

WHETHER AN AGED MAN OUGHT TO MEDDLE IN
STATE AFFAIRS.

1. WE are not ignorant, O Euphanes, that you, being an extoller of Pindar, have often in your mouth this saying of his, as a thing well and to the purpose spoken by him :

When as the combat's once agreed,
Who by pretence seeks to be freed
Obscures his virtue quite.

But since sloth and effeminacy towards civil affairs, having many pretences, do for the last, as if it were drawn from the sacred line, tender to us old age, and thinking by this chiefly to abate and cool our honorable desire, allege that there is a certain decent dissolution, not only of the athletic, but also of the political period, or that there is in the revolution of our years a certain set and limited time, after which it is no more proper for us to employ ourselves in the conduct of the state than in the corporeal and robust exercises of youth ; I esteem myself obliged to communicate also to you those sentiments of mine concerning old men's intermeddling with public matters, which I am ever and anon ruminating on by myself ; so that neither of us may desert that long course we have to this day held together, nor rejecting the political life, which has been (as it were) an intimate friend of our own years, change it for another to which we are absolute strangers, and with which we have not time to become acquainted and familiar, but that we may persist in what we had chosen and have been inured to from the beginning, putting the same

conclusion to our life and our living honorably ; unless we would, by the short space of life we have remaining, disgrace that longer time we have already lived, as having been spent idly and in nothing that is commendable. For tyranny is not an honorable sepulchre, as one told Dionysius, whose monarchy, obtained by and administered with injustice, did by its long continuance bring on him but a more perfect calamity ; as Diogenes afterwards let his son know, when, seeing him at Corinth, of a tyrant become a private person, he said to him : “ How unworthy of thyself, Dionysius, thou actest ! For thou oughtest not to live here at liberty and fearless with us, but to spend thy life, as thy father did, even to old age, immured within a tyrannical fortress.” But the popular and legal government of a man accustomed to show himself no less profitable in obeying than in commanding is an honorable monument, which really adds to death the glory accruing from life. For this thing, as Simonides says, “ goes last under the ground ; ” unless it be in those in whom humanity and the love of honor die first, and whose zeal for goodness sooner decays than their covetousness after temporal necessities ; as if the soul had its active and divine parts weaker than those that are passive and corporeal ; which it were neither honest to say, nor yet to admit from those who affirm that only of gaining we are never weary. But we ought to turn to a better purpose the saying of Thucydides, and believe that it is not the desire of honor only that never grows old,* but much more also the inclinations to society and affection to the state, which continue even in ants and bees to the very last. For never did any one know a bee to become by age a drone, as some think it requisite of statesmen, of whom they expect that, when the vigor of their youth is past, they should retire and sit mouldy at home, suffering their active virtue to be consumed by idle-

* Thuc. II. 44.

ness, as iron is by rust. For Cato excellently well said, that we ought not willingly to add the shame proceeding from vice to those many afflictions which old age has of its own. For of the many vices everywhere abounding, there is none which more disgraces an old man than sloth, delicacy, and effeminateness, when, retiring from the court and council, he mews himself up at home like a woman, or getting into the country oversees his reapers and gleaners; for of such a one we may say,

Where's Oedipus, and all his famous riddles ?

But as for him who should in his old age, and not before, begin to meddle with public matters, — as they say of Epimenides, that having fallen asleep while he was a young man, he awakened fifty years after, — and shaking off so long and so close-sticking a repose, should thrust himself, being unaccustomed and unexercised, into difficult and laborious employs, without having been experienced in civil affairs, or inured to the conversations of men, such a man may perhaps give occasion to one that would reprehend him, to say with the prophetess Pythia

Thou com'st too late,

seeking to govern in the state and rule the people, and at an unfit hour knocking at the palace gate, like an ill-bred guest coming late to a banquet, or a stranger, thou wouldst change, not thy place or region, but thy life for one of which thou hast made no trial. For that saying of Simonides,

The state instructs a man,

is true in those who apply themselves to the business of the commonweal whilst they have yet time to be taught, and to learn a science which is scarce attained with much labor through many strugglings and negotiations, even when it timely meets with a nature that can easily undergo toil and difficulty. These things seem not to be

impertinently spoken against him who in his old age begins to act in the management of the state.

2. And yet, on the contrary, we see how young men and those of unripe years are by persons of judgment diverted from meddling in public matters; and the laws also testify the same, when by the crier in the assemblies they summon not first the men like Alcibiades and Pytheas to come to the desk, but those who have passed the age of fifty years, to make speeches and consult together for the good of the people. For the being unused to boldness and the want of experience are not so much to every soldier. . . .

[Here is a defect in the original.]

But Cato, when above eighty years of age he was to plead his own cause, said, that it was a difficult thing for a man to make his apology and justify his life before others than those with whom he had lived and been conversant.

All men indeed confess, that the actions of Augustus Caesar, when he had defeated Antony, were no less royal and useful to the public towards the end of his life, than any he had done before. And himself severely reprehending the dissoluteness of young men by establishing good customs and laws, when they raised an uproar, he only said to them: Young men, refuse not to hear an old man, to whom old men not unwillingly gave ear when he was young. The government also of Pericles exerted itself with most vigor in his old age, when he both persuaded the Athenians to make war, and at another time, when they were eagerly bent unseasonably to go forth and fight sixty thousand armed men withstood and hindered them, sealing up in a manner the arms of the people and the keys of the gates. Now as for what Xenophon has written of Agesilaus, it is fit it should be set down in his own words. "What youth," says he, "was ever so gallant but that his old age surpassed it? Who was ever so terrible to

his enemies in the very flower of his virility, as Agesilaus in the declension of his days? At whose death were adversaries ever seen more joyful than at that of Agesilaus, though he departed not this life till he was stooping under the burden of his years? Who more emboldened his confederates than Agesilaus, though being at the utmost period of his life? What young man was ever missed more by his friends than Agesilaus, who died not till he was very old?"

3. Age then hindered not these men from performing such gallant actions; and yet we, forsooth, being at our ease in states which have neither tyranny, war, nor siege to molest them, are afraid of such bloodless debates and emulations, as are for the most part terminated with justice only by law and words; confessing ourselves by this not only worse than those ancient generals and statesmen, but even than poets, sophisters, and players. Since Simonides in his old age gained the victory by his choral songs, as the epigram testifies in these concluding verses:

Fourscore years old was Leoprepes' son,
Simonides, when he this glory won.

And it is said of Sophocles, that, to avoid being condemned of dotage at the instance of his children, he repeated the entrance song of the Chorus in his tragedy of Oedipus in Colonus, which begins thus:

Welcome, stranger, come in time
To the best place of this clime,
White Colonus, which abounds
With brave horses. In these grounds,
Spread with Nature's choicest green,
Philomel is often seen.
Here she her hearers charms with sweetest lays,
Whilst with shrill throat
And warbling note
She moans the sad misfortunes of her former days:*

and that, this song appearing admirable, he was dismissed

* Soph. Oed. Colon. 668.

from the court, as from the theatre, with the applause and acclamations of all that were present. And this short verse is acknowledged to be written of him :

When Sophocles framed for Herodotus
This ode, his years were fifty-five.

Philemon also the comedian and Alexis were snatched away by death, whilst they were acting on the stage and crowned with garlands. And as for Polus the tragedian, Eratosthenes and Philochorus related of him that, being seventy years of age, he a little before his death acted in four days eight tragedies.

4. Is it not then a shame, that those who have grown old in councils and courts of judicature should appear less generous than such as have spent their years on the stage, and forsaking those exercises which are really sacred, cast off the person of the statesman, to put on instead of it I know not what other? For to descend from the state of a prince to that of a ploughman is all over base and mean. For since Demosthenes says that the *Paralus*, being a sacred galley, was unworthily used in being employed to carry timber, pales, and cattle to *Midias*; would not a man who should, after his having quitted the office of superintendent at the public solemnities, governor of *Boeotia*, or president in the council of the *Amphictyons*, be seen measuring of corn, weighing of raisins, and bargaining about fleeces and wool-fells, — would not such a one, I say, wholly seem to have brought on himself, as the proverb has it, the old age of a horse, without any one's necessitating him to it? For to set one's self to mechanical employments and trafficking, after one has borne office in the state, is the same as if one should strip a well-bred virtuous gentlewoman out of her matron-like attire, and thrust her with an apron tied about her into a public victualling-house. For the dignity and greatness of political virtue is overthrown, when it is debased to such mean

administrations and traffics for gain. But if (which is the only thing remaining) they shall, by giving effeminacies and voluptuousness the name of living at quiet and enjoying one's self, exhort a statesman leisurely to waste away and grow old in them, I know not to which of the two shameful pictures his life will seem to have the greater resemblance, — whether to the mariners who, leaving their ship for the future not in the harbor but under sail, spend all their time in celebrating the feasts of Venus; or to Hercules, whom some painters merrily but yet ridiculously represent wearing in Omphale's palace a yellow petticoat, and giving himself up to be boxed and combed by the Lydian damsels. So shall we, stripping a statesman of his lion's-skin, and seating him at a luxurious table, there be always cloying his palate with delicacies, and filling his ears with effeminate songs and music; being not a whit put to the blush by the saying of Pompey the Great to Lucullus, who after his public services both in camp and council, addicted himself to bathing, feasting, conversing with women in the day, and much other dissoluteness, even to the raising and extravagantly furnishing of sumptuous buildings, and who, once upbraiding Pompey with an ambition and desire of rule unsuitable to his age, was by him answered, that it was more misbecoming an old man to live voluptuously than to govern? The same Pompey, when in his sickness his physican had prescribed him the eating of a thrush, which was then hard to be got, as being out of season, being told that Lucullus bred great store of such birds, would not send to him for one, but said: What! Cannot Pompey live, unless Lucullus be luxurious?

5. For though Nature seeks by all means to delight and rejoice herself, yet the bodies of old men are incapacitated for all pleasures, except a few that are absolutely necessary. For not only

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