

Honor and Its Decline

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It is commonly acknowledged that the cornerstone of the English literary canon is Shakespeare. What is only slightly less commonly acknowledged is that the cornerstone of Shakespeare is the virtue of honor. According to professor Gilbert Sikes Blakely, “Honor is the theme of nearly every one of Shakespeare’s plays. It intrudes on most of his sonnets. One can hardly read an act or a verse without encountering the centrality of honor.” Just consider a brief sampling of the Bard’s unforgettable lines:

“Honor’s thought reigns solely in the breast of every man.” (Henry V, Act 4, Scene 3)

“Mine honor is my life, both grow in one. Take honor from me and my life is done.” (Richard II, Act 1, Scene 3)

“If I lose my honor, I lose myself.” (Antony and Cleopatra, Act 3, Scene 4)

“By Jove, I am not covetous for gold, nor care I who doth feed upon my cost; it yearns me not if my garments wear; such outward things dwell not in my desires: but if it be a sin to covet honor, I am the most offending soul alive.” (Henry V, Act 4, Scene 3)

“Honor is the subject of my story.” (Julius Caesar, Act 1 Scene 2)

“The due of honor in no point neglect.” (Cymbeline, Act 3, Scene 5)

“The fewer the men, the greater the share of honor.” (Henry V, Act 4, Scene 3)

But of course, much has changed since Shakespeare penned those words. The decline of honor has been precipitous, from the pinnacle of Western Culture and Christian Virtue to utter obscurity, or perhaps even disreputable ignominy.

Honor once served as a barometer of the virtue and vitality of both men and nations. It was easily recognized and it was easily defined. It was foundational to healthy human relationships. It was vital for the maintenance of order in a civil society. After all, the Scriptural commands to honor abound. We are to honor God (1 Timothy 1:17). We are to honor Him with our wealth (Proverbs 3:9) and with our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:20). We are to honor father and mother (Exodus 20:12) and we are to honor marriage (Hebrews 13:4). We are to honor old men (Leviticus 19:32) and give double honor to elders in the church (1 Timothy 5:17). Our conduct is to be honorable (1 Peter 2:12). Indeed, we ought to desire to act honorably in all things (Hebrews 13:18) and seek to out do one another in showing honor (Romans 12:10).

Alas, the designer disaster wrought by the twin plagues of the Enlightenment, Rationalism and Romanticism, have together purposefully undermined this bulwark of civility. From Rousseau's "Noble Savage" to Derrida's "Deconstructed Man," and from Nietzsche's "Übermensch" to Eco's "Anti-Hero" the ideal of honorable men and women with honorable motivations and intentions has been under relentless attack.

Francis Schaeffer rightly identified the epistemological danger of separating truth into upper and lower stories—into Platonic universals above and Aristotelian particulars below, into values upstairs and facts downstairs. Fragmenting the notion of truth in this way insures that all manner of evil may be justified. This is the logic behind the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, where the inescapable scientific fact of human life (lower story objective reality) was separated from the rights and protections of personhood (upper story subjective value). This is the logic behind the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, where the historic definition of marriage between a man and a woman (lower story objective reality) was set aside for a newly created social construct (upper story subjective value). It is the logic behind moral relativism. It is the logic behind the inversion of values like purity, honesty, freedom, justice, love, hate, tolerance, and sensitivity. It is the logic behind what the postmodern developmental theorist Clare Graves has called "the new values that make us worthy for the momentous leap into second tier integral consciousness." It is the logic behind the stripping of all honor from the virtue of honor.

But, lest we lose our way in the philosophical fog or the political foment of these sundry contemporary issues, it is important for us to remember that any attempt at the sundering of truth into separate upper and lower categories is merely a pretext for unbelief. The decline and fall of honor in our day is not the second or third order consequence of the new fundamentalist dogmas of our abortion or LGBTQ+ or postmodern soothsayers. Instead, it is unbelief in the unchanging standards of an unchanging God that has precipitated this catastrophic domino effect across the whole terrain of our culture.

Contemplating such an inconceivable loss—the loss of any sense of honor, we might be tempted to join Shakespeare's plaintive lament:

"What is honor? A word. What is in that word honor? A trim reckoning." (Henry IV, Act 5 Scene 1)

Thankfully, we have the great assurance that God's providential purposes cannot and will not be frustrated. We have access to the "very great and precious promises" of the Gospel (2 Peter 1:4). We have the sure and certain hope that every "argument," every "pretension," and every "lofty opinion" raised up against the knowledge of God, will be torn down. In that day, every thought will "be made captive to obey Christ." (2 Corinthians 10:5)

Between here and there, we have our work cut out for us, no doubt. But we can look forward to that day when all due honor will be restored. For, "To him who sits on the

throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”
(Revelation 5:13)