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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. 50. Of Democritus and Heraclitus.

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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 stiet 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.*

hardly possibly introduce any Thing of his own, the Way being so beaten on every Side, that he must of Necessity walk in the Steps of another. In such a Case, 'tis the Work of the Judgment to take the Way that seems best, and of a thousand Paths, to determine that this or that was the best chosen. I leave the Choice of my Arguments to Fortune, and take what she first presents me with; they are all alike to me, I never design to go through any of them; for I never see all of any Thing: Neither do they who so largely promise to shew it to others. Of a hundred Members and Faces that every Thing has, I take one, one while to look it over only, another while to ripple up the Skin, and sometimes to pinch it to the Bones: I give a Stab, not so wide but as deep as I can; and am for the most Part tempted to take it in Hand by some absolute Gracefulness I discover in it. Did I know myself less, I might, perhaps, venture to handle something or other to the Bottom, and to be deceiv'd by my own Inability; but sprinkling here one Word, and there another, Patterns cut from several Pieces and scatter'd without Design, and without engaging myself too far, I am not responsible for them, or oblig'd to keep close to my Subject, without varying at my own Liberty and Pleasure, and giving up myself to Doubt and Incertainty, and to my own governing Method, Ignorance. All Motions discover us. The very same Soul of *Cæsar*, that made itself so conspicuous in marshalling and commanding the Battle of *Pharsalia*, was also seen as solicitous and busy in the softer Affairs of Love. A Man makes a Judgment of a Horse, not only by seeing his Menage in his Airs, but by his very Walk; nay, and by seeing him stand in the Stable. Amongst the Functions of the Soul, there are some of a lower and meaner Form, and he that does not see her in those inferior Offices, as well as those of nobler Note, never fully discover her; and peradventure, she is best discover'd where she moves her own natural Pace. The Winds of Passion take most Hold of her in her highest Flights; and the rather, by reason that she wholly applies herself to, and exercises her whole Virtue upon every particular Subject, and never handles more than one Thing at a Time, and that not according to it, but according to herself. Things in respect to themselves, have, peradventure, their Weight,
Measures

Measures and Conditions; but when we once take them into us, the Soul forms them as she pleases. Death is terrible to *Cicero*, coveted by *Cato*, and indifferent to *Socrates*. Health, Conscience, Authority, Knowledge, Riches, Beauty, and their Contraries, do all strip themselves at their entering into us, and receive a new Robe, and of another Fashion, from every distinct Soul, and of what Colour, Brown, Bright, Green, Dark; and Quality, Sharp, Sweet, Deep, or Superficial, as best pleases them; for they are not yet agreed upon any common Standard of Forms, Rules, or Proceedings; every one of them is a Queen in her own Dominions. Let us therefore no more excuse ourselves upon the external Qualities of Things; it belongs to us to give ourselves an Account of them. Our Good or Ill has no other Dependance but on ourselves. 'Tis there that our Offerings and our Vows are due, and not to Fortune: She has no Power over our Manners; on the contrary, they draw and make her follow in their Train, and cast her in their own Mould. Why should not I censure *Alexander*, roaring and drinking at the prodigious Rate he sometimes used to do? Or, if he plaid at Chess, what String of his Soul was not touched by this idle and childish Game? I hate and avoid it, because it is not Play enough, that it is too grave and serious a Diversion, and I am ashamed to lay out as much Thought and Study upon that, as would serve to much better Uses. He did not more pump his Brains about his glorious Expedition into the *Indies*; and another whom I will not name, took no more Pains to unravel a Passage, upon which depends the Safety of all Mankind. To what a Degree then does this ridiculous Diversion molest the Soul, when all her Faculties shall be summon'd together upon this trivial Account? And how fair an Opportunity she herein gives every one to know, and to make a right Judgment of himself? I do not more thoroughly sift myself in any other Posture than this. What Passion are we exempted from in this insignificant Game? Anger, Spite, Malice, Impatience, and a vehement Desire of getting the better in a Concern, wherein it were more excusable, to be ambitious of being overcome: For to be eminent, and to excel above the common Rate in frivolous Things, is nothing graceful in a Man of Quality and Honour. What I say in this Example,

may be said in all others. Every Particle, every Employment of Man, does exalt or accuse him, equally with any other. *Democritus* and *Heraclitus* were two Philosophers, the first of whom finding human Condition ridiculous and vain, never appear'd abroad but with a jeering and laughing Countenance: Whereas *Heraclitus* commiserating that Condition of ours, appear'd always with a sorrowful Look, and Tears in his Eyes.

Alter

*Ridebat quoties à limine moverat unum
Protuleratque pedem, flebat contrarius alter*.*

One always, when he o'er his Threshold stept,
Laugh'd at the World, the other always wept.

I am clearly for the first Humour; not because it is more pleasant to laugh than to weep, but because it is ruder, and expresses more Contempt than the other; because I think we can never be sufficiently despised to our Desert. Compassion and Bewailing seem to employ some Esteem of, and Value for the Thing bemoan'd: Whereas the Things we laugh at, are by that expressed to be of no Moment or Repute. I do not think that we are so unhappy as we are vain, or have in us so much Malice as Folly; we are not so full of Mischief as Inanity; nor so miserable as we are vile and mean. And therefore *Diogenes*, who past away his Time in rolling himself in his Tub, and made nothing of the great *Alexander*, esteeming us no better than Flies, or Bladders puffed up with Wind, was a sharper and more penetrating, and consequently, in my Opinion, a juster Judge, than *Timon*, surnam'd the *Man-hater*; for what a Man hates, he lays to Heart: This last was an Enemy to all Mankind, did positively desire our Ruin, and avoided our Conversation as dangerous, proceeding from wicked and deprav'd Natures; The other valu'd us so little, that we could neither trouble nor infect him by our Contagion; and left us to herd with one another, not out of Fear, but Contempt

* *Juven. Sat. 10.*

of our Society: Concluding us as incapable of doing Good as Ill. Of the same Strain was *Statilius's* Answer, when *Brutus* courted him into the Conspiracy against *Cæsar*: He was satisfy'd that the Enterprize was just; but he did not think Mankind so considerable, as to deserve a wise Man's Concern: According to the Doctrine of *Hegesias*; who said, That a wise Man ought to do nothing but for himself, forasmuch as he only was worthy of it: And to the Saying of *Theodorus*, That it was not reasonable a wise Man should hazard himself for his Country, and endanger Wisdom for a Company of Fools. Our Condition is as ridiculous as risible.



CHAP. LI.

Of the Vanity of Words.

A Rhetorician of Times past, said, That to make little Things appear great, was his Profession. This also a Shoemaker can do; he can make a great Shoe for a little Foot: They would in *Sparta* have sent such a Fellow to be whipp'd, for making Profession of a lying and deceitful Art: And I fancy, that *Archidamus*, who was King of that Country, was a little surpriz'd at the Answer of *Thucydides*, when enquiring of him, which was the better Wrestler, *Pericles* or he; he reply'd, That it was hard to affirm; for when I have thrown him, said he, he always persuades the Spectators that he had no Fall, and carries away the Prize. They who paint, pounce and plaister up the Ruins of Women, filling up their Wrinkles and Deformities, are less to blame; because it is no great Matter, whether we see them in their natural Complexions or not. Whereas these make it their Business to deceive, not our Sight only but our Judgments, and to adulterate and corrupt the very Essence of Things. The Republicks that have maintain'd themselves in a regular and well-modell'd Government such as those of *Lacedæmon* and *Crete*, had Orators in no very great Esteem. *Aristo* did wisely define *Rhetorick* to be a