He was not of humble origin. His father George (born c. 1250) was an archdeacon in Constantinople. Theodore Metochites was very close to Patriarch John XI Bekkos and was sent as an ambassador to the Papal States more than once. George Metochites was also an author and has written several theological works, with *Dogmatic History* (*Ἱστορία Δογματική*) being the most prominent among them.

Although most of Metochites' works have been preserved and many related studies have been published since the mid-1950s,<sup>4</sup> *On Education* was only recently published in 2002.<sup>5</sup> It is dated approximately to 1305, as deduced from the ages of the author's children mentioned in the text.<sup>6</sup> *On Education* is a rhetorical work in which Metochites tries to persuade an anonymous young man to educate himself. In attempting to do so, he outlines the benefits of education, mentioning the problems and the role of intellectuals in Byzantine society.

The second work is a romance, written by an unknown author. It is entitled *Βέλθανδρος καὶ Χρυσάντζα* or *Διήγησις Ἐξάϊρετος Βελθάνδρου τοῦ Ῥωμαίου* (*Velthandros and Chrysantza*) and it is probably dated to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Its chronological proximity to Metochites' *On Education* makes it ideal for a comparison, because it could provide an alternative testimony on marriage and its social function to that provided by Metochites. Both texts mention marriage, but they do that in a way that serves the different authorial intents and audience expectations. In the present paper, I will attempt to compare these two works, identify similarities and differences between them, and examine what they

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, there is uncertainty regarding the reception of Palaiologan romances. C. Cupane has proposed that they were produced for a listening elite audience, but this remains a hypothesis. On this subject see Cupane 2016: 479-494.

<sup>4</sup> Förstel 2011: 241.

<sup>5</sup> Polemis 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Ševčenko 1962: 141, n. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Kriaras 1955.

<sup>8</sup> Different opinions about the dating of the romance have been expressed. On this matter, see Tserevelakis 2020: 17.

reveal about the institution of marriage from a social perspective, taking into account the period in which they were written. I will try to specify whether marriage contributes to social stability or social mobility in the period under consideration, keeping a critical eye out for other information in these two works that sheds light on family relationships and gender relations.

### **Marriage in *On Education* (Ἠθικὸς ἢ Περὶ Παιδείας)**

I will start by examining what Metochites has to say on marriage in his *On Education*. The focus of the treatise, as already mentioned, is education and, as expected, marriage is not the main subject in this work. The author, however, mentions his own marriage and children, which he names as the reason why he was forced to abandon his literary pursuits (190.23–28). He informs that he thinks of marriage as a forced choice that has brought him no satisfaction (186.4 ff.). These passages are reminiscent of one of his poems, entitled *To the Mother of God and again on the monastery of the Chora* (Εἰς τὴν Θεοτόκον καὶ περὶ τῆς μονῆς ἔτι τῆς Χώρας). In this text, he praises monastic life and claims that he would have liked to be part of this community, but his marriage and children were standing between him and life in the monastery (ll. 471–515).<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Metochites seems to undermine the value of family in *On Education*, but we must bear in mind that his focus in *On Education* is the exaltation of studying and writing.

Metochites goes on to claim that he initially thought he could combine literary pursuits with the acquisition of wealth and procreation, but he was soon forced to abandon the former in order to be able to provide for his three daughters and son, who was still an infant when Metochites was writing these lines (194.1–196.12). Still, one may note that while paternity is described as the reason behind Metochites' deprivation of what he deemed truly valuable in life, having four children, one of them a new-born, would not have been possible for someone who did not desire to procreate.<sup>10</sup> The scholar then gets into more details on what paternity means to him

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<sup>9</sup> This could be a literary *topos*. For comments on this poem, see Magdalino 2011: 172–175.

<sup>10</sup> Religious beliefs could have played a role there, together with the desire of perpetuation of Metochites' lineage and wealth, but an in-depth discussion on the matter lies beyond the scope of this article.

and differentiates his concerns depending on the sex of the children, thus allowing readers to discern gender-related perceptions.

Metochites claims that his primary concern is to increase his wealth to a level that would secure his children's future, not only during his lifetime but posthumously as well (196.13–17). Such a notion could perhaps be justified by taking into account poverty rates in medieval societies, but it can be safely argued that Metochites and his family faced no such problems, as Metochites has been described as the 'richest citizen after the emperor' in his heyday.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the scholar seems to be talking about the perpetuation of his already high social status, which he wishes to bequeath to his children. This becomes evident when he goes on to talk about his daughters and argues that a good marriage presupposes substantial wealth to be given away as dowry (196.26–198.2). This practice was not new to him, since Metochites admits that he and others of his generation had accepted dowries upon marrying their wives, but he complains that over time the amount of wealth required for a decent marriage has been constantly growing (198.2–6). The words which Metochites chooses for the female spouses should not go unnoticed. He calls them 'mothers of their children', thus clearly qualifying their roles as mothers over all others.

Indeed, Metochites had managed to accumulate more wealth than most of his contemporaries. If the description of his mansion and portable goods in his nineteenth poem is to be believed, written after his and Andronikos II's downfall in 1328 and his return from exile, where everything was looted and gone, the scholar must have been extremely wealthy at the height of his prosperity.<sup>12</sup> He would have likely used this wealth to accelerate the rise of the social status of his children.

The economic and social functions of the dowry did not escape the attention of Metochites. The Byzantine scholar argues that there are many people, whom he characterises as selfish and greedy, who seek to marry into upper-class families and, therefore, gather as much dowry as possible. According to him, this practice aims at raising the social status of the house of these brides (198.6–10). With this observation, Metochites confirms a practice that seems to have been widespread in Byzantine society. Furthermore, the reason why he gathers all this wealth is made

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<sup>11</sup> Nelson 1999: 67–101.

<sup>12</sup> Featherstone 2000: 122–131.

clear: he aims to maintain the high social status of the father (that is, of himself) through good marriages for his daughters. It is worth mentioning that in *On Education*, the sons are the recipients of dowries from their wife's family and that is why Metochites is only concerned about his daughters. As will be discussed later, this is not the case in *Velthandros and Chrysantza*.

Metochites probably had personal experiences that made him consider that the maintenance of his family's elite status was of utmost importance. It is known that he was the offspring of a prominent family, which fell from grace after Michael VIII's death; however, he managed to rise socially again once his education attracted the attention of Andronikos II.<sup>13</sup> Having experienced exile and social decline at a tender age, he would not want his children to go through the same ordeal.

The practice of perpetuating social status through the marriage of children was not uncommon for the scholars of this period, since many chose to be connected with the elite through marriage.<sup>14</sup> It was not only scholars, however, who did this. Marriages for political reasons were practised as well. Furthermore, it seems that his duties often led Metochites to search for suitable spouses for the imperial environment, as in 1295 when he went to Cyprus to arrange the marriage of Prince Michael IX with a bride from the royal House of Lusignan. When it was made clear that this marriage was not possible, the following year he turned to Rita, the sister of Het'um II, king of Armenia, as a possible spouse for Michael.

In 1299, he travelled to Serbia five times to settle the marriage of Simonis, daughter of Andronikos I with the Serbian King Stefan Milutin. With this arrangement, several agreements between Byzantium and Serbia would be sealed.<sup>15</sup> This marriage took place despite the scandal caused by the very young age of Simonis and the fact that it was canonically illegal. It becomes apparent, therefore, that Metochites must have fully understood that marriage could be a tool for political and social flourishing. It would, thus, not be surprising if he had likewise arranged his children's marriages, as evidenced by the fact that he only mentions his daughters in the context of marriage and dowries in *On Education*.

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<sup>13</sup> Ševčenko 1975: 25–26.

<sup>14</sup> Ševčenko 1975: 22.

<sup>15</sup> Ševčenko 1975: 26–27.

Metochites' plan, as described in *On Education*, is not merely a theory but would be put into action several years later. When he was Prime Minister and Logothete of the Treasury, one of his daughters would marry John Palaeologus, the Emperor's nephew. Two of his sons would marry daughters of the nephews or nieces of Andronikos II,<sup>16</sup> thereby succeeding in connecting Metochites' family with the imperial house by marriage. His plan, of course, did not have the results he expected because of the civil war that broke out between Andronikos II and his grandson Andronikos III, and also because of accidental events such as the death of his son-in-law John Palaeologus. However, Metochites could not have foreseen these complications.

Despite how things turned out, Metochites' deeds contradict his accusations that those who sought to marry their children to scions of socially superior families were selfish and greedy, as he eventually did the same, and not by chance but apparently by calculation. Evidence of this exists not only in *On Education*. Ševčenko cites excerpts from a poem written by Metochites after 1328 where he also mentions his provisions for his children to find a suitable husband or wife,<sup>17</sup> which suggests that Metochites was methodically preparing these unions.

### **Marriage in *Velthandros and Chrysantza***

In order to examine whether *Velthandros and Chrysantza*<sup>18</sup> can be a reliable indicator of norms in Byzantium during the period in question, I will briefly touch on the extent to which its unknown author has been influenced by similar courtly romances from Western Europe and whether these influences are reflected in the way that Byzantine society has been presented in this work.

The names of the characters appearing in the romance cannot lead to secure conclusions as to whether they are Byzantine or not, and there are conflicting views on this subject.<sup>19</sup> In any case, the text makes it clear that in the face of Velthandros

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<sup>16</sup> On this issue, see Ševčenko 1975: 27, n. 61.

<sup>17</sup> Ševčenko 1975: 31, n. 97.

<sup>18</sup> Kriaras 1955: 87–196.

<sup>19</sup> Kriaras 1995: 97–98.

and his family, the author attempts to portray the Byzantine royal family,<sup>20</sup> while Chrysantza is presented as a princess of Antioch. Moreover, it has been categorised as an 'original work'<sup>21</sup> and it has been argued that the main characteristics of the romance, including the descriptions of nature, buildings, ceremonies, imperial celebrations, and social structure remain Byzantine. Even more so, it seems that as far as the subject of the present research is concerned, the customs mentioned in the romance are Byzantine and this is evidenced by the fact that what is written here can also be found in other Byzantine works of the same period.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it is safe to assume that this romance is a product of its time and that it can provide useful information about Byzantine society of the Palaiologan era.<sup>23</sup> The similarities found between *Velthandros and Chrysantza* and Metochites' *On Education*, which will be discussed subsequently, provide further evidence in this direction.

The main character, Velthandros, is a prince, the purple-born (*Πορφυρογέννητος*) son of the emperor of the Romans Rodoliphos.<sup>24</sup> He lives a wealthy life and is honoured by everyone (8, 132, 143–149). Velthandros, however, is second-born, (9) his elder brother being Philarmos. This, of course, would not have had him automatically excluded from being first in line for the royal succession in accordance with Byzantine standards, but since his father heavily despised him (*'μυριοκαταφρονεῖτον'*), which caused him much grief, it can be safely concluded that he was not first in line to the throne, at least as long as his brother was alive and able-bodied.

This does not mean, of course, that Velthandros lacked the qualities of a good king, since he is described as brave, well-trained, with great skills and dexterity and, above all, an excellent hunter (32–35, 98–100). The latter attribute cannot go unnoticed. Such virtues are often mentioned in rhetorical texts written in this period,

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<sup>20</sup> See for instance ll. 7–8, 25–26, 30–31, but also the title of the romance, which is *Διήγησις Ἐξαιρετος Βελθάνδρου τοῦ Ῥωμαίου* in the original.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, see categorization of 'original romances' and 'translations and adaptations of Western romances' made by P.A. Agapitos and O.L. Smith. Agapitos and Smith 1992: 50-72.

<sup>22</sup> Kriaras 1995: 94.

<sup>23</sup> Goldwyn and Nilsson 2019: 3.

<sup>24</sup> This means that he was born in the Purple Chamber of the Byzantine palace during the reign of his father. For this practice, see Talbot Rice 1967: 34–35.



the so-called *βασιλικοί άνδριάντες*, mirrors of princes,<sup>25</sup> intended to advise future emperors in their duties, and they are described as highly desirable for future rulers. A direct correspondence can hence be observed between imperial ideology as described in the rhetorical texts and in the romances of the period.

Velthandros is not only described as a great warrior. The author claims that he was also beautiful ('*εύειδής*',<sup>29</sup> and 98, using similar words) and handsome. He goes on to provide a more detailed description of what he thinks is beautiful in a man. The protagonist is fair-coloured, he has curly hair, beautiful eyes and, as mentioned before, a well-trained body (33–35). Beauty may not be a royal virtue, but it could undoubtedly facilitate a love affair.

Following the story, Velthandros, dissatisfied with the way his father treated him, decides to emigrate to the East (218, 234–235). It seems that the king was not keen to keep him in his kingdom anyway and when his son announced his intention to leave, he made no real effort to keep him at home (43–44). He only changed his mind when his other son, a person the king held in high regard, warned him that if Velthandros found refuge in a hostile kingdom he would ally himself with his hosts. This way, they would have gained a mighty warrior who would help them in the case of war. In the event that hostilities broke out between the emperor and that particular kingdom, Velthandros would be capable of winning the war for the enemy and dethrone his father (95–105). Thus, it was not out of love but out of fear that his father sent twenty-four of his best high-ranking soldiers after him in order to bring him back. It comes as no surprise that their order was to bring Velthandros back either willingly or by force (112–119, 195–199).

These twenty-four warriors were not only chosen for their military skills. They belonged to the Roman elite and were relatives of the emperor and subsequently of Velthandros (113). In another part of the romance, it is stated that these soldiers became relatives of the emperor by marriage (202–203). It could not be a coincidence that all twenty-four of the warriors were married to women of royal blood. It is safe to claim that a common practice is described here. What is not

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<sup>25</sup> These terms should be used with caution. For a discussion, see Coufalová Borhnová 2017: 5–16. For the virtues depicted here as shown in *βασιλικοί άνδριάντες*, see Karatolios 2021: 102–104.

clarified is if those men were aristocrats prior to the weddings, which is very possible, or not. It is, nevertheless, clearly stated that the newly created families were expecting to be honoured by the royal family (204).

While Velthandros roamed a foreign land, he had a vision (724), which led him to a castle, called *Ἐρωτόκαστρον*, meaning 'castle of love'. The regent of that place held a beauty contest so that Velthandros could choose a wife, despite the fact that he had no desire to get married and was at that moment not even aware that that was the purpose of the contest (531–536). The forty women taking part were all princesses, chosen for their figure and their beauty (525–528). Their beauty as a major virtue (543–544, 549) is repeated throughout the text and one cannot help but notice that this is the only virtue mentioned in relation to them. The contest began and Velthandros sorted out the women, stating each time what he thought detracted from their beauty, thus giving us an insight of what was considered beautiful in a woman in thirteenth-century Byzantium. Women were excluded because they were bleary-eyed (558), and also because of their big lips (562–563), their way of walking (567), their thick eyebrows (573), their kyphosis (578–579), their weight (584), their crooked teeth (591–592) and because they had hairs on their hands (620).

To the contrary, the chosen one, Chrysantza, was beautiful overall (675). She was young, had a nice figure with a straight posture and a beautiful face, and she moved her hips while she walked (644–645, 652–653, 710, 716–717). She was also fair-coloured (688–690) and had nice temples beneath her hair (693), black arched eyebrows (699–700), penetrating eyes that were capable of breaking one's heart (695–696, 715), a well-shaped nose (701) and mouth, and teeth that looked like pearls (702). Velthandros also liked the redness of her cheeks and lips (703), her round jaw (705), her white, tender arms (706), the shape of her neck (706, 709), her thin waist (707–708), and her breasts that he claimed could be noticed if someone looked carefully and which are described as a sensual paradise (713–714).

It is worth mentioning that Velthandros only examined the beauty of the women, and when he was down to the final three contestants, he made them do a catwalk (608–610). No questions are asked, and no discussion takes place apart from Velthandros justifying the exclusion of each one, while the women curse him as they depart. This

means that the primary factor for Velthandros to decide who is going to be his wife, as presented here, is beauty.<sup>26</sup>

One must not forget, however, that these were not just any women. Just like Velthandros was a son of an emperor, all of these women were also the daughters of kings. Therefore, the first criterion for their participation in the contest was their royal origin. The second criterion, beauty, is only implemented among these women that share this royal origin. Beyond that, nothing further is required of them. When it comes to Chrysantza, the reader is constantly reminded that she is the daughter of the king of Antioch (683, 736).

After this vision, Velthandros decides to go after what he saw in his dream because 'one cannot escape faith' (735–739). He moved to Antioch as fast as he could (745–746). Chrysantza also recognised him as the man of the vision (810–822) and the two fell in love.

What follows is described as a love affair. They formed a relationship which was only known to a chosen few and which extended for a period of two years and two months (827). After that, they decide to have sexual intercourse (860–864), only to be almost caught in the act by the Chrysantza's guardsmen (869–874). In order to avoid the consequences, Chrysantza comes up with a plan to let her servant Faidrokaza take the blame as the one who had an affair with Velthandros (904–905). Still, Velthandros had to be put on trial because the place that the intercourse happened was a garden that belonged to the princess (938–939, 951–952). The outcome of this trial was a marriage (966–970). Velthandros marries Faidrokaza, although this was a white marriage<sup>27</sup> (981–991), and Velthandros and Chrysantza continue their affair in secret (1013–1017, 1048–1056).

It is interesting to note that the fact that Velthandros was a prince was not enough for him and Chrysantza to reveal their affair (although it was obviously enough to satisfy the readers of the romance). One cannot help but wonder about the reasons behind that. A probable explanation could be the scandal of a princess not only having a secret affair but also being caught in the act of sexual intercourse prior to marriage.

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<sup>26</sup> Myrto Hatzaki offers a multifaceted discussion, albeit focused on men, on whether external beauty was perceived as a guarantee for internal beauty; see Hatzaki 2009: 38-48.

<sup>27</sup> Meaning that the two of them acted like a couple only in the presence of others.

After the marriage of Velthandros and Faidrokaza, everyone, including the king, expected to see the blood in her bedsheets as proof of the virginity of the maiden (1041–1046), which shows that sexual relationships before marriage could and would have caused a scandal.

Another thing to take into account is that, although both Velthandros and Chrysantza were of royal blood, their relationship was not part of an agreement between their fathers. Princes and princesses were expected to marry each other but not as the result of their own free will. Another piece of evidence of parental consent being crucial in Byzantine society for a couple to get married is found later in the text, when a Byzantine count meets Velthandros and Chrysantza and, without knowing their identity, assumed that they were husband and wife. He also assumes that they had run away in order to get married without the knowledge of their parents, which he strongly disapproves (1232–1236).

An interesting aspect in the marriage of Velthandros and Faidrokaza is that they both receive a dowry (993–997, 1021–1030): Velthandros from the king of Antioch since he was at his service, and Faidrokaza from Chrysantza, because she was her servant. Unfortunately, what this dowry consisted of is never exhibited, but the fact that they both got one, despite their gender, is different to Metochites' exclusive reference to dowries when it came to his daughters. Macrides, who studied the ecclesiastical register in the Vienna manuscript, which concerns the period for 1315-1402 with an emphasis in the years 1394-1401, states that property seemed to be flowing from the wife to the husband. She also argues that the *hypobolon*, the man's contribution to the marriage, had significantly decreased at this period.<sup>28</sup> While she mentions that there is contradicting information on this issue,<sup>29</sup> Metochites seems to be confirming this trend. The fact that Velthandros and Faidrokaza receive their dowries from their lords instead of their parents is also of some significance,

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<sup>28</sup> Macrides 1992: 89-98.

<sup>29</sup> Ruth Makrides states that due to the fact that the nature and the value of the property which was the man's contribution to the marriage are not easily defined from what is written in the ecclesiastical register, one must use caution. On top of that, there is a case from 1400 concerning Eirine Palaiologina and her son Alexios, where it is clearly stated that the contribution of the man was equal to that of the woman. Macrides 1992: 94.

although this could reflect the customs of a western kingdom, like the one of Antioch, and not of Byzantium.

In any case, Velthandros' and Chrysantza's secret affair went on for ten more months (1057) after the white marriage of Velthandros and Faidrokaza, before they fled out of fear of discovery (1060–1073). During their attempt to escape Antioch, Faidrokaza drowns in a river (1106), which is of course necessary for the plot because it left Velthandros with no wife, free to marry again.

As expected, the romance has a happy ending. On his way to Byzantium, Velthandros learns that his older brother had died and that his father did not wish to be emperor anymore (1251–1260). His father's approach to Velthandros had also changed and now he treated him with love (1320–1321). When the emperor found out that Chrysantza was the daughter of the king of Antioch (1314–1315), he was more than happy to let the couple marry and at the same time to make Velthandros king and Chrysantza queen (1330–1333).

Would things have been different if Chrysantza was not a princess? It is reasonable to believe so. Velthandros would not have met her in the first place and, even if he did, it is doubtful he would ever get into a relationship with her. One can easily conclude that the marriage of Velthandros and Chrysantza was one that secured the royal social status, as the marriage of Velthandros and Faidrokaza was one that perpetuated the social status of two people that were in the service of a royal family.

## **Conclusion**

Since the two texts belong to different genres, they allow their authors to express themselves in different ways. Metochites can be more straightforward. By claiming that the practice of gathering wealth to be given as a dowry in order for one to succeed in marrying his daughters to families with higher social status, he inserts an economic factor into the equation, even if he appears to condemn the practice. On the contrary, the author of *Velthandros and Chrysantza* can only have his characters speak for him through the plot of the romance.

What the story suggests is that, although beauty for both sexes is desirable and being a skilled warrior is good for a prince, and although love between a couple can also be a good thing, a marriage can only occur between people of the same social

class. When Velthandros is in the service of a foreign king, he can only marry the servant of the princess, but once he is restored to his rightful place and becomes king, he can then have the princess of Antioch as his wife. Furthermore, parental consent is essential for the arrangement of a wedding. These remarks lead to the conclusion that in the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries, the concept of marriage was directed at perpetuating the social status of Byzantine families.

It seems, however, that reality was somewhat different. Metochites states that the practice of finding a husband from a family of higher social status was widespread, even if condemnable, and moreover the author himself has done the same for his children. Furthermore, although marriage out of love is also condemned, the act of condemnation itself proves that this practice existed.

Summing up, although Metochites states, and the author of *Velthandros and Chrysantza* suggests, that marriage should be a means of social stability, practice shows that, on the contrary, it was often used as a means of social mobility.

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