

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 54



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Of vaine subtilties, or subtile devises

THERE ARE certaine frivolous and vaine inventions, or as some call them, subtilties of wit, by means of which, some men doe often endeavor to get credit and reputation: as divers Poets, that frame whole volumes with verses beginning with one letter: we see Egges, Wings, Hatchets, Crosses, Globes, Columnes, and divers other such-like figures anciently fashioned by the Græcians, with the measure and proportion of their verses, spreading, lengthning, and shortning them, in such sort as they justly represent such and such a figure. Such was the science and profession of him, who long time busied himselfe, to number how many severall wayes the letters of the Alphabet might be ranged, and found-out that incredible number mentioned by *Plutarke*. I allow of his opinion, who having one brought before him, that was taught with such industrie, and so curiously to cast a graine of millet with his hand, that without ever missing, he would every time make-it goe through a needles-eye; and being entreated to bestowe some thing upon him, (as a reward for so rare a skill,) very pleasantly and worthily, commaunded, that this cunning workeman should have two or three peckes of millet delivered him, to the end his rare arte and witty labour might not remaine without daily exercise. It is a wonderfull testimonie of our judgements imbecilitie, that it should commend and allow of things, either for their rarenesse, or noveltie, or for their difficultie, though neither goodnes or profit be joyned unto them. We come but now from my house, where we have a while recreated our selves, with devising who could finde out most things, that held by both extreame endes; As for example, *Sire*, is in our tongue a title onely given to the most imminent person of our state, which is the King, and yet is commonly given to some of the vulgar sorte, as unto marchants and pedlers, and nothing concerneth those of the middle sort, and that are betweene both. Women of chieftest calling and qualitie are called *Dames*, the meane sort *Damoisells*, and those of the basest ranke, are also entituled *Dames*. The clothes of estate, which we see set over tables and chaires, are onely allowed in Princes houses, yet we see them used in Tavernes. *Democritus* was wont to say, *That Gods and beastes, had quicker senses and sharper wittes then men, who are of the middle ranke*. The Romanes used to weare one selfe same garment on mourning and on festivall daies. It is most certaine, that both an

extreame feare, and an exceeding heate of courage, doe equally trouble and distemper the belly. The nick-name of *Tremblant*, wherewith *Zanchio* the twelfth King of *Navarre* was surnamed, teacheth, that boldnes, aswell as feare, engender a startling and shaking of the limbs. Those which armed, either him, or any other of like nature, whose skinne would quiver, assaied to re-assure him, by diminishing the danger wherein he was like to fall; you have no perfect knowledge of me (said he) for if my flesh knew how farre my courage wil ere-long carrie-it, it would presently fall into a flat swowne. That chilnesse, or as I may terme-it, faintnes, which we feele after the exercises of *Venus*, the same doth also proceede of an over vehement appetite and disordred heate. Excessive heate and extreame cold do both boile and roste. *Aristotle* saith, *that leaden vessels doe as well melt and consume away by an excessive cold and rigor of winter, as by a vehement heat.* Both desire and satietie fil the seates with sorow, both above and under voluptuousnes. Folly and wisdomme meete in one point of feeling and resolution, about the suffering of humane accidents. The wiser sort doth gourmandise and command evill, and others ignore-it. The latter, (as a man would say) short of accidents, the other, beyond. Who after they have well weighed and considered their qualities, and duly measured, and rightly judged what they are, over-leap them by the power of a vigorous courage. They disdain and tread them under foote, as having a strong and solide mind, against which, if fortunes darts chance to light, they must of necessitie be blunted and abated, meeting with so resisting a body, as they cannot pierce, or make any impression therein. The ordinarie and meane condition of men abideth betweene these two extremities; which are those that perceive and have a feeling of michiefes, but can not endure them. Both infancie and decrepitude meete with weaknesse of the braine. Covetise and profusion in a like desire to acquire and hoard-up. It may with likelyhoode be spoken, that there is a kinde of *Abeceinarie* ignorance; preceding science: an other doctorall, following science: an ignorance, which science doth beget: even as it spoileth the first. Of simple, lesse-curious, and least-instructed spirits are made good christians, who simply beleve through reverence and obedience, and are kept in awe of the lawes. In the meane vigor of spirits, and slender capacitie is engendred the error of opinions: They follow the apparance of the first sense; and have some title to interpret-it foolishnes and sottishnes, that we are confirmed in ancient waies, respecting us, that are nothing therein instructed by studie. The best, most-setled and clearest-seeing spirits, make another sorte of well-beleever, who by long and religious investigation, penetrate a more profound, and finde-out a more abstruse light in scriptures, and discover the misterious and divine secrets of our ecclesiasticall pollicie. And therefore see we some of them, that have reached unto this last ranke, by the second, with wonderfull fruite and confirmation; as unto the furthest bounds of christian inteligence: and enjoy their victorie with comfort, thanks-giving, reformation of manners, and great modestie. In which ranke, my purpose is not to place these others, who to purge themselves from the suspicion of their forepassed errors, and the better to assure us of them, become extreame, indiscreet and unjust in the conduct of our cause, and taxe and tainte the same with infinit reproches of violence. The simple peasants are honest men; so are Philosophers, (or as our time nameth them, strong and cleare natures) enriched with a large instruction of profitable sciences. The mongrell sort of husband-men, who have

disdained the first forme of ignorance of letters, and could never reach unto the other (as they that sit betweene two stooles, of which besides so many others I am one) are dangerous, peevish, foolish, and importunate, and they which trouble the world most. Therefore do I (as much as lieth in me) with-drawe my selfe into the first and naturall seate, whence I never assaid to depart. Popular and meerely naturall Poesie, hath certaine graces, and in-bred livelines, whereby it concurrereth and compareth it selfe unto the principall beautie of perfect and artificiall Poesie, as may plainly be seene in the *Villannelles*, homely gigges, and countrie songs of *Gasconie*, which are brought unto us from nations, that have no knowledge at all, either of any learning, or so much as of writing. Meane and indifferent Poesie, and that consisteth betweene both, is skorned, and contemned, and passeth without honor or esteeme. But forasmuch as since the passage hath bene opened unto the spirit, I have found (as it commonly happeneth) that we had apprehended that which is neither so nor so for a difficult exercise, and of a rare subject; And that since our invention hath bene set on fire, it discovereth an infinit number of like examples; I will onely adde this one: That if these Essayes were worthie to be judged-of, it might in mine opinion happen, that they would not greatly please the common and vulgar spirits, and as little the singular and excellent. The first will understand but little of them, the latter over-much; they might perhaps live and rub out in the middle region.