

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 43

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On Sumptuary Laws

The way by which our laws attempt to regulate idle and vain expenses in meat and clothes, seems to be quite contrary to the end designed. The true way would be to beget in men a contempt of silks and gold, as vain, frivolous, and useless; whereas we augment to them the honors, and enhance the value of such things, which, sure, is a very improper way to create a disgust. For to enact that none but princes shall eat turbot, shall wear velvet or gold lace, and interdict these things to the people, what is it but to bring them into a greater esteem, and to set every one more agog to eat and wear them? Let kings leave off these ensigns of grandeur; they have others enough besides; those excesses are more excusable in any other than a prince. We may learn by the example of several nations better ways of exterior distinction of quality (which, truly, I conceive to be very requisite in a state) enough, without fostering to this purpose such corruption and manifest inconvenience. 'Tis strange how suddenly and with how much ease custom in these indifferent things establishes itself and becomes authority. We had scarce worn cloth a year, in compliance with the court, for the mourning of Henry II, but that silks were already grown into such contempt with every one, that a man so clad was presently concluded a citizen: silks were divided betwixt the physicians and surgeons, and though all other people almost went in the same habit, there was, notwithstanding, in one thing or other, sufficient distinction of the several conditions of men.

How suddenly do greasy chamois and linen doublets become the fashion in our armies, whilst all neatness and richness of habit fall into contempt?

Let kings but lead the dance and begin to leave off this expense, and in a month the business will be done throughout the kingdom, without edict or ordinance; we shall all follow. It should be rather proclaimed, on the contrary, that no one should wear scarlet or goldsmiths' work but courtesans and tumblers. Zeleucus by the like invention reclaimed the corrupted manners of the Locrians. His laws were, that no free woman should be allowed any more than one maid to follow her, unless she was drunk: nor was to stir out of the city by night, wear jewels of gold about her, or go in an embroidered robe, unless she was a professed and public prostitute; that, bravos excepted, no man was to wear a gold ring, nor be

seen in one of those effeminate robes woven in the city of Miletus. By which infamous exceptions he discreetly diverted his citizens from superfluities and pernicious pleasures.

It was a project of great utility to attract then by honor and ambition to their duty and obedience. Our kings can do what they please in such external reformation; their own inclination stands in this case for a law: *Quidquid principes faciunt, praecipere videntur*. Whatever is done at court passes for a rule through the rest of France. Let the courtiers fall out with these abominable breeches, that discover so much of those parts should be concealed; these great bellied doublets, that make us look like I know not what, and are so unfit to admit of arms; these long effeminate locks of hair; this foolish custom of kissing what we present to our equals, and our hands in saluting them, a ceremony in former times only due to princes. Let them not permit that a gentleman shall appear in place of respect without his sword, unbuttoned and untrussed, as though he came from the house of office; and that, contrary to the custom of our forefathers and the particular privilege of the nobles of this kingdom, we stand a long time bare to them in what place soever, and the same to a hundred others, so many tiercelets and quartelets of kings we have got nowadays and other like vicious innovations: they will see them all presently vanish and cried down. These are, 'tis true, but superficial errors; but they are of ill augury, and enough to inform us that the whole fabric is crazy and tottering, when we see the roughcast of our walls to cleave and split.

Plato in his *Laws* esteems nothing of more pestiferous consequence to his city than to give young men the liberty of introducing any change in their habits, gestures, dances, songs, and exercises, from one form to another; shifting from this to that, hunting after novelties, and applauding the inventors; by which means manners are corrupted and the old institutions come to be nauseated and despised.

In all things, saving only in those that are evil, a change is to be feared; even the change of seasons, winds, viands, and humors. And no laws are in their true credit, but such to which God has given so long a continuance that no one knows their beginning, or that there ever was any other.

What princes themselves do, they seem to prescribe. • QUINT.,
DMAI., 3.15.7

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Quint., DMAI.

Quintilian, *Greater Declamations*