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Montaigne's Essays

In Three Books. With Notes and Quotations. And an Account of The Author's Life ; With a short Character of the Author and Translator, by the late Marquis of Halifax; With the Addition of A Complete Table to each Volume

Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de

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Chap. 35. Of the Custom of wearing Clothes.

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times persecutes to the last Degree, from the Danger of Necessity; and at least place them in such a Condition, that they must be very hard to please, if they were not contented. My Father in his oeconomic Government had this Order, (which I know how to commend, but by no Means imitate,) which was, that besides the Day-book, or Memorial of the Household-Affairs, where the small Accounts, Payments and Disbursements, which do not require a Secretary's Hand, were entred, and which a Bailiff always had in Custody; he ordered him whom he kept to write for him, to keep a Paper Journal, and in it, to set down all the remarkable Occurrences, and Day by Day the Memoirs of the Histories of his House; very pleasant to look over, when Time begins to wear Things out of Memory, and very useful sometimes to put us out of Doubt, when such a Thing was begun, when ended, what Courses were debated on, what concluded; our Voyages, Absences, Marriages, and Deaths, the Reception of good or ill News; the Change of principal Servants, and the like. An ancient Custom, which I think it would not be amiss for every one to revive in his own House; and I find I did very foolishly in neglecting the same.



C H A P. XXXV.

Of the Custom of wearing Clothes.

Whatever I shall say upon this Subject, I am of Necessity to invade some of the Bounds of Custom, so careful has she been to shut up all the Avenues. I was disputing with myself in this shivering Season, whether the Fashion of going naked in those Nations lately discovered, is imposed upon them, by the hot Temperature of the Air, as we say of the *Moors* and *Indians*, or whether it be the original Fashion of Mankind; Men of Understanding, forasmuch as all Things under the Sun, as the Holy Writ declares, are subject to the same Laws, were wont in such Considerations as these, where we are to distinguish

VOL. I.

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the natural Laws from those that have been imposed by Man's Invention, to have Recourse to the general Polity of the World, where there can be nothing counterfeited. Now all other Creatures being sufficiently furnished with all Things necessary for the Support of their Being, it is not to be imagined, that we only should be brought into the World in a defective and indigent Condition, and in such an Estate as cannot subsist without foreign Assistance; and therefore it is that I believe, that as Plants, Trees, and Animals, and all Things that have Life, are seen to be by Nature sufficiently clothed and covered, to defend them from the Injuries of Weather,

*Proptereaque ferè res omnes, aut corio sunt,
Aut seta, aut conchis, aut callo, aut cortice tectæ*.*

Moreover all Things, or with Skin or Hair,
Or Shell, or Bark, or Callous clothed are.

so were we: But as those who by artificial Light put out that of the Day, so we by borrowed Forms and Fashions have destroy'd our own. And 'tis plain enough to be seen, that 'tis Custom only which renders that impossible, that otherwise is nothing so; for of those Nations who have no Manner of Knowledge of Clothing, some are situated under the same Temperature that we are, and some in much colder Climates. And besides, our most tender Parts are always exposed to the Air, as the Eyes, Mouth, Nose and Ears; and our Country Labourers, like our Ancestors in former Times, go with their Breasts and Bellies open. Had we been born with a Necessity upon us of wearing Petticoats and Breeches, there is no Doubt, but Nature would have fortified those Parts she intended should be exposed to the Fury of the Seasons, with a thicker Skin, as she has done the Fingers Ends, and the Soles of the Feet. And why should this seem hard to believe? I observe much greater Distance betwixt my Habit, and that of one of our Country Peasants, than betwixt his and a Man that has no other Covering but his Skin. How many Men, especially

* *Lucret. l. 4.*

in *Turky*, go naked merely upon Account of Devotion? I know not who would ask a Beggar, whom he should see in his Shirt in the Depth of Winter, as brisk and frolick as he who goes muffled up to the Ears in Furs, how he is able to endure to go so? Why, Sir, he might answer you, you go with your Face bare, and I am all Face. The *Italians* have a Story of the Duke of *Florence's* Fool, whom his Master asking, *How being so thin clad, he was able to support the Cold, when he himself, warm wrapt up as he was, was hardly able to do it?* Why, reply'd the Fool, *use my Receipt, to put on all the Cloibes you have at once, and you'll feel no more Cold than I.* King *Massinissa* to an extreme old Age could never be prevailed upon to go with his Head covered, how cold, stormy, or rainy soever the Weather might be: Which also is reported of the Emperor *Severus*. *Herodotus* tells us, that in the Battles fought betwixt the *Aegyptians* and the *Persians*, it was observed, both by himself and others, that of those who were left dead upon the Place, the Heads of the *Aegyptians* were found to be, without Comparison, harder than those of the *Persians*, by Reason that the last had gone with their Heads always covered from their Infancy, first, with Biggins, and then with Turbans, and the others always shaved and open. And King *Agessilaus* observed to a decrepid Age, to wear always the same Clothes in Winter that he did in Summer. *Cæsar*, says *Suetonius*, marched always at the Head of his Army for the most Part on Foot, with his Head bare, whether it was Rain or Sun-shine, and as much is said of *Hannibal*,

*Tum vertice nudo,
Excipere insanos imbres, Cœlique ruinam*.*

Bare Head to march in Snow, and when it pours
Whole Cataracts of cold unwholesom Showers.

A *Venetian*, who has long lived in *Pegu*, and is lately returned from thence, writes, that the Men and Women of that Kingdom, though they cover all their other Parts, go always bare Foot, and ride so too. And *Plato* does very

* *Silius It. l. 6. 1.*

earnestly advise, for the Health of the whole Body, to give the Head and the Feet no other Clothing than what Nature has bestowed. He whom the *Poles* have elected for their King, since our's left them, who is indeed one of the greatest Princes of this Age, never wears any Gloves, and for Winter, or whatever Weather can come, never wears any other Cap Abroad, than the same he wears at Home. Whereas I cannot endure to go unbuttoned or untied; our neighbouring Labourers would think themselves in Chains if they were so braced. *Varro* is of Opinion, that when it was ordained, we should be bare in the Presence of the Gods, and before the Magistrate, it was rather so ordered upon the Score of Health, and to inure us to the Injuries of Weather, than upon the Account of Reverence. And since we are now talking of Cold, and *Frenchmen* used to wear Variety of Colours, (not I myself, for I seldom wear other than black or white, in Imitation of my Father) let us add another Story of Capt. *Martin du Bellay*, who affirms, that in the Journey of *Luxemburg*; he saw such a great Frost, that the Ammunition-Wine was cut with Hatchets and Wedges, was delivered out to the Soldiers by Weight, and that they carried it away in Baskets: And *Ovid*,

*Nudaque consistunt formam servantia testæ
Vina, nec hausta meri, sed data frustra bibunt*;*

The Wine
Stript of it's Cask, retains the Figure still,
Nor do they Draughts, but Crufts of *Bacchus* swill.

At the Mouth of the Lake *Mæotis*, the Frosts are so very sharp, that in the very same Place where *Mitbridates*'s Lieutenant had fought the Enemy dry-foot, and given them a notable Defeat, the Summer following he obtained over them a famous naval Victory. The *Romans* fought at a very great Disadvantage, in the Engagement they had with the *Carthaginians* near *Placentia*, by Reason, that they went on to charge with their Blood fixed, and their Limbs

* *Ovid. Trist. l. 3. El. 12.*

numbed with Cold. Whereas *Hannibal* had caused great Fires to be dispersed quite through his Camp to warm his Soldiers, and Oil to be distributed amongst them; to the End, that anointing themselves, they might render their Nerves more supple and active, and fortify the Pores against the Violence of the Air, and freezing Wind that raged in that Season. The Retreat the *Greeks* made from *Babylon* into their own Country, is famous for the Difficulties and Calamities they had to overcome. Of which this was one, that being encountered in the Mountains of *Armenia*, with a horrible Storm of Snow, they lost all Knowledge of the Country, and of the Ways, and being driven up, were a Day and a Night without eating or drinking, most of their Cattle died, many of themselves starved dead, several struck blind with the Driving, and the Glittering of the Snow, many of them maimed in their Fingers and Toes, and many stiff and motionless with the Extremity of the Cold, who yet had their Understanding entire. *Alexander* saw a Nation, where they bury the Fruit-Trees in Winter, to defend them from being destroy'd by the Frost, and we also may see the same. But concerning Clothes, the King of *Mexico* changed his Apparel four Times a Day, and never put them on more, employing those he left off, in his continual Liberalities and Rewards; nor was either Pot, Dish, or other Utensil of his Kitchen or Table, ever served in twice.

