

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book I · Chapter 11

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Of Prognostications

AS TOUCHING ORACLES it is very certaine, that long before the coming of our Saviour *Jesus Christ*, they had begun 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 jam oracula Delphis non eduntur, non modo nostra ætate, sed jamdiu, ut nihil possit esse contemptius? Why in like sort 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 sort ascribe the naturall constitution of the intermall members of them, of the scraping of chickens, of the flight of birds, *Aves quasdam rerum augurandarum causa natas esse putamus. We are of opinion, certaine birds were even bred to prognosticate some things; of thunders, of turnings and backe-recourse of rivers. Multa cernunt aruspices: multa augures provident: multa oraculis declarantur: multa vaticinationibus: multa somniis: multa portentis. Soothsayers see much: bird-prophets foresee as much: much is foretold by Oracles; much by prophecies; 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 mortalibus addere curam,
Noscant venturas 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 mortals care-clog'd minde;
That they their miserie know, ere it appeares?
Let thy drifts sudden 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 profidentem angere.
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 do no good. Yet is it of much lesse authoritie, loe here, wherefore the example of *Francis Marquis of Saluzzo* hath seemed remarkable unto me: who being Lieutenant General unto *Francis* our King, and over all his forces, which he then had beyond the Mountaines in *Italie*, a man highly favoured in al our court, and otherwise infinitely beholding to the King for that very, Marquisate, which his brother had forfeited: and having no occasion to doe it, yea and his minde and affections contradicting the same, buffered himselfe to be frighted 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 (but specially in *Italie*, where these foolish predictions so much possessed the Italians, that in *Rome* there were laid great wagers, and much money 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 he foresaw 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 reigning. But he 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 hands, the enemies armie under *Antonio Leva* about three paces from him, and we nothing mistrusting him, it was in his power to do worse than 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,
 Ridetque, si mortalis ultra
 Fas trepidat.*

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

*Ille potens sui
 Lætusue deget, cui licet in diem
 Dixisse, vixi, cras vel atra
 Nube polum pater occupato,
 Vel sole puro.*

*He ofhimselſe lives merily,
 Who each day, I have liv'd, can say,
 To morrow let God charge the skie
 With darke clouds, 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 et si divinatio sit dii sint, et si dii sint sit divinatio.* This consequence is so reciprocally as if there be any divination, there are Gods: and if there be Gods, there is divination. Much more wisely Pacuvius.

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

*Who understand what language birds expresse,
By their owne than beasts-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 saw *Tages*, a demy-God appear out of it, with an infantine face, yet fraught with an age-like wisdom. All men ranne to see him, and both his words and knowledges were for many ages after remembered, and collected, containing the principles and meanes of this art. An of-spring suitable to her progresse.

I would rather direct affaires by the chance of dice, than by such frivolous dreames.

And truly in all common-wealths, men have ever ascribed much authoritie unto lot. *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 betwene the good to be contrived by lot. And giveth so large privileges unto this casuall election, that hee appoints the Children proceeding from them to be brought up in the countrie; and those borne of the bad to be banished and sent abroad. Notwithstanding if any of those so exiled shall by fortune happen, whilest he is growing, to shew some good hope of himselfe, 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 conlincet?* 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 rec ordeth their fables, because they are ordinarie and infinit; and their predictions are made to be of credit, because they are rare, incredible and prodigious; so answered *Diagoras* surnamed the Atheist (being in *Samothrace*) to him, who in shewing him diver's vowes and offerings hanging in the Temple, brought thither by such as had escaped shipwracke, said thus unto him: *You that thinke the Gods 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 he: *Those which were drowned farre exceeding*

their number, are not here set-forth. Cicero saith, That amongst all other Philosophers that have avowed and acknowledged the Gods, onely Xenophanes the Colophonian hath gone about to root out all maner of divination. It is so much the lesse to be wondred at, if at any time we have seene some of our Princes mindes, 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 *Ioachin* the Abbat of *Calabria*, who foretold all the Popes that should ensue, together with their names and shapes: And that of *Leo* the Emperor, who fore-spake all the Emperors 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 maner of superstition, to search in heaven the causes and ancient threats of their ill-lucke; and in my time are so strangely successefull therein, as they have perswaded me, that it is an ammusung of sharpe and idle wits; that such as are inured to this subtletie, by folding and unfolding them, may in all other writings be capable to finde out what they seeke-after. But above all, their dark, ambiguous, fantastical, and propheticall, gibbrish, mends the matter much, to which their authors never give a plaine sense, that posterity may apply what mean ing and construction it shall please unto it.

The *Demon* of *Socrates* was peradventure a certaine impulsion or 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, of 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.