

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book I · Chapter 13

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Protocol at the Meetings of Kings

A NO SUBJECT is too frivolous for this collection: Our common customs have it that it would be a notable lack of courtesy, toward an equal and more so toward a superior, if they have given notice of their visit, to fail to be at home. Moreover, added Margaret, Queen of Navarre, it is improper for a gentleman to leave his home, as is usually done, to go meet those who have come to find him, no matter how important they are. It is more respectful and civil to wait for them in order to receive them, if only for fear of missing them on the way. And it is enough to go with them when they leave.

B As for me, I often forget one and the other of these niceties as I dispense with all ceremonies at my house. Is someone finding this rude? What can I do about it? Better I wrong them once than I wrong myself all the time. It would be constant subjugation. Why run away from the servitude of courts if we drag it back home with us?

A It is also a rule that applies to all gatherings that the lesser members of a group ought to arrive first, given that it is more suitable for the more important ones to be awaited. However, at the meeting arranged between Pope Clement and the king of France,¹ in Marseilles, the king, having made all necessary preparations, withdrew from the city and gave the pope the leisure of two or three days for his entrance and restoration before he came to meet him. Likewise, when the pope met with the emperor, in Bologna,² the emperor found a way to let the pope arrive first, and got there after him. They say it is common protocol, at the meetings of such princes, that the most important one should reach the designated place before the others, even before the one calling the meeting, with the understanding that, as these proceedings make evident, it is the highest-ranking party that the lower-ranking ones go to, the lower seeking the higher and not the other way around.

C Each country, each city too, has its own particular type of civility, as does each trade. I was rather carefully schooled in it in my childhood and have lived in good enough company to be well aware of our French customs. I could lecture on them. I like following them but not so sheepishly as to live constrained by them. Some of these rules can be

tedious. But as long as we neglect them by choice rather than by mistake, we can remain gracious. I have known many cases of individuals uncivil by excess of civility and bothersome in their courtesy.

Nevertheless, knowledge of etiquette at meetings remains very useful. Like grace and beauty, it facilitates initial contacts in society and familiarity. And it makes it possible for us to learn, therefore, from the example of others, and to present and share the benefits of our own example, should it be enlightening and accessible.

NOTES

- 1 The king, here, is Francis I. Montaigne has already referred to this meeting in *On Quick or Slow Speech*.
- 2 In 1530, Charles V met Pope Clement VII in Bologna to be crowned as Holy Roman Emperor.