

75 AD

THE COMPARISON OF LYSANDER WITH SYLLA

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." Lysander and Sylla Compared (75 AD) - Compares and contrasts the lives of Lysander, a Spartan military commander, and Sylla, a Roman general.

COMPARISON OF LYSANDER WITH SYLLA

HAVING completed this Life also, come we now to the comparison. That which was common to them both was that they were founders of their own greatness, with this difference, that Lysander had the consent of his fellow-citizens, in times of sober judgment, for the honours he received; nor did he force anything from them against their good-will, nor hold any power contrary to the laws.

“In civil strife e’en villains rise to fame.”

And so then at Rome, when the people were distempered, and the government out of order, one or other was still raised to despotic power; no wonder, then, if Sylla reigned, when the Glauciae and Saturnini drove out the Metelli, when sons of consuls were slain in the assemblies, when silver and gold purchased men and arms, and fire and sword enacted new laws and put down lawful opposition. Nor do I blame any one, in such circumstances, for working himself into supreme power, only I would not have it thought a sign of great goodness to be head of a state so wretchedly discomposed. Lysander, being employed in the greatest commands and affairs of state, by a sober and well-governed city, may be said to have had repute as the best and most virtuous man, in the best and most virtuous commonwealth. And thus, often returning the government into the hands of the citizens, he received it again as often, the superiority of his merit still awarding him the first place. Sylla, on the other hand, when he had once made himself general of an army, kept his command for ten years together, creating himself sometimes consul, sometimes proconsul, and sometimes dictator, but always remaining a tyrant.

It is true Lysander, as was said, designed to introduce a new form of government; by milder methods, however, and more agreeable to law than Sylla, not by force of arms, but persuasion, nor by subverting the whole state at once, but simply by amending the succession of the kings; in a way, moreover, which seemed the naturally just one, that the most deserving should rule, especially in a city which itself exercised command in Greece, upon account of virtue, not nobility.

For as the hunter considers the whelp itself, not the bitch, and the horsedealer the foal, not the mare (for what if the foal should prove a mule?), so likewise were that politician extremely out, who, in the choice of a chief magistrate, should inquire, not what the man

is, but how descended. The very Spartans themselves have deposed several of their kings for want of kingly virtues, as degenerated and good for nothing. As a vicious nature, though of an ancient stock, is dishonourable, it must be virtue itself, and not birth, that makes virtue honourable. Furthermore, the one committed his acts of injustice for the sake of his friends; the other extended his to his friends themselves. It is confessed on all hands, that Lysander offended most commonly for the sake of his companions, committing several slaughters to uphold their power and dominion; but as for Sylla, he, out of envy, reduced Pompey's command by land and Dolabella's by sea, although he himself had given them those places; and ordered Lucretius Ofella, who sued for the consulship as the reward of many great services, to be slain before his eyes, exciting horror and alarm in the minds of all men, by his cruelty to his dearest friends.

As regards the pursuit of riches and pleasures, we yet further discover in one a princely, in the other a tyrannical, disposition. Lysander did nothing that was intemperate or licentious, in that full command of means and opportunity, but kept clear, as much as ever man did, of that trite saying "Lions at home, but foxes out of doors;" and ever maintained a sober, truly Spartan, and well-disciplined course of conduct. Whereas Sylla could never moderate his unruly affections, either by poverty when young, or by years when grown old, but would be still prescribing laws to the citizens concerning chastity and sobriety, himself living all that time, as Sallust affirms, in lewdness and adultery. By these ways he so improverished and drained the city of her treasures, as to be forced to sell privileges and immunities to allied and friendly cities for money, although he daily gave up the wealthiest and the greatest families to public sale and confiscation. There was no end of his favours vainly spent and thrown away on flatterers; for what hope could there be, or what likelihood of forethought or economy, in his more private moments over wine, when, in the open face of the people, upon the auction of a large estate, which he would have passed over to one of his friends at a small price, because another bid higher, and the officer announced the advance, he broke out into a passion, saying: "What a strange and unjust thing is this, O citizens, that I cannot dispose of my own booty as I please!" But Lysander, on the contrary, with the rest of the spoil, sent home for public use even the presents which were made him. Nor do I comment him for it, for he, perhaps, by excessive liberality, did Sparta more harm than ever the other did Rome by rapine; I only use it as an argument of his indifference to riches. They exercised a

strange influence on their respective cities. Sylla, a profuse debauchee, endeavoured to restore sober living amongst the citizens; Lysander, temperate himself, filled Sparta with the luxury he disregarded. So that both were blameworthy, the one for raising himself above his own laws, the other for causing his fellow-citizens to fall beneath his own example. He taught Sparta to want the very things which he himself had learned to do without.

And thus much of their civil administration.

As for feats of arms, wise conduct in war, innumerable victories, perilous adventures, Sylla was beyond compare. Lysander, indeed, came off twice victorious in two battles by sea; I shall add to that the siege of Athens, a work of greater fame than difficulty. What occurred in Boeotia, and at Haliartus, was the result, perhaps, of ill fortune; yet it certainly looks like ill counsel, not to wait for the king's forces, which had all but arrived from Plataea, but out of ambition and eagerness to fight, to approach the walls at disadvantage, and so to be cut off by a sally of inconsiderable men. He received his death-wound, not as Cleombrotus, at Leuctra, resisting manfully the assault of an enemy in the field; not as Cyrus or Epaminondas, sustaining the declining battle, or making sure the victory; all these died the death of kings and generals; but he, as it had been some common skirmisher or scout, cast away his life ingloriously, giving testimony to the wisdom of the ancient Spartan maxim, to avoid attacks on walled cities, in which the stoutest warrior may chance to fall by the hand, not only of a man utterly his inferior, but by that of a boy or woman, as Achilles, they say, was slain by Paris in the gates.

As for Sylla, it were hard to reckon up how many set battles he won, or how many thousand he slew; he took Rome itself twice, as also the Athenian Piraeus, not by famine, as Lysander did, but by a series of great battles, driving Archelaus into the sea. And what is most important, there was a vast difference between the commanders they had to deal with. For I look upon it as an easy task, or rather sport, to beat Antiochus, Alcibiades's pilot, or to circumvent Philocles, the Athenian demagogue "Sharp only at the inglorious point of tongue," whom Mithridates would have scorned to compare with his groom, or Marius with his lictor. But of the potentates, consuls, commanders, and demagogues, to pass by all the rest who opposed themselves to Sylla, who amongst the Romans so formidable as Marius, what king more powerful than Mithridates? who of the Italians more warlike than Lamponius and Telesinus? yet of these, one he drove into banishment, one he quelled, and the others he slew.

And what is more important, in my judgment, than anything yet adduced, is that Lysander had the assistance of the state in all his achievements; whereas Sylla, besides that he was a banished person, and overpowered by a faction, at a time when his wife was driven from home, his houses demolished, adherents slain, himself then in Boeotia, stood embattled against countless numbers of the public enemy, and, endangering himself for the sake of his country, raised a trophy of victory; and not even when Mithridates came with proposals of alliance and aid against his enemies would he show any sort of compliance, or even clemency; did not so much as address him, or vouchsafe him his hand, until he had it from the king's own mouth that he was willing to quit Asia, surrender the navy, and restore Bithynia and Cappadocia to the two kings. Than which action Sylla never performed a braver, or with a nobler spirit, when preferring the public good to the private, and like good hounds, where he had once fixed, never letting go his hold, till the enemy yielded, then, and not until then, he set himself to revenge his own private quarrels. We may perhaps let ourselves be influenced, moreover, in our comparison of their characters, by considering their treatment of Athens.

Sylla, when he had made himself master of the city, which then upheld the dominion and power of Mithridates in opposition to him, restored her to liberty and the free exercise of her own laws; Lysander, on the contrary, when she had fallen from a vast height of dignity and rule, showed her no compassion, but abolishing her democratic government, imposed on her the most cruel and lawless tyrants.

We are now qualified to consider whether we should go far from the truth or no in pronouncing that Sylla performed the more glorious deeds, but Lysander committed the fewer faults, as, likewise, by giving to one the pre-eminence for moderation and self-control, to the other for conduct and valour.

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