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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. 43. Of Sumptuary Laws.

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what hinders you, if you please, from being now in the Condition you speak of? Why do you not now at this Instant, settle yourself in the State you seem to aim at, and spare the Labour and Hazard you interpose?

*Nimirum quia non bene norat quæ esset habendi Finis, & omnino quoad crescat vera voluptas\*.*

The End of being rich he did not know;  
Nor to what Pitch Felicity should grow.

I will conclude with an old Verse, that I think very pertinent to the Purpose.

*Mores cuique sui fingunt fortunam\*.*

Himself, not Fortune, ev'ry one must blame,  
Since Men's own Manners do their Fortunes frame.



CHAP. XLIII.

Of Sumptuary Laws.

THE Way by which our Laws attempt to regulate idle and vain Expences in Meat and Clothes, seem to be quite contrary to the End design'd. The true Way would be to beget in Men a Contempt of Silks and Gold, as vain, frivolous, and useles; whereas we augment to them the Honours and enhance the Value of such Things, which sure is a very improper Way to create a Disgust. For to enact, that none but Princes shall eat Turbes, shall wear Velvet, or Gold Lace, and interdict these Things to the People, what is it but to bring them into a greater Esteem, and to set every one more agog to eat and wear them? Let Kings (in God's Name) leave off these Ensigns of Grandeur, they have others enough besides; those Excesses are more excusable in any other, than a Prince. We may learn by

\* *Lucret. l. 5.* § *Corn Nep. in vit. A. Hici.*

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the Example of several Nations, better Ways of exterior Distinction of Quality (which truly I conceive to be very requisite in a State) enough, without fostering up this Corruption, and manifest Inconvenience to this Effect. 'Tis strange, how suddenly, and with how much Ease, Custom, in these different Things, establishes itself, and becomes Authority. We had scarce worn Cloth a Year (in Compliance with the Court) for the Mourning of *Henry* the Second, but that Silks were already grown into such Contempt with every one, that a Man so clad, was presently concluded a Citizen. The Silks were divided betwixt the Physicians and Chirurgeons, and though all other People almost went in the same Habit, there was notwithstanding in one Thing or other, sufficient Distinction of the Calling, and Conditions of Men. How suddenly do greasy *Chamois* Doublets become the Fashion in our Armies, whilst all Neatness and Riches of Habit fall into Contempt? Let Kings but lead the Dance, and begin to leave off this Expence, and in a Month the Business will be done throughout the Kingdom without an Edict; we shall all follow. It should be rather proclaim'd on the contrary, that no one should wear Scarlet or Goldsmith's Work, but Whores and Tumblers. *Zeleucus*, with the like Invention, reclaim'd the corrupted Manners of the *Locrians*; whose Laws were, That no free Women should be allow'd any more than one Maid to follow her, unless she was drunk: Nor was to stir out of the City by Night, wear Jewels of Gold about her, or go in an embroidered Robe, unless she was a profest and publick Whore: The Bravo's, and Ruffians excepted, no Man was to wear a Gold Ring, nor be seen in one of those effeminate Vests woven in the City of *Miletum*. By which infamous Exceptions, he discreetly diverted his Citizens from Superfluities and pernicious Pleasures, and it was a Project of great Utility to attract Men by Honour and Ambition to their Duty and Obedience. Our Kings may do what they please in such external Reformatations, their own Inclinations stand in this Case for a Law. *Quicquid Principes faciunt, præcipere videntur*\*. *What Princes themselves do, they seem*

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\* *Quint. Decla. 4.*



to enjoin others. Whatever is done at Court, passeth for a Rule through the rest of *France*. Let the Courtiers but fall out with these abominable Breeches, that discover so much of those Parts which should be conceal'd: These great-bellied Doublets, that make us look like I know not what; and are so unfit to admit of Arms; these long effeminate Locks of Hair; this foolish Custom of kissing what we present to our Equals, and our Hands in saluting them; a Ceremony in former Times only due to Princes: And that a Gentleman shall appear in Place of Respect without his Sword, unbuttoned and untruss'd, as though he came from the House-of-Office; and that, contrary to the Custom of our Fore-fathers, and the particular Privilege of the Nobles of this Kingdom, we shall stand a long Time bare to them in what Place soever, and the same to a hundred others, so many Tierces and Quarts of Kings we have got now-a-days, and also other the like Innovations and degenerate Customs; they will see them all presently vanish'd and cry'd down. These are, 'tis true, but superficial Errors; but however, of ill Consequence; and 'tis enough to inform us, that the whole Fabrick is crazy and tottering, when we see the rough-Cast of our Walls to cleave and split. *Plato* in his Laws, esteems nothing of more pestiferous Consequence to his City, than to give Young Men the Liberty of introducing any Change in their Habits, Gestures, Dances, Songs and Exercises, from one Form to another; shifting from this to that, hunting after Novelties, and applauding the Inventers; by which Means Manners are corrupted, and the old Institutions come to be nauseated and despised. In all Things, saving only in those that are evil, a Change is to be fear'd; even the Change of Seasons, Winds, Viands and Humours. And no Laws are in their true Credit, but such to which God has given so long a Continuance, that no one knows their Beginning, or that there ever was any other.