

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book I · Chapter 11

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Of Prognostications

FOR WHAT CONCERNS ORACLES, it is certain that a good while before the coming of Jesus Christ they had begun to lose their credit; for we see that Cicero troubled to find out the cause of their decay, and he has these words: *Cur isto modo jam oracula Delphis non eduntur, non modo nostro aetate, sed jam diu; ut nihil possit esse contemptius?* But as to the other prognostics, calculated from the anatomy of beasts at sacrifices (to which purpose Plato does, in part, attribute the natural constitution of the intestines of the beasts themselves), the scraping of poultry, the flight of birds — *Aves quasdam ... rerum augurandarum causa natas esse putamus* — claps of thunder, the overflowing of rivers — *Multa cernunt Aruspices, multa Augures provident, multa oraculis declarantur, multa vaticinationibus, multa somniis, multa portentis* — and others of the like nature, upon which antiquity founded most of their public and private enterprises, our religion has totally abolished 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 coeca futuri
Mens hominum fati, liceat sperare timenti.*

(*Ne utile quidem est scire quid futurum sit: miserum est enim, nihil proficientem angere*), yet are they of much less authority now than heretofore. Which makes so much more remarkable the example of Francesco, Marquis of Saluzzo, who being lieutenant to King Francis I. in his ultramontane army, infinitely favoured and esteemed in our court, and obliged to the king's bounty for the marquisate itself, 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, suffered himself to be so terrified, as it was confidently reported, with the fine prognostics that were spread abroad everywhere in favour of the Emperor Charles V., and to our disadvantage (especially in Italy, where

these foolish prophecies were so far believed, that at Rome great sums of money were ventured out upon return of greater, when the prognostics came to pass, so certain they made themselves of our ruin), that, having often bewailed, 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 revolted and turned to the other side; to his own misfortune, nevertheless, what constellation soever governed at that time. But he carried himself in this affair like a man agitated by divers passions; for having both towns and forces in his hands, the enemy's army under Antonio de Leyva 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 Fossano 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. Ille potens sui
Laetusque deget, cui licet in diem
Dixisse vixi! cras vel atra
Nube polum pater occupato,
Vel sole puro.*

*Laetus in praesens animus; quod ultra est,
Oderit curare*

And those who take this sentence in a contrary sense interpret it amiss: *Ista sic reciprocantur, ut et si divinatio sit, dii sint; et si dii lint, sit divinatio.* Much more wisely Pacuvius —

*Nam istis, qui linguam avium intelligunt,
Plusque ex alieno jecore sapiunt, quam ex suo,
Magis audiendum, quam auscultandum, censeo.*

The so celebrated art of divination amongst the Tuscans took its beginning thus: A labourer striking deep with his cutter into the earth, saw the demigod Tages 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 republics, a good share of the government has ever been referred to chance. Plato, in the civil regimen that he models according to his own fancy, leaves to it the decision of several things of very great importance, and will, amongst other things, that marriages should be appointed by lot; attributing so great importance to this accidental choice as to ordain that the children begotten in such wedlock be brought up in the country, and those begotten in any other be thrust out as spurious and base; yet so, that if any of those exiles, notwithstanding, should, peradventure, in growing up give any good hope of himself, he might be recalled, as, also, that such as had been retained, should be exiled, in case they gave little expectation of themselves in their early growth.

I see some who are mightily given to study and comment upon their almanacs, and produce them to us as an authority when anything has fallen out pat; and, for that matter, it is hardly possible but that these alleged authorities sometimes stumble upon a truth amongst an infinite number of lies. *Quis est enim, qui totum diem jaculans non aliquando collineet?* I think never the better of them for some such accidental hit. There would be more certainty in it if there were a rule and a truth of always lying. Besides, nobody records their flimflams and false prognostics, 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, surnamed the Atheist, answered him in Samothrace, who, showing him in the temple the several offerings and stories in painting of those who had escaped shipwreck, said to him, "Look, you who think the gods have no care of human things, what do you say to so many persons preserved from death by their especial favour?" "Why, I say," answered he, "that their pictures are not here who were cast away, who are by much the greater number."

Cicero observes that of all the philosophers who have acknowledged a deity, Xenophanes the Colophonian only has endeavoured to eradicate all manner of divination; which makes it the less a wonder if we have now and then seen some of our princes, sometimes to their own cost, rely too much upon these vanities. I had given anything with my own eyes to see those two great marvels, the book of Joachim the Calabrian abbot, which foretold all the future Popes, their names and qualities; and that of the Emperor Leo, which prophesied all the emperors and patriarchs of Greece. This I have been an eyewitness of, that in public confusions, men astonished 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 me believe that this being an amusement of sharp and volatile wits, those who have been versed 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 fantastic gibberish of the prophetic canting, where their authors deliver nothing of clear sense, but shroud all in riddle, to the end that posterity may interpret and apply it according to its own fancy.

Socrates demon might, perhaps, be no other but a certain impulsion of the will, which obtruded itself upon him without the advice or consent of his judgment; and in a soul so enlightened as his was, and so prepared by a continual exercise of wisdom-and virtue, 'tis to be supposed those inclinations of his, though sudden and undigested, were very important and worthy to be followed. Every one finds in himself some image of such agitations, of a prompt, vehement, and fortuitous opinion; and I may well allow them some authority, who attribute so little to our prudence, and who also myself have had some, weak in reason, but violent in persuasion and dissuasion, which were most frequent with Socrates, by which I have suffered myself to be carried away so fortunately, and so much to my own advantage, that they might have been judged to have had something in them of a divine inspiration.