

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 10



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Of quick or slow Speech

Onc ne fut à tous toutes Graces donnees.

*All graces by All-liberal Heaven
Were never yet to all men given*

AS we see in the Gift of Eloquence, wherein some have such a Facility and Promptness, and that which we call a *present* Wit, so easie, that they are ever ready upon all Occasions, and never to be surpriz'd: and others more heavy and slow, never venture to utter any thing but what they have long Premeditated, and taken great Care and Pains to fit and Prepare. Now, as we teach young Ladies those Sports and Exercises which are most Proper to set out the Grace and Beauty of those Parts wherein their chiefest Ornament and Perfection lie; so in these two advantages of Eloquence, to which the Lawyers and Preachers of our Age seem Principally to pretend. If I were worthy to advise, the slow Speaker, methinks, should be more Proper for the Pulpit, and the other for the Bar; and that because the Employment of the first does naturally allow him all the Leisure he can desire to prepare himself, and besides, his Career is perform'd in an even and unintermitted Line, without stop or interruption; whereas the Pleader's Business and Interest compells him to enter the Lists upon all Occasions, and the unexpected Objections and Replies of his adverse Party, justle him out of his Course, and put him, upon the Instant, to pump for new and *extempore* Answers and Defences. Yet, at the Interview betwixt Pope *Clement* and King *Francis* at *Marcelles*, it hapned quite contrary, that *Monsieur Poyett*, a man bred up all his Life at the Bar, and in the highest Repute for Eloquence, having the Charge of making the Harangue to the Pope committed to him, and having so long meditated on it before-hand, as (as it was said) to have brought it ready made along with him from *Paris*; the very day it was to have been pronounc'd, the Pope, fearing something might be said that might give Offence to the other Princes Ambassadors who were there attending on him, sent to acquaint the King with the Argument which he conceiv'd most suiting to the Time and Place, but by chance quite another thing to that *Monsieur de Poyett* had taken so much Pains about: so that the fine Speech he had prepared, was of no use, and he was upon the Instant to contrive another; which finding himself unable to do, Cardinal *Bellay* was constrain'd to

perform that Office. The Pleader's Part is, doubtless, much harder than that of the Preacher; and yet, in my Opinion we see more passable Lawyers than Preachers. It should seem that the nature of Wit is, to have its operation prompt and sudden, and that of Judgment, to have it more deliberate, and more slow: but he who remains totally silent for want of leisure to prepare himself to speak well, and he also whom leisure does no ways benefit to better speaking, are equally unhappy. 'Tis said of *Severus*, that he spoke best *extempore*, that he stood more oblig'd to Fortune, than his own Diligence, that it was an advantage to him to be interrupted in speaking, and that his Adversaries were afraid to nettle him, lest his Anger should redouble his Eloquence. I know, experimentally, a Disposition so impatient of a tedious and elaborate Premeditation, that if it do not go frankly and gayly to work, can perform nothing to purpose. We say of some Compositions, that they stink of Oyl, and smell of the Lamp, by reason of a certain rough harshness that laborious handling imprints upon those where great Force has been employ'd: but besides this, the sollicitude of doing well, and a certain striving and contending of a mind too far strain'd, and over-bent upon its Undertaking, breaks, and hinders it self, like Water, that by force of its own pressing violence and abundance, cannot find a ready issue through the neck of a Bottle, or a narrow Sluce. In this condition of Nature, of which I am now speaking, there is this also, that it would not be disorder'd, and stimulated with such a Passion as the Fury of *Cassius*; for such a Motion would be too violent and rude: it would not be justled, but sollicited, it would be rouz'd and heated by unexpected, sudden, and accidental Occasions. If it be left to it self, it flags and languishes, Agitation only gives it grace and vigour. I am always worst in my own possession, and when wholly at my own dispose. Accident has more title to any thing that comes from me, than I; Occasion, Company, and even the very rising and falling of my own Voice, extract more from my Fancy, than I can find when I examine and employ it by my self; by which means, the things I say are better than those I write, if either were to be preferr'd where neither are worth any thing. This also befalls me, that I am at a loss, when I seek, and light upon things more by chance, than by any inquisition of my own Judgment. I perhaps sometimes hit upon something when I write that seems quaint and spritely to me, but will appear dull and heavy to another. But let us leave this Subject. Every one talks thus of himself according to his Talent. For my part, I am already so lost in it, that I know not what I was about to say, and in such cases, a stranger often finds it out before me. If I should always carry my Razor about me, to use so oft as this inconvenience befalls me, I should make clean work: but some Occurence or other, may at some other time, lay it as visible to me as the Light, and make me wonder what I should stick at.