Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 1 · Chapter 11

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Of Prognostications

For what concerns Oracles, it is certain, that a good while before the coming of our Saviour *Christ,* they had begun to lose their Credit; for we see that *Cicero* is troubled to find out the cause of their decay, in these words: *Cur isto modo jam Oracula Delphis non eduntur, non modo nostro ætate, sed jam diu; ut nihil possit esse contemptius?* What should be the reason that the Oracles at *Delphos* are so utter'd, not only in this Age of ours, but moreover a great while ago that nothing can be more contemptible? But as to the other Prognosticks, calculated from the Anatomy of Beasts at Sacrifices (which *Plato* does in part attribute to the natural Constitution of the Intestines of the Beasts themselves) the scraping of Poultry, the flights of Birds: *Aves quasdam rerum augurandarum causa natas esse putamus;* We think some sorts of Birds to be Purposely created upon the account of Augury, Claps of Thunder, the winding of *Rivers , Multa cernunt Aruspices, multa Augures provident, multa Oraculis declarantur, multa Vaticinationibus, multa Somniis, multa Portentis,* Soothsayers and Augurs conjecture; and foresee many things, and many things are foretold in Oracles, Prophecies, Dreams and Portents; and others of the like Nature, upon which Antiquity founded most of their publick and Private Enterprizes, Christian Religion has totally abolish'd them. And although there yet remain amongst us some Practices of Divination from the Stars, from Spirits, from the Shapes and Complexions of men, from Dreams and the like, (a notable Example of the wild curiosity of our Nature to grasp at and anticipate future things, as if we had not enough to do to digest the present)

> *cur hanc tibi rector Olympi*
> *Sollicitis visum mortalibus addere curam,*
> *Noscant venturas ut dira per omina clades?*
> *Sit subitum, quodcumque paras, sit cœca futuri*
> *Mens hominum fati, liceat sperare timenti.*

Why, thou great Ruler of Olympus, why
Hast thou to timorous Mortality
Added this Care, that Men should be so wise
To know, by Omens, future Miseries?
Free us from this unnecessary care,
Unlook'd for send the Ills thou dost prepare;

Let humane Minds to future things be blind,
That Hope, amidst our Fears, some place may find.

(*Ne utile quidem est scire quid futurum sit: Miserum est enim, nihil proficientem angi:* It is not indeed convenient to know what shall come to pass; for it is a miserable thing to be vex'd and tormented to no purpose.) Yet are they of much less Authority now than heretofore. Which makes the Example of *Francis* Marquess of *Saluzzo,* so much more remarkable; who being Lieutenant to King *Francis* the First, in his Army beyond the Mountains, infinitely favour'd and esteem'd in our Court, and oblig'd to the King's Bounty for the Marquisate it self, which had been forfeited by his Brother; and as to the rest, having no manner of Provocation given him to do it, and even his own Affection opposing any such Disloyalty; suffer'd himself to be so terrified (as it was confidently reported) with the fine Prognosticks that were spread abroad in favour of the Emperour *Charles* the Fifth, and to our Disadvantage, (especially in *Italy,* where these foolish Prophecies were so far believ'd, that great Sums of Money were laid, and others ventur'd out upon return of greater when they came to pass, so certain they made themselves of our Ruine) that having bewail'd to those of his Acquaintance who were most intimate with him, the Mischiefs that he saw would inevitably fall upon the Crown of *France,* and the Friends he had in that Court, he unhandsomly revolted, and turn'd to the other side; but to his own Misfortune nevertheless, what Constellation soever govern'd at that time. But he carried himself in this Affair like a Man agitated with divers Passions; for having both Towns and Forces in his hands, the Enemy's Army under *Antonio de Leva* close by him, and we not at all suspecting his Design, it had been in his Power to have done more than he did; for we lost no Men by this Infidelity of his, nor any Town, but *Fossan* only, and that after a long Siege and a brave Defence.

Prudens futuri temporis exitum
Caliginosa nocte premit Deus,
Ridetque si mortalis ultra
Fas trepidat.

Th' Eternal Mover has in Shades of Night
Future Events conceal'd from humane sight,
And Laughs when he does see the timorous Ass
Tremble at what shall never come to pass.

ille potens sui
Lætusque deget, cui licet in diem
Dixisse vixi cras vel atra
Nube Polum pater occupato,
Vel sole puro.

He free and merrily may live, can say,
As the day passes I have liv'd today;
And for to morrow little does take Care,
Let the World's Ruler make it foul or fair.

Lætus in præsens animus quod ultra est
Oderit curare:

A mind that's cheerful in its present State,
To think of any thing beyond will hate.

And those who take this Sentence in a contrary Sence, interpret it amiss. *Ista sic reciprocantur, ut & si Divinatio sit, Dii sint, & si Dii sint, sit Divinatio.* These things have that mutual Relation to one another, that if there be such a thing as Divination, there must be Deities; and if Deities, Divination. Much more wisely *Pacuvius;*

> *Nam istis qui linguam avium intelligunt,*
> *Plusq ue ; ex alieno jecore sapiunt, quam ex suo,*
> *Magis audiendum, quàm auscultandum censeo.*

Who the Birds Language understand, and who
More from Brutes Livers than their own do know,
Are rather to be heard than hearkened to.

The so celebrated Art of Divination amongst the *Tuscans,* took its Beginning thus: A Labourer striking deep with his Coulter into the Earth, saw the Demy-God *Tages*[1] to ascend with an Infantine Aspect, but endued with a mature and Senile Wisdom. Upon the Rumour of which, all the People ran to see the sight, by whom his Words and Science, containing the Principles and means to attain to this Art, were recorded, and kept for many Ages. A Birth suitable to its Progress! I for my part should sooner regulate my Affairs by the chance of a Die, than by such idle and vain Dreams. And indeed, in all Republicks, a good share of the Government has ever been referr'd to chance. *Plato,* in the civil Regiment that he models according to his own Fancy, leaves the Decision of several things of very great Importance wholly to it, and will, amongst other things, that Marriages as he reputes legitimate and good, be appointed by Lot, and attributing so great Vertue, and adding so greate a Privilege to this accidental choice, as to ordain the Children begot in such Wedlock to be brought up in the Country, and those begot in any other to be thrust out as spurious and base; yet so, that if any of those Exiles, notwithstanding, should peradventure in growing up give any early hopes future Vertue, they were in a Capacity of being recall'd, as those also who had been retain'd, were of being exil'd in case they gave little Expectation of themselves in their greener Years. I see some who are mightily given to Study, pore and comment upon their Almanacks, and produce them for Authority when any thing has fall'n out patt: though it is hardly possible, but that these well-Wishers to the Mathematicks in saying so much, must sometimes stumble upon some Truths amongst an infinite Number of Lyes. *Quis est enim qui totum diem jaculans non aliquando conlineet?* For who shoots all day at Buts that does not sometimes hit the White? I think never the better of them for some accidental Hits. There would be more certainty in it if there were a Rule and a Truth of always lying. Besides, no Body records their Flimflams and false Prognosticks, forasmuch as they are infinite and common; but if they chop upon one Truth, that carries a mighty Report, as being rare, incredible, and prodigious. So *Diogenes,* surnam'd the *Atheist,* answer'd him in *Samothrace,* who shewing him in the Temple the several Offerings and Stories, in Painting, of those who had escap'd Shipwrack, said to him, *Look you* (said he) *you who think the Gods have no care of humane things, what do you say by so many Persons preserv'd from Death by their especial Favour? Why, I say,*

(answer'd he) *that their Pictures are not here who were cast away, who were by much the greater number. Cicero* observes, that of all the Philosophers who have acknowledg'd a Deity, *Xenophanes* only has endeavour'd to eradicate all manner of Divination: which makes it the less a Wonder, if we have sometimes seen some of our Princes, to their own cost relie too much upon these Fopperies. I wish had given any thing, that I had with my own Eyes seen those two great Rareties, the Book of *Joachim* the *Calabrian* Abbot, which foretold all the future Popes, their Names and Figures; and that of the Emperor *Leo,* which prophesied of all the Emperours and Patriarchs of *Greece.* This I have been an Eye-witness of, that in publick Confusions, men astonish'd at their Fortune, have abandoned their own Reason superstitiously to seek out in the Stars the ancient Causes and Menaces of the present mishaps, and in my time have been so strangely successful in it, as to make men believe, that this Study, being proper to fix and settle piercing and volatile Wits, those who have been any thing vers'd in this knack of unfolding and untying Riddles, are capable in any sort of Writing, to find out what they desire. But above all, that which gives them the greatest Room to play in, is the obscure, ambiguous, and fantastick Gibberish of their prophetick Canting, where their Authors deliver nothing of clear Sence, but shroud all in Riddle, to the end that Posterity may interpret, and apply it according to their own Fancy. *Socrates* his *Dæmon,* or *Familiar,* might perhaps be no other but a certain Impulsion of the will, which obtruded it self upon him without the advice or consent of his Judgment; and in a Soul so enlightened as his was, and so prepar'd by a continual exercise of Wisdom and Virtue, 'tis to be suppos'd, those Inclinations of his, though sudden and undigested, were ever very important, and worthy to be follow'd. Every one finds in himself some Image of such Agitations, of a prompt, vehement, and fortuitous Opinion. 'Tis I that am to allow them some Authority, who attribute so little to our own Prudence, and who also my self have had some, weak in Reason, but violent in Persuasion and Dissuasion, (which were most frequent with *Socrates)* by which I have suffer'd my self to be carried away so fortunately, and so much to my own Advantage, that they might have been judg'd to have had something in them of a Divine Inspiration.

Notes

1 *Indigenæ dixere Tagem, qui primus Hetruscam edocuit gentem casus aperire futuros.* Ovid. Meta. I. 15.