

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 43



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Of sumptuarie Lawes, or Lawes for moderating of expences

THE MANER wherewith our Lawes assay to moderate the foolish and vaine expences of table-cheare and apparell, seemeth contrary to it's end. The best course were to beget in men a contempt of gold and silk-wearing, as of vaine and unprofitable things, whereas we encrease their credite and price: A most indirecte course to withdraw men from them. As for example, to let none but Princes eate dainties, or weare velvets, and clothes of tisew, and interdict the people to do-it, what is-it but to give reputation unto those things, and to encrease their longing to use them? Let Kings boldly quit those badges of honour; They have many other besides: Such excesse is more excusable in other men, then in Princes. We may, by the examples of divers Nations, learne sundry better fashions to distinguish our selves and our degrees (which truly I esteeme requisite in an estate,) without nourishing to that purpose, this so manifest corruption and apparant inconvenience. It is strange how custome in these indifferent things doth easilie encroch and sodainly establish the footing of hir authority. We had scarce worne cloth one whole yeere at the Court, what time we mourned for our King *Henry* the second, but certainly in everie mans opinion, all maner of silkes were alreadie become so vile and abject, that was any man seene to weare them, he was presently judged to be some countrie fellow, or mechanicall man. They were left only for chyrurgians and Physitians. And albeit most men were apparreled a-like, yet were there other sufficient apparant distinctions of mens qualities. How soone doe plaine chamoy-jerkins, and greasie canvase doublets creepe into fashion and credite amongst our souldiers, if they lie in the field? And the garishnesse, neatnesse, and riches of silken garments grow in contempt and scorne? Let Kings first beginne to leave these superfluous expences, we shall all follow; and within a moneth, without edicts, ordinances, proclamations, and acts of parliament, it will be observed as a law. The statutes should speake contrary, as thus. That no man or woman, of what qualitie soever, shall, upon paine of great forfeitures, weare any maner of silke, of skarlet, or any gold-smiths worke, except only Enterlude-players, Harlots, and Curtizans. With such an invention did *Zealeucus* whilome correct the corrupted maners of the *Locrines*. His ordinances were such. Be it enacted, that no woman of free condition, shall have any more then one maide-servant to follow her when she goeth abroad, except when she

shall be drunken: And further, that she may not goe out of the Citty by night, nor weare any jewels of gold, or precious stones about hir, nor any gowne beset with gold-smiths work or imbroidery, except she be a publike-professed whore: and moreover, that except panders and bawdes, it shall not be lawfull for any man to weare any gold-rings on his fingers, nor any rich garments, as are such of cloth made in the Cittie of *Miletum*. So did he by these reprochfull exceptions ingeniously drive his cittizens from vaine superfluities, and pernicious dainties. It was a most profitable course, by honor and ambition to allure men unto their dutie and obedience. Our Kings have the power to redresse all these externall reformatiōns. Their inclination serveth them as a law. *Quicquid principes faciunt, præcipere videntur. Whatsoever Princes doe, that, they seeme to commaund.* The rest of *France* takes the model of the court, as a rule unto it selfe to follow. Let courtiers first beginne to leave-off and loathe these filthy and apish breeches, that so openly shew our secret partes; the bumbasting of long pease-cod-bellied doublets, which makes us seeme so farre from what we are, and which are so combersome to arme: These long, effeminate, and dangling locks: That fond custome to kisse what we present to others, and *Beso las manos* in saluting of our friends: (a ceremony heretofore onely due unto Princes;) And for a gentleman to come to any place of respect, without his rapier by his side, all unbraced, al untrust, as if hee came from his close-stoole: And that, against our forefathers maner, and the particular libertie of our *French* nobilitie, we should stand bare-headed, aloofe-off from them, wheresoever they be, and as about them, about many others: So many petty-kings, and petty-petty-kinglets have wee now adayes: And so of others like new-fangled and vicious introductions: They shall soone be seene to vanish and be left. Although but superficiall faultes, yet are they of evill presages. And we are warned, that the foundation or maine summers of our houses faile and shrinke, when we see the quarters bend, or walles to breake. *Plato* in his lawes, thinkes there is no worse plague, or more pernicious in his Cittie, then to suffer youth, to have the reines of libertie in her owne hand, to change in their attires, in their gestures, dances, exercises, and songs, from one forme to an other: And to remove their judgement, now to this, now to that place; following new-fangled devises, and regarding their inventors: By which, old customes are corrupted, and ancient institutions despised. In all things, except the wicked, mutation is to be feared; yea, even the alteration of seasons, of windes, of livings, and of humours. And no lawes are in perfect credite, but those to which God hath given some ancient continuance: So that no man know their offspring, nor that ever they were other then they are.