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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. 7. Of Recompences of Honour.

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to purpose the Precept of his God, *To know himself*; and by that Study was arriv'd to the Perfection of setting himself at nought, he was only reputed worthy the Title of a *Sage*. Whosoever shall so know himself, let him boldly speak it out.



C H A P. VII.

Of Recompences of Honour.

THOSE who write the Life of *Augustus Cæsar*, observe this in his Military Discipline, that he was wonderfully liberal of Gifts to Men of Merit; but that as to the true Recompences of Honour, he was altogether as sparing. So it is, that he had himself been gratify'd by his Uncle, with all the Military Recompences before he had ever been in the Field. It was a pretty Invention, and receiv'd into most Governments of the World, to institute certain vain and insignificant Distinctions to honour and recompence Virtue; such are the Crowns of Laurel, Oak, and Myrtle, the particular Fashion of some Garment; the Privilege to ride in a Coach in the City, or to have a Torch by Night; some peculiar Place assign'd in Publick Assemblies; the Prerogative of certain additional Names and Titles; certain Distinctions in their bearing of Coats of Arms, and the like: The Use of which, according to the several Humours of Nations, has been variously receiv'd, and do yet continue. We in *France*, as also several of our Neighbours, have the Orders of Knighthood, that are instituted only for this End. And it is, indeed, a very good and profitable Custom to find out an Acknowledgment for the Worth of excellent and extraordinary Men; and to satisfy their Ambition with Rewards that are not at all chargeable either to Prince or People: And what has been always found both by ancient Experience, and which we ourselves may also have observ'd in our own Times, that Men of Quality have ever been

*Orders of
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and extraordinary Men; and to satisfy their Ambition with Rewards that are not at all chargeable either to Prince or People: And what has been always found both by ancient Experience, and which we ourselves may also have observ'd in our own Times, that Men of Quality have ever been

been more jealous of such Recompences, than of those wherein there was gain and Profit, is not without very good Ground and Reason. If with Reward, which ought to be simply a Recompence of Honour, they should mix other Emoluments, and add Riches, this Mixture instead of procuring an Encrease of Esteem, would vilify and debase it. The Order of St. *Michael*, which has been so long in repute amongst us, had no greater Commodity, than that it had no Communication with any other; which produc'd this Effect, that formerly there was no Office, nor Title whatever, to which the Gentry pretended with so great a Desire and Affection, as they did to this Order; nor Quality that carry'd with it more Respect and Grandeur: Virtue more willingly embracing, and with greater Ambition, aspiring to a Recompence truly her own, and rather honourable than beneficial: For in truth, the other Rewards have not so great a Dignity in them, by reason they are laid out upon all sorts of Occasions. With Money a Man pays the Wages of a Servant, the Diligence of a Courier, Dancing, Vaulting, Speaking, and the vilest Offices we receive; nay, and reward Vice with it too, as Flattery, Treachery, and Pimping: And therefore 'tis no wonder if Virtue less desires, and less willingly receives this common Sort of Payment, than that which is proper and peculiar to her, as being truly generous and noble. *Augustus* had reason to be a better Husband, and more sparing of this, than the other, by how much Honour is a Privilege that extracts its principal Esteem from Rarity, and Virtue itself.

*Cui malus est nemo, quis bonus esse potest *?*

To whom none seemeth ill, who good can seem?

We do not intend it for a Commendation, when we say, that such a one is careful in the Education of his Children: By reason it is a common Act, how just and well done soever; no more then we commend a great Tree, where the whole Forrest is the same. I do not

* *Mart. lib. 2. Epig. 82.*

think

*Valour of
the Citizens
of Sparta.*

think that any Citizen of *Sparta* valu'd himself much upon his Valour, it being the universal Virtue of the whole Nation, and as little prided himself upon his Fidelity, and Contempt of Riches. There is no Recompence due to Virtue, how great soever, that is once become a general Custom; and I know not withal, whether we can ever call it Great, being common. Seeing then that these Rewards of Honour have no other Value and Estimation, but only this, That few People enjoy them; 'tis but to be liberal of them, to bring them down to nothing. And tho' there should be more Men found than in former Times, worthy of our Order, the Value of it, nevertheless, ought not be abated, nor the Honour made cheap. Nay, it may easily happen, that more may merit it now than formerly; for there is no Virtue that so easily dilates itself, as that of Military Valour: There is another true, perfect and philosophical, of which I do not speak (and only make use of the Word in the common Acceptation) much greater than this, and more full, which is Force and Assurance of Souls, equally despising all Sorts of adverse Accidents, and equally uniform and constant; of which ours is no more than one little Ray. Use, Institution, Example and Custom, can do all in all to the Establishment of that which I am speaking of, and with great Facility render it common, as by the Experience of our Civil War is manifest enough; and whoever could at this Instant unite us *Catholick* and *Hugonot* into one Body, and set us upon some brave Enterprize, we should make our ancient Military Reputation flourish again. It is most certain that in Times past, the Recompence of this Order had not only a regard to Valour, but had a farther Prospect. It never was the Reward of a valiant Soldier, but of a great Captain. The Science of obeying was not reputed worthy of so honourable a Guerdon, there was therein a more universal Military Expertness requir'd, which comprehended the most and the greatest Qualities of a Military Man; *Neque enim eadem Militares & Imperatoriae artes sunt*. Besides a Man was to be of a Birth and Rank suitable to such a Dignity. But I say that tho' more Men should be worthy now than formerly, yet ought it not to be more liberally distributed; and that it were better to fall short
in

in not giving it to all to whom it shall be acknowledg'd due, than for ever to lose, as we have lately done, the Fruit of so profitable an Invention. No Man of Spirit will vouchsafe to advantage himself with what is in common with many: And such of the present Time, as have least merited this Recompence, make the greater Shew of disclaiming it, being thereby to be rank'd with those, to whom so much wrong has been done, by the unworthy conferring and debasing the Character, which was their particular Right. Now to expect that in obliterating and abolishing this suddenly, to create and bring into Credit a like new Institution, is not a proper Attempt for so licentious and so sick a Time as this in which we now are; and it will fall out, that the last will, from its Birth, incur the same Inconveniences that have ruin'd the other. The Rules for the Dispensing of this new Order, had need to be extremely clip'd, and bound under great Restrictions to give it Authority; and this tumultous Season is incapable of such a Curb: Besides, that before this can be brought into Reputation, 'tis necessary that the Memory of the first, and the Contempt into which it is fallen should be totally bury'd in Oblivion.

*The Order of
the Holy
Ghost.*

This Place might naturally enough admit of some Discourse upon the Consideration of Valour, and the Difference of this Virtue from others: But *Plutarch* having so often handled this Subject, I should give myself an unnecessary Trouble to repeat what he has said; but this, nevertheless, is worth considering; that our Nation places Valour in the highest Degree of Virtue, as the very Word itself shews, being deriv'd from *Value*; and that, according to our Custom, when we mean a worthy Man, or a Man of Value, it is only in our Court Style, to say, a *Valiant Man*, after the *Roman* Way. For the general Appellation of *Virtue* with them, takes Etymology from *Force*. The proper, sole, and essential Method of the *French Nobility and Gentry*, is the Practice of Arms: And 'tis likely that the first Virtue which discover'd itself amongst Men, and that has given some Advantage over others, was this; by which the Strongest and most Valiant have lorded it over the Weaker, and entail'd upon themselves a particular Authority and Reputation: Or else, that these Nations

Nations being very warlike, have given the Preheminence to that of the *Virtues* which was most familiar to them, and which they thought of the most worthy Character. Just as our Passion and the feverish Solitude we have of the Chastity of Women, makes saying a good Woman, a Woman of Worth, and a Woman of Honour and Virtue, to signify no more but a chaste Woman: As if to oblige her to that one Duty, we were indifferent as to all the rest; and gave them the Reins to all other Faults whatever, to compound for that one of Incontinence.



C H A P. VIII.

Of the Affection of Fathers to their Children.

To Madam D'ESTISSAC.

Madam, if the Strangeness and Novelty of my Subject, which generally give Value to Things, do not save me, I shall never come off with Honour from this foolish Attempt: But 'tis so fantastick, and carries a Face so unlike the common Custom, that the Oddness of it may, perhaps, make it pass. 'Tis a Melancholick Humour, and consequently an Humour very much an Enemy to my natural Complexion, engendred by the Pensiveness of the Solitude, into which, for some Years past, I have retir'd myself, that first put into my Head this idle Fancy of Writing: Wherein, finding myself totally unprovided and empty of other Matters, I presented myself to myself, for Argument and Subject. 'Tis the only Book in the World of its Kind, and of a wild extravagant Design: there is nothing worth Remark but the Extravagancy in this Affair: For in a Subject so vain and frivolous, the best Workman in the World could not have given it a Form fit to recommend it to any Manner of Esteem.

Now, Madam, being to draw my own Picture to the Life, I should have omitted the only graceful Feature, had I not represented in it the Honour I have ever paid to your Merits;