

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE  
ESSAYS

**Book 1 · Chapter 49**



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## Of ancient customs

I WOULD willingly excuse our people for having no other patterne or rule of perfection, but his owne customes, his owne fashions: For, it is a common vice, not onely in the vulgar sorte, but as it were in all men, to bend their ayme, and frame their thoughts unto the fashions, wherein they were borne. I am pleased when he shall see *Fabricius* or *Lælius*, who because they are neither attired nor fashioned according to our manner, that he condemne their countenance to be strange, and their cariage barbarous. But I bewaile his particular indiscretion, in that he suffereth himselfe to be so blinded, and deceived by the authoritie of present custome, and that if custome pleaseth, he is readie to change opinion, and varie advise, every moneth, nay every day, and judgeth so diversly of himselfe. When he wore short-wasted doublets, and but little lower then his breast, he would maintaine by militant reasons, that the waste was in his right place: but when not long after he came to weare them so long-wasted, yea almost so low as his privities, then began he to condemne the former fashion, as fond, intollerable and deformed; and to commend the latter, as comely, handsome, and commendable. A new fashion of apparell creepeth no sooner into use, but presently he blameth and dispraiseth the olde, and that with so earnest a resolution, and universall a consent, that you would say, it is some kinde of madnes, or selfe-fond humor, that giddieth his understanding.

And forasmuch as our changing or altering of fashions, is so sodaine and new-fangled, that the inventions, and new devises of all the tailors in the world, cannot so fast invent novelties, it must necessarily follow that neglected, and stale-rejected fashions doe often come into credit and use againe: And the latest and newest, within a while-after come to be outcast and dispised, and that one selfe same judgement within the space of fiftene or twentie yeares admitteth, not onely two or three different, but also cleane contrarie opinions, with so light and incredible inconstancie, that any man would wonder-at. There is no man so suttile-craftie amongst-us, that suffreth not himselfe to be enveigled and over-reached by this contradiction, and that is not incensibly dazeled, both with his inward and externall eyes. I will here huddle-up some few ancient fashions that I

remember: Some of them like unto ours, other-some farre differing from them: To the end, that having ever this continuall variation of humane things in our minde, we may the better enlighten and confirme our transported judgement. That manner of fight which we use now adaies with rapier and cloke, was also used among the Romans, as saith *Cæsar*. *Sinistris sagos inuoluunt, gladiosque dstringunt: They wrap their left armes in their clokes, and draw their swordes.* We may to this day observe this vice to be amongst us, and which we have taken from them, that is, to stay such passengers as we meete by the way, and force them to tell-us, who they are, whence they come, whither they goe, and to count-it as an injurie, and cause of quarrell, if they refuse to answeere our demaund. In Baths, which our forefathers used daily before meales, as ordinarily as we use water to wash our hands, when first they came into them, they washed but their armes and legges, but afterward (which custome lasted many after-ages; and to this day continueth amongst divers nations of the world) their whole body over, with compounded and perfumed waters, in such sorte as they held-it as a great testimonie of simplicitie, to wash themselves in pure and uncompounded water: Such as were most delicate, and effeminate, were wont to perfume their whole bodies over and over, three or foure times every day; And often (as our French women have lately taken-up) to picke and snip out the haire of their forehead, so they of all their body.

*Quod pectus, quod crura tibi, quod brachia vellis.*

*That you from breast, legges, armes, the haire  
Neately pull off (to make them faire.)*

Although they had choise of ointments fit for that purpose.

*Psilotro nitet, aut arida latet abdita creta.*

*She shines with ointments that make haire to fall,  
Or with sowre chalke she over-covers all.*

They loved to lie soft, and on fine dowlne-beds, alleaging lying on hard mattresses as a signe of patience. They fed lying on their beds, neere after the manner of the Turkes nowadaies.

*Inde thoro pater Æneas sic orsus ab alto.*

*Father Æneas thus gan say,  
From stately couch where then he lay.*

And it is reported of *Cato Junior*, that after the battell of *Pharsalia*, and that he began to mourne and bewaile the miserable state of the commonwealth, and ill condition of publike affaires, he ever eate sitting on the ground, folowing an austere, and observing a strict kinde of life. The *Beso las manos* was used as a signe of honor and humilitie, onely toward great persons. If friends met, after friendly salutations, they used to kisse one another, as the Venetians doe at this day.

*Gratatusque darem cum dulcibus oscula uerbis.*

*Give hir I would with greetings graced,  
Kisses with sweete words enterlaced.*

And in saluting or suing to any great man, they touched his knees. *Pasicles* the Philosopher, brother unto *Crates*, comming to salute one, whereas he should have caried his hand to his knee, caried the same unto his genitories. The partie saluted, having rudely push't him away; *What?* quoth he, *is not that part yours as well as the other?* Their manner of seeding was as ours, their fruit last. They were wont to wipe their tailes (this vaine superstition of wordes must bee left unto women) with a sponge, and that's the reason why *Spongia* in Latin is counted an obscene word: which sponge was ever tied to the end of a staffe, as witnesseth the storie of him, that was caried to be devoured of wilde beasts before the people, who desiring leave to goe to a privie before his death, and having no other meanes to kill himselfe, thrust downe the sponge and staffe, hee found in the privie, into his throte, wherewith he choked himselfe. Having ended the delights of nature, they were wont to wipe their privities with perfumed wooll.

*At tibi nil faciam, sed lota mentula lana.*

*To thee no such thing will I bring,  
But with wash't wooll another thing.*

In every streete of *Rome* were placed tubs, and such vessels for passengers to make water-in.

*Pusi sæpe lacum propter, se ac dolia curta  
Somno deiuncti credunt extollere vestem.*

*Children asleepe oft thinke they take up all  
Neere to some pissing tub, some lake, (some wall.)*

They used to breake their fast, and nonchion betweene meales, and all summer time, had men that solde snowe up and downe the streetes, wherewith they refreshed their wines; of whom some were so daintie, that all winter long they used to put snow into their wine, not deeming it colde enough. Principall, and noble men had their cup-bearers, tasters, carvers, and buffons to make them merrie. In Winter their viandes were brought and set on the boord upon arches, as we use chafing dishes; and had portable kitchins (of which I have seene some) wherein might be drawne, wheresoever one list, a whole service and messe of meate.

*Has uobis epulas habete lautì,  
Nos offendimur ambulante cæna.*

*Take you daintie-mouth'd such stirring feasts;  
With walking meales we are offended guests.*

And in summer they often caused cold water (being carried through pipes) to drill upon them as they sate in their dining-chambers, or lowe parlors, where in cesterns, they kept store of fish alive, which the by-standers

might at their pleasure, chuse and take with their handes, and have-it drest every man according to his fantasie. Fish hath ever had this priviledge, as at this day it hath; that chiefe Gentlemen, are pleased, and have skill to dresse-it best: And to say truth, the taste of fish is much more delicate and exquisit, then that of flesh, at least in mine. But in all manner of magnificence, delitiousnes, riotous gluttonie, inventions of voluptuousnes, wantonnes, and sumptuositie, we truly endeavor, as much as may be, to equall and come neere them: For, our will and taste is as much corrupted as theirs, but our skill and sufficiencie is farre short of them: Our wit is no more capable, and our strength no more able, to approach and match them in these vitious and blame-worthie parts, then in vertuous and commendable actions: For, both proceede from a vigor of spirite, and farre-reaching witte; which, without comparison, was much greater in them, then now in us. And mindes, by how much more strong and excellent they are, so much lesse facultie and meanes have they, to doe, either excellently well, or notoriously ill. The chieffest aime amongst them was a meane or mediocrity. The *Foremost* or *Last*, in writing or speaking, had no signification of preheminance or greatnes, as may evidently appeare by their writings. They would as familiarly and as soone say, *Oppius* and *Cæsar*, as *Cæsar* and *Oppius*; and as indifferently, I and thou, as, thou and I. And that's the reason why I have heretofore noted in the life of *Flaminius*, in our French *Plutarke*, a place, where it seemeth that the Author, speaking of the jealousy of glorie, that was betweene the *Ætolians* and the *Romanes*, for the gaine of a battell, which they had obtained in common, maketh for the purpose, that in Greeke songs the *Ætolians* were named before the *Romanes*, except there bee some Amphibologie in the French words: for, in that tongue I reade-it. When Ladies came unto stoooves or hot-houses, they made-it not daintie to admit men into their companie, and to be washed, rubbed, chafed and annointed by the hands of their grooms and pages.

*Inguina succinctus nigra tibi seruus aluta  
Stat, quoties calidus nuda foueris aquis.*

*Your man, whose loynes blacke-lether guird's, stand's-by,  
Whilst in warme water you starke-naked lie.*

They also used to sprinkle themselves all over with certaine powders, thereby to alay and repress all maner of filth or sweate. The ancient *Gaules* (saith *Sidonius Apollinaris*) wore their haire long before, and all the hinder-part of their head shaven, a fashion that our wanton youths and effeminate gallants, have lately renued, and in this new-fangled and fond-doting age, brought-up againe, with wearing of long-dangling locks before. The ancient *Romans*, paid the water-men their fare or due so soone as they came into the boate, whereas we pay-it when they set us on shore.

*dum as exigitur, dum mula ligatur,  
Tota abit hora.*

*While they call for their fare, tie drawe-mule to,  
There runn's away, a full houre, if not two.*

Women were wont to lie on the utmost side of the bed, and therefore was Cæsar called *Spondam Regis Nicomedis*: King Nicomedes his beds side. They tooke breath while they were drinking and used to baptise, or put water in their wines.

*quis puer ocius  
Restinguet ardentis falerni  
Pocula prætereunte lympha?*

*What boy of mine or thine  
Shall coole our cup of wine  
With running water fine?*

Those cosening and minde-deceiving countenances of lakeis were also amongst them.

*O Iane, à tergo quem nulla ciconia pinsit  
Nec manus auriculas imitata est mobilis albas,  
Nec linguæ quantum sitiet canis Apula tantum.*

*O Ianus, whom behinde no Storks-bill doth deride,  
Nor nimble hand resembling mak's eares white and wide,  
Nor so much tongue lil'd out, as dogges with thirst ore-dride.*

The Argian and Romane Ladies, mourned in white, as our dames wont to doe; and if I might be credited, and beare-sway amongst them, they should continue it still. But because there are many bookes, that treat of this argument, I will say no more of-it.