Plutarch: Lives of the noble Grecians and Romans

Plutarch

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Plutarch's Lives

The following are the names of the chapters. These names, in all capitals, are found only once in the text, at the start of the chapter.

THESEUS
ROMULUS
COMPARISON OF ROMULUS WITH THESEUS
LYCURGUS
NUMA POMPILIUS
COMPARISON OF NUMA WITH LYCURGUS
SOLON
POPLICOLA
COMPARISON OF POPLICOLA WITH SOLON
THEMISTOCLES
CAMILLUS
PERICLES
FABIUS
COMPARISON OF PERICLES WITH FABIUS
ALCIBIADES
CORIOLANUS
COMPARISON OF ALCIBIADES WITH CORIOLANUS
TIMOLEON
AEMILIUS PAULUS
COMPARISON OF TIMOLEON WITH AEMILIUS PAULUS
PELOPIDAS
MARCELLUS
COMPARISION OF PELOPIDAS WITH MARCELLUS
ARISTIDES

MARCUS CATO
COMPARISON OF ARISTIDES WITH MARCUS CATO.
PHILOPOEMEN
FLAMININUS
COMPARISON OF PHILOPOEMEN WITH FLAMININUS
PYRRHUS
CAIUS MARIUS
LYSANDER
SYLLA
COMPARISON OF LYSANDER WITH SYLLA
CIMON
LUCULLUS
COMPARISON OF LUCULLUS WITH CIMON
NICIAS
CRASSUS
COMPARISON OF CRASSUS WITH NICIAS
SERTORIUS
EUMENES
COMPARISON OF SERTORIUS WITH EUMENES
AGESILAUS
POMPEY
COMPARISON OF POMPEY AND AGESILAUS
ALEXANDER
CAESAR
PHOCION
CATO THE YOUNGER
AGIS
CLEOMENES

TIBERIUS GRACCHUS
CAIUS GRACCHUS
COMPARISON OF TIBERIUS AND CAIUS GRACCHUS WITH AGIS AND CLEOMENES
DEMOSTHENES
CICERO
COMPARISON OF DEMOSTHENES AND CICERO
DEMETRIUS
ANTONY
COMPARISON OF DEMETRIUS AND ANTONY
DION
MARCUS BRUTUS
COMPARISON OF DION AND BRUTUS
ARATUS
ARTAXERXES
GALBA
OTHO

Tom Trent
tomtrent@pobox.com
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THESEUS

As geographers, Sosius, crowd into the edges of their maps parts of the world which they do not know about, adding notes in the margin to the effect, that beyond this lies nothing but sandy deserts full of wild beasts, unapproachable bogs, Scythian ice, or a frozen sea, so, in

this work of mine, in which I have compared the lives of the greatest men with one another, after passing through those periods which probable reasoning can reach to and real history find a footing in, I might very well say of those that are farther off, Beyond this there is nothing but prodigies and fictions, the only inhabitants are the poets and inventors of fables; there is no credit, or certainty any farther. Yet, after publishing an account of Lycurgus the lawgiver and Numa the king, I thought I might, not without reason, ascend as high as to Romulus, being brought by my history so near to his time. Considering therefore with myself

Whom shall I set so great a man to face? Or whom oppose? who's equal to the place?

(as Aeschylus expresses it), I found none so fit as him that peopled the beautiful and far-famed city of Athens, to be set in opposition with the father of the invincible and renowned city of Rome. Let us hope that Fable may, in what shall follow, so submit to the purifying processes of Reason as to take the character of exact history. In any case, however, where it shall be found contumaciously slighting credibility, and refusing to be reduced to anything like probable fact, we shall beg that we may meet with candid readers, and such as will receive with indulgence the stories of antiquity.

Theseus seemed to me to resemble Romulus in many particulars. Both of them, born out of wedlock and of uncertain parentage, had the repute of being sprung from the gods.

Both warriors; that by all the world's allowed.

Both of them united with strength of body an equal vigor mind; and of the two most famous cities of the world the one built Rome, and

the other made Athens be inhabited. Both stand charged with the rape of women; neither of them could avoid domestic misfortunes nor jealousy at home; but towards the close of their lives are both of them said to have incurred great odium with their countrymen, if, that is, we may take the stories least like poetry as our guide to the truth.

The lineage of Theseus, by his father's side, ascends as high as to Erechtheus and the first inhabitants of Attica. By his mother's side he was descended of Pelops. For Pelops was the most powerful of all the kings of Peloponnesus, not so much by the greatness of his riches as the multitude of his children, having married many daughters to chief men, and put many sons in places of command in the towns round about him. One of whom named Pittheus, grandfather to Theseus, was governor of the small city of the Troezenians, and had the repute of a man of the greatest knowledge and wisdom of his time; which then, it seems, consisted chiefly in grave maxims, such as the poet Hesiod got his great fame by, in his book of Works and Days. And, indeed, among these is one that they ascribe to Pittheus,--

Unto a friend suffice A stipulated price;

which, also, Aristotle mentions. And Euripides, by calling Hippolytus " scholar of the holy Pittheus," shows the opinion that the world had of him.

Aegeus, being desirous of children, and consulting the oracle of Delphi, received the celebrated answer which forbade him the company of any woman before his return to Athens. But the oracle being so obscure as not to satisfy him that he was clearly forbid this, he went to Troezen, and communicated to Pittheus the voice of the god, which was in this manner,--

Loose not the wine-skin foot, thou chief of men, Until to Athens thou art come again.

Pittheus, therefore, taking advantage from the obscurity of the oracle, prevailed upon him, it is uncertain whether by persuasion or deceit, to lie with his daughter Aethra. Aegeus afterwards, knowing her whom he had lain with to be Pittheus's daughter, and suspecting her to be with child by him, left a sword and a pair of shoes, hiding them under a great stone that had a hollow in it exactly fitting them; and went away making her only privy to it, and commanding her, if she brought forth a son who, when he came to man's estate, should be able to lift up the stone and take away what he had left there, she should send him away to him with those things with all secrecy, and with injunctions to him as much as possible to conceal his journey from every one; for he greatly feared the Pallantidae, who were continually mutinying against him, and despised him for his want of children, they themselves being fifty brothers, all sons of Pallas.

When Aethra was delivered of a son, some say that he was immediately named Theseus, from the tokens which his father had put @ under the stone; others that he received his name afterwards at Athens, when Aegeus acknowledged him for his son. He was brought up under his grandfather Pittheus, and had a tutor and attendant set over him named Connidas, to whom the Athenians, even to this time, the day before the feast that is dedicated to Theseus, sacrifice a ram, giving this honor to his memory upon much juster grounds than to Silanio and Parrhasius, for making pictures and statues of Theseus. There being then a custom for the Grecian youth, upon their first coming to man's estate, to go to Delphi and offer first-fruits of their hair to the god, Theseus also went thither, and a

place there to this day is yet named Thesea, as it is said, from him. He clipped only the fore part of his head, as Homer says the Abantes did.% And this sort of tonsure was from him named Theseis. The Abantes first used it, not in imitation of the Arabians, as some imagine, nor of the Mysians, but because they were a warlike people, and used to close fighting, and above all other nations accustomed to engage hand to hand; as Archilochus testifies in these verses: --

Slings shall not whirl, nor many arrows fly,
When on the plain the battle joins; but swords,
Man against man, the deadly conflict try,
As is the practice of Euboea's lords
Skilled with the spear.--

Therefore that they might not give their enemies a hold by their hair, they cut it in this manner. They write also that this was the reason why Alexander gave command to his captains that all the beards of the Macedonians should be shaved, as being the readiest hold for an enemy.

Aethra for some time concealed the true parentage of Theseus, and a report was given out by Pittheus that he was begotten by Neptune; for the Troezenians pay Neptune the highest veneration. He is their tutelar god, to him they offer all their first-fruits, and in his honor stamp their money with a trident.

Theseus displaying not only great strength of body, but equal bravery, and a quickness alike and force of understanding, his mother Aethra, conducting him to the stone, and informing him who was his true father, commanded him to take from thence the tokens that Aegeus had left, and to sail to Athens. He without any difficulty set himself

to the stone and lifted it up; but refused to take his journey by sea, though it was much the safer way, and though his mother and grandfather begged him to do so. For it was at that time very dangerous to go by land on the road to Athens, no part of it being free from robbers and murderers. That age produced a sort of men, in force of hand, and swiftness of foot, and strength of body, excelling the ordinary rate, and wholly incapable of fatigue; making use, however, of these gifts of nature to no good or profitable purpose for mankind, but rejoicing and priding themselves in insolence, and taking the benefit of their superior strength in the exercise of inhumanity and cruelty, and in seizing, forcing, and committing all manner of outrages upon every thing that fell into their hands; all respect for others, all justice, they thought, all equity and humanity, though naturally lauded by common people, either out of want of courage to commit injuries or fear to receive them, yet no way concerned those who were strong enough to win for themselves. Some of these, Hercules destroyed and cut off in his passage through these countries, but some, escaping his notice while he was passing by, fled and hid themselves, or else were spared by him in contempt of their abject submission; and after that Hercules fell into misfortune, and, having slain Iphitus, retired to Lydia, and for a long time was there slave to Omphale, a punishment which he had imposed upon himself for the murder, then, indeed, Lydia enjoyed high peace and security, but in Greece and the countries about it the like villanies again revived and broke out, there being none to repress or chastise them. It was therefore a very hazardous journey to travel by land from Athens to Peloponnesus; and Pittheus, giving him an exact account of each of these robbers and villains, their strength, and

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