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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. VII. Of the Inconvenience of Greatness.

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they call *Molly*: in which Work, where they met with Rocks and Mountains, they cut them through, and made them even, and filled up Pits and Valleys with Lime and Stone to make them level. At the End of every Day's Journey are beautiful *Palaces*, furnish'd with Provisions, Vestments, and Arms, as well for Travellers, as for the Armies that are to pass that Way. In the Estimate of this Work, I have reckon'd the Difficulty, which is particularly considerable in that Place. They did not build with any Stones less than ten Foot square: and had no other Conveniency of Carriage, but by drawing their Load themselves by Force of Arms, and knew not so much as the Art of Scaffolding, nor any other Way of standing to their Work, but by throwing up Earth against the Building, as it rose higher, taking it away again when they had done. Let us here return to our Coaches, instead of which, and of all other Sorts of Carriages, they caused themselves to be carried by Men, and upon their Shoulders. This last King of *Peru*, the Day that he was taken, was thus carried betwixt two upon Staves of Gold, and set in a Chair of Gold in the middle of his Battle. As many of these *Chairmen* as were killed to make him fall, (and they contended for it) took the Place of those that were slain, so that they could never beat him down, what Slaughter soever they made of those People, 'till a *Light-Horseman* seizing upon him, brought him down.]



C H A P. VII.

Of the Inconvenience of Greatness.

SINCE we cannot attain to Greatness, let us revenge ourselves by railing at it: and yet it is not absolutely railing against any thing to proclaim it's Defects, because they are to be found in all Things, how beautiful, or how much soever to be coveted. Greatness has in general this manifest Advantage, that it can grow less when
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it pleases, and has very near the absolute Choice of both the one and the other Condition. For a Man does not fall from all Heights, there are several from which one may descend without falling down. It does indeed appear to me, that we value it at too high a Rate, and also over-value the Resolution of those whom we have either seen, or heard have contemn'd it, or displac'd themselves of their own Accord. It's Essence is not so evidently commodious, that a Man may not without a Miracle refuse it; I find it a very hard Thing to undergo Misfortunes, but to be content with a competent Measure of Fortune, and to avoid Greatness, I think a very easy Matter. 'Tis methinks a Virtue, to which I, who am none of the nicest, could without any great Endeavour arrive. What then is to be expected from them that would yet put into Consideration the Glory attending this Refusal, wherein there may lurk worse Ambition, than even in the Desire itself, and Fruition of Greatness? Forasmuch as Ambition never behaves itself better according to itself, than when it proceeds by obscure and unfrequented Ways. I incite my Courage to Patience, but I rein it as much as I can towards Desire. I have as much to wish for as another, and allow my Wishes as much Liberty and Indiscretion; but yet it never besel me to wish for either Empire or Royalty, for the Eminency of those high and commanding Fortunes. I do not aim that way, I love myself too well. When I think to grow greater, 'tis but very moderately, and by a compell'd and timorous Advancement, such as is proper for me; in Resolution, in Prudence, in Health, in Beauty, and even in Riches too. But the supreme Reputation, and this mighty Authority oppres my Imagination. And quite contrary to some others, I should perhaps rather chuse to be the second or third in *Perigourd*, than the first at *Paris*; at least, without lying, the third, than the first at *Paris*. I would neither dispute, a miserable *unknown*, with a Nobleman's Porter, nor make Crowds open in Adoration as I pass: I am train'd up to a moderate Condition, as well by my Choice, as Fortune; and have made it appear in the whole Conduct of my Life and Enterprizes, that I have rather avoided than otherwise, the climbing above the Degree of Fortune in which God plac'd

plac'd me by my Birth: All natural Constitution is equally just and easy. My Soul is so sneaking and mean, that I measure not good Fortune by the Heighth, but by the Facility. But if my Heart be not great enough, 'tis open enough to make amends at any one's Request freely to lay open it's Weakness. Should any one put me upon comparing the Life of *L. Thorius Balbus*, a brave Man, handsom, learned, healthful, understanding, and abounding in all Sorts of Conveniencies and Pleasures, leading a quiet Life, and all his own, his Mind well prepar'd against Death, Superstition, Pains, and other Incumbrances of human Necessity; dying at last in Battle with his Sword in his Hand, for the Defence of his Country, on the one Part; and on the other Part, the Life of *M. Regulus*, so great and high as is known to every one, and his End admirable; the one without Name, and without Dignity, the other exemplary, and glorious to wonder: I shall doubtless say as *Cicero* did, could I speak as well as he. But if I was to touch it in my own Phrase, I should then also say, that the first is as much according to my Capacity, and Desire, which I conform to my Capacity, as the second is far beyond it; that I could not approach the last but with Veneration, the other I would willingly attain by Custom. But let us return to our Temporal Greatness, from which we are digress'd. I dislike all Dominion, whether active or passive. *Otanes*, one of the seven who had Right to pretend to the Kingdom of *Persia*, did, as I should willingly have done; which was, that he gave up to his Competitors his Right of being promoted to it, either by Election or by Lot; provided, that he and his might live in the Empire out of all Authority and Subjection, those of the ancient Laws excepted: and might enjoy all Liberty that was not prejudicial to them, as impatient of commanding, as of being commanded. The most painful and difficult Employment in the World, in my Opinion, is worthily to discharge the Office of a King. I excuse more of their Mistakes than Men commonly do, in Consideration

A Sovereign Authority mov'd for a moderate Fortune.

That it is a troublesome and difficult Employment to command.

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of the intolerable Weight of their Function, which astonishes me. 'Tis hard to keep measure in so immeasurable a Power. Yet so it is, that to those who are not the best natur'd Men, it is a singular Incitement to Virtue, to be seated in a Place where you cannot do the least good that shall not be put upon Record; and where the least Benefit redounds to so many Men: and where your Talent of Administration, like that of *Preachers*, does principally address itself to the People, no very exact Judge, easy to be deceived, and easily content. There are few Things wherein we can give a sincere Judgment, by reason that there are few wherein we have not in some sort a particular Interest. Superiority and Inferiority, Dominion and Subjection are bound to a natural Envy and Contest, and must necessarily perpetually encroach upon one another. I neither believe the one nor the other touching the Rights of the adverse Party; let *Reason* therefore, which is inflexible and without Passion, determine. 'Tis not above a Month ago, that I read over two *Scotch Authors* contending upon this Subject; of which, he who stands for the People, makes *Kings* to be in a worse Condition than a *Carter*; and he who writes for *Monarchy*, places him some Degrees above *God Almighty* in Power and Sovereignty. Now the Inconveniency of *Greatness*, that I have made Choice of to consider in this Place, upon some Occasion that has lately put it into my Head, is this: There is not perhaps any Thing more pleasant in the Commerce of Men, than the Trials that we make against one another, out of Emulation of Honour and Valour, whether, in the Exercises of the Body, or in those of the Mind; wherein the Sovereign Greatness can have no true part. And, indeed, I have often thought, that through mere Force of Respect Men have us'd Princes disdainfully and injuriously in that Particular. For the Thing I was infinitely offended at in my Childhood, that they who exercis'd with me, forbore to do their best, because they found me unworthy of their utmost Endeavour, is what we see happen to them every Day, every one finding himself unworthy to contend with them. If we discover that they have the least Passion to have the better, there is no one who

who will not make it his Business to give it them, and who will not rather betray his own Glory, than offend theirs; and will therein employ so much Force only as is necessary to advance their Honour. What Share have they then in the Engagement, wherein every one is on their Side? Methinks I see those *Paladins* of ancient times presenting themselves to *Justs*, with enchanted *Arms* and *Bodies*; *Bri-son* running against *Alexander*, purposely miss'd his Blow, and made a Fault in his Career; *Alexander* chid him for it, but he ought to have had him whipt. Upon this Consideration, *Carneades* said, that the Sons of Princes learn'd nothing right, but to ride the great Horse; by reason that in all their Exercises every one bends and yields to them: but a Horse, that is neither a Flatterer nor a Courtier, throws the Son of a *King* with no more Remorse, than he would do that of a *Porter*. *Homer* was compell'd to consent, that *Venus*, so sweet and delicate as she was, should be wounded at the Battle of *Troy*, thereby to ascribe Courage and Boldness to her; Qualities that cannot possibly be in those who are exempt from Danger. The *Gods* are made to be angry, to fear, to run away, to be jealous, to grieve, and to be transported with Passions, to honour them with the Virtues, that amongst us are built upon these Imperfections. Who does not participate in the Hazard and Difficulty, can pretend no Interest in the Honour and Pleasure that are the Consequents of hazardous Actions. 'Tis pity a Man should be so potent that all things must give way to him. *Fortune* therein sets you too remote from Society, and places you in too great a Solitude. This Easiness and mean Facility of making all things bow under you, is an Enemy to all Sorts of Pleasure. This is to slide, not to go, this is to sleep, and not to live. Conceive Man accompanied with Omnipotency, you throw him into an *Abyss*: he must beg Disturbance and Opposition as an Alms. His Being and his Good is indigent: Their good Qualities are dead and lost; for they are not to be perceived, but by Comparison, and we put them out of it: they have little Knowledge of the true Praise, having their Ears

The Paladins.
Riding the great Horse the only true Exercise of the Sons of Princes.

stunn'd with so continual and uniform an Approbation. Have they to do with the meanest of all their Subjects? They have no means to take any Advantage of him, if he say, 'Tis because he is my King, he thinks he has said enough to express, that he therefore suffered himself to be overcome. This Quality stifles and consumes the other true and essential Qualities: They are involv'd in the Royalty, and leave them nothing to recommend themselves withal, but Actions that directly concern themselves, and that meerly respect the Function of their Place. 'Tis so much to be a King, that he only is so by being so; the strange Lustre that surrounds him, con-

The Prize of Eloquence refus'd by Tiberius, and why.

ceals and throwds him from us; Our Sight is there repelled and dissipated, being stop'd and filled by this prevailing Light. The Senate awarded the Prize of Eloquence to *Tiberius*; he refus'd it, supposing, that though it had been just, he could derive no Advantage from a Judgment so partial, and that was so little free to judge. As we give them all Advantages of Honour, so do we sooth and authorize all their Vices and Defects, not only by Approbation, but by Imitation also. Every one of *Alexander's* Followers

Dionysius his Flatterers.

carried their Heads awry, as he did; and the Flatterers of *Dionysius* run against one another in his Presence, stumbled at, and over-turn'd whatever was under-foot, to shew they were as pur-blind as he. Natural Imperfections have sometimes also served to recommend a Man to

Those of Mithridates.

Favour. I have seen Deafness affected: and because the Master hated his Wife, *Plutarch* has seen his Courtiers repudiate theirs, whom they loved: And which is yet more, Uncleaness and all Manner of Dissolution has been in Fashion; as also Disloyalty, Blasphemies, Cruelty, Heresy, Superstition, Irreligion, Effeminacy, and worse if worse there be. And by an Example yet more dangerous than that of *Mithridates's* Flatterers, who, by how much their Master pretended to the Honour of a good Physician, came to him to have Incisions and Cauteries made in their Limbs; for these others suffered the Soul, a more delicate and noble Part, to be cauteriz'd. But

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to end where I begun : The Emperor *Adrian* disputin^g with the Philosopher *Favorinus* about the Interpretatioⁿ of some Word : *Favorinus* soon yielded him the Victory ; for which his Friends rebuking him ; *You talk simply*, said he, *would you not have him wiser than I, who commands thirty Legions ?* *Augustus* wrote Verses against *Asinius Pollio*, and I said *Pollio*, say nothing, for it is not Prudence to write in contest with him who has Power to proscribe : And he was in the right ; for *Dionysius*, because he could not equal *Philoxenus* in Poetry, and *Plato* in Discourse, condemn'd one to the Quarries, and sent the other to be sold for a Slave in the Island of *Ægina*.



CHAP. VIII.

Of the Art of Conferring.

TIS the Custom of our Justice to condemn some for a Warnings to other. To condemn them for having done amiss, were Folly, as *Plato* says, for what is done can never be undone ; but 'tis that they may offend no more, and that others may avoid the Example of their Offence : we do not correct the Man we hang, we correct others by him. I do the same. My Errors are sometimes natural, incorrigible and irremediable : but the Good which virtuous Men do the Publick in making themselves imitated, I perhaps may do in making my Manners avoided.

*Nonne vides Albi ut malè vivat filius utque
Barras inops ? magnum documentum, ne patriam
Perdere quis velit*.*

Do but observe the wealthy *Albius*' Son,
Into what Want he is by Wildness run ;

* *Horace, l. 1. Sat. 4.*