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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**

**London, 1743**

Chap. 36. Of Cato the younger.

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## C H A P. XXXVI.

*Of Cato the Younger.*

I Am not guilty of the common Error of judging another by myself. I easily believe that in another's Humour which is contrary to my own: And though I find myself engaged to one certain Form, I do not oblige others to it, as many do; but believe and apprehend a thousand Ways of Living, and contrary to most Men, more easily admit of Differences and Uniformity amongst us. I as frankly, as any one would have me, discharge a Man from my Humours and Principles, and consider him according to his own particular Model. Though I am not continent myself, I nevertheless sincerely love, and approve the Continency of the *Capuchins*, and other religious Orders, and highly commend their Way of Living. I insinuate myself by Imagination into their Place and Love, and honour them the more, for being other than I am. I very much desire, that we may be censured every Man by himself, and would not be drawn into the Consequence of common Examples. My Weakness does nothing alter the Esteem I ought to have of the Force and Vigour of those who deserve it. *Sunt qui nihil suadent, quam quod, se imitari posse confidunt* \*. There are those who persuade nothing but what they believe they can imitate themselves. Crawling upon the Slime of the Earth, I do not for all that cease to observe up in the Clouds the inimitable Height of some heroick Souls: 'Tis a great deal for me to have my Judgment regular and right, if the Effects cannot be so, and to maintain this sovereign Power at least free from Corruption: 'Tis something to have my Will right and good, where my Legs fail me. This Age wherein we live, in our Part of the

\* *Cicero de Orat.*



World at least, is grown so stupid, that not only Exercise, but the very Imagination of Virtue is defective, and seems to be no other but College-Fashion.

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*Virtutem verba putant, ut  
Lucum ligna\*.*

Words finely couch'd, these Men for Virtue take,  
As if each Word a sacred Grove could make.

*Quam vereri deberent, etiam si percipere non possent †.* Which they ought to reverence, though they cannot comprehend. 'Tis a new Gew-gaw to hang in a Cabinet, or at the End of the Tongue, as on the Tip of the Ear, for Ornament only. There are no more virtuous Actions extant, and those Actions that carry a Shew of Virtue, have yet nothing of it's Essence; by Reason, that Profit, Glory, Fear and Custom, and other such like foreign Causes, put us in the Way to produce them. Our Justice also, Valour and good Offices, may then be called so too, in Respect to others, and according to the Face they appear with to the Publick; but in the Doer it can by no Means be Virtue, because there is another End propos'd, another moving Cause. Now Virtue owns nothing to be her's, but what is done by herself, and for herself alone. In that great Battle of *Potidæa*, which the *Greeks*, under the Command of *Pausanias*, obtained against *Mardonius*, and the *Persians*, the Conquerors, according to their Custom, coming to divide amongst them the Glory of the Exploit, they attributed to the *Spartan* Nation the Pre-eminence of Valour in this Engagement. The *Spartans*, great Judges of Virtue, when they came to determine to what particular Man of their Nation the Honour was due, of having best behaved himself upon this Occasion, found that *Aristodemus* had, of all others, hazarded his Person with the greatest Bravery; but did not however allow him any Prize or Reward, by Reason that his Virtue had been incited by a Desire to clear his Reputation from the Reproach of his Miscarriage at the

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\* *Horace Ep. 6. l. 1.* † *Cicero Tus. 1.*



Business of *Thermopylae*, and with a Desire to die bravely, to wipe off that former Blemish. Our Judgments are yet sick, and obey the Humour of our depraved Manners. I observe most of the Wits of these Times pretend to Ingenuity, by endeavouring to blemish and darken the Glory of the bravest and most generous Actions of former Ages, putting one vile Interpretation or another upon them, and forging and supposing vain Causes and Motives for those noble Things they performed. A mighty Subtily indeed! Give me the greatest and most unblemished Action that ever the Day beheld, and I will contrive a hundred plausible Drifts and Ends to obscure it: God knows, whoever will stretch them out to the full, what Diversity of Images our internal Wills do suffer under; they do not so maliciously play the Censurers, as they do it ignorantly and rudely in all their Detractions. The same Pains and Licence that others take to blemish and bespatter these illustrious Names, I would willingly undergo to lend them a Shoulder to raise them higher. These rare Images, that are cull'd out by the Consent of the wisest Men of all Ages, for the World's Example, I should endeavour to honour anew, as far as my Invention would permit, in all the Circumstances of favourable Interpretation. And we are to believe, that the Force of our Invention is infinitely short of their Merit. 'Tis the Duty of good Men to draw Virtues as beautiful as they can, and there would be no Indecency in the Case, should our Passion a little transport us in Favour of so sacred a Form. What these People do to the contrary, they either do out of Malice, or by the Vice of confining their Belief to their own Capacity; or, which I am more inclined to think, for not having their Sight strong, clear, and elevated enough, to conceive the Splendor of Virtue in her native Purity: As *Plutarch* complains, that in his Time some attributed the Cause of the younger *Cato's* Death to his Fear of *Caesar*, at which he seems very angry, and with good Reason: And by that a Man may guess how much more he would have been offended with those who have attributed it to Ambition; senseless People! He would rather have performed a handsom, just, and generous Action, and to have had Ignominy for his Reward, than for his Glory. That Man was in Truth a  
 Pattern,



Pattern, that Nature chose out to shew to what Height human Virtue and Constancy could arrive : But I am not capable of handling so noble an Argument, and shall therefore only set five *Latin* Poets together by the Ears, who has done best in the Praise of *Cato* ; and inclusively for their own too. Now a Man well read in Poetry will think the two first, in Comparison of the others, a little flat and languishing ; the third more vigorous, but overthrown by the Extravagancy of his own Force. He will then think, that there will be yet Room for one or two Gradations of Invention to come to the fourth ; but coming to mount the Pitch of that, he will lift up his Hands for Admiration ; the last, the first by some Space, (but a Space that he will swear is not to be filled up by any human Wit) he will be astonished, he will not know where he is. These are Wonders. We have more Poets than Judges and Interpreters of Poetry. It is easier to write an indifferent Poem, than to understand a good one. There is indeed a certain low and moderate Sort of Poetry, that a Man may well enough judge by certain Rules of Art ; but the true, supreme and divine Poesy, is equally above all Rules and Reason. And whoever discerns the Beauty of it, with the most assured and most steady Sight, sees no more than the quick Reflection of a Flash of Lightning. This is a Sort of Poesy that does not exercise, but ravishes and overwhelms our Judgment. The Fury that possesses him who is able to penetrate into it, wounds yet a third Man by hearing him repeat it. Like a Loadstone, that not only attracts the Needle, but also infuses into it the Virtue to attract others. And it is more evidently eminent upon our Theatres, that the sacred Inspiration of the Muses, having first stirred up the Poet to Anger, Sorrow, Hatred, and out of himself, to whatever they will, does moreover by the Poet possess the Actor, and by the Actor, consecutively all the Spectators. So much our Passions hang and depend upon one another. Poetry has ever had that Power over me from a Child, to transpire and transport me: But this quick Resentment that is natural to me, has been variously handled by Variety of Forms, not so much higher and lower, (for they were ever the highest of every Kind) as differing in Colour. First, a gay and spritely Fluency,



Fluency, afterwards a lofty and penetrating Subtilty; and lastly, a mature and constant Force. Their Names will better exprefs them; *Ovid, Lucan, Virgil*. But our Poets are beginning their Career.

*Sit Cato dum vivat fama vel Cæsar major* \*.

—————Let *Cato's* Fame,  
Whilst he shall live, eclipse great *Cæsar's* Name,  
says one.

—————*Et invictum devicta Morte Catonem* †.

—————And *Cato* fell,  
Death being overcome, invincible,  
says the Second. And the Third speaking of the Civil Wars betwixt *Cæsar* and *Pompey*;

*Victrix causa Diis placuit, sed Victa Catoni* ||.

—————Heaven approves,  
The conquering Cause, the conquer'd *Cato* loves.

And the Fourth upon the Praises of *Cæsar*,

*Et cuncta terrarum subiecta,  
Præter atrocem animum Catonis* §.

‡ And conquer'd all where-e'er his Eagle flew,  
But *Cato's* Mind, that nothing could subdue.

And the Master of the Quire, after having set forth all the great Names of the greatest *Romans*, ends thus,

—————*His dantem jura Catonem* †.

Great *Cato* giving Laws to all the rest.

\* *Mart. lib. 6. Epig. 32.* † *Manil.* || *Lucan. l. 1.*  
§ *Hor. Car. lib. 2. Ode 1.* ‡ *Æneid. l. 8.*