

*Of the Titles of Illustrious, Highness,
and Excellence*

THE title of *illustrious* was never given, till the reign of Constantine, but to those whose reputation was splendid in arms, or in letters. Adulation had not yet adopted this noble word into her vocabulary. Suetonius composed a book to record those who had possessed this title; and, as it was then bestowed, a moderate volume was sufficient to contain their names.

In the time of Constantine, the title of *illustrious* was given more particularly to those princes who had distinguished themselves in war; but it was not continued to their descendants. At length, it became very common; and every son of a prince was *illustrious*. It is now a convenient epithet for the poet.

There is a very proper distinction to be made between the epithets of ILLUSTRIOUS and FAMOUS.

Niceron has entitled his laborious work, *Mémoires pour servir à l'Histoire des Hommes ILLUSTRES dans la République des Lettres*. The epithet ILLUSTRIOUS is always received in an honourable sense; yet in these Memoirs are inserted many authors who have only written with the design of combating religion and morality. Such writers as Vanini, Spinoza, Woolston, Toland, &c, had been better characterised under the more general epi-

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thet of FAMOUS; for it may be said, that the ILLUSTRIOUS are FAMOUS, but that the FAMOUS are not always ILLUSTRIOUS. In the rage for TITLES the ancient lawyers in Italy were not satisfied by calling kings ILLUSTRES; they went a step higher, and would have emperors to be *super-illustres*, a barbarous coinage of their own.

In Spain, they published a book of *titles* for their kings, as well as for the Portuguese; but Selden tells us, that “their *Cortesias* and giving of titles grew at length, through the affectation of heaping great attributes on their princes, to such an insufferable forme, that a remedie was provided against it.” This remedy was an act published by Philip III. which ordained that all the *Cortesias*, as they termed these strange phrases, they had so servilely and ridiculously invented, should be reduced to a simple subscription, “To the king our lord,” leaving out those fantastical attributes which every secretary had vied with his predecessors in increasing their number.

It would fill three or four of the present pages to transcribe the titles and attributes of the Grand Signior, which he assumes in a letter to Henry IV. Selden, in his *Titles of Honour*, first part, p. 140, has preserved

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it. This “emperor of victorious emperors,” as he styles himself, at length condescended to agree with the Emperor of Germany, in 1606, that in all their letters and instruments they should be only styled *father* and *son*: the emperor calling the sultan his son; and the sultan the emperor, in regard of his years, his *father*.

Formerly, says Houssaie, the title of *highness* was only given to kings; but now: it has become so common, that all the great houses assume it. All the Great, says a modern, are desirous of being confounded with princes, and are ready to seize on the privileges of royal dignity. We have already come to *highness*. The pride of our descendants, I suspect, will usurp that of *majesty*.

Ferdinand, king of Arragon, and his queen Isabella, of Castile, were only treated with the title of *highness*. Charles was the first who took that of *majesty*: not in his quality of king of Spain, but as emperor. St. Foix informs us, that kings were usually addressed by the titles of *most illustrious*, or *your serenity*, or *your grace*; but that the custom of giving them that of *majesty* was only established by Louis XI., a prince the least majestic in all his actions, his manners, and his exterior—a severe monarch, but no ordinary man, the Tiberius of France; whose manners were of the most sordid nature:—in public audiences he dressed like the meanest of the

people, and affected to sit on an old broken chair, with a filthy dog on his knees. In an account found of his household, this *majestic* prince has a charge made him, for two new sleeves sewed on one of his old doublets.

Formerly kings were apostrophized by the title of *your grace*. Henry VIII. was the first, says Houssaie, who assumed the title of *highness*; and at length *majesty*. It was Francis I. who saluted him with this last title, in their interview in the year 1520, though he called himself only the first gentleman in his kingdom!

So distinct were once the titles of *highness* and *excellence*, that when Don Juan, the brother of Philip II., was permitted to take up the latter title, and the city of Granada saluted him by the title of *highness*, it occasioned such serious jealousy at court, that had he persisted in it, he would have been condemned for treason.

The usual title, of *cardinals*, about 1600, was *seignoria illustrissima*; the Duke of Lerma, the Spanish minister and cardinal, in his old age, assumed the title of *excellencia reverendissima*. The church of Rome was in its glory, and to be called *reverend* was then accounted a higher honour than to be styled the *illustrious*. But by use *illustrious* grew familiar, and *reverend* vulgar, and at last the cardinals were distinguished by the title of *eminent*.

After all these historical notices respecting these titles, the reader will smile when he is acquainted with the reason of an honest curate, of Montferrat, who refused to bestow the title of *highness* on the duke of Mantua, because he found in his breviary these words, *Tu solus Dominus, Tu solus Altissimus*; from all which he concluded, that none but the Lord was to be honoured with the title of *highness*. The “Titles of Honour” of Selden is a very curious volume, and as the learned Usher told Evelyn, the most valuable work of this great scholar. The best edition is a folio of about 1000 pages. Selden vindicates the right of a king of England to the title of *emperor*.

“And never yet was TITLE did not move;
And never eke a mind, that TITLE did not love.”