

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 • Chapter 54

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On Vain Subtleties

There are a sort of little knacks and frivolous subtleties from which men sometimes expect to derive reputation and applause: as poets, who compose whole poems with every line beginning with the same letter; we see the shapes of eggs, globes, wings, and hatchets cut out by the ancient Greeks by the measure of their verses, making them longer or shorter, to represent such or such a figure. Of this nature was his employment who made it his business to compute into how many several orders the letters of the alphabet might be transposed, and found out that incredible number mentioned in Plutarch. I am mightily pleased with the humor of him, who having a man brought before him that had learned to throw a grain of millet with such dexterity and assurance as never to miss the eye of a needle; and being afterwards entreated to give something for the reward of so rare a performance, he pleasantly, and in my opinion justly, ordered a certain number of bushels of the same grain to be delivered to him, that he might not want wherewith to exercise so famous an art. 'Tis a strong evidence of a weak judgment when men approve of things for their being rare and new, or for their difficulty, where worth and usefulness are not conjoined to recommend them.

I come just now from playing with my own family at who could find out the most things that hold by their two extremities; as Sire, which is a title given to the greatest person in the nation, the king, and also to the vulgar, as merchants, but never to any degree of men between. The women of great quality are called Dames, inferior gentlewomen, Demoiselles, and the meanest sort of women, Dames, as the first.

The cloth of state over our tables is not permitted but in the palaces of princes and in taverns.

Democritus said, that gods and beasts had sharper sense than men, who are of a middle form. The Romans wore the same habit at funerals and feasts. It is most certain that an extreme fear and an extreme ardor of courage equally trouble and relax the belly.

The nickname of Trembling with which they surnamed Sancho XII, king of Navarre, tells us that valor will cause a trembling in the limbs as well as fear. Those who were arming that king, or some other person, who upon the like occasion was wont to be in the same disorder, tried to compose him by representing the danger less he was going to engage himself in: "You understand me ill," said he, "for could my flesh know the danger my courage will presently carry it into, it would sink down to the ground."

The faintness that surprises us from frigidity or dislike in the exercises of Venus are also occasioned by a too violent desire and an immoderate heat. Extreme coldness and extreme heat boil and roast. Aristotle says, that sows of lead will melt and run with cold and the rigor of winter just as with a vehement heat. Desire and satiety fill all the gradations above and below pleasure with pain. Stupidity and wisdom meet in the same center of sentiment and resolution, in the suffering of human accidents. The wise control and triumph over ill, the others know it not: these last are, as a man may say, on this side of accidents, the others are beyond them, who after having well weighed and considered their qualities, measured and judged them what they are, by virtue of a vigorous soul leap out of their reach; they disdain and trample them underfoot, having a solid and well-fortified soul, against which the darts of fortune, coming to strike, must of necessity rebound and blunt themselves, meeting with a body upon which they can fix no impression; the ordinary and middle condition of men are lodged betwixt these two extremities, consisting of such as perceive evils, feel them, and are not able to support them. Infancy and decrepitude meet in the imbecility of the brain; avarice and profusion in the same thirst and desire of getting.

A man may say with some color of truth that there is an Abecedarian ignorance that precedes knowledge, and a doctoral ignorance that comes after it: an ignorance that knowledge creates and begets, at the same time that it despatches and destroys the first.

Of mean understandings, little inquisitive, and little instructed, are made good Christians, who by reverence and obedience simply believe and are constant in their belief. In the average understandings and the middle sort of capacities, the error of opinion is begotten; they follow the appearance of the first impression, and have some color of reason on their side to impute our walking on in the old beaten path to simplicity and stupidity, meaning us who have not informed ourselves by study. The higher and nobler souls, more solid and clear-sighted, make up another sort of true believers, who by a long and religious investigation of truth, have obtained a clearer and more penetrating light into the Scriptures, and have discovered the mysterious and divine secret of our ecclesiastical polity; and yet we see some, who by the middle step, have arrived at that supreme degree with marvellous fruit and confirmation, as to the utmost limit of Christian intelligence, and enjoy their victory with great spiritual consolation, humble acknowledgment of the divine favor, reformation of manners, and singular modesty. I do not intend with these to rank those others, who to clear themselves from all suspicion of their former errors and to satisfy us that they are sound and firm, render themselves

extremely indiscreet and unjust, in the carrying on our cause, and blemish it with infinite reproaches of violence and oppression.

The simple peasants are good people, and so are the philosophers, or whatever the present age calls them, men of strong and clear reason, and whose souls are enriched with an ample instruction of profitable sciences. The mongrels who have disdained the first form of the ignorance of letters, and have not been able to attain to the other (sitting betwixt two stools, as I and a great many more of us do), are dangerous, foolish, and importunate; these are they that trouble the world. And therefore it is that I, for my own part, retreat as much as I can toward the first and natural station, whence I so vainly attempted to advance.

Popular and purely natural poetry has in it certain artless graces, by which she may come into comparison with the greatest beauty of poetry perfected by art: as we see in our Gascon villanels and the songs that are brought us from nations that have no knowledge of any manner of science, nor so much as the use of writing. The middle sort of poetry betwixt these two is despised, of no value, honor, or esteem.

But seeing that the path once laid open to the fancy, I have found, as it commonly falls out, that what we have taken for a difficult exercise and a rare subject, prove to be nothing so, and that after the invention is once warm, it finds out an infinite number of parallel examples. I shall only add this one—that, were these Essays of mine considerable enough to deserve a critical judgment, it might then, I think, fall out that they would not much take with common and vulgar capacities, nor be very acceptable to the singular and excellent sort of men; the first would not understand them enough, and the last too much; and so they may hover in the middle region.