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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

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Chap. 36. Of the most excellent Men.

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must impose this upon itself, when the Utility of our Friend does so require: We must sometimes lend ourselves to our Friends, and when we would die for ourselves, must break that Resolution for them. 'Tis a Testimony of Grandeur and Courage to return to Life for the Consideration of another, as many excellent Persons have done; and 'tis a Mark of singular good Nature to preserve old Age (of which, the greatest Convenience is the Indifferency of its Duration, and a more Stout and Disdainful Use of Life) when a Man perceives that this Office is Pleasing, Agreeable, and Useful to some Person by whom we are very much below'd. And a Man reaps by it a very pleasing Reward; for what can be more Delightful than to be so dear to his Wife, as upon her Account he shall become dear to himself. Thus has my Paulina loaded me not only with her Fears, but my own; it has not been sufficient to consider how resolutely I could die, but I have also consider'd how irresolutely she would bear my Death. I am enforc'd to live, and sometimes to live is Magnanimity. These are his own Words, as excellent as they every where use to be.



C H A P. XXXVI.

Of the most Excellent Men.

Should I be ask'd my Opinion and Choice of all the Men who have come to my Knowledge, I should make answer, *That methinks I find three more Excellent than all the rest.* One of them *Homer*; not that *Aristotle* and *Varro*, for Example, were not perhaps as learned as he; nor that possibly *Virgil* was not equal to him in his own Art; which I leave to be determined by such as know them both, and are best able to judge. I, who for my part, understand but one of them, can only say this, according to my poor Talent, *that I do not believe the Muses themselves did ever go beyond the Roman.*

*Tale facit carmen docta testudine, quale
Cynthius impositis temperat articulus*.*

* *Propert. l. 2. Eleg. ult.*

Whilst playing to his Lute, he Verse doth sing,
'Tis like *Apollo's* Voice and fingering.

And yet in this Judgment we are not to forget that it is chiefly from *Homer* that *Virgil* derives his Excellence, that he is his Guide and Teacher; and that the *Iliad* only has supply'd him with Body and Matter, out of which to compose his Great and Divine *Aeneis*. I do not reckon upon that, but mix several other Circumstances that render this Poet Admirable to me, even as it were above human Condition. And in truth, I often wonder that he who has erected, and by his Authority given so many Deities Reputation in the World, was not deified himself, being Blind and Poor; being that before the *Sciences* were reduc'd into Rule and certain Observations, he was so well acquainted with them, that all those who have since taken upon them to establish Governments, to carry on Wars, and to write either of *Philosophy* or *Religion*, or what Sect soever, or of the *Arts*, have made use of him as of a most perfect Instructor in the Knowledge of all Things, and of his *Books*, as of an unexhausted Treasure of all sorts of Learning.

*Qui quid sit pulchrum, quid turpe, quid utile, quid non
Plenius, ac melius Chryssippo at Crantore dixit*.*

Who, what's our good, what not, what brave, what base,
Fuller than *Crantor*, or *Chryssippus* says.

and as this other says,

*a quo ceu fonte perenni
Vatum Pieriis labro rigantur aquis †.*

From whose ne'er failing Spring the Poet sips,
And in *Pierian* Waters wets his Lips,

and another,

*Adde Heliconiadum Comites, quorum unus Homerus,
Astra potitus ‡.*

Of all Pretenders, *Homer* is alone
Judg'd the most worthy of the Poet's Throne.

* *Hor. lib. 1. Epist. 2.* † *Ovid. Amor. lib. 3. Eleg. 8.*

‡ *Lucret. lib. 3.*

and another,

————— *cujusque ex ore profuso*
Omnis posteritas latices in carmina duxit,
Annemque in tenuis ausa est deducere rivos,
Unius fœcunda bonis.*

From whose full flowing Stream, Posterity
 Have Channels laid to draw out Verses by,
 And have made bold to draw by those out-lets
 The *Torrent* into little *Rivulets*,
 All fruitful thorough one Man's Eloquence.

'Tis contrary to the Order of *Nature*, that he has made the most excellent Production that can possibly be, for the ordinary Birth of Things is imperfect; they usually thrive, and gather Strength by growing: Whereas he has rendred the Infancy of *Poesy* and other Sciences Mature, Perfect, and Accomplished at first. And for this Reason he may be call'd the first and the last of *Poets*, according to the fair Testimony Antiquity has left us of him, *That as there was none before him whom he could imitate, so there has been none since that could imitate him.* His Words, according to *Aristotle*, are the only Words that have Motion and Action, and are the only substantial Words. *Alexander* the Great, having found a rich Cabinet amongst *Darius's* Spoils, gave order it should be reserv'd for him to keep his *Homer* in: saying, *That he was the best and most faithful Counsellor he had in his Military Affairs.* For the same Reason it was, that *Cleomenes*, the Son of *Alexandrias*, said, *That the Lacedæmonian Poet was the best Master for the Discipline of War.* This singular and particular Commendation is also left of him in the Judgment of *Plutarch*, *That he is the only Author in the World that never gluttred nor disgusted his Readers, presenting himself always another Thing, and always flourishing in some new Grace.* That Wanton *Alcibiades*, having ask'd one who pretended to Learning for a Book of *Homer*, gave him a Box on the Ear because he had none, which he thought as scandalous, as to take one of our Priests without a Breviary. *Xenophanes* complain'd one Day to *Hiero*, the Tyrant of *Syracusa*, *that he was so poor he had not wherewithal to maintain two Servants;*

* *Manil. Astro.*

What, reply'd the Tyrant, Homer, who was much poorer than you are, keeps above ten thousand now he is dead! What did *Pandæus* leave unsaid, when he call'd *Plato* the *Homer of Philosophers*? Besides, what Glory can be compar'd to his? Nothing is so frequent in Men's Mouths as his Name and Works, nothing so known and receiv'd as *Troy*, *Helen*, and the War about her, when perhaps there was never any such Thing. Our Children are call'd by Names that he feign'd above three thousand Years ago. Who is ignorant of the Story of *Hector* and *Achilles*? Not only some particular Families, but most Nations also seek Original in his Inventions. *Mahomet*, the second of that Name, Emperor of the *Turks*, writing to our Pope *Pius* the Second; *I am astonish'd*, says he, *that the Italians should appear against me, considering that we have our common Descent from the Trojans, and that it concerns me as well as it does them, to revenge the Blood of Hector upon the Greeks, whom they countenance against me.* Is it not a noble Farce wherein Kings, Republicks, and Emperors, have so many Ages play'd their Parts, and to which the vast Universe serves for a Theatre? Seven *Grecian* Cities contended for his Birth, so much Honour even his Obscurity help'd him to.

*Smyrna, Rhodos, Colophon, Salamis, Chios, Argos, Athena**.

By *Smyrna, Rhodes, Colophon, Salamis, Chios, Argos, and Athens*, he claim'd is.

The other is *Alexander* the Great. For whoever will consider the Age at which he began his Enterprizes, the small Means by which he effected so glorious a Design; the Authority he obtain'd at so slender an Age, with the greatest and most experienc'd Captains of the World, by whom he was follow'd, and the extraordinary Favour wherewith *Fortune* embrac'd him, and favour'd so many hazardous, that I may not say rash Designs:

——— *impellens quicquid sibi summa petenti,
Obstaret, gaudensque, viam fecisse ruina †.*

Bearing down all his high Designs withstood,
And pleas'd by Ruin to have made them good.

* *Aul. Gellius.*

† *Lucan. l. 1.*

That Grandeur, to have at the Age of three and thirty Years pass'd Victorious through the whole habitable Earth, and in half a Life to have attain'd to the utmost of what human Nature can do; so that you cannot imagine his Duration just, and the Continuation of his Increase in Virtue, and Fortune, even to a due Maturity of Age, but that you must withal imagine something more than Man: To have so many royal Branches to spring from his Soldiers; leaving the World at his Death, divided amongst four Successors, who were no better than Captains of his Army, whose Posterity have so long continued, and maintain'd that vast Possession; so many excellent Virtues as he was Master of, Justice, Temperance, Liberality, Truth in his Word, Love towards his own, and Humanity towards those he overcame; for his Manners in general seem in truth incapable of any manner of Reproach, tho' some particular and extraordinary Action of his may perhaps fall under Censure. But it is impossible to carry on such great Things as he did with the strict *Rules of Justice*; such as he are to be judg'd in gross, by the main End of their Actions. The Ruin of *Thebes*, the Murther of *Menander*, and of *Ephesion's* Physician, the Massacre of so many *Persian* Prisoners at once, of a Troop of *Indian* Soldiers, not without Prejudice to his Word, and of the *Coffeyans*, so much as to the very Children, are indeed Sallies that are not well to be excus'd. For, as to *Clytus*, the Fault was more than recompenc'd in his Repentance, and that very Action, as much as any other whatever, manifests the Sweetness of his Nature, a Nature most excellently form'd to Goodness; and it was ingeniously said of him, *That he had his Virtues by Nature, and his Vices by Chance*. As to his being given a little to bragging, and a little too impatient of hearing himself ill spoken of; and as to those *Mangers, Arms, and Bits* he caus'd to be strew'd in the *Indies*; all those little Vanities, methinks, may very well be allow'd to his Youth, and the prodigious Prosperity of his Fortune. And who will consider withal his so many Military Virtues, his Diligence, Foresight, Patience, Discipline, Subtilty, Magnanimity, Resolution, and good Fortune, wherein (though we had not the Authority of *Hannibal* to assure us) he was the first of Men; the admirable Beauty and Symmetry of his Person even to a Miracle,

raile, his Majestick Port, and awful Deportment, in a Face so Young, so Ruddy and so Radiant;

*Qualis ubi Oceani perfusus Lucifer unda,
Quem Venus ante alios astrorum diligit ignes,
Extulit os sacrum cælo, tenebrasque resolvit*.*

Such the Day Star does from the Ocean rise,
Above all Lights, grateful to Venus' Eyes,
When he from Heaven darts his sacred Light,
And dissipates the sudden Shades of Night.

The Excellency of his Knowledge and Capacity; the Duration and Grandeur of his Glory, pure, clean, without Spot or Envy, and that long after his Death it was a Religious Belief, that his very *Medals* brought good Fortune to all that carried them about them; and that more *Kings* and *Princes* have writ his Acts, than other *Historians* have written the Acts of any other *King* or *Prince* whatever; and that to this very Day the *Mahometans*, who despise all other *Historicks*, admit of, and honour his alone, by a special Privilege: Whoever, I say, will seriously consider these Particulars, will confess, that all these Things put together, I had reason to prefer him before *Cæsar* himself, who alone could make me doubtful in my Choice: And it cannot be denied, but that there was more of his own Exploits, and more of Fortune in those of *Alexander*. They were in many Things equal, and perhaps *Cæsar* had the Advantage in some particular Qualities. They were two *Fires*; or two *Torrents* to over-run the World by several Ways.

*Et velut immissi diversis partibus ignes
Arentem in sylvam, & virgulta sonantia lauro:
Aut ubi decursu rapido de montibus altis
Dant sonitum spumosi amnes, & in æquora currunt,
Quisque suum populatus iter †.*

And like to Fires in several Parts apply'd
To a dry Grove of crackling Laurel's side;
Or like the Cataracts of foaming Rills,
That tumble headlong from the highest Hills
To hasten to the Ocean; even so
They bear all down before them where they go.

* *Æneid. lib. 8.* † *Æneid. lib. 12.* But

But tho' *Cæsar's* Ambition had been more moderate, it would still be so unhappy, having the Ruin of his *Country*, and the universal Mischief to the World for its abominable Object; that all Things rak'd together, and put into the Balance, I must needs incline to *Alexander's* Side.

The third, in my Opinion, and the most Excellent of all, is *Epaminondas*. Of Glory he has not near so much as the other two (which also is but a Part of the Substance of the Thing) of Valour and Resolution, not of that sort which is push'd on by Ambition, but of that which Wisdom and Reason can raise in a regular Soul, he had all that could be imagin'd. Of this Virtue of his, he has, in my Thoughts, given as ample Proof, as either *Alexander* himself, or *Cæsar*: For although his Expeditions were neither so frequent nor so renowned, they were yet, if duly consider'd in all their Circumstances, as important, as bravely fought, and carry'd with them as manifest Testimony of Valour and Military Conduct, as those of any whatever. The *Greeks* have done him the Honour, without Contradiction, to pronounce him *the greatest Man of their Nation*; and to be the first of *Greece*, is easily to be the first of the World. As to his Knowledge, we have this ancient Judgment of him, *That never any Man knew so much, and spoke so little as he.* For he was of the *Pythagorean* Sect. But when he did speak, *never any Man spoke better*; an excellent Orator, and of powerful Insinuation. But as to his Manners and Conscience, he has infinitely surpass'd all Men that ever undertook the Management of Affairs; for in this one thing, which ought chiefly to be consider'd, that alone only denotes us for what we are, and that alone I counter-balance with all the rest put together, he comes not short of any Philosopher whatever, not even of *Socrates* himself. *Innocency* in this Man is a Quality, peculiar, sovereign, constant, uniform, and incorruptible; compar'd to which, it appears in *Alexander* subject to something else above it, uncertain, variable, effeminate, and accidental. *Antiquity* has judg'd that in thoroughly sifting all the other great *Captains*, there is found in every one some peculiar Quality that illustrates his Name. In this Man only there is a full and equal Virtue throughout, that leaves nothing to be wish'd for in him, whether in private or publick Employment, whether in Peace or War, whether
glori-

gloriously to live or die. I do not know any Form or Fortune of Man that I so much honour or love. 'Tis true, that I look upon his obstinate Poverty, as it is set out by his best Friends, a little too scrupulous and nice. And this is the only Action, tho' high in itself, and well worthy of Admiration, that I find so severe as not to desire to imitate myself, to the Degree it was in him. The sole *Scipio Æmilianus*, would any attribute to him as brave and magnificent an End, and as profound and universal a Knowledge, might be put into the other Scale of the Balance. Oh! what an Injury has Time done me, to deprive me of the Sight of two of the most noble Lives, which, by the common Consent of all the World, one the greatest of the *Greeks*, and the other of the *Romans*, were in all *Plutarch*. What a Matter! What a Workman! For a Man that was no Saint, but as we say, a gallant Man, of civil and ordinary Manners, and of a moderate Ambition, the richest Life that I know, and full of the richest, and most to be desir'd Parts of all Things consider'd, is, in my Opinion, that of *Alcibiades*. But as to what concerns *Epaminondas*, I will here, *Humanity of Epaminondas.* for the Example of an excessive Goodness, add some of his Opinions. He declar'd, *That the greatest Satisfaction he ever had in his whole Life, was, the Contentment he gave his Father and Mother in his Victory of Leuctra; wherein his Defence is great, preferring their Pleasure before his own, so just, and so full of so glorious an Action. He did not think it lawful, even to restore the Liberty of his Country, to kill a Man without knowing a Cause; which made him so cold in the Enterprize of his Companion Pelopidas, for the Relief of Thebes. He was also of Opinion, That Men in Battle ought to avoid the Encounter of a Friend that was on the contrary Side, and to spare him. And Humanity even towards his Enemies themselves, having render'd him suspected to the Boetians, for that after he had miraculously forc'd the Lacedæmonians to open him the Pass, which they had undertaken to defend at the Entry of Morea, near unto Corinth, he contented himself with having charg'd thorough them, without pursuing them to the utmost, he had his Commission of General taken from him. Very honourably upon such an Account, and for Shame it*
was

was

was to them upon Necessity afterward to restore him to his Command, and then to see how much upon him depended their Safety and Honour: Victory like a Shadow attending him wherever he went; and indeed the Prosperity of his Country, as being from him deriv'd, died with him.



C H A P. XXXVII.

Of the Resemblance of Children to their Fathers.

THIS fagotting up of divers Pieces, is so oddly compos'd, that I never set Pen to Paper, but when I have too much idle Time, and never any where but at Home; so that it is compil'd at several Interruptions and Intervals, as Occasions keep me sometimes many Months abroad. As to the rest, I never correct my first by any second Conceptions; perhaps I may alter a Word or so; but 'tis only to vary the Phrase, and not to destroy my former Meaning. I have a mind to represent the Progress of my Humour, that every one may see every Piece as it came from the *Forge*. I could wish I had begun sooner, and had taken more Notice of the Course of my Mutations. A Servant of mine, that I employ'd to transcribe for me, thought he had got a Prize by stealing several Pieces from me, wherewith he was best pleas'd; but it is my Comfort, that he will be no greater a Gainer, than I shall be a Loser by the Theft. I am grown older by seven or eight Years since I begun; neither has it been without some new Acquisition: I have in that Time, by the Liberty of Years, been acquainted with the *Stone*, a long Conversation, which Time hardly wears off without some such Inconvenience. I could have been glad, that of other Infirmities, Age has to present long-liv'd Men, it had chosen some one that would have been more welcome to me, for it could not possibly have laid upon me a Disease, for which, even from my Infancy, I have had so great Horror; and it is in Truth of all the Accidents of Old Age, that of which I have