

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 46



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Of Names

WHAT DIVERSITIE soever there-be in hearbs, all are shuffled-up together under the name of a sallade. Even so, upon the consideration of names, I will here huddle up a galiemafrie of diverse articles. Every severall nation hath some names, which, I wot not how are sometimes taken in ill part, as with us *Jacke, Hodge, Tom, Will, Bat, Benet*, and so forth. Item, it seemeth that in the genealogies of Princes, there are certaine names fatally affected; as *Ptolomeus* with the *Ægyptians*, *Henries* in *England*, *Charles* in *France*, *Baldwins* in *Flanders*, and *Williams* in our ancient *Aquitanie*, whence some say came the name of *Guienne*; which is but a colde invention: As if in *Plato* himselfe there were not some as harsh and ill-founding. Item, it is an idle matter, yet neverthelesse by reason of the strangenes, worthie the memorie, and recorded by an oculare witnes, that *Henrie* Duke of *Normandie* sonne to *Henrie* King of *England*, making a great feast in *France*, the assemblie of the Nobilitie was so great, that for pastimes sake, being, by the resemblance of their names, divided into severall companies: in the first were found a hundred and ten Kinghts sitting at one table, and all called *Williams*; besides private Gentlemen and servants. It is as pleasant to distribute the tables by the names of the assistants, as it was unto *Geta* the Emperour, who would have all his messes or dishes served-in at his table orderly according to the first letters of their names; As for example, those that beganne with P. as pig, pie, pike, puddings, pouts, porke, pancakes, etc. were all served in together; and so of all the rest. Item, it is a common saying, *That it is good to have a good name*: As much to say, good credit, or good reputation. Yet verely it is very commodious to have a wel-sounding and smoothe name, and which is easie to be pronounced, and facile to be remembred: For, Kings, Princes, Lords, and magistrates knowe and remember us the better by them, and will not so soone forget-us. Marke but of those that serve and follow-us, whether we doe not more ordinarily commaund, and sooner employ such, whose names come readier to our tongue, or memorie. I have seene our King *Henrie* the second, who could never hit on the right name of a Gentleman of *Gascoigne*; and did ever call a Ladie waiting on the Queene, by the generall surname of hir house, because that of hir father was so harsh, and hard to be remembred. And *Socrates* saith, *it ought to be a fathers speciall care, to give his children good and easie-sounding names*. Item, it

is reported, that the foundation of our Ladie the great at *Poitiers* had this beginning; A licentious yoong man having his dwelling-house where the church now standeth, had one night gotten a wench to lie with him, who so soone as she came to bed, he demaunded hir name, who answered, *Marie*: The yong man hearing that name, was sodainly so strucken with a motive of religion, and an awefull respect unto that sacred name, of the virgin *Marie*, the blessed mother of our Saviour and Redeemer, that he did not only presently put hir away from him, but reformed all the remainder of his succeeding life: And that in consideration of this miracle, there was first erected a chappell in the place where this yong mans house stode, consecrated unto that holy name, and afterward the faire great church, which yet continueth. This vocale and auricular correction, and so full of devotion, strucke right unto his soule. This other following, of the same kind, insinuated itselfe by the corporall sences. *Pithagoras* being in companie with two yong men, whom he heard complot and consult (being somewhat heated with feasting and drinking) to goe and ravish a chaste-house, commaunded immediatly the minstrels to change their tune; and so by a solemne, grave, severe, and spondaicall kind of musike, did sweetely inchaunt, allay, and in-trance their rash-violent, and lawlesse lust. Item, shal not succeeding-posteritie say, that our moderne reformation hath been exact and delicate, to have not onely oppugned and resisted errors and vices, and filled the world with devotion, humilitie, obedience, peace, and every other kinde of vertue, but even to have combated their ancient names of baptisme, *Charles*, *Lewes*, *Francis*, to people the world with *Mathusalem*, *Ezechiel*, *Malachie*, much better feeling of a lively faith? A Gentleman my neighbor, esteming the commodities of ancient times in regarde of our daies, forgot not to aledge the fiercenes and magnificence of the names of the Nobilitie of those times, as *Don Grumedan*, *Quedragan*, and *Agesilan*: And that, but to heare them sounded, a man might easily perceive; they had beene other manner of men, then *Peter*, *Guillot*, or *Michell*. Item, I commend, and am much beholding to *James Amiot*, in the course of a French oration of his to have still kept the full ancient Latin names, without disguising or changing them, to give them a new French cadence. At the first they seemed somewhat harsh unto the Reader; but now, by reason of the credit, which his *Plutarke* hath deservedly gotten amongst-us, custom hath removed all strangenes from-us. I have often wished that those who write histories in Latin, would leave-us our names whole, and such as they are: For, altering *Vaudemont*, to *Vallemontanus*, and metamorphosing them, by suting them to the Græcian or Latin tongue, we know not what to make of them, and are often at a non-plus. To conclude my discourse; It is an ill custome, and of exceeding bad consequence in our cuntry of *France*, to call every man by the name of his Towne, Mannor, Hamlet, or Lordship, as the thing that doth most confound houses, and bring sur-names out of knowledge. A cadet or yonger-brother of a good house, having had for his appanage a Lordship, by whose name he hath beene knowne and honored, cannot well forsake and leave the same tenne yeares after his death; His Lord-ship commeth unto a stranger, who doth the like: Ghesse then where we are, and how we shall doe to come to the perfect knowledge of these men. We neede not goe farre for other examples, but looke into our Royall house, where so many partages, so many sur-names, and so many severall titles have so encombred-us, that the originall of the stocke is utterly lost. There is so

much libertie in these mutations, that even in my time, I have seene no man nor woman advanced by fortune unto some extraordinary preferment, that hath not immediatly had adjoyned unto him or hir Genealogicall titles, new and unknowne to their fathers, and that hath not bene engrafted into some noble stocke or familie. And as good lucke serveth, the basest upstart, and most obscure houses are most apt unto adulteration, and falsification. How many privat Gentlemen have we in *France*, which according to their accoumpt, and blazoning of their gentry are of the royall blood or race? I beleve more then others. Was it not pretilie said, and with a good grace, by one of my friends? There was a great companie banded together about a quarell which a Gentleman had with another, who in very truth had some prerogative of titles, honours, and alliances above the common sorte of Nobilitie; upon which word of his prerogative, every one seeking to equall-himselfe unto him, alledged, some one of-spring, some another, some the resemblance of his name, some of his armes, othersome an old far-fetcht pedigree, and the meanest of them to be the great grand-childe of some King beyond the Seas. When they came all to dinner, this man whom hitherto they had all followed, in lieu of taking his wonted place, making low-lowting reverences, went to the lowest end of the board, entreating the companie to hould him excused, that through rash-unadvisednes he had hitherto lived with them companion-like, but now being lately enformed of their right qualities, he began to know them according to their ancient degrees, and that it did not duly belong unto him to sit above so many Princes. And after he had acted his play, he began to raile upon them with a thousand injuries; saying thus unto them: For the love of God content your selves, with what your forefathers have been contented, and with the state whereto God hath called-us: we have sufficient if wee can maintaine it well, let-us not disparage the fortune and condition of our predecessors; and reject-we these fond imaginations, which can not faile any man, whatsoever hee be, that is so impudent as to aleadge them. Crests, Armes, and Coates have no more certaintie then surnames. I beare Azure semé of trefoiles, a Lions Paw in fæce, Or, armed Gules. What priviledge hath this Coate, that it should for ever continue particularly to my house? A sonne in lawe will transferre the same into an other familie: Some silly-upstart purchaser of armes will make it his chiefe coate. There is nothing wherein meete so many alterations and so much confusion.

But this consideration draweth mee perforce unto an other field. Let us somewhat narrowly search-into, and for Gods sake consider, on what foundation we ground this glorie and reputation, for which the world is turned topsie-turvie. On what doe we establish this transitorie renowne, which with so great minde-possessing toyle, and industrie we seeke and gape-after? In fine, it is *Peter* or *William*, that beareth the same (marke-it well reader) and to whom it belongeth. Is not hope a couragious facultie, which in a mortall subject, and in a moment, seekes to usurp infinite, and immensitie, and to replenish his maisters indigence with the possession of al things he can imagine or desire, before it would? Nature hath given us a pleasant joy to play withal in that. Is it *Peter* or *William*. And what is that but a word for all mouths? or three or foure dashes of a pen, first so easie to be varied, as I would willingly aske those, whom the honor of so many

victories concerneth, or whether *Guesquin*, or *Glesquin*, or *Gueaquin*? yet were there more apparance here, then in *Lucian* that Σ. did sue T. for,

non levia aut ludicra petuntur
Præmia:

No light prize, no reward in jest
Is hunted-after as the best.

The wager goeth deepe: The question is, which letter must be paide with so many sieges, battels, hurts, emprisonments, and services done unto the crowne of *France* by hir ever-renowmed Counstable. *Nicholas Denisot* hath had no care but of the letters of his name, and hath changed all the contexture of them, there-out to frame the Earle of *Alsinois*, whom he hath honored and presented with the glory of his Poesie and Painting. And *Suetonius* the Historian hath loved but the sense of his own, and having taken away *Lènis*, which was his fathers surname, hath left *Tranquillus* successor of his compositions reputation. Who would believe, Captaine *Bayard* had no honor, but that which he hath borrowed from the acts of *Peter Terrail*? And that *Antonio Escalin* (even before his eies) suffered Captaine *Poulin*, and the Baron of *La Garde*, to steale so many Navigations, voyages and attempts, both by sea and land from him? Secondly they are dashes, and trickes of the penne common unto a thousand men. How many are there in all races or families both of one name and surname? And how many in divers families, races, ages, and countries? History hath knowne three *Socrates*, five *Platoes*, eight *Aristotles*, seaven *Xenophons*, twenty *Demetrius*, twenty *Theodores*: besides which, imagine how many came not to her knowledge. Who letteth my horse boy to call himselfe *Pompey* the Great? But after all, what meanes, what devises, are there that annex unto my horse-keeper deceased, or to that other who had his head cut-off in *Ægypt*, or that joyne unto them this glorified, and farre-renowmed worde, and these penne-dashes, so much honored, that they may thereby advantage themselves?

Id cinerem & manes credis curare sepultos?

Thinke you, ghost's buried, ashes dead,
Care much how we alive are sped?

What feeling motion of revenge have the two companions in chiefe valor amongst men; *Epaminondas* of that glorious verse, which so many ages since is so common in our mouthes for him?

Consiliis nostris laus est attrita Laconum.

By our complots the haught-renowne
Of Spartan Gallants was brought downe.

And *Affricanus* of that other:

A sole exoriente, supra Mæotis paludes
Nemo est, qui factis me æquiparare queat?

*From sunne-rise to the Scythian-lake, of fame
None in exploités can equalize my name.*

Those that survive are tickled with the pleasure of these words, and by them solicited with jealousy and desire, doe presently without consideration transmit by fantasie this their proper motion of revenge unto the deceased; and with a fond-deceiving hope perswade themselves, when their turne commeth to be capable of-it. God he knowes-it: neverthelesse,

*ad hæc se
Romanus Graiúsque & Barbarus Induperator
Erexit, causas discriminis atque laboris
Inde habuit, tanto maior famæ sitis est, quàm
Virtutis.*

*Hereto himselfe the Romane Generall,
The Græcian, the Barbarian, rouz'd and rais'd;
Heere hence drew cause of perils, travailles all:
So more, then to be good, thirst to be prais'd.*