

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 7



Translation by John Florio (1603, Public domain) · Last updated on January 5, 2024

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FLORIO-2-7-20240215-142040

Of the recompences or rewards of Honour

THOSE which write the life of *Augustus Cæsar*, note this in his militarie discipline, that hee was exceeding liberall and lavish in his gifts to such as were of any desert; but as sparing and strait-handed in meere recompences of honour. Yet is it that himselfe had bin liberally gratified by his Unckle with militarie rewardes, before ever hee went to warres. It hath bene a witty invention, and received in most partes of the worlds common-wealths, to establish and ordaine certaine vaine and worthles marks, therewith to honor and recompence vertue: As are the wreathes of Lawrell, the Chaplets of Oake, and the Garlands of myrtle, the forme of a certaine peculiar garment; the priviledge to ride in Coche through the Citty; or by night to have a Torch carried before one; Some particular place to sit-in in common assemblies; the prerogatives of certaine surnames and titles, and proper additions in armes, and such like things; the use whereof hath bene diversly received according to the opinions of Nations, which continueth to this day. We have for our part, together with divers of our neighbour-Nations, the orders of Knight-hood, which only were established to this purpose. Verily it is a most laudable use, and profitable custome, to find meanes to reward the worth, and acknowledge the valour of rare and excellent men, to satisfie and content them with such payments, as in no sort charge the common wealth, and put the Prince to no cost at all. And that which was ever knowne by ancient experience, and at other times we have plainly perceived amongst ourselves, that men of qualitie, were ever more jealous of such recompences, then of others, wherein was both gaine and profite: which was not without reason and great apparance. If to the prize, which ought simply to be of honour, there be other commodities and riches joyned, this kinde of commixing, in steade of encreasing the estimation thereof, doeth empaire, dissipate, and abridge-it. The order of the Knights of Saint *Michael* in *France*, which of so long continuance hath bin in credite amongst us, had no greater commoditie then that it had no manner of communication with any other advantage or profite, which hath heeretofore bene the cause, that there was no charge or state of what quality soever, whereto the nobilitie pretended with so much desire, or aspired with more affection, as it did to obtaine that order; nor calling, that was followed with more respect or

greatnesse. Vertue embracing with more ambition, and more willingly aspiring after a recompence, that is meerly and simply her owne, and which is rather glorious, then profitable. For, to say truth, other giftes have no use so worthy; inasmuch, as they are employed to all manner of occasions. With riches a man doth reward the service of a grooms the diligence of a messenger, the hopping of a dancer, the tricks of a vaulter, the breath of a lawyer, and the basest offices a man may receive; yea, with the same poultry pelf-money, vice is payed and sinne requited, as flattery, murther, treason, *Maquerelage*, and what not? It is then no marvell, if vertue doth lesse willingly desire this kinde of common trash, mony, then that which is only proper and peculiar to hir selfe, and is altogether noble and generous. *Augustus* had therefore reason, to bee much more niggardly and sparing of this last, then of the former, forasmuch as honour is a priviledge which drawes his principall essence from rarenesse: and so doth vertue it selfe.

Cui malus est nemo, quis bonus esse potest?

*To him who good can seeme,
Who doth none bad esteeme?*

We shall not see a man highly regarded, or extraordinarily commended, that is curioslie carefull to have his children well nurtured, because it is a common action, how just and worthy praise soever it be: no more then one great tree, where the forrest is full of such. I doe not thinke that any Spartane Cittizen did boastingly glorifie himselfe for his valor, because it was a populare vertue in that Nation: And as little for his fidelitie, and contempt of riches. There is no recompence fals unto vertue, how great soever it be, if it once have passt into custome: And I wot not whether we might call it great, beeing common. Since then the rewardes of honor, have no other prize and estimation then that which few enjoy, there is no way to disannull them, but to make a largesse of them. Were there now more menne found deserving the same then in former ages, yet should not the reputation of it be corrupted. And it may easilie happen that more deserve-it: For, there is no vertue, doeth so easilie spread it selfe as military valiancie. There is another, true, perfect, and Philosophical, wherof I speake not (I use this word according to our custome) farre greater and more full then this, which is a force and assurance of the soule, equally contemning all manner of contrarie accidents, upright, uniforme, and constant, wherof ours is but an easie and glimmering raie. Custome, institution, example and fashion, may effect what ever they list in the establishing of that I speake-of, and easily make it vulgare, as may plainly bee seene by the experience our civill warres gives-us of-it. And whosoever could now joyne us together, and eagerly flesh al our people to a common enterprise, we should make our ancient military name and chivalrous credit to flourish againe. It is most certaine that the recompence of our order did not in former times only concerne prowes, and respect valour; it had a further ayme. It was never the reward or payment of a valiant souldier; but of a famous captaine. The skil to obey could not deserve so honorable an hire: for, cast we backe our eyes to antiquitie, wee shall perceive, that for the worthie obtaining thereof, there was required more universall warre-like expertnesse, and which might imbrace the greatest

part, and most partes of a military man; *Neque enim eadem militares & imperatoriae artes sunt; for the same artes and partes belong not to a generall and common Souldier;* and who besides that, should also be of a fit and accommodable condition for such a dignitie. But I say, that if more men should nowadaies be found worthy of it, then have bin heretofore, yet should not our Princes be more liberall of it: and it had bin much better, not to bestow it upon all them to whom it was due, then for ever to loose, (as of late we have done) the use of so profitable an invention. *No man of courage vouchsafeth to advantage himself of that which is common unto manie.* And those which in our dayes, have least merited that honourable recompence, seeme, in all apparance, most to disdain it, by that meanes to place themselves in the rancke of those to whom the wrong is offred by unworthy bestowing and vilifying of that badge, which particularly was due unto them. Now by defacing and abollishing this, to suppose, sodainly to be able to bring into credite, and renue a semblable custome, is no convenient enterprise, in so licentious, so corrupted, and so declining an age, as is this wherin we now live. And it will come to passe, that the last shall even from hir birth incurre the incommodities, which have lately ruined and overthrowne the other. The rules of this new orders-dispensation had neede to be otherwise wrested and constrained, for to give it authoritie: and this tumultuous season is not capable of a short and ordered bridle. Besides, before a man is able to give credite unto it, it is requisite a man loose the memory of the first, and of the contempt whereinto it is fallen. This place might admitte some discourse upon the consideration of valour, and difference betweene this vertue and others: But *Plutarke* having often spoken of this matter, it were in vaine for me here to repeate what he sayes of it. This is worthy to be considered, that our nation giveth the chiefe preheminance of all vertue unto valiancy, as the Etymologie of the word sheweth, which commeth of valour, or worth: and that according to our received custome, when after the phrase of our court and nobility we speak of a worthy man, or of an honest man, we thereby inferre no other thing than a valiant man; after the usuall Roman fashion. For, the generall denomination of vertue dooth amongst them take hir Etymologie, of force or might. The only proper and essential forme of our nobility in *France*, is military vacation. It is very likely, that the first vertue that ever appeared amongst men, and which to some hath given preheminance over others, hath bin this, by which the strongest and more couragious have become maisters over the weakest, and purchased a particular rancke and reputation to themselves: Whereby this honour and dignitie of speach is left unto it: or else these nations being very war-like, have given the price unto that of vertues, which was the worthiest and more familiar unto them. Even as our passion, and this hart-panting, and mind-vexing carefull diligence, and diligent carefulnesse, which we continually apprehend about womens chastitie, causeth; also that a good woman, an honest woman, a woman of honor and vertue, doth, in effect and substance, signifie no other thing unto us, than a chaste wife or woman; as if to binde them to this duty, we did neglect all others, and gave them free libertie to committe any other fault, to covenant with them, never to quitte or forsake this one.