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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**

**London, 1743**

Chap. 54. Of vain Subtilties.

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## C H A P. LIV.

*Of vain Subtilties.*

**T**Here are a Sort of little Knacks, and frivolous Subtilties, from which Men sometimes expect to derive Reputation and Applause: As the Poets, who compose whole Poems, with every Line beginning with the same Letter: We see the Shapes of Eggs, Globes, Wings and Hatchets cut out by the ancient *Greeks*, by the Measure of their Verses, making them longer or shorter, to represent such or such a Figure. Much in this Manner did he spend his Time, who made it his Business to compute into how many several Orders the Letters of the Alphabet might be transposed, and found out that incredible Number mention'd in *Plutarch*. I am mightily pleas'd with the Humour of the Gentleman, who, having a Man brought before him, that had learn'd to throw a Grain of Millet with such Dexterity as never to miss the Eye of a Needle; and being afterwards desired to give something for the Reward of so rare a Performance, he pleasantly, and in my Opinion ingeniously, ordered a certain Number of Bushels of the same Grain to be delivered to him, that he might not want where-withal to exercise so famous an Art. 'Tis a strong Evidence of a weak Judgment, when Men approve of Things for their being rare and new, or yet for the Difficulty; where Virtue and Usefulness are not conjoined to recommend them. I come just now from playing with my own Family, at who could find out the most Things, that had their principal Force in their two Extremities; as, *Sire*, which is a Title given to the greatest Person in the Nation, the King, and also to the Vulgar, as Pedlars and Mechanicks, but never to any Degree of Men between. The Women of great Quality are all called *Madam*, inferior Gentlewomen, *Mademoiselle*, and the meanest Sort of Women, *Madam*, as the first. The Canopy of State over

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Tables

Tables are not permitted, but in the Palaces of Princes and Taverns. *Democritus* said, that Gods and Beasts had a more exact and perfect Sense than Men, who are of a middle Form. The *Romans* wore the same Habit at Funerals and Feasts; and it is most certain, that an extreme Fear, and an extreme Ardour of Courage, do equally trouble and lax the Belly. The Nickname of Trembling with which they surnamed *Sancho XII*, King of *Navarre*, sufficiently informeth, that Valour will cause a Trembling in the Limbs, as well as Fear. The Friends of that King, or of some other Person, who upon the like Occasion was wont to be in the same Disorder, tried to compose him, by representing the Danger less, he was going to engage himself in: You understand me ill, said he, for could my Flesh know the Danger my Courage will presently carry it into, it would sink down to the Ground. The Faintness that surprizes us from Frigidity, or dislike in the Exercises of *Venus*, are also occasioned by a too violent Desire, and an immoderate Heat. Extreme Coldness, and extreme Heat, boil and roast. *Aristotle* says, that Sows of Lead will melt, and run with Cold, in the Extremity of Winter, as well as with a vehement Heat. Desire and Satiety fill all the Gradations above and below Pleasure with Grief. Brutality and Wisdom meet in the same Center of Sentiment and Resolution, in the suffering of human Accidents; the Wise controul and triumph over Ill; the others know it not: These last are, as a Man may say, on this Side of Accidents, the other are beyond them; who after having well weighed and considered their Qualities, measured and judged them what they are, by Virtue of a vigorous Soul leap out of their Reach. They disdain and trample them under Foot, having a solid and well fortified Soul, against which the Darts of Fortune coming to strike they must of Necessity rebound and blunt themselves, meeting with a Body upon which they can fix no Impression; the ordinary and middle Conditions of Men are lodged betwixt these two Extremes, consisting of such, who perceive Evils, feel them, and are not able to support them. Infancy and Decrepitude meet in the Imbecillity of the Brain: Avarice and Profusion in the same Thirst and Desire of getting. A Man may say, with some Colour of Truth, that there

is an *Abecedarian* Ignorance that precedes Knowledge; and a *Doctoral* Ignorance that comes after it; an Ignorance which Knowledge creates and begets, at the same time that she dispatches and destroys the first. Of mean Understandings, little inquisitive, and little instructed, are made good Christians, who by Reverence and Obedience implicitly believe, and are constant in their Belief. In the moderate Understandings, and the middle sort of Capacities, the Error of Opinions is begot, and they have some Colour of Reason on their Side, to impute our walking on in the old beaten Path to Simplicity, and Brutishness, I mean in us who have not informed ourselves by Study. The higher and nobler Souls, more solid and clear sighted, make up another sort of true Believers; who by a long and religious Investigation of Truth, have obtained a clearer and more penetrating Light into the Scriptures, and have discovered the Mysterious and Divine Secret of our Ecclesiastical Polity. And yet we see some, who, by this middle Step are arrived to that supreme Degree with marvellous Fruit and Confirmation; as to the utmost Limit of Christian Intelligence, and enjoying their Victory with great spiritual Consolation, humble Acknowledgment of the Divine Favour, exemplary Reformation of Manners, and singular Modesty. I do not intend with these to rank some others, who to clear themselves from all Suspicion of their former Errors, and to satisfy us, that they are sound and firm to us, render themselves extreme indiscreet and unjust, in the carrying on our Cause, and by that Means blemish it with infinite Reproaches of Violence and Oppression. The simple Peasants are good People, and so are the Philosophers: Men of strong and clear Reason, and whose Souls are enrich'd with an ample Instruction of profitable Sciences. The *Mongrels* who have disdain'd the first Form of the Ignorance of Letters, and have not been able to attain the other, (sitting betwixt two Stools, as I and a great many more of us do,) are dangerous, foolish, and importunate; these are they that trouble the World. And therefore it is, that I, for my own Part, retreat as much as I can towards my first and natural Station, from whence I so vainly attempted to advance. The vulgar and purely natural Poesy, has in it certain Proprieties and  
Graces,

Graces, by which she may come into some Comparison with the greatest Beauty of a Poesy perfected by Art: As is evident in our *Gascon* Villanels and Songs, that are brought us from Nations that have no Knowledge of any Manner of Science, nor so much as the Use of Writing. The indifferent and middle Sort of Poesy betwixt these two, is despised, of no Value, Honour, or Esteem. But seeing that the Ice being once broke, and a Path laid open to the Fancy, I have found, as it commonly falls out, that what we make Choice of for a rare and difficult Subject, proves to be nothing so, and that after the Invention is once warm, it finds out an infinite Number of parallel Examples. I shall only add this one; that were these Essays of mine considerable enough to deserve a Censure, it might then I think fall out, that they would not much take with common and vulgar Capacities, nor be very acceptable to the singular and excellent Sort of Men; for the first would not understand them enough, and the last too much, and so they might hover in the middle Region.



## C H A P. LV.

## Of Smells.

**I**T has been reported of others, as well as of *Alexander the Great*, that their Sweat exhaled an odoriferous Smell, occasioned by some very uncommon and extraordinary Constitution, of which *Plutarch* and others have been inquisitive into the Cause. But the ordinary Constitution of human Bodies is quite otherwise, and their best and chiefest Excellency is to be exempt from Smells: Nay, the Sweetness even of the purest Breaths has nothing in it of greater Perfection, than to be without any offensive Smell, like those of healthful Children; which made *Plutarch* say,

Vol. I.

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Mulier