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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. 46. Of Names.

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yet could not prevail so far as to bring it to so general a Rout, but that they leisurely retreated, still facing about upon him, till they were retired into Safety.



C H A P. XLVI.

Of Names.

WHAT Variety of Herbs soever are shuffled together in the Dish, yet the whole Mass is swallow'd up in one Name of a Sallet. In like Manner, under the Consideration of Names, I will make a Hodge-podge of differing Articles. Every Nation has certain Names, that, I know not why, are taken in no good Sense, as with us, *John, William, and Benedict*. In the Genealogy of Princes also there seems to be certain Names fatally affected, as the *Ptolemies of Egypt, the Henry's of England, the Charles's of France, the Baldwins of Flanders, and the Williams of our ancient Aquitaine*, from whence 'tis said, the Name of *Guyenne* has it's Derivation; which would seem far fetch'd, were there not as rude Derivations in *Plato* himself. 'Tis a very frivolous Thing in itself, but nevertheless worthy to be recorded for the Strangeness of it, which is writ by an Eye-witness; that *Henry Duke of Normandy, Son of Henry the Second, King of England*, making a great Feast in *France*, the Concourse of Nobility and Gentry was so great, that being, for Sports Sake, divided into Troops, according to their Names, in the first Troop, which consisted of *Williams*, there were found an hundred and ten Knights sitting at the Table of that Name, without reckoning the ordinary Gentlemen, and their Servants. It is as pleasant to distinguish the Tables by the Names of the Guests, as it was in the Emperor *Geta*, to distinguish the several Courses of his Meat, by the first Letters of the Meats themselves, where those that began with *B*, were serv'd up together, as *Brawn, Beef, Bream, Buttards and Beccaficos*, and so of others. Now there is a Saying, that it is a good thing to have a good Name, that is to say, Credit, and a good Repute: But besides this, it

is really convenient, to have such a Name as is easy of Pronunciation, and easy to be remembred; by Reason, that Kings, and other great Persons, do by that Means the more easily know, and the more hardly forget us; and indeed, of our own Servants, we more frequently call and employ those, whose Names are most ready upon the Tongue. I myself have seen *Henry* the Second, when he could not for his Heart hit of a Gentleman's Name of our Country of *Gascony*; and moreover was fain to call one of the Queen's Maids of Honour, by the general Name of her Family, her own being so difficult to pronounce or remember. And *Socrates* thinks it worthy a Father's Care, to give fine Names to his Children. 'Tis said, that the Foundation of *Nostre Dame la Grande*, at *Poitiers*, took it's Original from hence, that a debauch'd young Fellow formerly living in that Place, having pick'd up a Whore, and at her first coming in, asking her Name, and being answer'd, that it was *Mary*, he felt himself so suddenly darted through with the Awe of Religion, and the Reverence to that sacred Name of the blessed Virgin, that he not only immediately put his lewd Mistress away from him, but became a reformed Man, and so continued the Remainder of his Life: And that in Consideration of this Miracle, there was erected upon the Place, where this young Man's House stood, first a Chapel dedicated to our Lady, and afterwards the Church that we now see standing there. This auricular Reproof wrought upon the Conscience, and that right into the Soul. This that follows, insinuated itself merely by the Sense. *Pythagoras* being in Company with some wild young Fellows, and perceiving that, heated with the Feast, they plotted to go violate an honest House, commanded the Singing-Wench to alter her wanton Airs; and by a solemn, grave, and spondaick Musick, gently enchanted and laid asleep their Ardour. Will not Posterity * say, that our modern Reformation has been wonderfully exact, in having not only scuffled with, and overcome Errors and Vice, and fill'd the World with Devotion, Humility, Obedience, Peace,

* This Paragraph seems to be foisted in, and none of *Montaigne's*, who was himself a Papist.

and all Sorts of Virtue ; but to have proceeded so far, as to quarrel with the ancient Baptismal Names of *Charles*, *Lewis*, and *Francis*, to fill the World with *Methusalems*, *Ezekiels*, and *Malachies*, of a more spiritual Sound? A Gentleman, a Neighbour of mine, a great Admirer of Antiquity, and who was always preferring the Excellency of preceding Times, in Comparison with this present Age of ours, did not (amongst the rest) forget to magnify the lofty and magnificent Sound of the Gentlemen's Names of those Days, *Don Grumedan*, *Quadregan*, *Angeslan*, &c. which but to hear nam'd, he perceiv'd to be other kind of Men, than *Pierre*, *Guillot* and *Michel*. I am mightily pleas'd with *Jaques Amiot*, for leaving throughout a whole *French* Oration, the *Latin* Names entire, without varying and dissecting them, to give them a *French* Termination. It seem'd a little harsh and rough at first ; but already Custom, by the Authority of *Plutarch*, (whom he took for his Example) has overcome that Novelty. I have often wish'd, that such as write Chronicle Histories in *Latin*, would leave our Names as they find them, and as they are, and ought to be, for in making *Vaudemont*, *Vallemontance*, and Metamorphosing Names, to make them suit better with the *Greek* or *Latin*, we know not where we are, and with the Persons of the Men, lose the Benefit of the Story. To conclude, 'tis a scurvy Custom, and of very ill Consequence, which we have in our Kingdom of *France*, to call every Man by the Name of his Mannor, or Seigneury, and the Thing in the World that does the most Prejudice, and most confound Families and Descents. A younger Brother of a good Family, having a Mannor left him by his Father, by the Name of which he has been known and honour'd, cannot handsomly leave it ; ten Years after his Decease, it falls into the Hand of a Stranger, who does the same : Do but judge whereabouts we shall be, concerning the Knowledge of these Men. We need look no farther for Examples, than our own royal Family, where every Partage creates a new Surname, whilst in the mean Time the Original of the Family is totally lost. There is so great Liberty taken in these Mutations, that I have not in my Time seen any one advanc'd by Fortune to any extraordinary Condition, who has not presently had genealogick Titles added to him, new, and

and unknown to his Father, and who has not been inoculated into some illustrious Stem; and by good Luck, the obscurest Families are the most proper for Falsification. How many Gentlemen have we in *France*, who, by their own Talk, are of royal Extraction? More I think than of those that will confess they are not. Was it not a pleasant Passage of a Friend of mine? There were a great many Gentlemen assembled together, about the Dispute of one Lord of a Mannor, with another; which other had in Truth, some Pre-eminence of Titles and Alliances, above the ordinary Scheme of Gentry. Upon the Debate of this Priority of Place, every one standing up for himself, to make himself equal to him, alledging One one Extraction, Another another; One the near Resemblance of Name; Another of Arms; Another an old worm-eaten Patent; and the last of them, Great-Grandchild to some foreign King. When they came to sit down to Dinner, my Friend, instead of taking his Place amongst them, retiring with most profound Congees, entreated the Company to excuse him, for having hitherto liv'd with them at the faicy Rate of a Companion: But being now better inform'd of their Quality, he would begin to pay them the Respect due to their Birth and Grandeur, alledging that it would ill become him to sit down among so many Princes; and ended the Farce with a thousand Reproaches. Let us in God's Name satisfy ourselves with what our Fathers were contented with, and with what we are: We are great enough, if we rightly understand how to maintain it: Let us not disown the Fortune and Condition of our Ancestors, but lay aside these ridiculous Pretences, that can never be wanting to any one that has the Impudence to alledge them. Arms have no more Security, than Surnames. I bear *Azure powdered with Trefoils, Or, with a Lion's Paw of the same armed Gules in Fesse.* What Privilege to continue particularly in my House and Name? A Son-in-Law will transport it into another Family; or some paultry Purchaser will make them his first Arms; there is nothing wherein there is more Change and Confusion. But this Consideration leads me per-force into another Subject. Let us pry a little narrowly into, and, in God's Name, examine upon what Foundation we erect this Glory and Reputation, for

which the World is turn'd topsy-turvy: Wherein do we place this Renown, that we hunt after with so great Fragrancy, and through so many Impediments, and so much Trouble? It is, in Conclusion, *Peter* or *William* that carries it, takes it into his Possession, and whom it only concerns. O what a valiant Faculty is Hope, that in a mortal Subject, and in a Moment, makes nothing of usurping Infinity and Immensity, and of supplying her Master's Indigence at her Pleasure, with all Things he can imagine or desire! Nature has given us this Passion for a pretty Toy to play withal. And this *Peter* or *William*, what is it but a Sound, when all is done? Or three or four Dashes with a Pen, so easy to be vary'd, that I would fain know to whom is to be attributed the Glory of so many Victories, to *Guesquin*, to *Glesquin*, or to *Guaquin*? And yet there would be something of greater Moment in the Case, than in *Lucian*, that *Sigma* should serve *Tau* with a Process for,

—Non levia, aut ludicra petuntur
Præmia*.

To do brave Acts, who has the noble Spirit,
Slights mean Rewards, as Things below his Merit.

The Chace is there in very good earnest: The Question is, which of these Letters is to be rewarded for so many Sieges, Battles, Wounds, Imprisonments, and Services done to the Crown of *France*, by this famous Constable. *Nicholas Denisot* never concern'd himself further than the Letters of his Name, of which he has altered the whole Contexture to build up by Anagram the Count of *Alsnois*, whom he has celebrated with the utmost Force and Glory of his Poetry and Painting. And the Historian *Suetonius* could be satisfied with nothing he writ, unless it might redound to his own particular Honour, which made him cashier his Father's Sirname *Lewis*, to leave *Tranquillus* Successor to the Reputation of his Writings. Who would believe, that Captain *Bayard* should have no Honour, but what he de-

* *Æncid. lib. 12,*

rives from *Peter Terrail*; and that *Antonio Escalin* should suffer himself to his Face, to be robb'd of the Honour of so many Navigations and Commands at Sea and Land by Capt. *Paulin*, and the Baron *De la Garde*? These are Injuries of the Pen, common to a thousand People. How many are there in every Family of the same Name and Sirname? And how many more in several Families, Ages and Countries? History tells us of three of the Name of *Socrates*, of five *Platos*, of eight *Aristotles*, of seven *Xenophons*, of twenty *Demetrius's*, and of twenty *Theodores*; and how many more she was not acquainted with, we may imagine. Who hinders my Groom from calling himself *Pompey the Great*? But after all, by what Virtue, what Authority, or what secret Conveyances are there, that fixed upon my deceased Groom, or the other *Pompey*, who had his Head cut off in *Ægypt*, this glorious Renown, and these so much honoured Flourishes of the Pen, so as to be of any Advantage to them?

Id cinerem, & manes credis curare sepultos?*

Can we believe the Dead regard such Things?

What Sense have the two Collegues of the greatest Esteem amongst Men? *Epaminondas* of this glorious Verse, that has been so many Ages current in his Praise;

Consiliis nostris laus est attrita Laconum:

One *Sparta* by my Counsels is o'erthrown.

Or *Africanus* of this other?

*A sole ex oriente, supra Mæotis Paludes
Nemo est, qui factis me æquiparare queat.*

From early Dawn, unto the setting Sun,
No none can match the Deeds that I have done.

* *Æneid. lib. 4.*

Survivors indeed tickle themselves with these Praises, and by them incited to Jealousy or Desire, inconsiderately, and according to their own Fancy, attribute to the Dead those Virtues themselves pretend to most: God knows how vainly flattering themselves, that they shall one Day in Turn be capable of the same Characters: However,

Ad hæc se
 Romanus, Grajusque & Barbarus, *Induperator*
Erexit; causas discriminis, atque laboris
Inde habuit, tanto major famæ sitis est, quam
Virtutis †.

Greek, Roman, and Barbarian Chiefs to these,
 Devote their Valour and Contrivances,
 And to the Greediness of Glory woe
 The Dangers and Fatigues they undergo;
 So much more potent is the Thirst of Fame
 Than that of Virtue.



C H A P. XLVII.

Of the Uncertainty of our Judgment.

IT was well said of the Poet,

Ἐπέων δὲ πολλὸς νόμος ἔνθα κ' ἔνθα †.

There is every where Liberty of Arguing enough, and enough to be said on both Sides: For Example;

Vince Annibal', & non seppe usar' poi
Ben la vittoriosa sua ventura †.

* *Juvenal. Sat. 10.* † *Homer. Iliad. 20.* ‡ *Vettrar. Son. 83.*

Hannibal