

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 • Chapter 35

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On the Custom of Wearing Clothes

Whatever I shall say upon this subject, I am of necessity to invade some of the bounds of custom, so careful has she been to shut up all the avenues. I was disputing with myself in this shivering season, whether the fashion of going naked in those nations lately discovered is imposed upon them by the hot temperature of the air, as we say of the Indians and Moors, or whether it be the original fashion of mankind. Men of understanding, forasmuch as all things under the sun, as the Holy Writ declares, are subject to the same laws, were wont in such considerations as these, where we are to distinguish the natural laws from those which have been imposed by man's invention, to have recourse to the general polity of the world, where there can be nothing counterfeit. Now, all other creatures being sufficiently furnished with all things necessary for the support of their being it is not to be imagined that we only are brought into the world in a defective and indigent condition, and in such a state as cannot subsist without external aid. Therefore it is that I believe, that as plants, trees, and animals, and all things that have life, are seen to be by nature sufficiently clothed and covered, to defend them from the injuries of weather,

*Proptereaque fere res omnes aut corio sunt,
Aut seta, aut conchis, aut callo, aut cortice tectæ,*

so were we: but as those who by artificial light put out that of day, so we by borrowed forms and fashions have destroyed our own. And 'tis plain enough to be seen, that 'tis custom only which renders that impossible that otherwise is nothing so; for of those nations who have no manner of knowledge of clothing, some are situated under the same temperature that we are, and some in much colder climates. And besides, our most tender parts are always exposed to the air, as the eyes, mouth, nose, and ears; and our country laborers, like our ancestors in former times, go with their breasts and bellies open. Had we been born with a necessity upon us of wearing petticoats and breeches, there is no doubt but nature would have fortified those parts she intended should be exposed to the fury of the seasons with a thicker skin, as she has done the finger-ends and the soles of the feet.

And that for this reason nearly all things are clothed with skin, or hair, or shells, or bark, or some such thing. • LUCR., 4.935

And why should this seem hard to believe? I observe much greater distance betwixt my habit and that of one of our country boors, than betwixt his and that of a man who has no other covering but his skin.

How many men, especially in Turkey, go naked upon the account of devotion?

Some one asked a beggar, whom he saw in his shirt in the depth of winter, as brisk and frolic as he who goes muffled up to the ears in furs, how he was able to endure to go so? "Why, sir," he answered, "you go with your face bare: I am all face." The Italians have a story of the Duke of Florence's fool, whom his master asking how, being so thinly clad, he was able to support the cold, when he himself, warmly wrapped up as he was, was hardly able to do it? "Why," replied the fool, "use my receipt to put on all your clothes you have at once, and you'll feel no more cold than I." King Massinissa, to an extreme old age, could never be prevailed upon to go with his head covered, how cold, stormy, or rainy soever the weather might be; which also is reported of the Emperor Severus.

Herodotus tells us, that in the battles fought betwixt the Egyptians and the Persians, it was observed both by himself and by others, that of those who were left dead upon the field, the heads of the Egyptians were without comparison harder than those of the Persians, by reason that the last had gone with their heads always covered from their infancy, first with biggins, and then with turbans, and the others always shaved and bare.

King Agesilaus continued to a decrepit age to wear always the same clothes in winter that he did in summer. Caesar, says Suetonius, marched always at the head of his army, for the most part on foot, with his head bare, whether it was rain or sunshine, and as much is said of Hannibal,

*tum vertice nudo,
Excipere insanos imbres, coelique ruinam.*

A Venetian who has long lived in Pegu, and has lately returned thence, writes that the men and women of that kingdom, though they cover all their other parts, go always barefoot and ride so too.

And Plato very earnestly advises for the health of the whole body, to give the head and the feet no other clothing than what nature has bestowed.

He whom the Poles have elected for their king, since ours came thence, who is, indeed, one of the greatest princes of this age, never wears any gloves, and in winter or whatever weather can come, never wears other cap abroad than that he wears at home.

Whereas I cannot endure to go unbuttoned or untied; my neighboring laborers would think themselves in chains, if they were so braced. Varro is of opinion, that when it was ordained we should be bare in the presence of the gods and before the magistrate, it was so ordered rather upon the score of health, and to inure us to the injuries of weather, than upon the account of reverence.

Bareheaded he marched in snow,
exposed to pouring rain and the
utmost rigor of the weather. • SIL.,
PUN., 1.250

And since we are now talking of cold, and Frenchmen used to wear variety of colors (not I myself, for I seldom wear other than black or white, in imitation of my father), let us add another story out of Le Capitaine Martin du Bellay, who affirms, that in the march to Luxembourg he saw so great frost, that the munition-wine was cut with hatchets and wedges, and delivered out to the soldiers by weight, and that they carried it away in baskets; and Ovid:

*Nudaque consistunt, formam servantia testæ,
Vina; nec hausta meri, Sed data frusta, bibunt.*

At the mouth of Lake Maeotis the frosts are so very sharp, that in the very same place where Mithridates' lieutenant had fought the enemy dryfoot and given them a notable defeat, the summer following he obtained over them a naval victory.

The Romans fought at a very great disadvantage, in the engagement they had with the Carthaginians near Piacenza, by reason that they went to the charge with their blood congealed and their limbs numbed with cold, whereas Hannibal had caused great fires to be dispersed quite through his camp to warm his soldiers, and oil to be distributed among them, to the end that anointing themselves, they might render their nerves more supple and active, and fortify the pores against the violence of the air and freezing wind, which raged in that season.

The retreat the Greeks made from Babylon into their own country is famous for the difficulties and calamities they had to overcome; of which this was one, that being encountered in the mountains of Armenia with a horrible storm of snow, they lost all knowledge of the country and of the ways, and being driven up, were a day and a night without eating or drinking; most of their cattle died, many of themselves were starved to death, several struck blind with the force of the hail and the glare of the snow, many of them maimed in their fingers and toes, and many stiff and motionless with the extremity of the cold, who had yet their understanding entire.

Alexander saw a nation, where they bury their fruit-trees in winter to protect them from being destroyed by the frost, and we also may see the same.

But, so far as clothes go, the king of Mexico changed four times a day his apparel, and never put it on again, employing that he left off in his continual liberalities and rewards; and neither pot, dish, nor other utensil of his kitchen or table was ever served twice.

The wine when out of the cask
retains the form of the cask; and is
given out not in cups, but in bits. •
Ov., *Tril.*, 3.10.23

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Lucr.

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*

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Ov., Tri.

Ovid, *Tristia*

Sil., Pun.

Silius Italicus, *Punica*