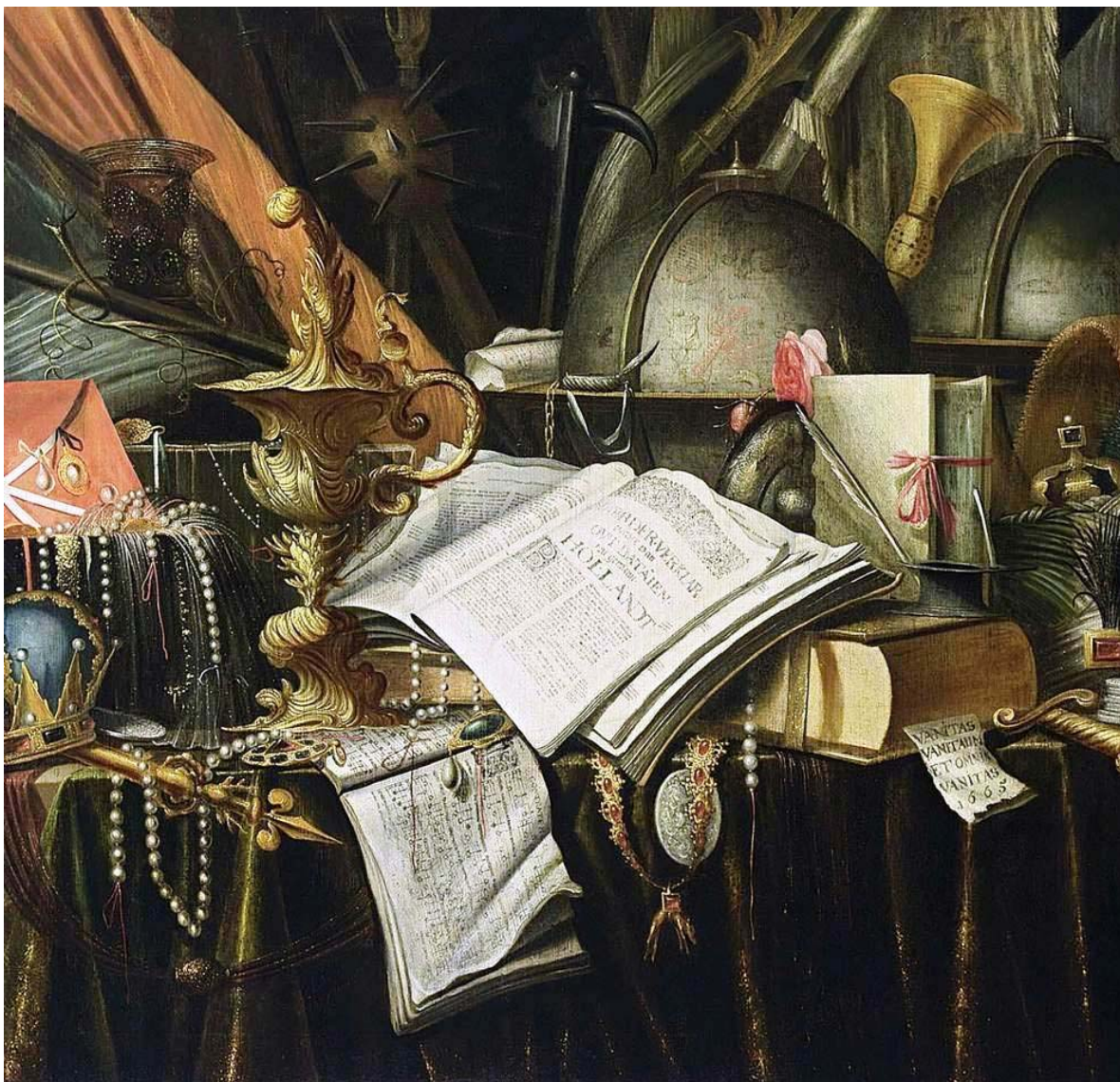


Plutarch's Morals
On how we may show off
without being envied

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Vanitas still-life (1665) Edward Collier, Private collection



Train of thought

- An arrogant boaster is universally condemned.
- Yet there are times when a man may fitly praise himself.
- A man may vindicate his worthy acts when maligned by others.
- Instances of this in Pericles, Pelopidas, Epaminondas.
- A man grappling with ill-fortune may vindicate himself.
- A man may do it, if treated ungratefully.
- Or if unjustly accused of evil acts.
- A man may indirectly praise himself by praising others who are of similar character.
- Envy may be forestalled by giving the credit of our good actions to Fortune or to God.
- And by admissions of partial wrong in our character or conduct.
- We may praise ourselves when it seems to be for the advantage of others.
- And when by so doing we may silence an insolent and blustering man.
- When evil conduct is praised, and we may attract the attention of the company to a worthier example.
- In general we should avoid talking about ourselves.
- This habit engenders boasting and vain-glory.
- It leads to the disparagement of others.
- We should hear our praises uttered with modesty and caution.
- Otherwise we incur disgrace.



1 He that talks big and arrogantly of himself, Herculanus, is universally condemned as a troublesome and ill-bred companion. But the most, even of those who in words mightily declaim against him, seem to applaud him in their actions. Euripides could say,

If speech grew scarce, and at great rates were sold,
Commend himself what lavish fellow would?
But since the infinite treasure of the air
Praise gratis yields, none truth or falsehood spare;
Suffering no damage, though they give their ware.

Yet he often brings in his heroes intolerably boasting, and stuffs their most tragical adventures and passions with improper discourses of themselves. So Pindar declares,

Unseasonably to glory
Makes harmony with fury;¹

but he forbears not to extol his own raptures, which indeed, by the confession of all men, are worthy of the noblest praise.

But those who are crowned for mastery in the games or in the learned combats have others to celebrate their victories, that the people's ears be not grated with the harsh noises of self-applause. And Timotheus is justly censured as unskilfully and irregularly setting forth his conquest of Phrynis, when he thus proudly boasted it in writing: Happy man wast thou, Timotheus, when the crier proclaimed, "The Milesian Timotheus hath vanquished the son of Carbo, the soft Ionian poet."

It is true then, as Xenophon says, The most pleasant sound that a man can hear is his own praise in another's mouth; but the most odious thing unto others is a man commending himself. For we brand them as impudent who commend themselves, it becoming them to be modest though they were praised by others; and we account them unjust in arrogating that to themselves which another has the sole propriety of bestowing on them. Besides, if we then are silent, we seem either angry or envious; but if we second their discourse, we are presently entangled and forced to contribute more than we intended, speaking to men's faces what sounds well only behind their backs; and so we undertake rather the base work of drudging flattery than any real offices of true honor.

2 Yet, however, there is a time when a statesman may be the subject of his own discourse, and give a free relation of things he has worthily done or said, as well as other truths; taking care that it be not merely for favor or reputation, but upon some emergent occasion, and especially, when the deeds achieved by him or the parts that be in him be good and honest, then he is not to forbear and say merely that he hath done so or else much like. There is indeed a praise of this kind which bears very excellent and lovely fruit, from whose seeds arise many of the same species very much meliorated and improved. And therefore it is that the wise statesman seeks glory not as the reward or solace of his virtue, nor embraces it merely as the companion of his

¹ Pindar, *Olymp.* IX. 58.



achievements, but because the being accounted an honorable person and gallant man affords a thousand opportunities of compassing many and more desirable things. For it is easy and delightful to be of use to those who are apt to believe and love us; whereas, if a man lie under calumnies and suspicions, he cannot exert his virtue to the benefit of others without committing a kind of violence upon them.

There may also be more reasons than these, which we must enquire into, that, while we endeavor to avert a frivolous and nauseous applauding of ourselves, we chance not to omit that sort which may be truly useful.

3 The praise therefore is vain which a man heaps on himself to provoke others also to praise him, and is chiefly contemptible, as proceeding from an importunate and unseasonable affectation of esteem.

For as they who are ready to die for food are compelled against nature to gnaw off their own flesh, and thus put a miserable end to their famine; so they who mortally hunger after praise, unless some one afford them a little scantling alms of commendation, do violate the laws of decency, shamelessly endeavoring to supply those wants by an unnatural extolling of themselves.

But when they do not on the bare consideration of themselves hunt applause, but strive to obscure the worth of others, by fighting against their praises and opposing their own works and practices to theirs, they add to their vanity an envious and abhorred baseness. He who thrusts his foot into another's dance is stigmatized with a proverb as a ridiculous and pragmatistical clown; but upon envy and jealousy to thrust ourselves between the praises of others, or to interrupt the same with our own self praise, is a thing that we ought equally to beware of. Neither should we allow others to praise us at such a time, but frankly yield the honor to those who are then celebrated, if their merit be real; and though the persons be vicious or unworthy, yet must we not take from them by setting up ourselves; but rather on the other hand we must reprove the unskilful applauders, and demonstrate their encomiums to be improperly and dangerously conferred. It is plain that these errors must be avoided.

4 But self-praise is not liable to disgrace or blame when it is delicately handled by way of apology to remove a calumny or accusation. Thus Pericles: But ye are angry at me, a man inferior to none, whether it be in the understanding or interpreting of necessary things; a man who am a lover of my country, and above the meannesses of bribes. For, in speaking with this gallantry of himself, he was not only free from arrogance, vanity, and ambition, but he demonstrated the greatness and spirit of that virtue which could not be dejected itself, and even humbled and tamed the haughtiness of envy. Such men as these will hardly be condemned; but those who would vote against them are won over to their cause, do receive infinite satisfaction, and are agreeably inspirited with this noble boasting, especially if that bravery be steady, and the ground firm on which it stands. This history does frequently discover. For, when the Theban generals accused Pelopidas and Epaminondas that, the time for their office as Boeotarchs being expired, they did not forthwith give up their power, but made an incursion into Laconia and repaired and repeopled Messene, Pelopidas, submitting himself and making many lowly entreaties, very hardly obtained his absolution; but Epaminondas loftily glorying in those actions, and at last declaring he



would willingly be put to death so that they would set up his accusation, “Epaminondas hath wasted Laconia, hath settled Messene, and happily united Arcadia into one state, against our will,” they admired him, and the citizens, wondering at the cheerful greatness of his courage, dismissed him with unspeakable pleasantness and satisfaction.

Therefore, when Agamemnon thus reproached Diomedes,

O son of Tydeus! — he whose strength could tame
The bounding steeds, in arms a mighty name, —
Canst thou remote the mingling hosts descry,
With han is inactive and a careless eye?

Sthenelus is not to be much condemned for saying,

Ourselves much greater than our ancestors
We boast;²

for Sthenelus had not been calumniated himself, but he only patronized his abused friend; and so the cause excused that freedom of speech, which seemed otherwise to have something of the glorioso.

But Cicero’s magnifying his diligence and prudence in Catiline’s trial was not very pleasing to the Romans; yet when Scipio said, they ought not to judge Scipio, who had enstated them in the power of judging all men, they as cended crowned to the Capitol, and sacrificed with him. For Cicero was not necessitated to this, but merely spurred by the desire of glory; while the danger wherein Scipio stood delivered him from envy.

5 Now talking after an high and glorious manner proves advantageous, not only to persons in danger of the law or such like eminent distress, but to those also who are clouded in a dull series of misfortunes; and that more properly than when they appear splendid in the world. For what addition can words make to those who already seem possessed of real glory, and do lie indulging and basking in her beams? But those who at present are incapable of ambition, if they express themselves loftily, seem only to bear up against the storms of Fortune, to undergird the greatness of their souls, and to shun that pity and commiseration which supposes a shipwrecked and forlorn condition. As therefore those who in walking affect a stiffness of body and a stretched-out neck are accounted effeminate and foppish, but are commended if in fencing and fighting they keep themselves erect and steady; so the man grappling with ill fortune, if he raise himself to resist her,

Like some stout boxer, ready with his blow,³

and by a bravery of speech transform himself from abject and miserable to bold and noble, is not to be censured as obstinate and audacious, but honored as invincible and great. So, although Homer described Patroclus in the happinesses of his life as

² *Il. IV.* 370 and 405.

³ *Soph. Trachin.* 442.



smooth and without envy, yet in death he makes him have something of the bravo, and a soldier's gallant roughness:

Had twenty mortals, each thy match in might,
Opposed me fairly, they had sunk in fight.⁴

So Phocion, though otherwise very mild, after the sentence passed on him, showed the greatness of his mind in many respects; particularly to one of his fellow-sufferers, who miserably cried out and bewailed his misfortune, What, says he, is it not a pleasure to thee to die with Phocion?

6 Further, a man of state has not less but greater liberty to speak any thing of himself when his merits are rewarded with injurious and unkind returns. Achilles usually gave the Gods their glory, and spoke modestly in this manner:

Whene'er, by Jove's decree, our conquering powers
Shall humble to the dust Troy's lofty towers.

But when he was unhandsomely reproached and aspersed with contumelies, he added swelling words to his anger, and these in his own applause:

I sacked twelve ample cities on the main;

and also these:

It was not thus, when, at my sight amazed,
Troy saw and trembled, as this helmet blazed.⁵

For apologies claim a great liberty of speech and boasting, as considerable parts of their defence.

Themistocles also, having been guilty of nothing distasteful either in his words or actions, yet perceiving the Athenians glutted with him and beginning to neglect him, forbore not to say: Why, O ye happy people, do ye weary out yourselves by still receiving benefits from the same hands? Upon every storm you fly to the same tree for shelter; yet, when it is fair again, you despoil it of its leaves as you go away.

7 They therefore who are injured usually recount their good actions to the ingrate. And, if they also praise those excellences which others are pleased to condemn, they are not only pardonable but altogether without blame. For it is evident they do not reproach others, but apologize for themselves.

This gave Demosthenes a glorious freedom, yet allayed the offensive brightness of his own praises, which almost everywhere shine through his whole Oration on the Crown, in which he extols those embassies and decrees which were so much objected against him.

⁴ *Il.* XVI. 847.

⁵ *Il.* I. 128; IX. 328; XVI. 70.



- 8 Not much unlike this is the insinuating delicacy of an antithesis, when a person, being accused for any thing as a crime, demonstrates its opposite to be base and vicious. So Lycurgus, being upbraided by the Athenians for stopping a sycophant's mouth with money, said: And what kind of citizen do you then take me to be, who, having so long managed the affairs of the republic amongst you, am at last found rather to have given than to have received money unjustly? And Cicero, Metellus objecting he had cast more by his evidence against them than ever he had acquitted by his pleading for them, replies: Who therefore will not freely declare that Cicero has more honesty and faith than eloquence? Many expressions of this nature are in Demosthenes; particularly, But who might not justly have slain me, if I had endeavored in word only to sully the honors and glorious titles which the city hath? Or, What, think you, would those vile fellows have said, if, whilst I had been curiously poring on other things, the cities had rejected our alliance?⁶ And all his forementioned oration ingeniously dresses these antitheses and solutions of cases with the subtle ornaments of his own praise.
- 9 But this may very profitably be learned therein, that, delicately tempering the encomiums of his auditors with the things relating to himself, he secures himself from being liable to envy, nor becomes suspected of self-love. There he relates in what manner the Athenians behaved themselves to the Euboeans, in what manner to the Thebans, and what benefits they conferred upon those of Byzantium and Chersonesus; in all which he confesses his part was only that of their minister or steward. Thus by a rhetorical deceit, he finely and insensibly instils his own praises into his hearers, who pleasingly hang upon his words, and rejoice at the commemoration of those worthy deeds. Now this joy is immediately seconded by admiration, and admiration is succeeded by a liking and love of that person who so wisely administered the affairs. This Epaminondas seems to have considered, when reviled by Meneclidas, as though he had an higher opinion of himself than ever Agamemnon had. If it be so, says he, Thebans, 'tis you have puffed me up; you, by whose help alone I overthrew the Lacedaemonian empire in one day.
- 10 But since for the most part men are exceedingly displeased with those who are the trumpeters of their own fame, but if they sound forth another's, are delighted and give them cheerful acclamations; it is hence grown a frequent custom amongst orators, by a seasonable extolling those who have like purposes, actions, and manner of life with theirs, to assure and wheedle over the auditory to themselves. For the hearers know that, though the panegyrist solemnizes another's worth, he has yet the same endowments of virtue, so that his encomiums will redound to himself. For as he who reproaches any man for faults of which he himself is guilty cannot but perceive he principally upbraids himself, so the virtuous, by giving applauses to the virtuous, offer their own praises to the apprehensive, who will presently cry out, And are not you one of these? Therefore Alexander honoring Hercules, and Androcottus again honoring Alexander, in effect proposed themselves to be in like manner honored by others. So Dionysius scoffing Gelon, and calling him the Gelos (or laughing-

⁶ Demosthenes on the Crown, p. 260, 1; p. 307, 9.



stock) of Sicily, was not aware that through envy he had happened to infringe the greatness of his own authority and power.

11 These things the man of state must know and observe. Now those who are forced upon their own praises are the more excusable, if they arrogate not the causes wholly to themselves, but ascribe them in part to Fortune and in part to God. Achilles therefore said:

Since now at length the powerful will of heaven
The dire destroyer to our arm has given.⁷

And Timoleon did well, who erected a fane to Fortune, and dedicated his house to the Good Genius, to whom he referred the felicity of his attempts. But best of all, Python of Aenos, after he had slain Cotys, coming to Athens and perceiving the orators very busy in applauding him to the people, which displeased many and stirred them up to envy, thus speaks: These things, ye Athenians, some of the Gods have done; our hands were only the instruments of their work. Sylla also prevented envy by perpetually praising Fortune, not his own prowess; and at last surnamed himself Epaphroditus, in acknowledgment that his success proceeded from the care of Venus. For men will more readily impute a defeat to chance or the pleasure of some God than to the virtue of the conqueror; for the one they think to be a good not pertinent to the conqueror, but the other to be a proper defect of their own, which proceedeth from themselves. The laws therefore of Zaleucus were received by the Locrians with the more willingness and delight, because he had told them Minerva constantly appeared to him and dictated and instructed him in those laws, and that they were none of them his own inventions.

12 This kind of excuses may be framed as convenient remedies or preventions when we have to do with persons of a difficult or envious humor. But it is not amiss to use some little revocations or corrections of what may seem spoken to our praise, before those who are of a sedate and composed temper. If any commend us as those who have learning, riches, or authority, we should hinder them from choosing such topics, and rather desire of them, if they can, to take notice of us as innocent, good, and useful. Thus we do not so much confer as transfer praises, and seem not to be puffed up with our applauders, but rather to be offended that they have not praised conveniently and for truly meritorious things. We hide also inferior with better qualifications; yet not as desiring to be commended, but as teaching to commend aright. Such forms as these may be referred hither: It is true, I have not walled the city with stones or brick; but if you will view my fortifications, you shall find armor, and horses, and confederates.⁸ But more apt is that of Pericles. When his friends bewailed him in the extremities of death, they put him in mind of his authority and the great offices he had discharged, as also what victories, trophies, and cities he had left the Athenians; but he, raising himself a little, reproved them as fixing only upon common encomiums, and enlarging rather on those of fortune than on those of virtue, whereas they neglected the greatest matter, which was more peculiar to himself,

⁷ *Il.* XXII. 379.

⁸ Demosthenes on the Crown, *p.* 325, 22.



— that he had never been the occasion of any Athenian's wearing black. And hence the orator may learn, if he be a good man, to transfer the eulogiums of his eloquence to his virtuous life and manners; and the commander who is admired and applauded for his conduct and happy fortune in the wars may freely propose his clemency or justice as more worthy to be praised. Nay, further, it becomes even an emperor, upon a profusion of such glutting praises as flatterers are commonly guilty of, to say something of this nature:

No God am I. Why do ye equal me
Thus to th' immortal powers.⁹

If you know me well, let my justice or temperance, my equanimity or humanity, be rather spoken of. For even envy herself can easily concede the lesser honors to him who refuses the greater; nor will it rob any of true encomiums, not to expect false and vain ones. Therefore several princes, who permitted not themselves to be called Gods or the offspring of the Gods, have yet assumed the titles Philadelphus, Philometor, Evergetes, or Theophilus; and were never offended when they were honored with those glorious yet human appellations.

Again, they who in their writings and sayings are absolute votaries to wisdom by no means will be called σοφοί (or wise men), but can presently swallow the epithet of philosophers (or lovers of wisdom), or that of proficient, or any other easy name which sounds not big nor exposes them to envy; and so they beget and preserve a good esteem. But your rhetorical sophisters, whilst in their orations they gape for the extraordinary acclamations of divine, angelical, wonderful, lose even those common ones of manly or pretty well.

13 Now as skilful painters, that they may not offend those that have weak eyes, allay their over-bright and gaudy colors by tempering them with darker; so there are some who will not represent their own praises altogether glaring and immoderately splendid, but cast in some defects, some scapes or slight faults, to take away the danger of displeasure or envy. Epeus intolerably brags of his skill in boxing,

I'll crush my adversary's body, break his bones;
yet he would seem to qualify all with this,

Is 't not enough that I'm in fight unskilled?¹⁰

But, to say truth, to excuse his arrogance with so base a confession is ridiculous. He then who would be an exact man corrects himself for his forgetfulness, ignorance, ambition, or eagerness for certain knowledge and discourses. So does Ulysses when he says of the Sirens,

Thus the sweet charmers warbled o'er the main,
My soul takes wing to meet the heavenly strain;
I give the sign, and struggle to be free;

and again, when he sang of his visit to the Cyclops,

⁹ *Odyss.* XVI. 187.

¹⁰ *Il.* XXIII. 673 and 670.



Their wholesome counsel rashly I declined,
Curious to view the man of monstrous kind,
And try what social rites a savage lends.¹¹

And for the most part it is a good antidote against envy, to mix amongst our praises those faults that are not altogether ungenerous and base. Therefore many temper them not only with confessions of poverty or unskilfulness, but even of vile descent. So Agathocles, carousing amongst the Sicilian youth in golden bowls very curiously wrought, commanded earthen pots to be brought in. See (says he) what diligence, laboriousness, and fortitude can do! Once we made muggen jugs, but now vessels of gold. For his original was so mean and contemptible, that it was thought he had served in a potter's shop who at last governed almost all Sicily.

14 These are the outward preventions or remedies against diseases that may arise from the speaking of one's self. There are some others inward, which Cato has recourse to when he tells us he was envied for neglecting his domestic affairs and being vigilant whole nights in those of his country. So with this:

How shall I boast, who grew so easily,
Though mustered 'mongst the common soldiery;
Great in my fortune as the bravest be?

And this:

But I am loath to lose past labor's gains;
Nor will retreat from a fresh troop of pains.¹²

For as they who obtain great possessions of houses or lands gratis and with little difficulty are under the eye of envy, but not if their purchases were troublesome and dear, so it is with them who arrive at honor and applause.

15 Well then, since it is evident we may praise ourselves not only inoffensively and without being liable to envy, but with great advantage too; that we may seem not to do this for itself, but for a further and better end, first consider whether it may prove for the instruction of the company, by exciting them to a virtuous emulation. For so Nestor's relation of his own achievements inflamed Patroclus and nine others with a vehement desire of single combat; and we know the counsel that brings persuasive deeds as well as words, a lively exemplar, and an immediate familiar incentive, in-souls a man with courage, moves, yea, vehemently spurs him up to such a resolution of mind as cannot doubt the possibility and success of the attempt. This was the reason of that chorus in Lacedaemon consisting of boys, young men, and old men, which thus sang in parts: —

OLD MEN Once we were young, and bold and strong.
BOYS And we shall be no less ere long.
YOUNG MEN We now are such; behold us, if you will.¹³

¹¹ Odyss. XII. 192; IX. 228.

¹² From the *Philoctetes* of Euripides, Frag. 785 and 787.

¹³ See Vol. 1. p. 91.



Well and politicly in this public entertainment did the legislator propose to the youth obvious and domestic examples of such as had already performed the things he exhorted them to.

16 Moreover, it is not only available for the exciting of a generous emulation, but sometimes requisite for the silencing and taming an insolent and audacious man, to talk a little gloriously of one's self. As Nestor in this:

I have conversed with men more gallant far
Than you; much your superiors they in all things were,
Nor did they ever to contemn me dare.¹⁴

And Aristotle writes to Alexander, that not only those who have mighty empires may think highly of themselves, but they also who have worthy thoughts and notions of the Gods. Such a remark as this is also profitable against enemies, and recalls the spirits:

Weak sons of misery our strength oppose.¹⁵

And such a reflection as that of Agesilaus, who said concerning the king of Persia, when he heard him called the Great: And who is greater than I, unless he be more just? So Epaminondas answered the Lacedaemonians, when they had spun out a long accusation against the Thebans: I see then we have forced you out of your wonted humor of short speech.

The like to these are proper against adversaries; but amongst our friends and fellow-citizens a seasonable glorying is good not only to humble and throw down their haughtiness, but if they be fearful or astonished, to fetch back their courage and teach them to rally up themselves again. Therefore Cyrus in perils and battles talked at a thundering rate, but otherwise was mild and gentle in discourse. And Antigonus the Second generally was modest and free from blustering; but at the sea-fight at Cos, — one of his friends saying, See you not how much greater the number of the enemy's ships is than ours? — he answers, And for how many ships dost thou reckon me?

This Homer seems to have considered, who makes Ulysses, when his friends were dismayed at the noise and horrible waves of Charybdis, remind them of his former stratagems and valor:

O friends! O often tried in adverse storms!
With ills familiar in more dreadful forms!
Deep in the dire Cyclopean den you lay,
Yet safe return'd, — Ulysses led the way.¹⁶

For this kind of praise is not such as the haranguers to the people or sophistical beggars use, nor those who affect popular humming and applause; but a necessary pledge of that courage and conduct which must be given to hearten up our friends.

¹⁴ *Il. I.* 260.

¹⁵ *Il. VI.* 127.

¹⁶ *Odyss. XII.* 209.



For we know that opinion and confidence in him whom we esteem endued with the fortitude and experience of a complete captain is, in the crisis of a battle, no small advantage to the obtaining of the day.

17 We have before declared the opposing of himself to the reputation and credit of another to be altogether unbefitting a worthy man; but where a vicious praise becomes hurtful and corruptive, creating an earnestness after evil things or an evil purpose in great matters, it is not unprofitable to refuse it; but it becomes us to direct the minds of the company towards better sentiments of things, showing them the difference. For certainly any one will be pleased when he sees many voluntarily abstaining from the vices they heard cried down and reprov'd; but if baseness be well accounted of, and honor be made to attend on him who pursues pleasure or avarice, where is the nature so happily strong that can resist, much less conquer, the temptation? Therefore a generous and discreet person must set himself against the praises, not of evil men, but of evil actions; for this kind of commendation perverts the judgments of men, and miserably leads them to imitate and emulate unworthy practices as laudable. But they may be easily betrayed by confronting them with opposite truths. Theodorus the tragedian is reported to have said to Satyrus the comedian, It is not so wonderful an art to move the theatre's laughter as to force its tears. But if some philosopher should have retorted, Aye; but, friend, it is not so fit and seemly to make men weep, as to remove and free them from their sorrows, it is likely by this odd way of commending himself he would have delighted his hearer, and endeavored to alter or secure his judgment. So Zeno knew how to speak for himself, when the great number of Theophrastus's scholars was opposed to the fewness of his, saying, His chorus is indeed greater than mine, but mine is sweeter. And Phocion, while Leosthenes yet prospered, being asked by the orators what good he had done the city, replies: Nothing but this, that in my government of you there have been no funeral orations, but all the deceased were buried in the sepulchres of their ancestors. So Crates, by way of antithesis to this epitaph of the glutton,

What I have eat is mine; in words my will
I've had, and of my lust have took my fill,

well opposes these,

What I have learnt is mine; I've had my thought,
And me the Muses noble truths have taught.

This kind of praise is amiable and advantageous, teaching to admire and love convenient and profitable things instead of the superfluous and vain. Thus much for the stating of the question, in what cases and how far self-praise may be inoffensive.

18 Now the order of the discourse requires to show how an uncomely and unseasonable affectation of praise may be avoided. Discourse of a man's self usually sallies from self-love, as from its fort, and is there observed to lay wait, even in those who are vulgarly thought free enough from ambition. Therefore, as it is one of the rules of health to avoid dangerous and unwholesome places, or being in them to take the greater care, so ought there to be a like rule concerning converse and speaking of one's self. For this kind of talk has slippery occasions, into which we unawares and indiscernibly are apt to fall.



For first (as is above said), ambition usually intrudes into the praises of others with some flourishing remarks to adorn herself. For let a person be commended by his equal or inferior, the mind of the ambitious is tickled and rubbed at the hearing of his praise, and immediately he is hurried by an intemperate desire and precipitation after the like; as the appetite of the hungry is sharpened by seeing others eat.

19 In the second place, the story of men's prosperous actions naturally carries them into the humor of boasting; and joy so far transports them, that they swell with their own words when they would give you a relation of their victories or their success in the business of the state, or of their other publicly applauded actions or orations, and find it difficult to contain themselves and preserve a mean. In which kind of error it is observable that soldiers and mariners are most entangled. Nor is it infrequent with those who return from the government of provinces and the management of great affairs. Such as these, when mention is once made of illustrious and royal personages, presently thrust in some eulogies of themselves, as proceeding from the favor and kind opinion of those princes; and then they fancy they seem not at all to have praised themselves, but to have given only a bare account what great men have said honorably of them. So another sort, little different from these, think they are not discerned when they tell you all the familiarities of kings and emperors with them and their particular applying themselves to them in discourse, and appear to recount them, not as thereby intending their own honor, but as bringing in considerable evidences of singular affability and humanity in persons so exceeding great.

We see then what reason we have to look narrowly to ourselves, that, whilst we confer praises on others, we give no ground for suspicion that we make them but the vehicles of our own, and that, "in pretending to celebrate Patroclus," under his name we mean romantically ourselves.

20 Further, that kind of discourse which consists in dispraising and finding fault is dangerous, and yields opportunity to those that watch it for the magnifying their own little worth. Of this old men are inclinable to be guilty, when, by chastising and debasing others for their vices, they exalt themselves as wonderfully great in the opposite virtues. Indeed to these there must be a very large concession, if they be revered not only in age, but in virtue and place; for it is not altogether an unprofitable way, since it may sometimes create an extraordinary zeal and emulation of honor in those who are thus spurred up. But otherwise that sort of humor is carefully to be shunned; for reproof is often bitter, and wants a great deal of caution to sweeten and correct it. Now this is not done by the tempering our own praises with the reprehension of another; for he is an unworthy and odious fellow who seeks his own credit through any man's disgrace, basely endeavoring to build a slight reputation of his virtue upon the discovery of another's crimes.



21 Lastly, as they who are naturally inclined to a dangerous sort of laughter, — which is a kind of violent passion or disease, — must preserve especially the smooth parts of the body from tickling incentives, which cause these parts to yield and relent, thus provoking the passion; so they whose minds are soft and propense to the desires of reputation must carefully beware that they be not precipitated by the ticklings of another's praises into a vapping of themselves. They ought rather to blush, if they hear themselves commended, and not put on a brazen face. They ought modestly and handsomely to reprove their applauders as having honored them too much, and not chide them for having been too sparing in their praise. Yet in this many offend, putting those who speak advantageously of them in mind of more things of the same nature; endeavoring to make a huge heap of creditable actions, till by what they themselves add they spoil all that their friends have conferred to the promoting their esteem.

Some there are who flatter themselves, till they are stupidly puffed up; others allure a man to talk of himself, and take him by casting some little gilded temptation in his way; and another sort for a little sport will be putting questions, as those in Menander to the silly braggadocio soldier:

How did you get this wound?
By a furious dart.
For heaven's sake, how?
As from my scaling ladder
I mounted the proud walls. See here! Behold!
Then I proceed to show my wound
With earnest look; but they spoiled all with laughter.

22 We must be watchful in all these cases, that we neither of ourselves drop into our own inconvenient praises, nor be hooked into them by others. Now the best and most certain way of security is to look back upon such as we can remember guilty of this fault, and to consider how absurd and ugly it is accounted by all men, and that hardly any thing is in converse a greater disturbance than this.

Hence it is that, though there be no other quality in such persons unpleasing, yet, as if Nature had taught us to abhor and fly it, we hasten out to get a little fresh air; and even the very parasite and indigent flatterers are uneasy, when the wealthy and great men by whose scraps they live begin to admire and extol themselves; nay, they give out that they pay the greatest portion of the shot, when they must give ear to such vanities. Therefore he in Menander cries out,

They kill me — I am a macerated guest —
With their wise sayings and their soldier's brags;
How base these glorious are!

But these faults are not only to be objected against common soldiers and upstarts who detain others with gaudy and proud relations of their own actions, but also against sophists, philosophers, and commanders who grow full of themselves and talk at a fastuous rate. Therefore it is fit we still remember that another's dispraise always accompanies the indiscreet praises of ourselves; that the end of vain-glory is disgrace; and that, as Demosthenes tells us, the company will both be offended and



judge otherwise of us than we would have them.¹⁷ Let us then forbear to talk of ourselves, unless the profit that we or our hearers may thence probably reap be considerably great.



Flowers and Fruit still-life (c 1665) Jan Davidszoon de Heem, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

¹⁷ See Demosthenes on the *Crown*, p. 270, 3.

