

The Comparison of Pompey with Agesilaus

By Plutarch

Translated by John Dryden

Thus having drawn out the history of the lives of Agesilaus and Pompey, the next thing is to compare them; and in order to this, to take a cursory view, and bring together the points in which they chiefly disagree; which are these. In the first place, Pompey attained to all his greatness and glory by the fairest and justest means, owing his advancement to his own efforts, and to the frequent and important aid which he rendered Sylla, in delivering Italy from its tyrants. But Agesilaus appears to have obtained his kingdom, not without offence both towards gods and towards men, towards these, by procuring judgment of bastardy against Leotychides, whom his brother had declared his lawful son, and towards those, by putting a false gloss upon the oracle, and eluding its sentence against his lameness. Secondly, Pompey never ceased to display his respect for Sylla during his lifetime, and expressed

it also after his death, by enforcing the honourable interment of his corpse, in despite of Lepidus, and by giving his daughter in marriage to his son Faustus. But Agesilaus, upon a slight pretence, cast off Lysander with reproach and dishonour. Yet Sylla in fact had owed to Pompey services as much as Pompey ever received from him, whereas Lysander made Agesilaus King of Sparta and general of all Greece. Thirdly, Pompey's transgressions of right and justice in his political life were occasioned chiefly by his relations with other people, and most of his errors had some affinity, as well as himself to Caesar and Scipio, his fathers-in-law. But Agesilaus, to gratify the fondness of his son, saved the life of Sphodrias by a sort of violence, when he deserved death for the wrong he had done to the Athenians; and when Phoebidas treacherously broke the peace with Thebes, zealously abetted him for the sake, it was clear, of the unjust act itself. In short, what mischief soever Pompey might be said to have brought on Rome through compliance with the wishes of his friends or through inadvertency, Agesilaus may be said to have brought on Sparta out of obstinacy and malice, by kindling the Boeotian war. And if, moreover, we are to attribute any part of these disasters to some personal ill-fortune, attaching to the men themselves, in the case of Pompey, certainly the Romans had no reason to anticipate it. Whereas Agesilaus would

not suffer the Lacedaemonians to avoid what they foresaw and were forewarned must attend the "lame sovereignty." For had Leotychides been chargeable ten thousand times as foreign and spurious, yet the race of the Eurypontidae was still in being, and could easily have furnished Sparta with a lawful king that was sound in his limbs, had not Lysander darkened and disguised the true sense of the oracle in favour of Agesilaus.

Such a politic piece of sophistry as was devised by Agesilaus, in that great perplexity of the people as to the treatment to be given to those who had played the coward at the battle of Leuctra, when after that unhappy defeat he decreed that the laws should sleep for that day, it would be hard to find any parallel to; neither have we the fellow of it in all Pompey's story. But on the contrary, Pompey for a friend thought it no sin to break those very laws which he himself had made, as if to show at once the force of his friendship, and the greatness of his power; whereas Agesilaus, under the necessity, as it seemed, of either rescinding the laws, or not saving the citizens, contrived an expedient by the help of which the laws should not touch these citizens, and yet should not, to avoid it, be overthrown. Then I must commend it as an incomparable act of civil virtue and obedience

in Agesilaus, that immediately upon the receipt of the scytala, he left the wars in Asia and returned into his country. For he did not, like Pompey, merely advance his country's interest by acts that contributed at the same time to promote his own greatness, but looking to his country's good, for its sake laid aside as great authority and honour as ever any man had before or since, except Alexander the Great.

But now to take another point of view, if we sum up Pompey's military expeditions and exploits of war, the number of his trophies, and the greatness of the powers which he subdued, and the multitude of battles in which he triumphed, I am persuaded even Xenophon himself would not put the victories of Agesilaus in balance with his, though Xenophon has this privilege allowed him, as a sort of special reward for his other excellences, that he may write and speak, in favour of his hero, whatever he pleases. Methinks, too, there is a great deal of difference betwixt these men in their clemency and moderation towards their enemies. For Agesilaus, while attempting to enslave Thebes and exterminate Messene, the latter, his country's ancient associate, and Thebes, the mother-city of his own royal house, almost lost Sparta itself, and did really lose the government of Greece; whereas Pompey gave cities to those of the pirates who were willing to change their manner

of life; and when it was in his power to lead Tigranes, King of Armenia, in triumph, he chose rather to make him a confederate of the Romans, saying, that a single day was worth less than all future time. But if the pre-eminence in that which relates to the office and virtues of a general should be determined by the greatest and most important acts and counsels of war, the Lacedaemonian would not a little exceed the Roman. For Agesilaus never deserted his city, though it was besieged by an army of seventy thousand men, when there were very few soldiers within to defend it, and those had been defeated too, but a little before, at the battle of Leuctra. But Pompey, when Caesar, with a body only of fifty-three hundred men, had taken but one town in Italy, departed in a panic out of Rome, either through cowardice, when there were so few, or at least through a false and mistaken belief that there were more; and having conveyed away his wife and children, he left all the rest of the citizens defenceless, and fled; whereas he ought either to have conquered in fight for the defence of his country, or yielded upon terms to the conqueror, who was, moreover, his fellow-citizen and allied to him; but now to the same man to whom he refused a prolongation of the terms of his government, and thought it intolerable to grant another consulship, to him he gave the power, by letting him take the city, to tell Metellus, together with all the rest, that they

were his prisoners.

That which is chiefly the office of a general, to force the enemy into fighting when he finds himself the stronger, and to avoid being driven into it himself when he is the weaker, this excellence Agesilaus always displayed, and by it kept himself invincible; whereas in contending with Pompey, Caesar, who was the weaker, successfully declined the danger, and his own strength being in his land-forces, drove him into putting the conflict to issue with these, and thus made himself master of the treasure, stores, and the sea too, which were all in his enemy's hands, and by the help of which the victory could have been secured without fighting. And what is alleged as an apology in vindication of Pompey, is to a general of his age and standing the greatest of disgraces. For, granting that a young commander might by clamour and outcry be deprived of his fortitude and strength of mind, and weakly forsake his better judgment, and the thing be neither strange nor altogether unpardonable, yet for Pompey the Great, whose camp the Romans called their country, and his tent the senate, styling the consuls, praetors, and all other magistrates who were conducting the government at Rome by no better title than that of rebels and traitors, for him, whom they well knew never to have been under the command

of any but himself, having served all his campaigns under himself as sole general, for him upon so small a provocation as the scoffs of Favonius and Domitius, and lest he should bear the nickname of Agamemnon, to be wrought upon, and even forced to hazard the whole empire and liberty of Rome upon the cast of a die, was surely indeed intolerable. Who, if he had so much regarded a present infamy, should have guarded the city at first with his arms, and fought the battle in defence of Rome, not have left it as he did: nor while declaring his flight from Italy an artifice in the manner of Themistocles, nevertheless be ashamed in Thessaly of a prudent delay before engaging. Heaven had not appointed the Pharsalian fields to be the stage and theatre upon which they should contend for the empire of Rome, neither was he summoned thither by any herald upon challenge, with intimation that he must either undergo the combat or surrender the prize to another. There were many other fields, thousands of cities, and even the whole earth placed at his command, by the advantage of his fleet and his superiority at sea, if he would but have followed the examples of Maximus, Marius, Lucullus, and even Agesilaus himself, who endured no less tumults within the city of Sparta, when the Thebans provoked him to come out and fight in defence of the land, and sustained in Egypt also numerous calumnies, slanders, and suspicions on the part

of the king, whom he counselled to abstain from a battle. And thus following always what he had determined in his own judgment upon mature advice, by that means he not only preserved the Egyptians against their wills, not only kept Sparta, in those desperate convulsions, by his sole act, safe from overthrow, but even was able to set up trophies likewise in the city over the Thebans, having given his countrymen an occasion of being victorious afterwards by not at first leading them out, as they tried to force him to do, to their own destruction. The consequence was that in the end Agesilaus was commended by the very men, when they found themselves saved, upon whom he had put this compulsion, whereas Pompey, whose error had been occasioned by others, found those his accusers whose advice had misled him. Some indeed profess that he was deceived by his father-in-law Scipio, who, designing to conceal and keep to himself the greatest part of that treasure which he had brought out of Asia, pressed Pompey to battle, upon the pretence that there would be a want of money. Yet admitting he was deceived, one in his place ought not to have been so, nor should have allowed so slight an artifice to cause the hazard of such mighty interests. And thus we have taken a view of each, by comparing together their conduct and actions in war.

As to their voyages into Egypt, one steered his course thither out of necessity in flight; the other neither honourably, nor of necessity, but as a mercenary soldier, having enlisted himself into the service of a barbarous nation for pay, that he might be able afterwards to wage war upon the Greeks. And secondly, what we charge upon the Egyptians in the name of Pompey, the Egyptians lay to the charge of Agesilaus. Pompey trusted them and was betrayed and murdered by them; Agesilaus accepted their confidence and deserted them, transferring his aid to the very enemies who were now attacking those whom he had been brought over to assist.

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