

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 3 · Chapter 11

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On the Lame

'Tis now two or three years ago that they made the year ten days shorter in France.¹ How many changes may we expect should follow this reformation! it was really moving heaven and earth at once. Yet nothing for all that stirs from its place my neighbors still find their seasons of sowing and reaping, the opportunities of doing their business, the hurtful and propitious days, dust at the same time where they had, time out of mind, assigned them; there was no more error perceived in our old use, than there is amendment found in the alteration; so great an uncertainty there is throughout; so gross, obscure, and obtuse is our perception. 'Tis said that this regulation might have been carried on with less inconvenience, by subtracting for some years, according to the example of Augustus, the Bissextile, which is in some sort a day of impediment and trouble, till we had exactly satisfied this debt, the which itself is not done by this correction, and we yet remain some days in arrear: and yet, by this means, such order might be taken for the future, arranging that after the revolution of such or such a number of years, the supernumerary day might be always thrown out, so that we could not, henceforward, err above four-and-twenty hours in our computation. We have no other account of time but years; the world has for many ages made use of that only; and yet it is a measure that to this day we are not agreed upon, and one that we still doubt what form other nations have variously given to it, and what was the true use of it. What does this saying of some mean, that the heavens in growing old bow themselves down nearer toward us, and put us into an uncertainty even of hours and days? and that which Plutarch says of the months, that astrology had not in his time determined as to the motion of the moon; what a fine condition are we in to keep records of things past.

I was just now ruminating, as I often do, what a free and roving thing human reason is. I ordinarily see that men, in things propounded to them, more willingly study to find out reasons than to ascertain truth: they slip over presuppositions, but are curious in examination of consequences; they leave the things, and fly to the causes. Pleasant talkers! The knowledge of causes only concerns him who has the conduct of things; not us, who are merely to undergo them, and who have perfectly full and accomplished use of them, according to our need,

without penetrating into the original and essence; wine is none the more pleasant to him who knows its first faculties. On the contrary, both the body and the soul interrupt and weaken the right they have of the use of the world and of themselves, by mixing with it the opinion of learning; effects concern us, but the means not at all. To determine and to distribute appertain to superiority and command; as it does to subjection to accept. Let me reprehend our custom. They commonly begin thus: "How is such a thing done?" Whereas they should say, "Is such a thing done?" Our reason is able to create a hundred other worlds, and to find out the beginnings and contexture; it needs neither matter nor foundation: let it but run on, it builds as well in the air as on the earth, and with inanity as well as with matter,

dare pondus idonea fumo.

Able to give weight to smoke. •
PERS., 5.20

I find that almost throughout we should say, "there is no such thing," and should myself often make use of this answer, but I dare not: for they cry that it is an evasion produced from ignorance and weakness of understanding; and I am fain, for the most part, to juggle for company, and prate of frivolous subjects and tales that I believe not a word of; besides that, in truth, 'tis a little rude and quarrelsome flatly to deny a stated fact; and few people but will affirm, especially in things hard to be believed, that they have seen them, or at least will name witnesses whose authority will stop our mouths from contradiction. In this way, we know the foundations and means of things that never were; and the world scuffles about a thousand questions, of which both the Pro and the Con are false. *Ita finitima sunt falsa veris, ut in præcipitem locum non debeat se sapiens committere.*

False things are so near the true, that a wise man should not trust himself in a precipitous place. •
CIC., ACAD., 2.21

Truth and lies are faced alike; their port, taste, and proceedings are the same, and we look upon them with the same eye. I find that we are not only remiss in defending ourselves from deceit, but that we seek and offer ourselves to be gulled; we love to entangle ourselves in vanity, as a thing conformable to our being.

I have seen the birth of many miracles in my time; which, although they were abortive, yet have we not failed to foresee what they would have come to, had they lived their full age. 'Tis but finding the end of the clew, and a man may wind off as much as he will; and there is a greater distance betwixt nothing and the least thing in the world than there is betwixt this and the greatest. Now the first that are imbued with this beginning of novelty, when they set out with their tale, find, by the oppositions they meet with, where the difficulty of persuasion lies, and so caulk up that place with some false piece; besides that *insita hominibus libido alendi de industria rumores*, we naturally make a conscience of restoring what has been lent us, without some usury and accession of our own. The particular error first makes the public error, and afterward, in turn, the public error makes the particular one; and thus all this vast fabric goes forming and piling itself up from hand to hand, so that the remotest witness knows more about it than those who were nearest, and the last informed is better persuaded than the first. 'Tis a natural progress; for whoever believes anything, thinks it a work of charity to persuade another into the same opinion; which the better to do, he will make no difficulty of adding as much of his own invention as he

men having a natural desire to nourish reports, • LIVY, 28.24

conceives necessary to his tale to encounter the resistance or want of conception he meets with in others.

I myself, who make a great conscience of lying, and am not very solicitous of giving credit and authority to what I say, yet find that in the arguments I have in hand, being heated with the opposition of another, or by the proper warmth of my own narration, I swell and puff up my subject by voice, motion, vigor, and force of words, and moreover, by extension and amplification, not without some prejudice to the naked truth; but I do it conditionally withal, that to the first who brings me to myself, and who asks me the plain and bare truth, I presently surrender my passion, and deliver the matter to him without exaggeration, without emphasis, or any painting of my own. A quick and earnest way of speaking, as mine is, is apt to run into hyperbole.

There is nothing to which men commonly are more inclined than to make way for their own opinions; where the ordinary means fail us, we add command, force, fire, and sword. 'Tis a misfortune to be at such a pass, that the best test of truth is the multitude of believers in a crowd, where the number of fools so much exceeds the wise. *Quasi vero quidquam sit tam valde, quam nil sapere, vulgare. Sanitatis patrociniū est, insanientium turba.* 'Tis hard to resolve a man's judgment against the common opinions: the first persuasion, taken from the very subject itself, possesses the simple, and from them diffuses itself to the wise, under the authority of the number and antiquity of the witnesses. For my part, what I should not believe from one, I should not believe from a hundred and one: and I do not judge opinions by years.

'Tis not long since one of our princes, in whom the gout had spoiled an excellent nature and sprightly disposition, suffered himself to be so far persuaded with the report made to him of the marvellous operations of a certain priest who by words and gestures cured all sorts of diseases, as to go a long journey to seek him out, and by the force of his mere imagination, for some hours so persuaded and laid his legs asleep, as to obtain that service from them they had long time forgotten. Had fortune heaped up five or six such-like incidents, it had been enough to have brought this miracle into nature. There was afterward discovered so much simplicity and so little art in the author of these performances, that he was thought too contemptible to be punished, as would be thought of most such things, were they well examined. *Miramur ex intervallo fallentia.* So does our sight often represent to us strange images at a distance that vanish on approaching near. *Nunquam ad liquidum fama perducitur.*

'Tis wonderful from how many idle beginnings and frivolous causes such famous impressions commonly, proceed. This it is that obstructs information; for whilst we seek out causes and solid and weighty ends, worthy of so great a name, we lose the true ones; they escape our sight by their littleness. And, in truth, a very prudent, diligent, and subtle inquisition is required in such searches, indifferent, and not prepossessed. To this very hour, all these miracles and strange events have concealed themselves from me: I have never seen greater monster or miracle in the world than myself: one grows familiar with all strange things by time and custom, but the more I frequent and the better I know

As if anything were so common as ignorance. • CIC., DIV., 2

The multitude of fools is a protection to the wise. • AUG., DE CIV. D., 6.10

We admire after an interval things that deceive. • SEN., EP., 118.2

Report is never fully substantiated. • CURT., HIST., 9.2

myself, the more does my own deformity astonish me, the less I understand myself.

The principal right of advancing and producing such accidents is reserved to fortune. Passing the day before yesterday through a village two leagues from my house, I found the place yet warm with a miracle that had lately failed of success there, where with first the neighborhood had been several months amused; then the neighboring provinces began to take it up, and to run thither in great companies of all sorts of people. A young fellow of the place had one night in sport counterfeited the voice of a spirit in his own house, without any other design at present, but only for sport; but this having succeeded with him better than he expected, to extend his farce with more actors he associated with him a stupid silly country girl, and at last there were three of them of the same age and understanding, who from domestic, proceeded to public, preachings, hiding themselves under the altar of the church, never speaking but by night, and forbidding any light to be brought. From words which tended to the conversion of the world, and threats of the day of judgment (for these are subjects under the authority and reverence of which imposture most securely lurks), they proceeded to visions and gesticulations so simple and ridiculous that nothing could hardly be so gross in the sports of little children. Yet had fortune never so little favored the design, who knows to what height this juggling might have at last arrived? These poor devils are at present in prison, and are like shortly to pay for the common folly; and I know not whether some judge will not also make them smart for his. We see clearly into this, which is discovered; but in many things of the like nature that exceed our knowledge, I am of opinion that we ought to suspend our judgment, whether as to rejection or as to reception.

Great abuses in the world are begotten, or, to speak more boldly, all the abuses of the world are begotten, by our being taught to be afraid of professing our ignorance, and that we are bound to accept all things we are not able to refute: we speak of all things by precepts and decisions. The style at Rome was that even that which a witness deposed to having seen with his own eyes, and what a judge determined with his most certain knowledge, was couched in this form of speaking: "it seems to me." They make me hate things that are likely, when they would impose them upon me as infallible. I love these words which mollify and moderate the temerity of our propositions: "peradventure; in some sort; some; 'tis said, I think," and the like: and had I been set to train up children I had put this way of answering into their mouths, inquiring and not resolving: "What does this mean? I understand it not; it may be: is it true?" so that they should rather have retained the form of pupils at threescore years old than to go out doctors, as they do, at ten. Whoever will be cured of ignorance must confess it. Iris is the daughter of Thaumias. Admiration is the foundation of all philosophy, inquisition the progress, ignorance the end. But there is a sort of ignorance, strong and generous, that yields nothing in honor and courage to knowledge; an ignorance which to conceive requires no less knowledge than to conceive knowledge itself.

I saw in my youth a trial (which Corras, a Councillor of Toulouse, had printed) of a strange incident of two men who presented themselves the one for the other.² I remember (and I hardly remember anything else) that

he seemed to have rendered the imposture of him whom he judged to be guilty, so wonderful and so far exceeding both our knowledge and his own, who was the judge, that I thought it a very bold sentence that condemned him to be hanged. Let us have some form of decree that says, "The court understands nothing of the matter" more freely and ingenuously than the Areopagites did, who, finding themselves perplexed with a cause they could not unravel, ordered the parties to appear again after a hundred years.

The witches of my neighborhood run the hazard of their lives upon the report of every new author who seeks to give body to their dreams. To accommodate the examples that Holy Writ gives us of such things, most certain and irrefragable examples, and to tie them to our modern events, seeing that we neither see the causes nor the means, will require another sort-of wit than ours. It, peradventure, only appertains to that sole all-potent testimony to tell us. "This is, and that is, and not that other." God ought to be believed; and certainly with very good reason; but not one among us for all that who is astonished at his own narration (and he must of necessity be astonished if he be not out of his wits), whether he employ it about other men's affairs or against himself.

I am plain and heavy, and stick to the solid and the probable, avoiding those ancient reproaches: *Maiorem fidem homines adhibent iis, quæ non intelligunt. — Cupidine humani ingenii libentius obscura creduntur.* I see very well that men get angry, and that I am forbidden to doubt upon pain of execrable injuries; a new way of persuading! Thank God, I am not to be cuffed into belief. Let them be angry with those who accuse their opinion of falsity; I only accuse it of difficulty and boldness, and condemn the opposite affirmation equally, if not so imperiously, with them. He who will establish this proposition by authority and huffing discovers his reason to be very weak. For a verbal and scholastic altercation let them have as much appearance as their contradictors. *Videantur sane, non affirmentur modo.* But in the real consequence they draw from it these have much the advantage. To kill men, a clear and strong light is required, and our life is too real and essential to warrant these supernatural and fantastic accidents. As to drugs and poisons, I throw them out of my count, as being the worst sort of homicides: yet even in this, 'tis said, that men are not always to rely upon the personal confessions of these people; for they have sometimes been known to accuse themselves of the murder of persons who have afterward been found living and well.

In these other extravagant accusations, I should be apt to say, that it is sufficient a man, what recommendation soever he may have, be believed as to human things; but of what is beyond his conception, and of supernatural effect, he ought then only to be believed when authorized by a supernatural approbation. The privilege it has pleased Almighty God to give to some of our witnesses, ought not to be lightly communicated and made cheap. I have my ears battered with a thousand such tales as these: "Three persons saw him such a day in the east three, the next day in the west: at such an hour, in such a place, and in such habit;" assuredly I should not believe it myself. How much more natural and likely do I find it that two men should lie than that one man in twelve hours' time should fly with the wind from east to west? How much more natural that our

Men are most apt to believe what they least understand.

From the acquisitiveness of the human intellect, obscure things are more easily credited. • TAC., HIST., 1.22

Let them state the probabilities, but not affirm. • CIC., ACAD., 2.27

understanding should be carried from its place by the volubility of our disordered minds, than that one of us should be carried by a strange spirit upon a broomstaff, flesh and bones as we are, up the shaft of a chimney? Let not us seek illusions from without and unknown, we who are perpetually agitated with illusions domestic and our own. Methinks one is pardonable in disbelieving a miracle, at least, at all events where one can elude its verification as such, by means not miraculous; and I am of Saint Augustine's opinion, that, "tis better to lean toward doubt than assurance, in things hard to prove and dangerous to believe."

'Tis now some years ago that I traveled through the territories of a sovereign prince, who, in my favor, and to abate my incredulity, did me the honor to let me see, in his own presence, and in a private place, ten or twelve prisoners of this kind, and among others, an old woman, a real witch in foulness and deformity, who long had been famous in that profession. I saw both proofs and free confessions, and I know not what insensible mark upon the miserable creature: I examined and talked with her and the rest as much and as long as I would, and gave the best and soundest attention I could, and I am not a man to suffer my judgment to be made captive by prepossession. In the end, and in all conscience, I should rather have prescribed them hellebore than hemlock, *Captisque res magis mentibus, quam consceleratis similis visa*. Justice has its corrections proper for such maladies.

The thing seemed to resemble minds possessed rather than guilty. • LIVY, 8.18

As to the oppositions and arguments that worthy men have made to me, both there, and often in other places, I have met with none that have convinced me, and that have not admitted a more likely solution than their conclusions. It is true, indeed, that the proofs and reasons that are founded upon experience and fact, I do not go about to untie, neither have they any end; I often cut them, as Alexander did the Gordian knot. After all, 'tis setting a man's conjectures at a very high price upon them to cause a man to be roasted alive.

We are told by several examples, as Praestantius of his father, that being more profoundly, asleep than men usually are, he fancied himself to be a mare, and that he served the soldiers for a sumpter; and what he fancied himself to be, he really proved. If sorcerers dream so materially; if dreams can sometimes so incorporate themselves with effects, still I cannot believe that therefore our will should be accountable to justice; which I say as one who am neither judge nor privy councillor, and who think myself by many degrees unworthy so to be, but a man of the common sort, born and avowed to the obedience of the public reason, both in its words and acts. He who should record my idle talk as being to the prejudice of the pettiest law, opinion, or custom of his parish, would do himself a great deal of wrong, and me much more; for, in what I say, I warrant no other certainty, but that 'tis what I had then in my thought, a tumultuous and wavering thought. All I say is by way of discourse, and nothing by way of advice. *Nec me pudet, ut istos, fateri nescire quod nesciam*. I should not speak so boldly, if it were my due to be believed; and so I told a great man, who complained of the tartness and contentiousness of my exhortations. Perceiving you to be ready and prepared on one part, I propose to you the other, with all the diligence and care I can, to clear your judgment, not to compel it. God has your hearts in His hands, and will furnish you with the means of choice. I am not so presumptuous

Neither am I ashamed, as they are, to confess my ignorance of what I do not know. • CIC., TUSC., 1.25

even as to desire that my opinions should bias you—in a thing of so great importance: my fortune has not trained them up to so potent and elevated conclusions. Truly, I have not only a great many humors, but also a great many opinions, that I would endeavor to make my son dislike, if I had one. What, if the truest are not always the most commodious to man, being of so wild a composition?

Whether it be to the purpose or not, tis no great matter: 'tis a common proverb in Italy, that he knows not Venus in her perfect sweetness who has never lain with a lame mistress. Fortune, or some particular incident, long ago put this saying into the mouths of the people; and the same is said of men as well as of women; for the queen of the Amazons answered the Scythian who courted her to love, ἀριστα χολὸς οἴφει, lame men perform best. In this feminine republic, to evade the dominion of the males, they lamed them in their infancy — arms, legs, and other members that gave them advantage over them — and only made use of them in that wherein we, in these parts of the world, make use of them. I should have been apt to think; that the shuffling pace of the lame mistress added some new pleasure to the work, and some extraordinary titillation to those who were at the sport; but I have lately learnt that ancient philosophy has itself determined it, which says that the legs and thighs of lame women, not receiving, by reason of their imperfection, their due aliment, it falls out that the genital parts above are fuller and better supplied and much more vigorous; or else that this defect, hindering exercise, they who are troubled with it less dissipate their strength, and come more entire to the sports of Venus; which also is the reason why the Greeks decried the women-weavers as being more hot than other women by reason of their sedentary trade, which they carry on without any great exercise of the body. What is it we may not reason of at this rate? I might also say of these, that the joggling about whilst so sitting at work, rouses and provokes their desire, as the swinging and jolting of coaches does that of our ladies.

Do not these examples serve to make good what I said at first: that our reasons often anticipate the effect, and have so infinite an extent of jurisdiction that they judge and exercise themselves even on inanity itself and non-existency? Besides the flexibility of our invention to forge reasons of all sorts of dreams, our imagination is equally facile to receive impressions of falsity by very frivolous appearances; for, by the sole authority of the ancient and common use of this proverb, I have formerly made myself believe that I have had more pleasure in a woman by reason she was not straight, and accordingly reckoned that deformity among her graces.

Torquato Tasso, in the comparison he makes betwixt France and Italy, says that he has observed that our legs are generally smaller than those of the Italian gentlemen, and attributes the cause of it to our being continually on horseback; which is the very same cause from which Suetonius draws a quite opposite conclusion; for he says, on the contrary, that Germanicus had made his legs bigger by the continuation of the same exercise. Nothing is so supple and erratic as our understanding; it is the shoe of Theramenes, fit for all feet. It is double and diverse, and the matters are double and diverse too. "Give me a drachm of silver," said a Cynic philosopher to Antigonus. "That is not a present befitting a king,"

replied he. "Give me then a talent," said the other. "That is not a present befitting a Cynic."

*Seu plures calor ille vias, & cæca relaxat
Spiramenta, novas veniat qua succus in herbas
Seu durat magis, & venas astringit hiantes;
Ne tenues pluviae, rapidive potentia solis
Acrior, aut Boreæ penetrabile frigus adurat.*

Ogni medaglia ha il suo reverso. This is the reason why Clitomachus said of old that Carneades had outdone the labors of Hercules, in having eradicated consent from men, that is to say, opinion and the courage of judging. This so vigorous fancy of Carneades sprang, in my opinion, anciently from the impudence of those who made profession of knowledge and their immeasurable self-conceit. Aesop was set to sale with two other slaves; the buyer asked the first of these what he could do; he, to enhance his own value, promised mountains and marvels, saying he could do this and that, and I know not what; the second said as much of himself or more: when it came to Aesop's turn, and that he was also asked what he could do; "Nothing," said he, "for these two have taken up all before me; they know everything." So has it happened in the school of philosophy: the pride of those who attributed the capacity of all things to the human mind created in others, out of despite and emulation, this opinion, that it is capable of nothing; the one maintain the same extreme in ignorance that the others do in knowledge; to make it undeniably manifest that man is immoderate throughout, and can never stop but of necessity and the want of ability to proceed further.

Whether the heat opens more passages and secret pores through which the sap may be derived into the new-born herbs; or whether it rather hardens and binds the gaping veins that the small showers and keen influence of the violent sun or penetrating cold of Boreas may not hurt them. •

VERG., G., 1.89

Every medal has its reverse.

NOTES

- 1 Montaigne is referring to the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in 1582.
- 2 This is the famous trial of Arnaud du Tilh charged, in 1560, with stealing Martin Guerre's identity. The case is the subject of Natalie Zemon Davis's best-known book, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), as well as the inspiration for Janet Lewis's *The Wife of Martin Guerre* (1941), a couple of movies and musicals, and an opera by William Bergsma. Jean de Coras (*Corras* in the *Essays*), a jurist, published records of the trial, *Arrest Memorable du parlement de Tolose*, in 1561. Montaigne's description of his connection to the trial, which took place when he was 27, is slightly ambiguous: *Je vy en mon enfance, un procez que Corras Conseiller de Thoulouse fit imprimer...* Did he attend the trial or did he merely read about it? Florio translated *I saw a law-case...*; Frame *I read about the trial...*; Cotton and Screech *I saw a Report/the account of...* But Émile Telle (1975) convincingly showed that Montaigne meant to say that he was at the trial and that his *en mon enfance* (lit. *in my childhood*) can be understood as *when I was younger*.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Aug., De civ. D.	Augustine, <i>City of God</i>
Cic., Acad.	Cicero, <i>Academica</i>
Cic., Div.	Cicero, <i>On Divination</i>
Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Curt., Hist.	Quintus Curtius Rufus, <i>Histories of Alexander the Great</i>
Livy	Livy, <i>History of Rome</i>
Pers.	Persius, <i>Satires</i>
Sen., Ep.	Seneca, <i>Epistles</i>
Tac., Hist.	Tacitus, <i>Histories</i>
Theoc.	Theocritus, <i>Idylls</i>
Verg., G.	Virgil, <i>Georgics</i>