

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 11

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Of Prognostications

AS TOUCHING ORACLES it is very certaine, that long before the comming of our Saviour *Jesus Christ*, they had begunne to lose their credit: for we see that *Cicero* laboureth to finde the cause of their declination: And these be his words: *Cur isto modo iam oracula Delphis non eduntur non modo nostra ætate, sed iamdiu, ut nihil possit esse contemptius? Why in like sorte are not Oracles now uttered, not onely in our times, but a good while since, so as now nothing can be more contemptible?* But as for other prognostikes, that were drawne from the anatomie of beasts in sacrifice, to which *Plato* doth in some sorte ascribe the naturall constitution of the internall members of them, of the scraping of chickins, of the flight of birds, *Aues quasdam rerum augurandarum causas natas esse putamus. We are of opinion, certaine birdes were even bred to prognosticate some things of thunders, of turnings and back-recourse of rivers. Multa cernunt aruspices: multa augures prouident: multa oraculis declarantur: multa uaticinationibus: multa somniis: multa portentis. Soothsayers see much: bird-prophets fore-see as much; much is foretold by Oracles; much by prophesies; much by dreames; much by portentuous signes, and others, upon which antiquitie grounded most of their enterprises, as well publike as private: our religion hath abolished them. And albeit there remaine yet amongst us some meanes of divination in the starres, in spirits, in shapes of the body, in dreames, and elsewhere a notable example of the mad and fond curiositie of our nature, ammusung it selfe to preoccupate future things, as if it had not enough to doe to digest the present.*

*cur hanc tibi rector Olympi
Sollicitis uisum mortalibus addere curam,
Noscant uenturas ut dira per omnia clades?
Sit subitum quodcunque paras, sit cæca futuri
Mens hominum fati, liceat sperare timenti.*

*Why pleas'd it thee, thou ruler of the spheares,
To adde this care to mortalls care-clog'd minde,
That they their miserie know, ere it appeares?
Let thy drifts sodaine come; let men be blinde
T'wards future fate: oh let him hope that feares.*

Ne utile quidem est scire quid futurum sit: Miserum est enim nihil proficientem angi. It is not so much as profitable for us, to know what is to come, for it is a miserable thing, a man should fret and be vexed, and doe no good. Yet is it of much lesse authoritie, loe here wherefore the example of *Francis Marquis of Saluzzo* hath seemed remarkeable unto me: who being Lieutenant General unto *Francis* our King, and over all his forces, which hee then had beyond the Mountaines in *Italie*, a man highly favoured in all our court, and otherwise infinitely beholding to the King for his owne Marquisate, which his brother had forfeited: and having no occasion to doe it, yea and his minde and affections contradicting the same, suffered himselfe to be frightened and deluded (as it hath since been manifestly proved) by the fond prognostications, which then throughout all *Europe* were given out to the advantage of the Emperor *Charles* the fift, and to our prejudice and disadvantage (but specially in *Italie*, where these foolish prædictions had so much possessed the Italians, that in *Rome* were laide great wagers, and much mony given out upon the exchange, that we should utterly be overthrowne) that after he had much condoled, yea and complained with his secret friends, the unavoidable miseries, which hee foresawe prepared by the fates against the crowne of *France*, and the many friends he had there, he unkindly revolted, and became a turne-cote on the Emperors side, to his intolerable losse and destruction, notwithstanding all the constellations then raigning. But was drawne unto it as a man encompassed and beset by divers passions; for having both strong castles, and all maner of munition and strength in his owne handes, the enemies armie under *Antonio Leva* farre from him, and wee nothing mistrusting him, it was in his power to doe worse then he did. For notwithstanding his treason we lost neither man nor towne, except *Fossan*: which long after was by us stoutly contested and defended.

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

*Our wise God hides in pitch-darke night
Of future time th'event decreede,
And laughes at man, if man affright
Feare more, then he to feare hath neede.*

*Ille potens sui
Lætusque deget, cui licet in diem
Dixisse, uixi, cras uel atra
Nube polum pater occupato,
Uel sole puro.*

*He of himselfe lives merilie,
Who each day, I have liv'd, can say;
To morow let God charge the skie
With darke cloudes, or faire sunne-shine raye.*

*Lætus in præsens animus, quod ultra est,
Oderit curare.*

*For present time a mery minde
Hates to respect what is behinde.*

And those which take this word in a contrary sense are in the wrong. *Ista sic reciprocantur, ut & si diuination sit, dii sint, & si dii sint, sit diuination. This consequence is so reciprocally, as if there be any divination, there are Gods: and if there be Goddesses, there is divination.* Much more wisely *Pacuvius*.

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

*Who understand what language birds expresse,
By their owne, then beastes-livers knowing lesse,
They may be heard, not hearkned-to, I guesse.*

This so famous art of divination of the Tuskanes grew thus. A husbandman digging very deepe into the ground, with his plough-share, saw *Tages*, a demy-God appeare out of it, with an infantine face, yet fraught with an aged-like wisdom. All men ranne to see-him, and both his words and knowledge were for many ages-after remembered, and collected, containing the principles and meanes of this art. An offspring suitable to her progresse. I would rather direct affaires by the chance of dice, then by such frivolous dreames. And truly in all common-wealthes, men have ever ascribed much authoritie unto chance. *Plato* in the policie which he imagineth by discretion, ascribeth the deciding of manie important effects unto it, and amongst other things would have marriages betweene the good to be contrived by fortune. And giveth so large priviledges unto this casuall election, that hee appointes the Children proceeding from them to be brought up in the cuntry; and those borne of the bad to be banished and sent abroad. Notwithstanding if any of those so exiled shall by fortune happen, whilst he is growing, to shew some good hope of him-selfe, that he may be revoked and sent-for backe, and such amongst the first as shall in their youth give small hope of future good to be banished. I see some that studie, plod, and glosse their Almanackes, and in all accidents alleage their authoritie. A man were as good to say, they must needs speake truth and lies. *Quis est enim qui totum diem iaculans, non aliquando conlineet?* For who is he that shooting all day, sometimes hits not the white? I thinke not the better of them, though what they say proove sometimes true. It were more certaine, if there were either a rule or a truth to lie ever. Seeing no man recordeth their fables, because they are ordinarie and infinit; and their prædictions are made to be of credite, because they are rare, incredible and prodigious. So answered *Diagoras* surnamed the Atheist (being in *Samothrace*) to him, who in shewing him diverse vowes and offerings hanging in the Temple, brought thither by such as had escaped shipwracke, saide thus unto him: *You that thinke the Goddesses to have no care of humane things, what say you by so many men saved by their grace and helpe? Thus is it done,* answered hee: *Those which were drowned farre exceeding their number, are not heere sette-foorth.* *Cicero* saith, *That amongst all other philosophers that have avowed and acknowledged the Gods, onely Xenophanes the Colophonian hath gone-about to roote-out all manner of divination.* It is so much the lesse to be wondred at, if at any time we have seene some of our Princes minds to their great damage, relie upon such like vanities. I

would to God, I had with mine-owne eyes seene those two wonders, mentioned in the booke of *Joachin* the Abbot of *Calabria*, who fore-told all the Popes that should ensue, together with their names and shapes: And that of *Leo* the Emperour who fore-spake all the Emperours and Patriarkes of *Greece*. This have I seene with mine owne eyes, that in publike confusions, men amazed at their owne fortune, give themselves head-long, as it were to all manner of superstition, to search in heaven the causes and ancient threats of their ill-lucke; and in my time are so strongly successefull therein, as they have perswaded me, that it is an ammusing of sharpe and idle wits, that such as are inured to this sutteltie, by foulding and unfoulding them, may in all other writings be capable to find out what they seeke-after. But above all, their darke, ambiguous, fantastical, and propheticall gibbrish, mends the matter much, to which their authors never give a plaine sense, that posteritie, may apply what meaning and construction it shall please unto it. The *Demon* of *Socrates* was peradventure a certaine impulsion of will, which, without the advice of his discourse presented it selfe unto him. In a minde so well purified, and by continuall exercise of wisdom and vertue so well prepared, as his was, it is likely, his inclinations (though rash and inconsiderate) were ever of great moment, and worthie to be followed. Every man feeleth in himselfe some image of such agitations, with a prompt, vehement, and casuall opinion. It is in me to give them some authoritie, that afford so little to our wisdom. And I have had some, equally weake in reason, and violent in perswasion and disswasion (which was more ordinarie to *Socrates*) by which I have so happily and so profitably suffred my selfe to be transported, as they might perhaps be thought to containe some matter of divine inspiration.