

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 • Chapter 49

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On Ancient Customs

I should willingly pardon our people for admitting no other pattern or rule of perfection than their own peculiar manners and customs; for 'tis 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 Laelius, that they look upon their countenance and behavior as barbarous, seeing they are neither clothed nor fashioned according to our mode. But I find fault with their singular indiscretion in suffering themselves to be so blinded and imposed upon by the authority of the present usage 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 busk of their doublets up as high as their breasts, they stiffly maintained that they were in their proper place; some years after it was slipped down betwixt 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 resolution and so universal consent, that a man would think there was a certain kind of madness crept in among 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 tailors in the world cannot furnish out new whim-whams enow to feed our vanity withal, there will often be a necessity that the despised forms must again come in vogue, these immediately after fall into the same contempt; and that the same judgment must, in the space of fifteen or twenty years, take up half-a-dozen not only divers but contrary opinions, with an incredible lightness and inconstancy; there is not any of us so discreet, who suffers not himself to be gulled with this contradiction, and both in external and internal sight to be insensibly blinded.

I wish to muster up here some old customs that I have in memory, some of them the same with ours, the others different, to the end that, bearing in mind this continual variation of human things, we may have our judgment more clearly and firmly settled.

The thing in use among us of fighting with rapier and cloak was in practice among the Romans also: *Sinistras sagis involvunt, gladiosque dstringunt* says Caesar; and he observes a vicious custom of our nation, that continues yet among 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 affront and just cause of quarrel if they refuse to do it.

At the Baths, 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 bathed their arms and legs; but afterwards, and by a custom that has continued for many ages in most nations of the world, they bathed stark naked in mixed and perfumed water, looking upon it as a great simplicity to bathe in mere water. The most delicate and affected perfumed themselves all over three or four times a day. They often caused their hair to be pinched 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 veilis,

though they had ointments proper for that purpose:

Psilotro nitet, aut acids latet oblita creta.

They delighted to lie soft, and alleged it as a great testimony of hardness to lie upon a mattress. They ate lying upon beds, much after the manner of the Turks in this age,

Inde thoro pater Aeneas sic orsus ab alto.

And 'tis said of the younger Cato, that after the battle of Pharsalia, being entered into a melancholy disposition at the ill posture of the public affairs, he took his repasts always sitting, assuming a strict and austere course of life. It was also their custom to kiss the hands of great persons; the more to honor and caress them. And meeting with friends, they always kissed in salutation, as do the Venetians:

Gratatusque darem cum dulcibus oscula verbis.

In petitioning or saluting any great man, they used to lay their hands upon his knees. Pasicles the philosopher, brother of Crates, instead of laying his hand upon the knee laid it upon the private parts, and being roughly repulsed by him to whom he made that indecent compliment: "What," said he, "is not that part your own as well as the other?"

They used to eat fruit, as we do, after dinner. They wiped their fundamentals (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 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 way to despatch himself, forced the sponge and stick down his throat and choked himself. They used to wipe, after coition, with perfumed wool:

They wrapped their cloaks upon the left arm, and drew their swords • CAES., BCIV., 1.75

You pluck the hairs out of your breast, your arms, and thighs. • MART., 2.62.1

She shines with unguents, or with chalk dissolved in vinegar. • MART., 6.93.9

Thus Father Aeneas, from his high bed of state, spoke. • VERG., AEN., 2.2

And kindest words I would mingle with kisses. • OV., PONT., 4.9.13

*At tibi nil faciam; Sed lota mentula lana.*¹

They had in the streets of Rome vessels and little tubs for passengers to urinate in,

*Puri saepe lacum propter se, ac dolia curta.
Somno devincti, credunt extollere vestem.*

They had collation betwixt meals, and had in summer cellars of snow to cool their wine; and some there were who made use of snow in winter, not thinking their wine cool enough, even at that cold season of the year. The men of quality had their cupbearers and carvers, and their buffoons to make them sport. They had their meat served up in winter upon 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 about with them:

*Has vobis epulas habete, lauti
Nos offendimur ambulante caena.*

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 be dressed every man according to his own liking. Fish has ever had this pre-eminence, and keeps it still, that the grantees, as to them, all pretend to be cooks; and indeed the taste is more delicate than that of flesh, at least to my fancy. But in all sorts of magnificence, debauchery, and voluptuous inventions of effeminacy and expense, we do, in truth, all we can to parallel them; for our wills are as corrupt as theirs: but we want ability to equal them. Our force is no more able to reach them in their vicious, than in their virtuous, qualities, for both the one and the other proceeded from a vigor 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 either very well or very ill.

The highest place of honor among them was the middle. The name going before, or following after, either in writing or speaking, had no signification of grandeur, as is evident by their writings; they will as soon say Oppius and Caesar, as Caesar and Oppius; and me and thee, as thee and me. This is the reason that made me formerly take notice in the life of Flaminus, in our French Plutarch, of one passage, where it seems as if the author, speaking of the jealousy of honor betwixt the Aetolians and Romans, about the winning of a battle they had with their joined forces obtained, made it of some importance, that in the Greek songs they had put the Aetolians before the Romans: if there be no amphibology in the words of the French translation.

The ladies, in their baths, made no scruple of admitting men among them, and moreover made use of their serving-men to rub and anoint them,

*Inguina succinctus nigri tibi servus aluta
Stat, quoties calidis nuda foveris aquis.*

I shall get you nothing but a cock rag. • MART., 11.58.11

The little boys in their sleep often think they are near the public urinal, and raise their coats to make use of it. • LUCR., 4.1026

Do you, if you please, esteem these feasts: we do not like the ambulatory suppers. • MART., 7.48.4

A slave—his middle girded with a black apron—stands before you, when, naked, you take a hot bath. •

They all powdered themselves with a certain powder, to moderate their sweats.

MART., 7.35.1

The ancient Gauls, says Sidonius Apollinaris, wore their hair long before and the hinder part of the head shaved, a fashion that begins to revive in this vicious and effeminate age.

The Romans used to pay the watermen their fare at their first stepping into the boat, which we never do till after landing,

*dum aes exigitur, dum mula ligatur,
Tota abit hora.*

Whilst the fare's paying, and the mule is being harnessed, a whole hour's time is past. • HOR., SAT., 1.5.13

The women used to lie on the side of the bed next the wall: and for that reason they called Caesar, *spondam regis Nicomedis*.

The bed of King Nicomedes. • SUET., IUL., 49

They took breath in their drinking, and watered their wine,

*quis puer ocius
Restinguet ardentis falerni
Pocula prætereunte lympa?*

What boy will quickly come and cool the heat of the Falernian wine with clear water? • HOR., CARM., 2.11.18

And the roguish looks and gestures of our lackeys were also in use among them,

*O Jane, a tergo quern nulls ciconia pinsit,
Nec manus, auriculas imitari est mobilis albas,
Nec lingua, quantum sitiati canis Appula, tantum.*

O Janus, whom no crooked fingers, simulating a stork, peck at behind your back, whom no quick hands deride behind you, by imitating the motion of the white ears of the ass, against whom no mocking tongue is thrust out, as the tongue of the thirsty Apulian dog. • PERS., 1.58

The Argian and Roman ladies mourned in white, as ours did formerly and should do still, were I to govern in this point. But there are whole books on this subject.

NOTES

- 1 In the Loeb Classical Library edition, the last two lines of Martial's epigram read: *at tibi nil faciam, sed lota mentula lana / λαικάζενcupidae dicet avaritiae*. To you, however, I shall do nothing, but with washed wool / my cock shall tell your eager avarice to go suck. (Martial, *Epigrams, Volume III: Books 11-14*. Edited and translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey. Loeb Classical Library 480. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993)

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Caes., BCiv.	Caesar, <i>Civil War</i>
Hor., Carm.	Horace, <i>Odes</i>

Hor., Sat.	Horace, <i>Satires</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Mart.	Martial, <i>Epigrams</i>
Ov., Pont.	Ovid, <i>Ex Ponto</i>
Pers.	Persius, <i>Satires</i>
Suet., Iul.	Suetonius, <i>Divus Iulius</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>