

The Comparison of Poplicola with Solon

By Plutarch

Translated by John Dryden

There is something singular in the present parallel which has not occurred in any other of the lives; that the one should be the imitator of the other, and the other his best evidence. Upon the survey of Solon's sentence to Croesus in favour of Tellus's happiness, it seems more applicable to Poplicola; for Tellus, whose virtuous life and dying well had gained him the name of the happiest man, yet was never celebrated in Solon's poems for a good man, nor have his children or any magistracy of his deserved a memorial; but Poplicola's life was the most eminent amongst the Romans, as well for the greatness of his virtue as his power, and also since his death many amongst the distinguished families, even in our days, the Poplicolae, Messalae, and Valerii, after a lapse of six hundred years, acknowledge him as the fountain of their honour. Besides, Tellus, though keeping his

post and fighting like a valiant soldier, was yet slain by his enemies; but Poplicola, the better fortune, slew his, and saw his country victorious under his command. And his honours and triumphs brought him, which was Solon's ambition, to a happy end; the ejaculation which, in his verses against Mimnermus about the continuance of man's life, he himself made-

"Mourned let me die; and may I, when life ends, Occasion sighs and sorrows to my friends," is evidence to Poplicola's happiness; his death did not only draw tears from his friends and acquaintance, but was the object of universal regret and sorrow through the whole city, the women deplored his loss as that of a son, brother, or common father. "Wealth I would have," said Solon, "but wealth by wrong procure would not," because punishment would follow. But Poplicola's riches were not only justly his, but he spent them nobly in doing good to the distressed. So that if Solon was reputed the wisest man, we must allow Poplicola to be the happiest; for what Solon wished for as the greatest and most perfect good, this Poplicola had, and used and enjoyed to his death.

And as Solon may thus be said to have contributed to Poplicola's glory,

so did also Poplicola to his, by his choice of him as his model in the formation of republican institutions; in reducing, for example, the excessive powers and assumption of the consulship. Several of his laws, indeed, he actually transferred to Rome, as his empowering the people to elect their officers, and allowing offenders the liberty of appealing to the people, as Solon did to the jurors. He did not, indeed, create a new senate, as Solon did, but augmented the old to almost double its number. The appointment of treasurers again, the quaestors, has a like origin; with the intent that the chief magistrate should not, if of good character, be withdrawn from greater matters; or, if bad, have the greater temptation to injustice, by holding both the government and treasury in his hands. The aversion to tyranny was stronger in Poplicola; any one who attempted usurpation could, by Solon's law, only be punished upon conviction; but Poplicola made it death before a trial. And though Solon justly gloried, that, when arbitrary power was absolutely offered to him by circumstances, and when his countrymen would have willingly seen him accept it, he yet declined it; still Poplicola merited no less, who, receiving a despotic command, converted it to a popular office, and did not employ the whole legal power which he held. We must allow, indeed, that Solon was before Poplicola in observing that-

"A people always minds its rulers best
When it is neither humoured nor oppressed."

The remission of debts was peculiar to Solon; it was his great means for confirming the citizens' liberty; for a mere law to give all men equal rights is but useless, if the poor must sacrifice those rights to their debts, and, in the very seats and sanctuaries of equality, the courts of justice, the offices of state, and the public discussions, be more than anywhere at the beck and bidding of the rich. A yet more extraordinary success was, that, although usually civil violence is caused by any remission of debts, upon this one occasion this dangerous but powerful remedy actually put an end to the civil violence already existing, Solon's own private worth and reputation overbalancing all the ordinary ill-repute and discredit of the change. The beginning of his government was more glorious, for he was entirely original, and followed no man's example, and, without the aid of any ally, achieved his most important measures by his own conduct; yet the close of Poplicola's life was more happy and desirable, for Solon saw the dissolution of his own commonwealth, Poplicola maintained the state in good order to the civil wars. Solon, leaving his laws, as soon as he had made

them, engraved in wood, but destitute of a defender, departed from Athens; whilst Poplicola, remaining both in and out of office, laboured to establish the government. Solon, though he actually knew of Pisistratus's ambition, yet was not able to suppress it, but had to yield to usurpation in its infancy; whereas Poplicola utterly subverted and dissolved a potent monarchy, strongly settled by long continuance; uniting thus to virtues equal to those, and purposes identical with those of Solon, the good fortune and the power that alone could make them effective.

In military exploits, Daimachus of Plataea will not even allow Solon the conduct of the war against the Megarians, as was before intimated; but Poplicola was victorious in the most important conflicts, both as a private soldier and commander. In domestic politics, also, Solon, in play, as it were, and by counterfeiting madness induced the enterprise against Salamis; whereas Poplicola, in the very beginning, exposed himself to the greatest risk, took arms against Tarquin, detected the conspiracy, and, being principally concerned both in preventing the escape of and afterwards punishing the traitors, not only expelled the tyrants from the city, but extirpated their very hopes. And as, in cases calling for contest and resistance and manful opposition, he behaved with courage and resolution, so, in instances where peaceable

language, persuasion, and concession were requisite, he was yet more to be commended; and succeeded in gaining happily to reconciliation and friendship, Porsenna, a terrible and invincible enemy. Some may, perhaps, object that Solon recovered Salamis, which they had lost, for the Athenians; whereas Poplicola receded from part of what the Romans were at that time possessed of; but judgment is to be made of actions according to the times in which they were performed. The conduct of a wise politician is ever suited to the present posture of affairs; often by foregoing a part he saves the whole, and by yielding in a small matter secures a greater; and so Poplicola, by restoring what the Romans had lately usurped, saved their undoubted patrimony, and procured, moreover, the stores of the enemy for those who were only too thankful to secure their city. Permitting the decision of the controversy to his adversary, he not only got the victory, but likewise what he himself would willingly have given to purchase the victory, Porsenna putting an end to the war, and leaving them all the provision of his camp, from the sense of the virtue and gallant disposition of the Romans which their consul had impressed upon him.

THE END

