

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 11



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On Prognostications

▲ AS FOR ORACLES, they obviously started to lose their credibility well before the coming of Jesus Christ for we see Cicero going to great lengths to find the cause of their failing. ◊ These words are his: *Cur isto modo dam oracula Delphis non eduntur, non modo nostra aetate, sed iamdiu, ut nihil possit esse contemptius?* ▲ As for other forms of prognostication that used to be made from the anatomy of animals offered in sacrifice ◊ — and partly responsible for the layout of their internal organs according to Plato — ▲ from the stamping of chickens and the flight of birds, ◊ *Aues quasdam rerum augurandarum causa natas esse putamus*, ▲ from thunder and the eddies of rivers, ◊ *Multa cernunt aruspices, multa augures prouident, multa oraculis declarantur, multa vaticinationibus, multa somniis, multa portentis*, ▲ as well as from others on which, in the past, most public and private business relied, our religion has abolished them. Still, we are left with a few means of divination by stars, spirits, body parts, dreams, and others, all notable examples of the stubborn curiosity of our nature which delights in worrying about the future as if it had not enough to deal with in the present:

◊ *cur hanc tibi, rector Olympi,
Sollicitis uisum mortalibus addere curam,
Noscant uenturas 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*, ▲ even though it can hardly be trusted to be correct.

◊ This is why the example of François, marquis of Saluces,¹ seems remarkable to me. A lieutenant in the ultramontane army of the king of France, a man in great favor at the court and in the king's debt for his title — which had been taken from his brother — he let himself be spooked (as was later shown), for no particular reason and in spite of his own sympathies, by those fine predictions that favored the emperor Charles the Fifth against us and that had spread everywhere, even to Italy where these mad prophecies had gone so far that large sums of money were

Why have prophecies not been uttered at Delphi like they used to, neither now nor for ages, to the point where there is nothing left to prize? • CIC., DIV., 2.57

We believe some birds are born for the sake of augury • CIC., NAT. D., 2.160

Haruspices see many things; augurs foresee many things; many things are told by oracles, many by prophecies, many by dreams, many by omens • CIC., NAT. D., 2.163

Why, ruler of Olympus, do you need to further worry agitated mortals who see in sinister omens their coming woes? Let whatever you plan unfold quickly. Let the mind of men be blind to what is to be. May those who fear be permitted to hope. • LUC., 2.4

Knowing what the future holds does not help at all. It is misery in fact to be powerless and tormented by it • CIC., NAT. D., 3.14

exchanged in Rome over this idea that we were finished. For a while, he complained in private about the inevitable troubles that would befall the French crown and his friends in France until he turned and defected to the other side — to his great disadvantage however, his lucky star notwithstanding. Still, his behavior betrayed his ambivalence: With cities and soldiers at his command, the enemy army led by Antoine de Leve only a few paces away, and our side suspecting nothing, he could have done much more damage than he did. For, in spite of his betrayal, we lost neither troops nor town, except Fossano, and only after a long fight.

◻ *Prudens futuri temporis exitum
Caliginosa nocte premit Deus,
Ridetque, si mortalis ultra
Fas trepidat.
Ille potens sui
Laetusque deget, cui licet in diem
Dixisse uixi! cras uel atra
Nube polum pater occupato,
Uel sole puro.*

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

◻ And those who believe these words to the contrary are mistaken. *Ista sic re ciprocantur, ut et si diuination sit, dii sint: et si dii sint, sit diuination.* Much more wisely, Pacuvius,

◻ *Nam istis, qui linguam auium intelligunt,
Plusque ex alieno iecore sapiunt, quam ex suo,
Magis audiendum, quam auscultandum, censeo.*

◻ This is how the famous art of divination of the Tuscans was born: a plowman pushing his plow deep into the ground saw Tages come to the surface, a demigod with the face of a child but possessing the wisdom of old age. All rushed to see him and his words and knowledge of the principles and methods of this art were received and preserved for centuries. A birth befitting its progress.

▣ I would much rather leave my affairs up to a roll of the dice than to these fairy-tales.

◻ And, to be fair, chance has always had some part to play in all republics. Plato lets it preside over many important aspects of the government he likes to imagine and wishes, for instance, that marriages among the good happen by drawing lots. This random matching method is so meaningful to him that he recommends that children born of it be raised in the country while those born of the bad be exiled. However, if one of those who were banished were to show promise growing up, they should be recalled. And if one of those who were kept seemed not to amount to much in their teenage years, they should be exiled.

A clever god conceals in the dark of night what is to come in the days ahead and laughs when a mortal frets more than they should. Happy is he who lives with confidence, who each day can say: “I have lived!” Tomorrow, let Father fill the sky with either dark clouds or bright sunshine. • HOR., CARM., 3.29

A heart happy in the moment sinks when it worries about the next. • HOR., CARM., 2.16

It thus goes both ways that if there is divination, there are gods, and that if there are gods, there is divination. • CIC., DIV., 1.6

As for those who understand the language of birds and know another being’s liver better than their own, I hear them talking but pay no attention to their words. • CIC., DIV., 1.57

¶ I see some who study and annotate their almanacs and assure us that they hold the key to what is happening. They go on and on and, inevitably, make some true and some false statements. ¶ *Quis est enim, qui totum diem iaculans, non aliquando conlineet.* ¶ My opinion of them does not improve when, by chance, they get something right. Consistent and straightforward lying would prove more reliable. ¶ Add to this that no one keeps track of their mistakes, especially given how common and endless they are; and that what they do guess right is highly regarded for being rare, incredible, and amazing! That is why Diagoras, whom they called the Atheist, when he was in Samothrace being shown, in a temple, the many messages and paintings of those who had survived shipwrecks and was asked: “You, who believes gods play no part in human affairs, what do you make of so many saved by their grace?” replied by saying “The fact is that there are no paintings for those who, in far greater numbers, drowned and died.” Cicero says that only Xenophanes of Colophon, among all the philosophers who recognized the gods, had tried to root out all types of divination. It is not so hard to believe considering that ¶ we have seen some of our great minds take an interest in this nonsense, sometimes to their detriment.

Who takes shots all day long and does not sometimes get it in? • CIC., DIV., 2.59

¶ I wish I could have seen with my own eyes these two incredible things: a book by a Calabrian abbot, Joachim, who predicted the name and appearance of all future popes; and another, by Emperor Leo, who predicted the emperors and patriarchs of Greece. What I have seen for myself is that when times are tough and people are confused by what is happening to them, they will look to the heavens for explanations and past omens of their misfortune (as they would with any superstition). And, strangely enough, this works so well for them that I am sure, given that it is a pastime for crafty and idle minds, that those who have a knack for weaving and untangling these things would be able to find all their answers in any bit of text. In fact, what helps them the most is the mysterious, ambiguous, and grotesque prophetic gibberish they speak in order to make no sense at all so that it can be said later to mean whatever they want it to.

¶ Perhaps Socrates’ *daimonion* was some kind of impulse of the will presenting itself to him immediately, bypassing the advice of reason. In a refined mind such as his, shaped by the continuous practice of wisdom and virtue, it is likely that these inclinations, though hasty and raw, were always important and worth following. We are all familiar with these urges ¶ arising from a quick, strong, and unexpected feeling. What influence they have over me, when I let prudence have so little, is up to me. ¶ I have felt some that ¶ were as irrational as they were compelling — or dissuasive, which was more common with Socrates — but ¶ proved so useful and fortunate when I gave in to them that they could almost be said to be the product of some divine inspiration.

NOTES

- 1 Francesco of Saluzzo. In the late 1530s, when this episode takes place, Saluzzo is under French control.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Cic., Div.	Cicero, <i>On Divination</i>
Cic., Nat. D.	Cicero, <i>On the Nature of the Gods</i>
Du Bellay, Mem.	Du Bellay, Martin, <i>Mémoires</i>
Hor., Carm.	Horace, <i>Odes</i>
Luc.	Lucan, <i>Civil War</i>
Pl., Rep.	Plato, <i>Republic</i>
Pl., Ti.	Plato, <i>Timaeus</i>