

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 56

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Of Praiers and Orisons

I PROPOSE certaine formelesse and irresolute fantasies, as do those schollers, who in schooles publish doubtfull and sophisticall questions to be disputed and canvased: not to establish the truth, but to find-it out: which I submit to their judgements, to whom the ordering and directing, not onely of my actions and compositions, but also of my thoughts, belongeth. The condemnation, as well as the approbation of them, will be equally acceptable and profitable unto me, deeming-it absurde and impious, if any thing be, either ignorantly, or unadvisedly set downe in this rapsodie, contrary unto the sacred resolutions, and repugnant to the holy prescriptions of the Catholike, Apostolike, and Romane church, wherein I was borne, and out of which I purpose not to die. And therefore alwayes referring my selfe unto their censures that have all power over me, do I meddle so rashly, to write of all manner of purposes and discourses, as I do here. I wot not whether I be deceived, but sithence, by an especial and singular favor of Gods divine bounty, a certaine forme of praier, hath, by the very mouth of God, word by word beene prescribed and directed unto us, I have ever thought the use of-it, should be more ordinary with us, then it is. And might I be believed, both rising and going to bed, sitting downe and rising from boorde, and going about any particular action or busines, I would have all good Christians, to say the *Pater noster*, and if no other praier, at least not to omitte that. The Church may extend, amplifie, and diversifie prayers according to the neede of our instruction: For, I knowe it is alwayes the same substance, and the same thing. But that one should ever have this priviledge, that all manner of people, should at all times, and upon every occasion have it in their mouth: For, it is most certaine, that onely it containeth whatsoever we want, and is most fit, and effectuall in all events. It is the onely prayer I use in every place, at all times, and upon every accident; and in steade of changing, I use often repetition of it: whence it commeth to passe, that I remember none so well as that one. I was even now considering, whence this generall error commeth, that in all our desseignes and enterprises, of what nature soever, we immediatly have recourse unto God, and in every necessitie, we call upon his holy name: And at what time soever wee stand in neede of any help, and that our weaknesse wanteth assistance, we onely invoke him, without considering whether the occasion be just or unjust; and what estate or action we be in, or go about, be it never so

vicious or unlawfull, we call upon his name and power. Indeede he is our onely protector, and of power to affoorde-us all maner of help and comfort; but although he vouchsafe to honour us with this joy-bringing fatherly adoption, yet is he as just as he is good; and as good and just, as he is mightie: But oftner useth his justice than his might, and favoereth us according to the reason of the same, and not according to our requests. *Plato* in his lawes maketh three sortes of injurious beliefe in the Gods: First, that there is none at all; Secondly, that they meddle not with our affaires; Thirdly, that they never refuse any thing unto our vowes, offrings, and sacrifices. The first errour, according to his opinion, did never continue immutable in man, even from his first infancie unto his latter age. The two succeeding may admit some constancie. His justice and power are inseparable. It is but in vaine to emprove his power in a bad cause. Man must have an unpolluted soule when he praieth (at least in that moment he addresseth himselfe to pray) and absolutely free from all vicious passions; otherwise we our selves present him the rodde to scourge us withall. In lieu of redressing our fault, we redouble the same, by presenting him with an affection fraught with irreverence, sinne, and hatred, to whom onely we should sue for grace and forgiveness. Loehere, why I doe not willingly commend those Pharisicall humours, whom I so often behold, and more then ordinary, to pray unto God, except their actions imediately preceding or succeeding their prayers witnesse some shew of reformation or hope of amendment.

*Si nocturnus adulter
Tempora sanctonico uelas adoperta cucullo.*

*If in a cape-cloke-hood befrenchifide
Thou a night-whore-munger thy head doost hide.*

And the state of a man that commixeth devotion unto an execrable life, seemeth in some sort to be more condemnable, then that of one, that is conformable unto himselfe, and everie way dissolute. Therefore doth our Church continually refuse, the favour of hir enterance and societie, unto customes and manners wilfully-obstinate on some egregious villanie. Wee onely pray by custome and use, and for fashion-sake, or to say better, wee but reade and pronounce our prayers: To conclude, it is nothing but a shew of formalitie, and a formall shew. And it greeveth me to see many men, who at grace before and after meate, will with great shew of devotion, crosse themselves three or foure times (and it vexeth me so much the more, when I call to mind, that it is a signe I greatly reverence, and have in continuall use, yea, if I be but gaping) and therwhilst, shall you see them bestow all other houres of the day in al maner of hatred, malice, covetousnes, and injustice. Many houres spend they about vice, but one to God, and that as it were by way of recompence and composition. It is wonderous to see, so far different and divers actions, continue with so even a tenor, that no interruption or alteration at-all can be perceived, either about their confines, or passage from one unto another. What prodigious conscience can be at any hartes-ease, fostring, and feeding with so mutual, quiet, and agreeing society, in one selfe same mansion, both crime and judge? A man whose *Paillardize* and luxurie, doth uncessantly sway and rule the head, and who judgeth the same abhominable and most hateful in the sight of God; what saith he unto his all-seeing Majestie, when he openeth his lippes, either of mouth

or hart, to speake to him of-it? He reclaimeth himselfe, but falleth sodainely againe. *If the object of his divine justice, and his presence should strike, (as he saith) and chastize his soule, how short-soever the penitence were; feare it selfe would so often cast his thought on-it, that he should presently perceive himselfe maister of those vices, which are habituated, in-bred, setled and enfleshed in him.* But what of those, which ground a whole life upon the fruit and benefite of that sinne, they know to bee mortall? How many trades, professions, occupations and vacations, have we dayly and continually used, frequented and allowed amongst us, whose essence is vicious and most pernicious? And hee that would needs confesse himselfe unto me, and of his owne accord told me, that for feare of loosing his credite, and to keepe the honour of his offices; he had for a whole age, made shew and profession, and acted the effects of a religion, which in his owne selfe-accusing conscience, hee judged damnable, and cleane contrary unto that he had in his hart: How could he admit and foster so contradictory and impious a discourse in his heart? With what language entertaine they divine justice concerning this subject? Their repentance, consisting in visible amends, and manageable reparation; they loose both towards God and us, the meanes to alleage the same. Are they so malapart and fond-hardie as to crave pardon without satisfaction, and sans-repentance? I thinke it goeth with the first, as with these last: But obstinacie is not herein so easie to be vanquished. This so sodaine contrarietie, and violent volubilitie of opinion, which they faine unto-us, seemeth to me a miracle. They present-us with the state of an indigestible agonie. How fantastickall seemed their imagination unto me, who these latter yeares had taken up a fashion, to checke and reprove all men, that professed the Catholike religion, in whom shined any extraordinary brightnesse of spirit, saying, that it was but fained: and to doe him honour, held, that whatsoever he saide in apparance, he could not inwardly chuse but have his beliefe reformed according to their byase. It is a peevisch infirmitie, for a man to thinke himselfe so firmly grounded, as to perswade himselfe, that the contrary may not be believed: And more peevisch also, to bee perswaded by such a spirit, that preferreth I wot not what disparitie of fortune, before the hopes and threats of eternall life, They may believe mee: If any thing could have tempted my youth, the ambition of the hazard, and difficulty, which followed this late-moderne enterprize, should have had good part therein. It is not without great reason, in my poore judgement, that the church forbiddeth the confused, rash and indiscreete use of the sacred and divine songs, which the holy spirit hath indited unto *David*. God ought not to be commixed in our actions, but with awfull reverence, and an attention full of honor and respect. The word or voyce is too divine, having no other use but to exercise our lungs, and to please our eares. It is from the conscience and not from the tongue that it must proceede. It is not consonant unto reason, that a prentise or shoppe-keeping boy, amidst his idle, vaine, and frivolous conceits, should be suffered to entertaine himselfe, and play therewith. Nor is it seemely, or tolerable, to see the sacred booke of our beliefes-Mysteries, tossed up and downe and plaid withall, in a shoppe, or a hall, or a kitchin. They have heretofore bin accompted mysteries, but through the abuse of times, they are now held as sports and recreations. So serious, and venerable a studie should not, by way of pastime, and tumultuarily be handled. It ought to be a fixed, a purposed, and setled action, to which this preface of our office *sursum corda* should ever be adjoyned; and the very exterior parts of the body,

should with such a countenance, be referred unto it, that to all mens eyes it may witnesse a particular attention and duteous respect. It is not a studie fitting all men, but onely such as have vowed themselves unto-it, and whome God hath, of his infinit mercy, called thereunto. The wicked, the ungodly, and the ignorant are thereby empaired. It is no historie to be fabulously reported, but a historie to bee dutifully revered, awfully feared, and religiouslie adored. Are they not pleasantly conceited, who because they have reduced the same into the vulgar tongues, and that all men may understand-it, perswade themselves, that the people shal the better conceive and digest the same? Consisteth-it but in the wordes, that they understand not all they finde written? Shall I say more? By approaching thus little unto it, they goe backe from it. Meere ignorance, and wholly relying on others, was verily more profitable and wiser, then is this verball, and vaine knowledge, the nurse of presumption, and sourse of temerity. Moreover, I am of opinion, that the uncontroled libertie, that all men have to wrest, dissipate, and wyre-draw a word so religious, and important, to so manie severall idiomes, hath much more danger then profit following-it. The Jewes, the Mahometans, and well-nigh all other nations, are wedded unto, and reverence the language, wherein their mysteries and religion had originally bin conceived; and any change or translation hath not without apparance of reason bin directly forbidden. Know we whether there be Judges enow in *Basque* and in *Brittanie* to establish this translation made in their tongue? The Universall Church hath no more difficult and solemne judgement to make. Both in speaking and preaching the interpretation is wandring, free, and mutable, and of one parcell; so is it not alike. One of our Græcian Historians, doth justly accuse his age, forsomuch as the secrets of Christian religion were dispersed in all publike places, and even amongst the basest artificers; and that every man might, at his pleasure, dispute of it, and at randon speake his mind of the same. And it should be a great shame for us, who by the unspeakable grace of God enjoy the pure and sacred mysteries of piety, to suffer the same to be profaned in the mouthes of ignorant and popular people, seeing the very Gentiles interdicted *Socraetes* and *Plato*, and the wisest, to meddle, enquire or speake of things committed unto the Priestes of *Delphos*. Saying moreover, *That the factions of Princes, touching the subject of Divinitie, are armed, not with zeale, but with anger. That zeale dependeth of divine reason and justice, holding an orderly and moderate course, but that it changeth into hatred and envie, and in steede of corne and grape, it produceth nettles and darnell, if it be directed by humane passion.* And justly saith this other, who counselling the Emperour *Theodosius*, affirmed *that disputations, did not so much appease and lull asleepe the schismes of the Church, as stirre up and cause heresies.* And therefore it behooved, to avoyde all contentions, controversies, and logicall arguings, and wholly and sincerely referre himselfe unto the prescriptions and orders of faith, established by our forefathers. And *Andronicus* the Emperour, finding by chance in his pallace, certaine principall men verie earnestly disputing against *Lapodius*, about one of our points of great importance, taunted and rated them verie bitterly, and threatned if they gave not over, he would cause them to bee cast into the river. Children and women doe now-adayes governe and sway the oldest and most experienced men concerning Ecclesiasticall Lawes: Whereas the first that *Plato* made, forbiddeth them to enquire after the reason of civill Lawes, and which ought to stand in place of divine ordinances. Allowing aged men to communicate the same amongst

themselves, and with the Magistrate, adding more-over, alwayes provided it be not in the presence of yoong men, and before profane persons. A notable Bishoppe hath left written, that in the other end of the world, there is an Iland called of our predecessours *Dioscorida*, very commodious, and fertile of all sortes of fruites and trees, and of a pure and wholesome ayre; whose people are Christians, and have churches and altars; adorned with nothing else but crosses, without other images; great observers of fastings and holy dayes; exact payers of their priests tithes; and so chaste, that none of them may lawfully all his life long know any more then one wife. And in all other matters so well pleased with their fortune, that being seated in the middest of the sea, they have and knowe no use of shippes: and so simple, that of their religion, which they so diligently and awfully observe, they know not, nor understand so much as one onely word. A thing incredible, to him that knew not how the Pagans, who are so devout and zealous idolaters, know nothing of their Gods, but only their bare names and statues. The ancient beginning of *Menalippe*, a tragedy of *Euripides*, importeth thus.

*O Jupiter, car de toy rien sinon,
Je ne cognois seulement que le nom.*

*O Jupiter, for unto me,
Onely the name is knowne of thee.*

I have also in my time heard certaine writings complained-of, for somuch as they are meerly humane and Philosophicall, without meddling with divinitie. He that should say to the contrarie (which a man might doe with reason) that heavenly doctrine, as a Queene and governesse doth better keepe hir ranke apart; that she ought to be chiefe ruler and principall head every where, and not suffragant and subsidiarie. And that peradventure examples in Grammer, Rethorike, and Logike, might more fitly and sortably be taken from elsewhere, then from so sacred and holie a subject, as also the arguments of theatres, plots of plaies, and groundes of publike spectacles. That mysteriously-divine reasons are more venerably and reverently considered alone, and in their native stile, then joyned and compared to humane discourse. That this fault is oftener seene, which is, that Divines write too humanely, then this other, that humanists write not theologically enough. *Philosophie*, saith S. *Chrysostom*, is long since banished from sacred schooles, as an unprofitable servant, and deemed unworthie to beholde, but in passing by the entrie, or the vestrie of the sacred treasures of heavenly doctrine. That the formes of humane speech, are more base, and ought by no meanes to make any use of the dignitie, majestie, and preheminance of divine speech. As for my part, I give it leave to say, *verbis indisciplinatis, with undisciplined words*, Fortune, destinie, chance, accident, fate, good lucke, ill lucke, the Gods, and other phrases, as best it pleaseth. I propose humane fantasies and mine owne, simply as humane conceits, and severally considered; not as settled, concluded, and directed by celestiall ordinance, incapable of any doubt or alteration. A matter of opinion, and not of faith. What I discourse according to my selfe, not what I beleeve according unto God, with a laycall fashion, and not a clericall manner; yet ever most religious. As children propose their essayes, instructable, not instructing. And might not a man also say without apparance, that the institution, which willeth, no man shall dare to write of religion, but sparingly, and reservedly,

except such as make expresse profession of it, would not want some shew of profit and justice; and happily to me to be silent. It hath bin told me, that even those which are not of our consent, do flatly inhibite amongst themselves the use of the sacred name of God in all their vulgar and familiar discourses. They would have no man use it as an interjection, or exclamation, nor to be aleaged as a witsse, or comparison; wherein I finde they have reason. And howsoever it bee, that we call God to our commerce and societie, it should be zealously, seriously and religiously. There is (as farre as I remember) such a like discourse in *Xenophon*, wherein he declareth, *That we should more rarely pray unto God: forasmuch as it is not easie, we should so often settle our mindes in so regular, so reformed, and so devout a seate, where indeede it ought to be, to pray aright and effectually: otherwise our prayers are, not onely vaine and unprofitable, but vicious. Forgive us (say we) our offences, as we forgive them that trespassed against us.* What else inferre we by that petition, but that we offer him our soule void of all revenge and free from all rancour? We neverthelesse invoke God and call on his aide, even in the complot of our grievousest faultes, and desire his assistance in all maner of injustice and iniquitie.

Quæ nisi seductis nequeas committere diuis.

*Which you to Saints not drawne aside,
Would thinke unfit to be applide.*

The covetous man sueth and praieth unto him for the vaine encrease and superfluous preservation of his wrong-gotten treasure. The ambitious, he importuneth God for the conduct of his fortune, and that he may have the victorie of all his desseignes. The theefe, the pirate, the murtherer, yea and the traitor, all call upon him, all implore his ayde, and all sollicite him, to give them courage in their attempts, constancie in their resolutions, to remove all lets and difficulties, that in any sorte may withstand their wicked executions, and impious actions; or give him thanks, if they have had good successe; the one if he have met with a good bootie, the other if he returne home rich, the third if no man have seene him kill his enemy, and the last, though he have caused any execrable mischief. The Souldier, if he but go to besiege a cottage, to scale a Castle, to robbe a Church, to Pettard a gate, to force a religious house, or any villanous act, before he attempt-it, praieth to God for his assistance, though his intents and hopes be full-fraught with cruelty, murther, covetise, luxurie, sacriledge, and all iniquitie.

*Hoc ipsum quo tu Iouis aurem impellere tentas,
Dic agedum, Staio, proh Iuppiter, ô bone, clamet,
Iuppiter, at sese non clamet Iuppiter ipse.*

*Goe-to then, say the same to some bad fellow,
Which thou prepar'st for Gods eares: let him bellow,
O God, good God; so God, On himselfe would not plod.*

Margaret Queene of *Navarre*, maketh mention of a yong Prince (whom although she name not expresly, yet his greatnes hath made him sufficiently knowne) who going about an amorous assignation, and to lie with an advocates wife of *Paris*, his way lying alongst a Church, he did never passe by so holy a place, whether it were in going or comming from

his lecherie, and cuckolding-labor, but would make his praier unto God, to be his help and furtherance. I would faine have any impartiall man tell me, to what purpose this Prince invoked and called on God for his divine favor, having his minde onely bent to sinne, and his thoughts set on luxurie: Yet doth she alleage him for a speciall testimonie of singular devotion. But it is not onely by this example, a man might verifie, that women are not very fit to manage or treat matters of religion and divinitie. A true and hartie praier, and an unfained religious reconciliation from us unto God, cannot likely fall into a wicked and impure soule, especially when Sathan swaieth the same. He that calleth upon God for his assistance, whilst he is engulphed and wallowing in filthie sinne, doth as the cut-purce, that should call for justice unto his ayde, or those that produce God in witnes of a lie.

*tacito mala uota susurro
Concipimus*

*With silent whispering we,
For ill things suppliant be.*

There are few men, that would dare to publish the secret requests they make to God.

*Haud cuiuis promptum est, murmurque humilésque susurros
Tollere de templis, & aperto uiuere uoto.*

*From Church low-whispring murmurs to expell,
T'is not for all, or with knowne vowes live well.*

And that's the reason, why the Pithagorians would have them publike, that all might heare them, that no man should abusively call on God, and require any undecent or unjust thing of him, as that man;

*clarè cum dixit, Apollo,
Labra mouet metuens audiri: pulchra Lauerna
Da mihi fallere, da iustum sanctumque uideri.
Noctem peccatis, & fraudibus obiice nubem.*

*When he aloud hath said, Apollo heare,
Loth to be heard, Goddess of theeves, said he,
Grant me to cosen, and yet just appeare,
My faultes in night, my fraud's in clouds let be.*

The Gods did greuously punish the impious vowes of *Oedipus*, by granting them unto him. His praier was, that his children might betweene themselves decide in armes the succession of his estate; he was so miserable, as to be taken at his word. A man should not request that all things follow our will, but that it may follow wisdom. Verely, it seemeth, that we make no other use of our praier, then of a companie of gibrish phrases: And as those who employ holy and sacred words about witchcraft and magicall effects; and that we imagine their effect dependeth of the contexture, or sound, or succession of words, or from our countenance. For, our soule, being full-fraught with concupiscence, and all manner of ungodly thoughts, nothing touched with repentance,

nor moved with new reconciliation towards God, wee headlong present unto him those heedles words, which memorie affoordeth our tongue, by which we hope to obtaine an expiation and remission of our offences. There is nothing so easie, so sweete, so comfortable and favourable, as the law of God; she (of his infinit mercie) calleth us unto him, how faultie and detestable soever we be; she gently stretcheth forth hir armes unto us, and mildely receiveth us into hir lap, how guiltie, poluted, and sinfull soever we are, and may be in after-times. But in recompence of so boundles and unspeakable a favor, she must be thankfully accepted, and cheerefully regarded: and so gracious a pardon must be received with a gratuitie of the soule, and at least, in that instant, that we addresse our selves unto hir presence; to have our soule grieved for hir faults, penitent of hir sinnes, hating those passions and affections, that have caused or provoked us to transgresse his lawes, to offend his Majestie, and to breake his commaundments. *Plato saith, That neither the Gods, nor honest men will ever accept the offering of a wicked man.*

*Immunis aram si tetigit manus,
Non sumptuosa blandior hostia
Molliuit auersos Penates,
Farre pio & saliente mica.*

*If guiltles hand the altare tuch,
Shall better please our God offended
No offering, cost it ne're so much,
Then corne with crackling-corne salte blended.*