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THE COMPARISON OF ARISTIDES WITH MARCUS CATO

by Plutarch

translated by John Dryden

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THE COMPARISON OF ARISTIDES WITH MARCUS CATO

HAVING mentioned the most memorable actions of these great men, if we now compare the whole life of the one with that of the other, it will not be easy to discern the difference between them, lost as it is amongst such a number of circumstances in which they resemble each other. If, however, we examine them in detail, as we might some piece of poetry, or some picture, we shall find this common to them both, that they advanced themselves to great honour and dignity in the commonwealth by no other means than their own virtue and industry. But it seems when Aristides appeared, Athens was not at its height of grandeur and plenty, the chief magistrates and officers of his time being men only of moderate and equal fortunes among themselves. The estimate of the greatest estates then was five hundred medimms; that of the second, or knights, three hundred; of the third and last call Zeugitae, two hundred. But Cato, out of a petty village from a country life, leaped into the commonwealth, as it were into a vast ocean; at a time when there were no such governors as the Curii, Fabricii, and Hostilii. Poor labouring men were not then advanced from the plough and spade to be governors and magistrates; but greatness of family, riches, profuse gifts, distributions, and personal application were what the city looked to; keeping a high hand, and, in a manner, insulting over those that courted preferment. It was not as great a matter to have Themistocles for an adversary, a person of mean extraction and small fortune (for he was not worth, it is said, more than four or five talents when he first applied himself to public affairs), as to contest with a Scipio Africanus, a Servius Galba, and a Quintius Flamininus, having no other aid but a tongue free to assert right.

Besides, Aristides at Marathon, and again at Plataea, was but one commander out of ten; whereas Cato was chosen consul with a single colleague, having many competitors, and with a single colleague, also, was preferred before seven most noble and eminent pretenders to be censor. But Aristides was never principal in any action; for Miltiades carried the day at Marathon, at Salamis, Themistocles, and at Plataea, Herodotus tells us, Pausanias got the glory of that noble victory: and men like Sophanes, and Aminias, Callimachus, and Cynaegyus, behaved themselves so well in all those engagements as to contest it with Aristides even for the second place. But Cato not only in his consulship was esteemed the chief in courage and conduct in the

Spanish war, but even whilst he was only serving as tribune at Thermopylae, under another's command, he gained the glory of the victory, for having, as it were, opened a wide gate for the Romans to rush in upon Antiochus, and for having brought the war on his back, whilst he only minded what was before his face. For that victory, which was beyond dispute all Cato's own work, cleared Asia out of Greece, and by that means made way afterwards for Scipio into Asia. Both of them, indeed, were always victorious in war; but at home Aristides stumbled, being banished and oppressed by the faction of Themistocles; yet Cato, notwithstanding he had almost all the chief and most powerful of Rome for his adversaries, and wrestled with them even to his old age, kept still his footing. Engaging also in many public suits, sometimes plaintiff, sometimes defendant, he cast the most, and came off clear with all; thanks to his eloquence, that bulwark and powerful instrument to which more truly, than to chance or his fortune, he owed it, that he sustained himself unhurt to the last. Antipater justly gives it as a high commendation to Aristotle, the philosopher, writing of him after his death, that among his other virtues, he was endowed with a faculty of persuading people which way he pleased.

Questionless, there is no perfecter endowment in man than political virtue, and of this Economics is commonly esteemed not the least part; for a city, which is a collection of private households, grows into a stable commonwealth by the private means of prosperous citizens that compose it. Lycurgus by prohibiting gold and silver in Sparta, and making iron, spoiled by the fire, the only currency, did not by these measures discharge them from minding their household affairs, but cutting off luxury, the corruption and tumour of riches, he provided there should be an abundant supply of all necessary and useful things for all persons, as much as any other lawmaker ever did; being more apprehensive of a poor, needy, and indigent member of a community, than of the rich and haughty. And in this management of domestic concerns, Cato was as great as in the government of public affairs; for he increased his estate, and became a master to others in economy and husbandry; upon which subjects he collected in his writings many useful observations. On the contrary Aristides, by his poverty, made justice odious, as if it were the pest and impoverisher of a family, and beneficial to all, rather than to those that were endowed with it. Yet Hesiod urges us alike to just dealing and care of our households, and inveighs against idleness as the origin of injustice; and Homer admirably says:

"Work was not dear, nor household cares to me,  
Whose increase rears the thriving family;  
But wellrigged ships were always my delight,  
And wars, and darts, and arrows of the fight:

as if the same characters carelessly neglected their own estates, and lived by injustice and rapine from others. For it is not as the physicians say of oil, that, outwardly applied, it is very wholesome, but taken inwardly detrimental, that thus a just man provides carefully for others, and is heedless of himself and his own affairs; but in this Aristides's political virtues seem to be defective; since, according to most authors, he took no care to leave his daughters a portion, or himself enough to defray his funeral charges: whereas Cato's family produced senators and generals to the fourth generation; his grandchildren, and their children, came to

the highest preferments. But Aristides, who was the principal man of Greece, through extreme poverty reduced some of his to get their living by jugglers' tricks, others, for want, to hold out their hands for public alms; leaving none means to perform any noble action, or worthy his dignity.

Yet why should this needs follow? since poverty is dishonourable not in itself, but when it is a proof of laziness, intemperance, luxury, and carelessness whereas in a person that is temperate, industrious, just, and valiant, and who uses all his virtues for the public good, it shows a great and lofty mind. For he has no time for great matters who concerns himself with petty ones; nor can he relieve many needs of others, who himself has many needs of his own. What most of all enables a man to serve the public is not wealth, but content and independence; which, requiring no superfluity at home, distracts not the mind from the common good. God alone is entirely exempt from all want: of human virtues, that which needs least is the most absolute and most divine. For as a body bred to a good habit requires nothing exquisite either in clothes or food, so a sound man and a sound household keep themselves up with a small matter. Riches ought to be proportioned to the use we have of them; for he that scrapes together a great deal, making use of but little, is not independent; for if he wants them not, it is folly in him to make provision for things which he does not desire; or if he does desire them, and restrains his enjoyment out of sordidness, he is miserable. I would fain know of Cato himself, if we seek riches that we may enjoy them, why is he proud of having a great deal, and being contented with little? But if it be noble, as it is, to feed on coarse bread, and drink the same wine with our hinds, and not to covet purple, and plastered houses, neither Aristides, nor Epaminondas, nor Manius Curius, nor Caius Fabricius wanted necessaries, who took no pains to get those things whose use they approved not. For it was not worth the while of a man who esteemed turnips a most delicate food, and who boiled them himself, whilst his wife made bread, to brag so often of a halfpenny, and write a book to show how a man may soonest grow rich; the very good of being contented with little is because it cuts off at once the desire and the anxiety for superfluities. Hence Aristides, it is told, said, on the trial of Callias, that it was for them to blush at poverty who were poor against their wills; they who like him were willingly so might glory in it. For it is ridiculous to think Aristides's neediness imputable to his sloth, who might fairly enough by the spoil of one barbarian, or seizing one tent, have become wealthy. But enough of this.

Cato's expeditions added no great matter to the Roman empire, which already was so great, as that in a manner it could receive no addition; but those of Aristides are the noblest, most splendid, and distinguished actions the Grecians ever did, the battles at Marathon, Salamis, and Plataea. Nor indeed is Antiochus, nor the destruction of the walls of the Spanish towns, to be compared with Xerxes, and the destruction by sea and land of so many myriads of enemies; in all of which noble exploits Aristides yielded to none, though he left the glory and the laurels, like the wealth and money, to those who needed and thirsted more greedily after them: because he was superior to those also. I do not blame Cato for perpetually boasting and preferring himself before all others, though in one of his orations he says that it is equally absurd to praise and dispraise one's self: yet he who does not so much as desire others' praises, seems to me more perfectly virtuous, than he who is always extolling

himself. A mind free from ambition is a main help to political gentleness; ambition, on the contrary, is hardhearted, and the greatest fomenter of envy; from which Aristides was wholly exempt; Cato very subject to it. Aristides assisted Themistocles in matters of highest importance, and, as his subordinate officer, in a manner raised Athens: Cato, by opposing Scipio, almost broke and defeated his expedition against the Carthaginians, in which he overthrew Hannibal, who till then was even invincible; and, at last, by continually raising suspicions and calumnies against him, he chased him from the city, and inflicted a disgraceful sentence on his brother for robbing the state.

Finally, that temperance which Cato always highly cried up, Aristides preserved truly pure and untainted. But Cato's marriage, unbecoming his dignity and age, is a considerable disparagement, in this respect, to his character. For it was not decent for him at that age to bring home to his son and his wife a young woman, the daughter of a common paid clerk in the public service: but whether it were for his own gratification or out of anger at his son, both the fact and the pretence were unworthy. For the reason he pretended to his son was false: for if he desired to get more as worthy children, he ought to have married a wellborn wife; not to have contented himself, so long as it was unnoticed, with a woman to whom he was not married; and, when it was discovered, he ought not to have chosen such a fatherinlaw as was easiest to be got, instead of one whose affinity might be honourable to him.

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