

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 51



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Of the vanitie of Wordes

A RETHORICIAN of ancient times, said, that his trade was, to make small things appeare and seeme great. It is a shooemaker, that can make great shoes for a little foote. Had hee lived in *Sparta*, he had doubtlesse beene well whipped, for professing a false, a cozening and deceitfull arte. And I thinke, *Archidamus* King of that Cittie, did not without astonishment listen unto the answer of *Thucydides*, of whom he demaunded, whether he, or *Pericles*, was the strongest and nimblest wrestler; whose answer was this, *Your question Sir, is very hard to be decided; for, if in wrestling with him, I give him a fall, with his faire words he perswadeth those that saw him on the ground, that he never fell, and so gets the victorie.* Those that maske and paint women, commit not so foule a fault; for, it is no great losse, though a man see them not, as they were naturally borne and unpainted: Whereas these professe to deceive and beguile, not our eyes, but our judgement; and to bastardize and corrupt the essence of things. Those common-wealths, that have maintained themselves in a regular, formall, and well politied estate, as that of *Creete* and *Lacedemon*, did never make any great esteeme of Orators. *Ariston* did wisely define Rhetorike to be a Science, to perswade the vulgare people: *Socrates* and *Plato*, to be an Art to deceive and flatter. And those which deny it in the generall description, doe every where in their precepts verifie the same. The Mahometanes, by reason of it's inutilitie, forbid the teaching of it unto their children. And the Athenians, perceiving how pernicious the profession and use thereof was, and of what credite in their Cittie, ordained, that their principall part, which is to moove affections, shoulde bee dismissed and taken away, together with all *exordiums* and *perorations*. It is an instrument devised, to busie, to manage, and to agitate a vulgar and disordered multitude; and is an implemēt employed, but about distempered and sicke mindes, as physicke is about crazed bodies. And those where either the vulgar, the ignorant, or the generalitie have had all power, as that of *Rhodes*, those of *Athens*, and that of *Rome*, and where things have ever beene in continuall disturbance and uproare, thither have Orators and the professors of that Art flocked. And verily, if it bee well looked into, you shall finde very few men in those common-wealths, that without helpe of eloquence have attained to any worthy estimation and credite: *Pompey*, *Cæsar*, *Crassus*, *Lucullus*, *Lentulus*, *Metellus*,

have thence taken their greatest stay and furtherance, whereby they have ascended unto that height and greatnesse of authoritie, whereunto they at last attained, and against the opinion of better times have more prevailed with words, than with armes. For, *L. Volumnius* speaking publickely in favour of the election, which some had made of *Quintus Fabius*, and *Publius Decius*, to be Consules; saith thus; *They are men borne unto warre, of high spirittes, of great performance, and able to effect any thing, but rude, simple, and unarted in the combate of talking; mindes truely Consulare. They only are good Pretors, to doe justice in the Cittie, (saith he) that are subtile, cautelous, well-spoken, wily, and lippe-wise.* Eloquence hath chiefly flourished in *Rome* when the common-wealths affaires have beene in worst estate, and that the devouring Tempest of civill broyles, and intestine warres did most agitate and turmoyle them. Even as a rancke, free and untamed soyle, beareth the ranckest and strongest weeds, wherby it seemeth that those common-weales, which depend of an absolute Monarch, have lesse neede of-it then others: For, that foolishnesse and facilitie, which is found in the common multitude, and which doth subject the same, to be managed, perswaded, and led by the eares, by the sweet alluring and sense-entrancing sound of this harmony, without duely weighing, knowing, or considering the trueth of things by the force of reason. This facility and easy-yeelding, I say, is not so easily found in one only ruler, and it is more easie to warrant him from the impression of this poyson, by good institution and sound counsell. There was never seene any notable or farre-renowned Orator to come out of *Macedon* or *Persia*. What I have spoken of-it, hath beene upon the subject of an Italian, whom I have latelie entertained into my service. Who during the life of the whilom cardinal *Caraffa* served him in the place of steward of his house. Enquiring of his charge, and particular quality, he tolde mee, a long, formall, and eloquent discourse of the science or skill of epicurisme and gluttonie, with such an Oratory-gravitie, and Magistrale countenance, as if he had discoursed of some high-mysterious point of divinitie, wherein he hath very methodically decifred and distinguished sundry differences of appetites: First of that which a man hath fasting, then of that men have after the first, the second, and third service. The severall meanes how sometimes to please-it simply, and other times to sharpen and provoke the same; the policy and rare invention of his sawces: First, in general terms, than particularizing the qualities and severall operations of the ingredients, and their effects: The differences of salades according to their distinct seasons, which must be served-in warme, and which cold: The maner how to dresse, how to adorne, and embellish them, to make them more pleasing to the sight. After that, he entred into a large and farre-fetcht narration, touching the true order, and due methode of service, full of goodly and important considerations.

*Nec minimo sanè discrimine reffert,
Quo gestu lepores, & quo gallina secetur.*

*What grace we use, it makes small difference, when
We carve a Hare, or else breake up a Henne.*

And all that filled up and stuffed with rich magnificent words, wel couched phrases, oratory figures, and patheticall metaphores; yea, such as learned

men use and employ in speaking of the Government of an Empire, which made me remember my man.

*Hoc salsum est, hoc adustum est, hoc lautum est parum,
Illudrectè, iterum sic memento, sedulò,
Moneo quæ possum pro mea sapientia.
Postremò tanquam in speculum, in patinas, Demea,
Inspicere iubeo, & moneo quid facto usus sit.*

*This dish is salt, this burnt, this not so fine,
That is well done, do so againe; Thus I
As my best wisdome serves, all things assigne.
Lastly Sir, I commaund, they neatly prie,
On dishes, as a glasse,
And shew what needfull was.*

yet did those strict Græcians commend the order and disposition, which *Paulus Æmilius* observed in the banquet he made them at his returne from *Macedon*: But heere I speake not of the effects, but of the wordes. I know not whether they worke that in others, which they doe in mee. But when I heare our Architects mouth-out those bigge and ratling words of *Pilasters*, *Architraves*, *Cornixes*, *Frontispices*, *Corinthian*, and *Dorike* workes and such-like fustian-termes of theirs, I cannot let my wandering imagination from a sodaine apprehension of *Apollidonius* his pallace, and I finde by effect, that they are the seelie, and decayed peeces of my Kitchin-doore. Doe but heare one pronounce *Metonomia Metaphore*, *Allegory*, *Ætymologie*, and other such trash-names of Grammer, would you not thinke, they meant some forme of a rare and strange language? They are titles and wordes that concerne your chamber-maides tittle-tattle. It is a foppery and cheating trick, cosin-Germane unto this, to call the offices of our estate by the proud titles of the ancient Romans, though they have no resemblance at all of charge, and lesse of authoritie and power. And this likewise, which in mine opinion will one day remaine as a reproch unto our age, unworthily and undeservedly to bestow on whom we list the most glorious Surnames, and loftiest titles, wherewith antiquitie in manie long-continued ages honoured but one or two persons. *Plato* hath by such an universal consent borne-away the surname of Divine, that no man did ever attempt to envy him for-it. And the Italians, which vaunt (and indeede with some reason) to have generallie more lively, and farre reaching wits, and their discourse more sound and sinnowy, then other nations of their times, have lately therewith embellished *Peter Aretine*; in whom except it be an high-raised, prowdly-pufft, mind-moving, and hart-danting maner of speech, yet in good sooth more then ordinary, witty and ingenious; But so new fangled, so extravagant, so fantastical, so deep-labored; and to conclude, besides the eloquence, which be it as-it may-be, I cannot perceiue any thing in it, beyond our exceeding that of manie other writers of his age, much lesse that it in any sorte approacheth that ancient divinity. And the surname Great, we attribute and fasten the same on Princes, that have nothing in them exceeding popular greatnesse.