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Montaigne's Essays

In Three Books. With Notes and Quotations. And an Account of The Author's Life ; With a short Character of the Author and Translator, by the late Marquis of Halifax; With the Addition of A Complete Table to each Volume

Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de

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Chap. 49. Of ancient Customs.

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very good Shots, backward with his Bow, take up any thing from the Ground, setting one Foot down, and the other in the Stirrup; with twenty other Apes-tricks, which he got his living by. There has been seen, in my Time, at *Constantinople*, two Men upon an Horse, who in the Height of his Speed would throw themselves off, and into the Saddle again by Turn, and one who bridled and saddled his Horse with nothing but his Teeth. Another who betwixt two Horses, one Foot upon one Saddle, and another upon the other, carrying another upon his Shoulders; would ride full Career, the other standing bolt upright upon him, making very good Shots with his Bow. Several who would ride full Speed with their Heels upwards, and their Hands upon the Saddle betwixt several *Scymiters*, with the Points upward fix'd in the Harness. When I was a Boy, the Prince of *Salmona*, riding a rough Horse at *Naples* to all his Airs, held Reals under his Knees and Toes; as if they had been nail'd there, to shew the Firmness of his Seat.



C H A P. XLIX.

Of Ancient Customs.

I Should willingly pardon our People for admitting no other Pattern, or Rule of Perfection, than their own peculiar Manners, and Customs. It being a common Vice, not of the Vulgar only, but almost of all Men, to walk in the beaten Road their Ancestors have trod before them: I am content when they see *Fabricius* or *Lælius*, that they look upon their Countenance and Behaviour as barbarous, seeing they are neither clothed nor fashion'd according to our Mode. But I find Fault with their Singularity, when it arrives to that Degree of Indiscretion, as to suffer themselves to be so impos'd upon by Authority of the present Custom, as every Month to alter their Opinion, if Custom so require, and that they should so vary their Judgment in their own particular Concern: When they wore the Belly-pieces of
their

their Doublets up as high as their Breasts, they stiffly maintain'd that they were in their proper Place: Some Years after they were slipt down between their Thighs, and then they could laugh at the former Fashion as uneasy and intolerable. The Fashion now in Use makes them absolutely condemn the other two, with so great Indignation, and so universal Contempt, that a Man would think, there was a certain kind of Madness crept in amongst them, that infatuates their Understandings, to this strange Degree. Now seeing that our Change of Fashions is so prompt and sudden, that the Inventions of all the Taylors in the World cannot furnish out new Whim-whams enough to feed our Vanity withal; there will often be a Necessity, that the despised ones must again come in Vogue, and even those immediately after fall into the same Contempt; and that the same Judgment must, in the Space of fifteen or twenty Years, take up not only different, but contrary Opinions, with an incredible Lightness and Inconstancy: There is not any of us so cautious and discreet, that suffers not himself to be gull'd with this Contradiction, and both in external and internal Sight to be insensibly blinded. I will here muster up some old Customs, that I have in Memory, some of them the same with ours, the other different, to the End, that bearing in Mind this continual Variation of human Things, we may have our Judgments clearer, and more firmly settled: The thing in use amongst us of fighting with Rapier and Cloak, was in Practice amongst the Romans also, *Sinistris sagos involvant, gladiosque distringunt* *. They wrapp'd their Cloaks upon the Left Arm, and handled the Sword with the Right, says Cæsar; And I observe an old vicious Custom of our Nation, which continues yet amongst us, which is to stop Passengers we meet upon the Road, to compel them to give an Account who they are; and to take it for an Injury, and just Cause of Quarrel, if they refuse to do it: At the Bath, which the Ancients made Use of every Day before they went to Dinner, and as frequently as we wash our Hands, they at first only bath'd their Arms and Legs, but afterwards,

* Cæsar de bello civili, lib. 1.

and

and by a Custom that has continued for many Ages in most Nations of the World, they bath'd stark naked in mix'd and perfum'd Water : The most delicate and affected, perfum'd themselves all over three or four Times a Day. They often caus'd their Hair to be pincht off ; as the Women of *France* have some Time since, taken up a Custom to do their Foreheads.

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

How dost thou twitch thy Breast, thy Arms and Thighs.

Though they had Ointments proper for that Purpose.

Psilotro nitet, aut arida latet abdita creta §.

This in Wild-vine shines, or else doth calk,
Her Rank pores up in a dry Cruft of Chalk.

They delighted to lye soft, and pretended it for a great Testimony of Hardiness, to lye upon a Matrass. They did eat lying upon Beds, much after the Manner of the *Turks* in this Age.

Inde thoro pater Æneas sic orsus ab alio †.

Then thus *Æneas* from his Bed of State,
Begun *Troy's* woful Story to relate.

And 'tis said of the younger *Cato*, that after the Battle of *Pharsalia*, being entered into a melancholick Disposition, at the ill Posture of the publick Affairs he took his Repose always fitting, assuming a strict and severe Course of Life. It was also their Custom to kiss the Hands of great Persons; the more and better to honour and caress them: And meeting with their Equals, they always kiss'd in Salutation, as do the *Venetians*.

* *Mart. lib. 2. Epig. 62.*

§ *Id. lib. 6. Epi. 93.*

† *Æneid. l. 2.*

*Gratatusque darem cum dulcibus oscula verbis **

And kindest Words I would with Kisses mix.

In petitioning, or saluting any great Man, they us'd to lay their Hands upon his Knees. *Fascicles*, the Philosopher and Brother of *Crates*, instead of laying his Hand upon the Knee, laid it upon his private Parts, and being rudely repuls'd by him to whom he made that indecent Compliment; What, said he, is not that Part your own as well as the other? They us'd to eat their Fruits as we do after Dinner. They wiped their Arses (let the Ladies, if they please, mince it smaller) with a Sponge; which is the Reason that *Spongia* is a smutty Word in *Latin*; which Sponge was also fastened to the End of a Stick, as appears by the Story of him, who, as he was led along to be thrown to the wild Beasts in the Sight of the People, asking Leave to do his Business, and having no other Ways to dispatch himself, forc'd the Sponge and Stick down his own Throat and choaked himself. They us'd to terge after Coition with perfum'd Wool.

At tibi nil faciam, sed lota mentula lana †.

They used in the Streets of *Rome* to place certain Vessels and little Tubs for Passengers to piss in.

*Pueri sæpe lacum propter, se ac dolia curta,
Somno de vinceti credunt, extollere vestem §.*

Boys dream of pissing in the Tub and Lake,
And find themselves bepiss when they awake.

They used to collation betwixt Meals, and had in Summer Cellars of Snow to cool their Wine; and some there were

* *Ovid de pont. lib. 4. Eleg. 9.* † *Mart. lib. 11. Epist. 50.*
§ *Lucret. l. 4.*

who

who made Use of Snow in Winter, not thinking their Wine cool enough at that cold Season of the Year. The Men of Quality had their Cup-bearers and Carvers, and their Buffoons to make them Sport: They had their Meat served up in Winter upon a Sort of Chafing-Dishes; which were set upon the Table, and had portable Kitchens (of which I myself have seen some) wherein all their Service was carried after them.

*Has vobis epulas habete lauti.
Nos offendimus ambulante Cæna **

Those Feasts, by you indeed, are highly priz'd,
At walking Suppers we are scandaliz'd.

In Summer they had a Contrivance to bring fresh and clear Rills through their lower Rooms, wherein were great Store of living Fish, which the Guests took out with their own Hands to bedress'd; every Man according to his own Liking. Fish has ever had this Pre-eminence, and keeps it still, that the great ones all pretend to be Cooks in their Favour; and indeed, the Taste is more delicate than that of Flesh, at least to me. But in all Sorts of Magnificence, Debauchery, and voluptuous Inventions of Effeminacy and Expence, we do, in Truth, all we can to parallel them; for our Wills are as corrupt as theirs: But we want Power to reach them; and our Force is more able to reach them in their vicious, than in their virtuous Qualities; for both the one and the other proceed from a Vigour of Soul, which was without Comparison greater in them than in us: And Souls by how much the weaker they are, by so much have they less Power to do, very well, or very ill: The highest Place of Honour amongst them was the Middle; the Name going before, and that following after, either in Writing or Speaking, had no Signification of Grandeur, as is evident by their Writings; they will sooner say *Oppius* and *Cæsar*, than *Cæsar* and *Oppius*, and me and thee, than thee and me, which is the Reason that made me formerly

* *Mart. l. 7. Epig. 47.*

take Notice in the Life of *Flaminius*, in our *French Plutarch*, of one Passage, where it seems as if the Author speaking of the Jealousy of Honour, betwixt the *Ætolians* and *Romans*, about the winning of a Battle they had with their joint Forces obtain'd, made it of some Importance, that in the *Greek Songs* they had put the *Ætolians* before the *Romans*: If there be no Amphibology, or double Dealing in the Words of the *French Translation*; an Instance of which I present you out of *Plutarch*, though *Monseur de Montaigne* did not think it worth repeating.

*Here, friendly Passenger, we buried lye,
Without Friends, Tears, or Fun'ral Obsequy,
Full thirty thousand Men in Battle slain
By the Ætolians, on Thessalian Plain;
And Latines, whom Flaminius led on,
And brought from Italy to Macedon.
With his fierce Valour, when faint Philip fled
With greater Speed to save his tim'rous Head,
Than Hart or Hind, when Dogs upon the Trace,
Through Woods pursue them with a full Cry Chace*.*

The Ladies in their Baths made no Scruple of admitting Men amongst them, and moreover made Use of their Serving Men to rub and anoint them:

*Inguina succinctus nigra tibi servus alluta
Stat, quoties calidis nuda foveris aquis §.*

They all powdered themselves with a certain Powder, to moderate their Sweats. The ancient *Gauls*, says *Sidonius Apollinaris*, wore their Hair long before, and the hinder Part of the Head cut short, a Fashion that begins to be reviv'd in this vicious and effeminate Age. The *Romans*

* *Plut. vit. Tit. Quint. Flaminius.* § *Mart. lib. Epig. 34.*
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used to pay the Watermen their Fare at their first stepping into the Boat, which we never do 'till after landing.

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

Whilst the Fare's paying, and the Mule is ty'd,
A whole Hour's Time, at least, away doth slide.

The Women used to lye on that Side the Bed next the Wall;
And for that Reason they call'd *Cæsar*, *Spondam Regis Nicomedis*, one of the greatest Blemishes in his Life, and that gave Occasion to his Soldiers to sing to his Face,

Gallias Cæsar subegit, Nicomedes Cæsarem †.

*Cæsar the Gauls subdu'd, 'tis true,
But Nicomedes Cæsar did subdue.*

*Ecce Cæsar nunc triumphat, qui subegit Gallias,
Nicomedes non triumphat, qui subegit Cæsarem ‡.*

See *Cæsar* triumphs now for conqu'ring *Gaul*,
For conqu'ring him, King *Nicomedes* at all
No Triumph has.

They took Breath in their Drinking, and dash'd their Wine,

*Quis puer ociosus
Restinguet ardentis falerni
Pocula prætereunte lymphæ ||?*

What pretty Boy's at Leisure to come in,
And cool the Heat of the *Falernian Wine*,
With the clear gliding Stream?

* *Hor. lib. 1. Sat. 5.* † *Suet. in vita Cæs.* ‡ *Id. eod.*
not quoted by *Montaigne.* || *Hor. lib. 7. Ode. 11.*
And

Of Democritus and Heraclitus. 363

And the roguish Looks and Gestures of our Lacqueys was also in Use amongst them.

O Jane, à tergo quem nulla ciconia pinxit,
Nec manus auriculus imitata est mobilis albas,
Nec linguæ quantum sitiet canis Apula tantum*.

O Janus, who both Ways a Spy dost wear,
So that no Scoffer, though behind thee, dare
Make a Stork's-Bill, Ass-Ears, or far more long,
Than thirsty panting Curs shoot out their Tongue.

The *Argian* and *Roman* Ladies always mourn'd in White, as ours did formerly here; and should do still, were I to govern in this Point. But there are whole Books of this Argument.



C H A P. L.

Of Democritus and Heraclitus.

THE Judgment is an Utensil proper for all Subjects, and will have an Oar in every Thing; which is the Reason, that in these Essays I take Hold of all Occasions; where, though it happen to be a Subject I do not very well understand, I try however, sounding it at a Distance, and finding it too deep for my Stature, I keep me on the firm Shore: And this Knowledge that a Man can proceed no farther, is one Effect of it's Virtue, even in the most inconsidering sort of Men. One while in an idle and frivolous Subject, I try to find out Matter whereof to compose a Body, and then to prop and support it. Another while I employ it in a noble Subject, one that has been tost and tumbled by a thousand Hands, wherein a Man can

* *Persius, Sat. 1.*