

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 46

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On Names

No matter what greens are in the mix, we call the whole a salad. In like manner, under the consideration of names, I will make a hodge-podge of divers articles.

Every nation has certain names, that, I know not why, are taken in no good sense, as with us, John, William, Benedict.

In the genealogy of princes, also, there seem to be certain names fatally affected, as the Ptolemies of Egypt, the Henries in England, the Charleses in France, the Baldwins in Flanders, and the Williams of our ancient Aquitaine, from whence, 'tis said, the name of Guyenne has its derivation; which would seem far fetched were there not as crude derivations in Plato himself.

Item, 'tis a frivolous thing in itself, but nevertheless worthy to be recorded for the strangeness of it, that is written by an eyewitness, that Henry, Duke of Normandy, son of Henry II, king of England, making a great feast in France, the concourse of nobility and gentry was so great, that being, for sport's sake, divided into troops, according to their names, in the first troop, which consisted of Williams, there were found an hundred and ten knights sitting at the table of that name, without reckoning the ordinary gentlemen and servants.

It is as pleasant to distinguish the tables by the names of the guests as it was in the Emperor Geta to distinguish the several courses of his meat by the first letters of the meats themselves; so that those that began with B were served up together, as brawn, beef, bream, bustards, beccaficos; and so of the others.

Item, there is a saying that it is a good thing to have a good name, that is to say, credit and a good repute; but besides this, it is really convenient to have a well-sounding name, such as is easy of pronunciation and easy to be remembered, by reason that kings and other great persons do by that means the more easily know and the more hardly forget us; and indeed of our own servants we more frequently call and employ those whose names are most ready upon the tongue. I myself have seen Henry II, when he

could not for his heart hit of a gentleman's name of our country of Gascony, and moreover was fain to call one of the queen's maids of honor by the general name of her race, her own family name being so difficult to pronounce or remember.

And Socrates thinks it worthy a father's care to give fine names to his children.

Item, 'tis said that the foundation of Notre Dame la Grande at Poitiers took its original from hence that a debauched young fellow formerly living in that place, having got to him a wench, and, at her first coming in, asking her name, and being answered that it was Mary, he felt himself so suddenly pierced through with the awe of religion and the reverence to that sacred name of the Blessed Virgin, that he not only immediately sent the girl away, but became a reformed man and so continued the remainder of his life; and that, in consideration of this miracle, there was erected upon the place where this young man's house stood, first a chapel dedicated to our Lady and afterwards the church that we now see standing there.

This vocal and auricular reproof wrought upon the conscience, and that right into the soul; this that follows, insinuated itself merely by the senses. Pythagoras being in company with some wild young fellows, and perceiving that, heated with the feast, they comploted to go violate an honest house, commanded the singing wench to alter her wanton airs; and by a solemn, grave, and spondaic music, gently enchanted and laid asleep their ardor.

Item, will not posterity say that our modern reformation has been wonderfully delicate and exact, in having not only combated errors and vices, and filled the world with devotion, humility, obedience, peace, and all sorts of virtue; but in having proceeded so far as to quarrel with our ancient baptismal names of Charles, Louis, Francis, to fill the world with Methuselahs, Ezeiels, and Malachis, names of a more spiritual sound? A gentleman, a neighbor of mine, a great admirer of antiquity, and who was always extolling the excellences of former times in comparison with this present age of ours, did not, among the rest, forget to dwell upon the lofty and magnificent sound of the gentleman's names of those days, Don Grumedan, Quedregan, Agesilan, which, but to hear named he conceived to denote other kind of men than Pierre, Guillot, and Michel.

Item, I am mightily pleased with Jacques Amyot for leaving, throughout a whole French oration, the Latin names entire, without varying and garbling them to give them a French cadence. It seemed a little harsh and rough at first; but already custom, by the authority of his Plutarch, has overcome that novelty. I have often wished that such as write histories in Latin would leave our names as they find them and as they are; for in making Vaudemont into Vallemontanus, and metamorphosing names to make them suit better with the Greek or Latin, we know not where we are, and with the persons of the men lose the benefit of the story.

To conclude, 'tis a scurvy custom and of very ill consequence that we have in our kingdom of France to call every one by the name of his manor or seigneury; 'tis the thing in the world that the most prejudices and

confounds families and descents. A younger brother of a good family, having a manor left him by his father, by the name of which he has been known and honored, cannot handsomely leave it; ten years after his decease it falls into the hand of a stranger, who does the same: do but judge whereabouts we shall be concerning the knowledge of these men. We need look no further for examples than our own royal family, where every partition creates a new surname, whilst, in the meantime, the original of the family is totally lost.

There is so great liberty taken in these mutations, that I have not in my time seen any one advanced by fortune to any extraordinary condition who has not presently had genealogical titles added to him, new and unknown to his father, and who has not been inoculated into some illustrious stem by good luck; and the obscurest families are the most apt for falsification. How many gentlemen have we in France who by their own account are of royal extraction? more, I think, than who will confess they are not. Was it not a pleasant passage of a friend of mine? There were, several gentlemen assembled together about the dispute of one seigneur with another; which other had, in truth, some preeminence of titles and alliances above the ordinary gentry. Upon the debate of this prerogative, every one, to make himself equal to him, alleged, this one extraction, that another; this, the near resemblance of name, that, of arms; another, an old worm-eaten patent; the very least of them was great-grandchild to some foreign king.

When they came to sit down, to dinner, my friend, instead of taking his place among them, retiring with most profound conges, entreated the company to excuse him for having hitherto lived with them at the saucy rate of a companion; but being now better informed of their quality, he would begin to pay them the respect due to their birth and grandeur, and that it would ill become him to sit down among so many princes — ending this farce with a thousand reproaches: “Let us, in God’s name, satisfy ourselves with what our fathers were contented with, with what we are. We are great enough, if we rightly understand how to maintain it. Let us not disown the fortune and condition of our ancestors, and let us lay aside these ridiculous pretenses, that can never be wanting to any one that has the impudence to allege them.”

Arms have no more security than surnames. I bear azure powdered with trefoils or, with a lion’s paw of the same armed gules in fesse. What privilege has this to continue particularly in my house? A son-in-law will transport it into another family, or some paltry purchaser will make them his first arms. There is nothing wherein there is more change and confusion.

But this consideration leads me, perforce, into another subject. Let us pry a little narrowly into, and, in God’s name, examine upon what foundation we erect this glory and reputation for which the world is turned topsy-turvy: wherein do we place this renown that we hunt after with so much pains? It is, in the end, Peter or William that carries it, takes it into his possession, and whom it only concerns. O what a valiant faculty is hope, that in a mortal subject, and in a moment, makes nothing of usurping infinity, immensity, eternity, and of supplying its master’s indigence, at its pleasure, with all things he can imagine or desire! Nature has given us this passion for a pretty toy to play withal. And this

Peter or William, what is it but a sound, when all is done? or three or four dashes with a pen, so easy to be varied that I would fain know to whom is to be attributed the glory of so many victories, to Guesquin, to Glesquin, or to Gueaquin? and yet there would be something of greater moment in the case than in Lucian, that Σ should serve T with a process; for

*non levia aut ludicra petuntur
Praemia;*

They aim at no slight or jocular rewards. • VERG., AEN., 12.764

the chase is there in very good earnest: the question is, which of these letters is to be rewarded for so many sieges, battles, wounds, imprisonments, and services done to the crown of France by this famous constable? Nicholas Denisot never concerned himself further than the letters of his name, of which he has altered the whole contexture to build up by anagram the Count d'Alsinois, whom he has handsomely endowed with the glory of his poetry and painting. The historian Suetonius was satisfied with only the meaning of his name, which made him cashier his father's surname, *Lenis*, to leave *Tranquillus* successor to the reputation of his writings. Who would believe that Captain Bayard should have no honor but what he derives from the deeds of Peter Terrail; and that Antonio Iscalin should suffer himself to his face to be robbed of the honor of so many navigations and commands at sea and land by Captain Paulin and the Baron de la Garde?

Secondly, these are dashes of the pen common to a thousand people. How many are there, in every family, of the same name and surname? and how many more in several families, ages, and countries? History tells us of three of the name of Socrates, of five Platos, of eight Aristotles, of seven Xenophons, of twenty Demetrii, and of twenty Theodores; and how many more she was not acquainted with we may imagine. Who hinders my groom from calling himself Pompey the Great? But after all, what virtue, what authority, or what secret springs are there that fix upon my deceased groom, or the other Pompey, who had his head cut off in Egypt, this glorious renown, and these so much honored flourishes of the pen, so as to be of any advantage to them?

Id cinerem et manes credis curare sepultos?

Do you believe the dead regard such things? • VERG., AEN., 4.34

What sense have the two companions in greatest esteem among me, Epaminondas, of this fine verse that has been so many ages current in his praise:

Consiliis nostris laus est attrita Laconum?

The glory of the Spartans is extinguished by my plans. • CIC., TUSC., 5.17

or Africanus, of this other:

*A sole exoriente supra Mæotis paludes
Nemo est qui factis me æquiparare queat?*

From where the sun rises over the Palus Maeotis, to where it sets, there is no one whose acts can compare with mine • CIC., TUSC., 5.17

Survivors indeed tickle themselves with these fine phrases, and by them incited to jealousy and desire, inconsiderately and according to their own fancy, attribute to the dead this their own feeling, vainly flattering themselves that they shall one day in turn be capable of the same character.

However,

*ad hæc se
Romanus Graiusque, et Barbaras Induperator
Erexit, caucas discriminis atque laboris
Inde habuit, tanto major famae sitis est quam
Virtutis.*

For these the Roman, the Greek,
and the Barbarian commander
hath aroused himself; he has
incurred thence causes of danger
and toil: so much greater is the
thirst for fame than for virtue. •
JUV., 10.137

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Juv.	Juvenal, <i>Satires</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Æneid</i>