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THE COMPARISON OF ROMULUS WITH THESEUS

by Plutarch

translated by John Dryden

This is what I have learned of Romulus and Theseus, worthy of memory. It seems, first of all, that Theseus, out of his own free-will, without any compulsion, when he might have reigned in security at Troezen in the enjoyment of no inglorious empire, of his own motion affected great actions, whereas the other, to escape present servitude and a punishment that threatened him (according to Plato's phrase), grew valiant purely out of fear, and dreading the extremest inflictions, attempted great enterprises out of mere necessity. Again, his greatest action was only the killing of one King of Alba; while, as mere by-adventures and preludes, the other can name Sciron, Sinnis, Procrustes, and Corynetes; by reducing and killing of whom, he rid Greece of terrible oppressors, before any of them that were relieved knew who did it; moreover, he might without any trouble as well have gone to Athens by sea, considering he himself never was in the least injured by those robbers; whereas Romulus could not but be in trouble whilst Amulius lived. Add to this, the fact that Theseus, for no wrong done to himself, but for the sake of others, fell upon these villains; but Romulus and Remus, as long as they themselves suffered no ill by the tyrant, permitted him to oppress all others. And if it be a great thing to have been wounded in battle by the Sabines, to have killed King Acron, and to have conquered many enemies, we may oppose to these actions the battle with the Centaurs and the feats done against the Amazons. But what Theseus adventured, in offering himself voluntarily with young boys and virgins, as part of the tribute unto Crete, either to be a prey to a monster or a victim upon the tomb of Androgeus, or, according to the mildest form of the story, to live vilely and dishonourably in slavery to insulting and cruel men; it is not to be expressed what an act of courage, magnanimity, or justice to the public, or of love for honour and bravery, that was. So what methinks the philosophers did not ill define love to be the provision of the gods for the care and preservation of the young; for the love of Ariadne, above all, seems to have been the proper work and design of some god in order to preserve Theseus; and, indeed, we ought not to blame her for loving him, but rather wonder all men and women were not alike affected towards him; and if she alone were so, truly I dare pronounce her worthy of the love of a god, who was herself so great a lover of virtue and goodness, and the bravest man.

Both Theseus and Romulus were by nature meant for governors; yet neither lived up to the true character of a king, but fell off, and ran, the one into popularity, the other into tyranny, falling both into the same fault out of different passions. For a ruler's first aim is to maintain his office, which is done no less by avoiding what is unfit than by observing what is suitable. Whoever is either too remiss or too strict is no more a king or a governor, but either a demagogue or a despot, and so becomes either odious or contemptible to his subjects. Though certainly the one seems to be the fault of easiness and good-nature, the other of pride and severity.

If men's calamities, again, are not to be wholly imputed to fortune, but refer themselves to differences of character, who will acquit either Theseus of rash and unreasonable anger against his son, or Romulus against his brother? Looking at motives, we more easily excuse

the anger which a stronger cause, like a severer blow, provoked. Romulus, having disagreed with his brother advisedly and deliberately on public matters, one would think could not on a sudden have been put into so great a passion; but love and jealousy and the complaints of his wife, which few men can avoid being moved by, seduced Theseus to commit that outrage upon his son. And what is more, Romulus, in his anger, committed an action of unfortunate consequence; but that of Theseus ended only in words, some evil speaking, and an old man's curse; the rest of the youth's disasters seem to have proceeded from fortune; so that, so far, a man would give his vote on Theseus's part.

But Romulus has, first of all, one great plea, that his performances proceeded from very small beginnings; for both the brothers being thought servants and the sons of swine-herds, before becoming freemen themselves, gave liberty to almost all the Latins, obtaining at once all the most honourable titles, as destroyers of their country's enemies, preservers of their friends and kindred, princes of the people, founders of cities, not removers, like Theseus, who raised and compiled only one house out of many, demolishing many cities bearing the names of ancient kings and heroes. Romulus, indeed, did the same afterwards, forcing his enemies to deface and ruin their own dwellings, and to sojourn with their conquerors; but at first, not by removal, or increase of an existing city, but by foundation of a new one, he obtained himself lands, a country, a kingdom, wives, children, and relations. And, in so doing, he killed or destroyed nobody, but benefited those that wanted houses and homes and were willing to be of a society and become citizens. Robbers and malefactors he slew not; but he subdued nations, he overthrew cities, he triumphed over kings and commanders. As to Remus, it is doubtful by whose hand he fell; it is generally imputed to others. His mother he clearly retrieved from death, and placed his grandfather, who was brought under base and dishonourable vassalage, on the ancient throne of Aeneas, to whom he did voluntarily many good offices, but never did him harm even inadvertently. But Theseus, in his forgetfulness and neglect of the command concerning the flag, can scarcely, methinks, by any excuses, or before the most indulgent judges, avoid the imputation of parricide. And, indeed, one of the Attic writers, perceiving it to be very hard to make an excuse for this, feigns that Aegeus, at the approach of the ship, running hastily to the Acropolis to see what news, slipped and fell down, as if he had no servants, or none would attend him on his way to the shore.

And, indeed, the faults committed in the rapes of women admit of no plausible excuse in Theseus. First, because of the often repetition of the crime; for he stole Ariadne, Antiope, Anaxo the Troezenian, at last Helen, when he was an old man, and she not marriageable; she a child, and he at an age past even lawful wedlock. Then, on account of the cause; for the Troezenian, Lacedaemonian, and Amazonian virgins, beside that they were not betrothed to him, were not worthier to raise children by than the Athenian women, derived from Erechtheus and Cecrops; but it is to be suspected these things were done out of wantonness and lust. Romulus, when he had taken near eight hundred women, chose not all, but only Hersilia, as they say, for himself; the rest he divided among the chief of the city; and afterwards, by the respect and tenderness and justice shown towards them, he made it clear that this violence and injury was a commendable and politic exploit to establish a society; by which he intermixed and united both nations, and made it the foundation of after friendship and public stability. And to the reverence and love and constancy he established in matrimony, time can witness, for in two hundred and thirty years, neither any husband deserted his wife, nor any wife

her husband; but, as the curious among the Greeks can name the first case of parricide or matricide, so the Romans all well know that Spurius Carvilius was the first who put away his wife, accusing her of barrenness. The immediate results were similar; for upon those marriages the two princes shared in the dominion, and both nations fell under the same government. But from the marriages of Theseus proceeded nothing of friendship or correspondence for the advantage of commerce, but enmities and wars and the slaughter of citizens, and, at last, the loss of the city Aphidnae, when only out of the compassion of the enemy, whom they entreated and caressed like gods, they escaped suffering what Troy did by Paris. Theseus's mother, however, was not only in danger, but suffered actually what Hecuba did, deserted and neglected by her son, unless her captivity be not a fiction, as I could wish both that and other things were. The circumstances of the divine intervention, said to have preceded or accompanied their births, are also in contrast; for Romulus was preserved by the special favour of the gods; but the oracle given to Aegeus commanding him to abstain, seems to demonstrate that the birth of Theseus was not agreeable to the will of the gods.

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