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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. 26. Of Thumbs.

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for I have naturally an Aversion to those Monsters; and if I have a Mind to laugh at a Fool, I need not seek him far, I can laugh at myself. This Fool has suddenly lost her Sight. I tell you a strange, but a very true Thing; she is not sensible that she is blind, but eternally importunes her Keeper to take her abroad, because she says the House is dark. I pray believe, that what we laugh at in her happens to every one of us: No one knows himself to be avaricious. Besides, the Blind call for a Guide, but we stray of our own accord. I am not ambitious, we say, but a Man cannot live otherwise at Rome; I am not wastful, but the City requires a great Expence; 'tis not my Fault if I am choleric, and if I have not yet established any certain Course of Life, 'tis the Fault of Youth. Let us not seek our Disease out of ourselves, 'tis in us, and planted in our Bowels. And even this, that we do not perceive ourselves to be sick, renders us more hard to be cur'd. If we do not betimes begin to dress ourselves, when shall we have done with so many Wounds and Evils wherewith we abound? And yet, we have a most sweet and charming Medicine of Philosophy; for all the rest are sensible of no Pleasure 'till after the Cure: This pleases and heals at once. This is what Seneca says, he has carry'd me from my Subject, but there is Advantage in the Change.



C H A P. XXVI.

Of Thumbs.

TAcitus reports, that amongst certain Barbarian Kings their Manner was, when they would make a firm Obligation, to join their Hand close to one another, and twist their Thumbs, and when by Force of Straining the Blood it appear'd in the Ends, they lightly prick'd them with some sharp Instrument, and mutually suck'd them. Physicians say, *That the Thumbs are the Master-finger of the Hand, and that their Latin Etymology is derived from Pollere.* The Greeks call'd them *ἀνίσχιστος*, as who should say, *another Hand.* And it seems, that the Latins also sometimes take in this Sense for the whole Hand;

Sed

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*Sed nec vocibus excitata blandis,
Molli pollice nec rogata surgit*.*

It was at Rome a Signification of Favour to depreſs and clap in the Thumbs ;

Fautor utroque tuum laudabit pollice ludum †.

Thy Patron, when thou mak'ſt thy Sport,
Will with both Thumbs applaud thee for't.

and of Diſfavour to elevate and thruſt them outward :

———— *converſo pollice vulgi
Quemlibet occidunt populariter ‡.*

The Vulgar with reverted Thumbs,
Kill each one that before them comes.

The Romans exempted from War all ſuch as were maim'd in the Thumbs, as having no more ſufficient Strength to hold their Arms. *Augustus* confiscated the Eſtate of a Roman Knight, who had maliciously cut off the Thumbs of two young Children he had, to excuſe them from going into the Armies: And before him, the Senate, in the Time of the Italick War, had condemn'd *Caius Valienus* to perpetual Imprisonment, and confiscated all his Goods, for having purpoſely cut off the Thumb of his Left-hand, to exempt himſelf from that Expedition. Some one, I have forgot who, having won a Naval Battle, cut off the Thumbs of all his vanquiſh'd Enemies, to render them incapable of Fighting, and of handling the Oar. The Athenians alſo cauſed the Thumbs of thoſe of *Ægina* to be cut off, to deprive them of the Preference in the Art of Navigation. And in *Lacedæmonia*, Pedagogues chaſtiz'd their Scholars by biting their Thumbs.



C H A P. XXVII.

Cowardize the Mother of Cruelty.

I Have often heard it ſaid, that Cowardize is the Mother of Cruelty: And I have found by Experience, that that malicious and inhuman Animofity and Fierceneſs is

† *Mart. l. 12. Epig. 99.*

† *Hor. l. 1. Ep. 18.*

‡ *Juven. Sat. 3.*