

75 AD

THE COMPARISON OF DEMETRIUS AND ANTONY

Plutarch
translated by John Dryden

Plutarch (46-120) - Greek biographer, historian, and philosopher, sometimes known as the encyclopaedist of antiquity. He is most renowned for his series of character studies, arranged mostly in pairs, known as "Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans" or "Parallel Lives." Demetrius and Antony Compared (75 AD) - Compares and contrasts the lives of Demetrius, a Greek ruler, and Antony, a Roman emperor

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AS both are great examples of the vicissitudes of fortune, let us first consider in what way they attained their power and glory. Demetrius hired a kingdom already won for him by Antigonus, the most powerful of the Successors, who, before Demetrius grew to be a man, traversed with his armies and subdued the greater part of Asia. Antony's father was well enough in other respects, but was no warrior, and could bequeath no great legacy of reputation to his son, who had the boldness, nevertheless, to take upon him the government, to which birth give him no claim, which had been held by Caesar, and became the inheritor of his great labours. And such power did he attain, with only himself to thank for it, that, in a division of the whole empire into two portions, he took and received the nobler one; and, absent himself, by his mere subalterns and lieutenants often defeated the Parthians, and drove the barbarous nations of the Caucasus back to the Caspian Sea. Those very things that procured him ill-repute bear witness to his greatness. Antigonus considered Antipater's daughter Phila, in spite of the disparity of her years, an advantageous match for Demetrius. Antony was thought disgraced by his marriage with Cleopatra, a queen superior in power and glory to all, except Arsaces, who were kings in her time. Antony was so great as to be thought by others worthy of higher things than his own desires.

As regards the right and justice of their aims at empire, Demetrius need not be blamed for seeking to rule a people that had always had a king to rule them. Antony, who enslaved the Roman people, just liberated from the rule of Caesar, followed a cruel and tyrannical object. His greatest and most illustrious work, his successful war with Brutus and Cassius, was done to crush the liberties of his country and of his fellow-citizens. Demetrius, till he was driven to extremity, went on, without intermission, maintaining liberty in Greece, and expelling the foreign garrisons from the cities; not like Antony, whose boast was to have slain in Macedonia those who had set up liberty in Rome. As for the profusion and magnificence of his gifts, one point for which Antony is lauded, Demetrius so far outdid them that what he gave to his enemies was far more than Antony ever gave to his friends. Antony was renowned for giving Brutus honourable burial; Demetrius did so to all the enemy's dead, and sent the prisoners back to Ptolemy with money and presents.

Both were insolent in prosperity, and abandoned themselves to luxuries and enjoyments. Yet it cannot be said that Demetrius, in his revellings and dissipations, ever let slip the time for action; pleasures with him attended only the superabundance of his ease, and his Lamia, like that of the fable, belonging only to his playful, half-waking, half-sleeping hours. When war demanded his attention, his spear was not wreathed with ivy, nor his helmet redolent of unguents; he did not come out to battle from the women's chamber, but, bushing the bacchanal shouts and putting an end to the orgies, he became at once, as Euripides calls it, "the minister of the unpriestly Mars; and, in short, he never once incurred disaster through indolence or self-indulgence. Whereas Antony, like Hercules in the picture where Omphale is seen removing his club and stripping him of his lion's skin, was over and over again disarmed by Cleopatra, and beguiled away, while great actions and enterprises of the first necessity fell, as it were, from his hands, to go with her to the seashore of Canopus and Taphosiris, and play about. And in the end, like another Paris, he left the battle to fly to her arms; or rather, to say the truth, Paris fled when he was already beaten; Antony fled first, and, following Cleopatra, abandoned his victory.

There was no law to prevent Demetrius from marrying several wives; from the time of Philip and Alexander it had become usual with Macedonian kings, and he did no more than was done by Lysimachus and Ptolemy. And those he married he treated honourably. But Antony, first of all, in marrying two wives at once, did a thing which no Roman had ever allowed himself; and then he drove away his lawful Roman wife to please the foreign and unlawful woman. And so Demetrius incurred no harm at all; Antony procured his ruin by his marriage. On the other hand, no licentious act of Antony's can be charged with that impiety which marks those of Demetrius. Historical writers tell us that the very dogs are excluded from the whole Acropolis because of their gross, uncleanly habits. The very Parthenon itself saw Demetrius consorting with harlots and debauching free women of Athens. The vice of cruelty, also, remote as it seems from the indulgence of voluptuous desires, must be attributed to him, who, in the pursuit of his pleasures, allowed or, to say more truly, compelled the death of the most beautiful and most chaste of the Athenians, who found no way but this to escape his violence. In one word, Antony himself suffered by his excesses, and other people by those of Demetrius.

In his conduct to his parents, Demetrius was irreproachable. Antony gave up his mother's brother, in order that he might have leave to kill Cicero, this itself being so cruel and shocking an act that Antony would hardly be forgiven if Cicero's death had been the price of this uncle's safety. In respect of breaches of oaths and treaties, the seizure of Artabazes, and the assassination of Alexander, Antony may urge the plea which no one denies to be true, that Artabazes first abandoned and betrayed him in Media; Demetrius is alleged by many to have invented false pretexts for his act, and not to have retaliated for injuries, but to have accused one whom he injured himself.

The achievements of Demetrius are all his own work. Antony's noblest and greatest victories were won in his absence by his lieutenants. For their final disasters they have both only to thank themselves; not, however, in an equal degree.

Demetrius was deserted, the Macedonians revolted from him; Antony deserted others, and ran away while men were fighting for him at the risk of their lives.

The fault to be found with the one is that he had thus entirely alienated the affections of his soldiers; the other's condemnation is that he abandoned so much love and faith as he still possessed. We cannot admire the death of either, but that of Demetrius excites our greater contempt. He let himself become a prisoner, and was thankful to gain a three years' accession of life in captivity. He was tamed like a wild beast by his belly, and by wine; Antony took himself out of the world in a cowardly, pitiful, and ignoble manner, but still in time to prevent the enemy having his person in their power.

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