

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 7

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On Honorary Awards

They who write the life of Augustus Caesar, observe this in his military discipline, that he was wonderfully liberal of gifts to men of merit, but that as to the true recompenses of honor he was as sparing; yet he himself had been gratified by his uncle with all the military recompenses before he had ever been in the field. It was a pretty invention, and received into most governments of the world, to institute certain vain and in themselves valueless distinctions to honor and recompense virtue, such as the crowns of laurel, oak, and myrtle, the particular fashion of some garment, the privilege to ride in a coach in the city, or at night with a torch, some peculiar place assigned in public assemblies, the prerogative of certain additional names and titles, certain distinctions in the bearing of coats of arms, and the like, the use of which, according to the several humors of nations, has been variously received, and yet continues.

We in France, as also several of our neighbors, have orders of knighthood that are instituted only for this end. And 'tis, in earnest, a very good and profitable custom to find out an acknowledgment for the worth of rare and excellent men, and to satisfy them with rewards that are not at all chargeable either to prince or people. And that which has always been found by ancient experience, and which we have heretofore observed among ourselves, that men of quality have ever been more jealous of such recompenses than of those wherein there was gain and profit, is not without very good ground and reason. If with the reward, which ought to be simply a recompense of honor, they should mix other commodities and add riches, this mixture, instead of procuring an increase of estimation, would debase and abate it. The Order of St. Michael, which has been so long in repute among us, had no greater commodity than that it had no communication with any other commodity, which produced this effect, that formerly there was no office or title whatever to which the gentry pretended with so great desire and affection as they did to that; no quality that carried with it more respect and grandeur, valor and worth more willingly embracing and with greater ambition aspiring to a recompense purely its own, and rather glorious than profitable. For, in truth, other gifts have not so great a dignity of usage, 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 meanest 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, throughout generous and noble. Augustus had reason to be more sparing of this than the other, insomuch that honor is a privilege which derives its principal essence from rarity; and so virtue itself:

Cui malus est nemo, quis bonus esse potest?

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 than we commend a great tree, where the whole forest is the same. I do not think that any citizen of Sparta glorified himself much upon his valor, it being the universal virtue of the whole nation; and as little upon his fidelity and contempt of riches. There is no recompense becomes virtue, how great soever, that is once passed into a custom; and I know not withal whether we can ever call it great, being common.

Seeing, then, that these remunerations of honor 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 though there should be now more men found than in former times worthy of our order, the estimation of it nevertheless should not be abated, nor the honor made cheap; and it may easily happen that more may merit it; for there is no virtue that so easily spreads as that of military valor. There is another virtue, true, perfect, and philosophical, of which I do not speak, and only make use of the word in our common acceptance, much greater than this and more full, which is a force and assurance of the soul, equally despising all sorts of adverse accidents, equable, uniform, and constant, of which ours is no more than one little ray. Use, education, example, and custom can do all in all to the establishment of that whereof I am speaking, and with great facility render it common, as by the experience of our civil wars is manifest enough; and whoever could at this time unite us all, Catholic and Huguenot, into one body, and set us upon some brave common enterprise, we should again make our ancient military reputation flourish. It is most certain that in times past the recompense of this order had not only a regard to valor, but had a further 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 honorable a guerdon. There was therein a more universal military expertness required, and that comprehended the most and the greatest qualities of a military man: *Neque enim eadem militares et imperatorix artes sunt*, as also, besides, a condition suitable to such a dignity. But, I say, though more men were worthy than formerly, yet ought it not to be more liberally distributed, and it were better to fall short in not giving it at all to whom it should be due, than for ever to lose, as we have lately done, the fruit of so profitable an invention. No man of spirit will deign to advantage himself with what is in common with many; and such of the present time as have least merited this recompense themselves make the greater show of disdaining it, in order thereby to be ranked with those to

To whom no one is ill who can be good? • MART., 12.82

For the arts of soldiery and generalship are not the same. • LIVY, 25.19

whom so much wrong has been done by the unworthy conferring and debasing the distinction which was their particular right.

Now, to expect that in obliterating and abolishing this, suddenly to create and bring into credit a like institution, is not a proper attempt for so licentious and so sick a time as this wherein we now are; and it will fall out that the last will from its birth incur the same inconveniences that have ruined the other. The rules for dispensing this new order had need to be extremely clipped and bound under great restrictions, to give it authority; and this tumultuous season is incapable of such a curb: besides that, before this can be brought into repute, 'tis necessary that the memory of the first, and of the contempt into which it is fallen, be buried in oblivion.

This place might naturally enough admit of some discourse upon the consideration of valor, 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 is worth considering: that our nation places valor, vaillance, in the highest degree of virtue, as its very word evidences, being derived from valeur, and that, according to our use, when we say a man of high worth a good man, in our court style—'tis to say a valiant man, after the Roman way; for the general appellation of virtue with them takes etymology from vis, force. The proper, sole, and essential profession of, the French noblesse is that of arms: and 'tis likely that the first virtue that discovered itself among men and has given to some advantage over others, was that by which the strongest and most valiant have mastered the weaker, and acquired a particular authority and reputation, whence came to it that dignified appellation; or else, that these nations, being very warlike, gave the pre-eminence to that of the virtues which was most familiar to them; just as our passion and the feverish solicitude we have of the chastity of women occasions that to say, a good woman, a woman of worth, a woman of honor and virtue, signifies merely a chaste woman as if, to oblige them to that one duty, we were indifferent as to all the rest, and gave them the reins in all other faults whatever to compound for that one of incontinence.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Livy	<i>Livy, History of Rome</i>
Mart.	<i>Martial, Epigrams</i>