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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. 55. Of Smells.

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Graces, by which she may come into some Comparison with the greatest Beauty of a Poesy perfected by Art: As is evident in our *Gascon* Villanels and Songs, that are brought us from Nations that have no Knowledge of any Manner of Science, nor so much as the Use of Writing. The indifferent and middle Sort of Poesy betwixt these two, is despised, of no Value, Honour, or Esteem. But seeing that the Ice being once broke, and a Path laid open to the Fancy, I have found, as it commonly falls out, that what we make Choice of for a rare and difficult Subject, proves to be nothing so, and that after the Invention is once warm, it finds out an infinite Number of parallel Examples. I shall only add this one; that were these Essays of mine considerable enough to deserve a Censure, it might then I think fall out, that they would not much take with common and vulgar Capacities, nor be very acceptable to the singular and excellent Sort of Men; for the first would not understand them enough, and the last too much, and so they might hover in the middle Region.



C H A P. LV.

Of Smells.

IT has been reported of others, as well as of *Alexander the Great*, that their Sweat exhaled an odoriferous Smell, occasioned by some very uncommon and extraordinary Constitution, of which *Plutarch* and others have been inquisitive into the Cause. But the ordinary Constitution of human Bodies is quite otherwise, and their best and chiefest Excellency is to be exempt from Smells: Nay, the Sweetness even of the purest Breaths has nothing in it of greater Perfection, than to be without any offensive Smell, like those of healthful Children; which made *Plutarch* say,

Vol. I.

C c

Mulier

Muliere tum bene olet, ubi nihil olet *.

That Woman we a sweet one call,
Whose Body breathes no Scent at all.

And such as make Use of these exotick Perfumes, are with good Reason to be suspected of some natural Imperfection, which they endeavour by these Odours to conceal, according to that of Mr. *Johnson*, which, without Offence to Monsieur de *Montaigne*, I will here presume to insert, it being at least as well said, as any of those he quotes out of the ancient Poets,

Still to be neat, still to be drest,
As you were going to a Feast,
Still to be powder'd, still perfum'd,
Lady, it is to be presum'd,
Though Art's hid Causes are not found,
All is not sweet, all is not found †.

As may be judged by these following,

Rides nos, Coracine, nil olentes :
Malo quam bene olere, nil olere ‡.

Because thou, *Coracinus*, still dost go
With Musk and Ambergrease perfumed so,
We under thy Contempt, forsooth, must fall ;
I'd rather than smell sweet, not smell at all :

And elsewhere,

Posthume, non bene olet, qui bene semper olet ||.

He does not naturally smell well,
Who always of Perfumes does smell.

* *Plaut. Molest. Art. 1. Sc. 3.*

‡ *Mart. lib. 6. Epig. 55.*

† *Ben Johnson.*

|| *Id. lib. 2. Ep. 12.*

I am

I am, nevertheless, a strange Lover of good Smells, and as much abominate the ill Ones, which also I reach at a greater Distance, I think, than other Men :

*Namque sagacius unus odoror,
Polypus, an gravis hirsutis cubet hircus in alis,
Quam canis acer ubi lateat sus †.*

For I can smell a putrid Polypus,
Or the rank Arm-pits of a Red-hair'd Fuff,
As soon as best nos'd Hound the stinking Sty,
Where the wild Boar does in the Forest lye.

Of Smells, the simple and natural seem to be most pleasing. Let the Ladies look to that, for 'tis chiefly their Concern. In the wildest Parts of *Barbary*, the *Scythian* Women, after Bathing, were wont to powder and crust their Faces, and whole Bodies, with a certain odoriferous Drug, growing in their own Territories; which being cleansed off, when they came to have Familiarity with Men, they were found perfumed and sleek: 'Tis not to be believed, how strangely all Sorts of Odours cleave to me, and how apt my Skin is to imbibe them. He that complains of Nature, that she has not furnished Mankind with a Vehicle to convey Smells to the Nose, had no Reason; for they will do it themselves; especially to me: My very Mustachio's perform that Office; for if I stroke them but with my Gloves or Handkerchief, the Smell will remain a whole Day: They will reproach me where I have been; the close, luscious, devouring and melting Kisses of youthful Ardour, would, in my wanton Age, have left a Sweetness upon my Lips for several Hours after. And yet I have ever found myself very little subject to Epidemick Diseases, that are caught either by conversing with the Sick, or bred by the Contagion of the Air; I have very well escaped from those of my Time, of which there has been several virulent Sorts in our Cities and Armies. We read of *Socrates*, that though he never departed from *Athens*,

† *Hor. Ep. 12.*

during the frequent Plagues that infested that City, he was the only Man that was never infected. Physicians might (I believe) if they would, extract greater Utility from Odours than they do; for I have often observed, that they cause an Alteration in me, and work upon my Spirits according to their several Virtues; which makes me approve of what is said, namely, That the Use of Incense and Perfumes in Churches, so ancient, and so universally received in all Nations and Religions, was intended to cheer us, and to rouse and purify the Senses, the better to fit us for Contemplation. I could have been glad, the better to judge of it, to have tasted the Culinary Art of those Cooks, who had so rare a Way of seasoning exotick Odours with the Relish of Meats; as it was particularly observed in the Service of the King of *Tunis*, who, in our Days, landed at *Naples*, to have an Interview with *Charles* the Emperor, where his Dishes were farced with odoriferous Drugs, to that Degree of Expence, that the Cookery of one Peacock and two Pheasants amounted to an hundred Ducats, to dress them after their Fashion. And when the Carver came to break them up, not only the Dining-Room, but all the Apartments of his Palace, and the adjoining Streets were filled with an Aromatick Vapour, which did not presently vanish. My chiefest Care in chusing my Lodgings, is always to avoid a thick and stinking Air; and those beautiful Cities of *Venice* and *Paris* have very much lessened the Kindness I had for them, the one by the offensive Smell of her Marshes, and the other of her Dirt.



C H A P.