



75 AD

THE COMPARISON OF TIBERIUS AND CAIUS GRACCHUS
WITH AGIS AND CLEOMENES

by Plutarch

translated by John Dryden

HAVING given an account severally of these persons, it remains only that we should take a view of them in comparison with one another.

As for the Gracchi, the greatest detractors and their worst enemies could not but allow that they had a genius to virtue beyond all other Romans, which was improved also by a generous education. Agis and Cleomenes may be supposed to have had stronger natural gifts, since, though they wanted all the advantages of good education, and were bred up in those very customs, manners, and habits of living which had for a long time corrupted others, yet they were public examples of temperance and frugality. Besides, the Gracchi, happening to live when Rome had her greatest repute for honour and virtuous actions, might justly have been ashamed, if they had not also left to the next generation the noble inheritance of the virtues of their ancestors. Whereas the other two had parents of different morals, and though they found their country in a sinking condition, and debauched, yet that did not quench their forward zeal to what was just and honourable.

The integrity of the two Romans, and their superiority to money, was chiefly remarkable in this: that in office and the administration of public affairs, they kept themselves from the imputation of unjust gain; whereas Agis might justly be offended if he had only that mean commendation given him, that he took nothing wrongfully from any man, seeing he distributed his own fortunes which, in ready money only, amounted to the value of six hundred talents, amongst his fellow-citizens. Extortion would have appeared a crime of a strange nature to him, who esteemed it a piece of covetousness to possess, though never so justly gotten, greater riches than his neighbours.

Their political actions, also, and the state revolutions they attempted, were very different in magnitude. The chief things in general that the two Romans commonly aimed at, were the settlement of cities and mending of highways; and, in particular, the boldest design which Tiberius is famed for, was the recovery of the public lands; and Caius gained his greatest reputation by the addition, for the exercise of judiciary powers, of three hundred of the order of knights to the same number of senators. Whereas the alteration which Agis and Cleomenes made was in a quite different kind. They did not set about removing partial evils and curing petty incidents of disease, which would have been (as Plato says) like cutting off one of the Hydra's heads, the very means to increase the number; but they instituted a thorough reformation, such as would free the country from all its grievances, or rather, to speak more truly, they reversed that former change which had been the cause of all their calamities, and so restored their city to its ancient state.

However, this must be confessed in the behalf of the Gracchi, that their undertakings were always opposed by men of the greatest influence. On the other side, those things which were first attempted by Agis, and afterwards consummated by Cleomenes, were supported by the great and glorious precedent of those ancient laws concerning frugality and levelling which they had themselves

received upon the authority of Lycurgus, and he had instituted on that of Apollo. It is also further observable, that from the actions of the Gracchi, Rome received no additions to her former greatness; whereas, under the conduct of Cleomenes, Greece presently saw Sparta exert her sovereign power over all Peloponnesus, and contest the supreme command with the most powerful princes of the time; success in which would have freed Greece from Illyrian and Gaulish violence, and placed her once again under the orderly rule of the sons of Hercules.

From the circumstances of their deaths, also, we may infer some difference in the quality of their courage. The Gracchi, fighting with their fellow-citizens, were both slain as they endeavoured to make their escape; Agis willingly submitted to his fate, rather than any citizen should be in danger of his life. Cleomenes, being shamefully and unjustly treated, made an effort toward revenge, but failing of that, generously fell by his own hand.

On the other side it must be said, that Agis never did a great action worthy a commander, being prevented by an untimely death. And as for those heroic actions of Cleomenes, we may justly compare with them that of Tiberius, when he was the first who attempted to scale the walls of Carthage, which was no mean exploit. We may add the peace which he concluded with the Numantines, by which he saved the lives of twenty thousand Romans, who otherwise had certainly been cut off. And Caius, not only at home, but in war in Sardinia, displayed distinguished courage. So that their early actions were no small argument that afterwards they might have rivalled the best of the Roman commanders, if they had not died so young.

In civil life, Agis showed a lack of determination; he let himself be baffled by the craft of Agesilaus, disappointed the expectations of the citizens as to the division of the lands, and generally left all the designs, which he had deliberately formed and publicly announced, unperformed and unfulfilled through a young man's want of resolution. Cleomenes, on the other hand, proceeded to effect the revolution with only too much boldness and violence, and unjustly slew the Ephors whom he might, by superiority in arms, have gained over to his party, or else might easily have banished, as he did several others of the city. For to use the knife, unless in the extremest necessity, is neither good surgery nor wise policy, but in both cases mere unskillfulness; and in the latter, unjust as well as unfeeling. Of the Gracchi, neither the one nor the other was the first to shed the blood of his fellow-citizens; and Caius is reported to have avoided all manner of resistance, even when his life was aimed at, showing himself always valiant against a foreign enemy, but wholly inactive in a sedition. This was the reason that he went from his own house unarmed, and withdrew when the battle began, and in all respects showed himself anxious rather not to do any harm to others, than not to suffer any himself. Even the very flight of the Gracchi must not be looked upon as an argument of their mean spirit, but an honourable retreat from endangering of others. For if they had stayed, they must either have yielded to those who assailed them, or else have fought them in their own defence.

The greatest crime that can be laid to Tiberius's charge was the deposing of his fellow tribune, and seeking afterwards a second tribuneship for himself. As for the death of Antyllius, it is falsely and unjustly attributed to Caius, for he was slain unknown to him, and much to his grief. On the contrary, Cleomenes (not to mention the murder of the Ephors) set all the slaves at liberty, and governed by himself alone in reality, having a partner only for show; having made choice of his brother Euclidas, who was one of the same family. He prevailed upon Archidamus, who was the right heir to

the kingdom of the other line, to venture to return home from Messene; but after his being slain, by not doing anything to revenge his death, confirmed the suspicion that he was privy to it himself. Lycurgus, whose example he professed to imitate, after he had voluntarily settled his kingdom upon Charillus, his brother's son, fearing lest, if the youth should chance to die by accident, he might be suspected for it, travelled a long time, and would not return again to Sparta until Charillus had a son, and an heir to his kingdom. But we have indeed no other Grecian who is worthy to be compared with Lycurgus, and it is clear enough that in the public measures of Cleomenes various acts of considerable audacity and lawlessness may be found.

Those, therefore, who incline to blame their characters may observe, that the two Grecians were disturbers even from their youth, lovers of contest, and aspirants to despotic power; that Tiberius and Caius by nature had an excessive desire after glory and honours. Beyond this, their enemies could find nothing to bring against them; but as soon as the contention began with their adversaries, their heat and passions would so far prevail beyond their natural temper, that by them, as by ill winds, they were driven afterwards to all their rash undertakings. What could be more just and honourable than their first design, had not the power and the faction of the rich, by endeavouring to abrogate that law, engaged them both in those fatal quarrels, the one, for his own preservation, the other, to revenge his brother's death, who was murdered without any law or justice?

From the account, therefore, which has been given, you yourself may perceive the difference; which if it were to be pronounced of every one singly, I should affirm Tiberius to have excelled them all in virtue; that young Agis had been guilty of the fewest misdeeds; and that in action and boldness Caius came far short of Cleomenes.

THE END