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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. 51. Of the Vanity of Words.

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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

Science to persuade the People; *Socrates* and *Plato*, an Art to flatter and deceive: And those who deny it in the general Description, verify it throughout in their Precepts. The *Mahometans* will not suffer their Children to be instructed in it, as being useles; and the *Athenians* perceiving of how pernicious Consequence the Practice of it was, it being in their City of universal Esteem, order'd the principal Part, which is to move Affections, with their Exordiums and Perorations, to be taken away. 'Tis an Engine invented to manage and govern a disorderly and tumultuous Rabble, and is never made Use of but, like Physick to the Sick, in the Paroxisms of a discomposed State. In those States, where the Vulgar or the Ignorant, or both together, have been all powerful, and able to give Law, as in *Athens*, *Rhodes* and *Rome*, and where the Publick Affairs have been in a continual Tempest of Commotion, to such Places have the Orators always repair'd. And, in Truth, we find few Persons in those Republicks, who have push'd their Fortunes to any great Degree of Eminence, without the Assistance of Elocution: *Pompey*, *Cæsar*, *Crassus*, *Lucullus*, *Lentulus* and *Metellus*, have thence taken their chiefest Spring to mount to that Degree of Authority, to which they did at last arrive; making it of greater Use to them than Arms, contrary to the Opinion of better Times. For *L. Volumnius* speaking publickly in Favour of the Election of *Q. Fabius* and *Pub. Decius*, to the Consular Dignity: These are Men, said he, born for War, and great in Execution, in the Combat of the Tongue altogether to seek; Spirits truly consular. The Subtle, Eloquent and Learned, are only good for the City, to make Prætors of, to administer Justice. Eloquence flourish'd most at *Rome*, when the publick Affairs were in the worst Condition, and the Republick most disquieted with intestine Commotions, as a frank and untill'd Soil bears the worst Weeds. By which it should seem, that a Monarchical Government has less Need of it than any other: For the Brutality and Facility, natural to the common People, which render them subject to be turn'd and twin'd, and led by the Ears by this charming Harmony of Words, without weighing or considering the Truth and Reality of Things by the Force of Reason: This Facility, I say, is not easily found in a single Person, and

and it is also more easy, by good Education and Advice, to secure him from the Impression of this Poison. There never was any famous Orator known to come out of *Persia* or *Macedon*.

I have entered into this Discourse upon the Occasion of an *Italian* I lately received into my Service, who was Clerk of the Kitchen to the late Cardinal *Caraffa* till his Death. I put this Fellow upon an Account of his Office: Where he fell to discourse of this Palate-Science, with such a settled Countenance, and magisterial Gravity, as if he had been handling some profound Point of Divinity. He made a learned Distinction of the several Sorts of Appetites, of that which a Man has before he begins to eat, and of those after the second and third Service: The Means simply to satisfy the first, and then to raise and quicken the other two: The ordering of the Sauces, first in general, and then proceeded to the Qualities of the Ingredients, and their Effects: The Differences of Sallets, according to their Seasons, which of them ought to be served up hot, and which cold: The Manner of their Garnishment and Decoration, to render them yet more acceptable to the Eye: After which he entered upon the Order of the whole Service, full of weighty and important Considerations.

— *Nec minimo sane discrimine refert
Quo gestu lepores, & quo gallina secetur* *.

Nor with less Criticism did observe
How we a Hare, and how a Hen should carve.

And all this set out with lofty and magnifick Words; the very same we make Use of, when we discourse of the Government of an Empire. Which learned Lecture of my Man, brought this of *Terence* into my Memory.

*Hoc falsum est, hoc adustum est, hoc lautum est parum,
Illud rectè iterum sic memento, sedulo
Moneo quæ possum pro mea sapientia.
Postremo tanquam in speculum, in patinas, Demea,
Inspicere jubeo, & moneo quid factò usus sit* †.

* *Juven. Sat. 5.*

† *Ter. Adelp. Act 3. Sc. 5.*
This

This is too salt, this burnt, this is too plain,
 That's well, remember to do so again.
 Thus do I still advise to have Things fit,
 According to the Talent of my Wit.
 And then (my *Demea*) I command my Cook,
 That into ev'ry Dish he pry and look,
 As if it were a Mirror, and go on
 To order all Things as they should be done.

And yet even the *Greeks* themselves did very much admire, and highly applaud the Order and Disposition that *Paulus Æmilius* observed in the Feast he made for them at his Return from *Macedon*: But I do not here speak of Effects, I speak of Words only. I do not know whether it may have the same Operation upon other Men that it has upon me: But when I hear our Architects thunder out their bombast Words of *Pilasters*, *Architraves*, and *Cornices*, of the *Corinthian* and *Dorick* Orders, and such like Stuff, my Imagination is presently possessed with the Palace of *Apollidonius* in *Amadis de Gaul*; when, after all, I find them but the poultry Pieces of my own Kitchen-Door. And to hear Men talk of *Metonymies*, *Metaphors*, and *Allegories*, and other Grammar Words, would not a Man think they signify'd some rare and exotick Form of Speaking? And this other is a Gullery of the same Stamp, to call the Offices of our Kingdom by the lofty Titles of the *Romans*, though they have no Similitude of Function, Authority, or Power. And this also, which I doubt will one Day turn to the Reproach of our present polite Age, unworthily and indifferently to confer upon any we think fit, the most glorious Surnames with which Antiquity honoured but one or two Persons in several Ages. *Plato* carried away the Surname of Divine by so universal a Consent, that never any one repined at it, or attempted to take it from him: And yet the *Italians*, who pretend, and with good Reason, to more sprightly Wits and sounder Discourses than the other Nations of their Time, have lately honoured *Aretine* with the same Title; in whose Writings, except it be a tumid Phrase, set out with some smart Periods, ingenious indeed, but far fetch'd and fantastick, and the Eloquence (be it what it will) I see nothing in him above
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the ordinary Writers of his Time, so far is he from approaching the ancient Divinity. And we make nothing of giving the Sirname of *Great* to Princes that have nothing in them above a popular Grandeur.



C H A P. LII.

Of the Parsimony of the Ancients.

A *Tullius Regulus*, General of the Roman Army in *Africk*, in the Height of all his Glory and Victories over the *Carthaginians*, writ to the Republick to acquaint them, that a certain Peasant whom he had left in Trust with his whole Estate, which was in all but seven Acres of Land, was run away with all his Instruments of Husbandry, entreating therefore, that they would please to call him Home, that he might take Order in his own Affairs, lest his Wife and Children should suffer by this Disaster: Whereupon the Senate appointed another to manage his Business, caused his Losses to be made good, and ordered his Family to be maintained at the publick Expence. The elder *Cato* returning Consul from *Spain*, sold his War-Horse, to save the Money it would have cost in bringing him back by Sea into *Italy*; and being Governor of *Sardinia*, made all his Visits on Foot, without other Attendants, than one Officer of the Republick, to hold up the Train of his Gown and carry a Censer for Sacrifices; and, for the most Part, carried his Mail himself. He bragged, that he had never worn a Gown that cost above ten Crowns, nor had ever sent above Ten-pence to the Market for one Day's Provision; and that as to his Country Houses, he had not one that was rough cast on the Out-side. *Scipio Emilianus*, after two Triumphs, and two Consulships, went an Embassy with no more than seven Servants in his Train. 'Tis said, that *Homer* had never more than one, *Plato* three, and *Zeno*, Founder of the Sect of *Stoicks*, none at all. *Tiberius Gracchus* was allowed but Five-pence Half-