

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 10

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Of readie or slowe speach

Onc ne furent à tous toutes graces donnees.

All Gods good graces are not gone to all, or of al any one.

SO DOE WE SEE that in the gift of eloquence, some have such a facilitie and promptitude, and that which we call utterance, so easie and at commaunde, that at all assayes, and upon everie occasion, they are ready and provided; and others more slowe, never speake any thing except much laboured and premeditated. As Ladies and daintie Dames are taught rules to take recreations and bodily exercises, according to the advantage of what they have fairest about them. If I were to give the like counsel, in those two different advantages of eloquence, whereof preachers and pleading-lawyers of our age seeme to make profession; the slowe speaker in mine opinion shoulde be the better preacher, and the other the better lawyer. Forsomuch as the charge of the first allowes-him as much leisure as he pleaseth to prepare him-selfe; moreover his cariere continueth still in one kind without interruption: whereas the Lawyers occasions urging him still upon any accident to be ready to enter the lists: and the unexpected replies and answers of his adverse partie, do often divert him from his purpose, where he is enforced to take a new course. Yet is-it, that at the last enter-view which was at *Marceilles* betweene Pope *Clement* the feaventh, and *Francis* the first, our King, it hapned cleaned-contrarie, where Monsieur *Poyet*, a man of chiefe reputation, and all daies of his life, brought up to pleade at the bar, whose charge being to make an Oration before the Pope, and having long time before premeditated and con'd the same by roate, yea, and as some report, brought it with him ready-penned from *Paris* the verie same day it should have beene pronounced; the Pope suspecting he might happily speake something, might offend the other Princes Ambassadors, that were about him, sent the argument, which hee at that time and place thought fittest to be treated of, to the king, and by fortune cleane-contrarie to that which *Poyet*, had so much studied for: So that his Oration was altogether frustrate, and he must presently frame another. But he perceiving himselfe unable for-it, the Cardinall *Bellay* was faine to supply his place and take that charge upon him. The Lawyers

charge is much harder then the preachers: (yet in mine opinion) shall we finde more passable Lawyers then commendable preachers, at least in *France*. It seemeth to be more proper to the minde, to have hir operation ready and sodaine, and more incident to the judgement, to have it flow and considerate. But who remaineth mute, if he have no leisure to prepare himselfe, and he likewise to whome leisure giveth no advantage to say better, are both in one selfe degree of strangenesse. It is reported that *Severus Cassius* spake better extempore, and without premeditation. That he was more beholding to fortune, then to his diligence; that to bee interrupted in his speach redounded to his profite: and that his adversaries feared to urge-him, lest his sodaine anger should redouble his eloquence. I know this condition of nature by experience, which can-not abide a vehement and laborious premeditation: except it hold a free, a voluntarie, and selfe-pleasing course, it can never come to a good end. We commonly say of some compositions, that they smell of the oile, and of the lampe, by reason of a certaine harshnesse, and rudenesse, which long plodding labour imprints in them that be much elaborated. But besides, the care of well-doing, and the contention of the minde, over-stretched to her enterprise, doth breake and impeach the-same; even as it happeneth unto water, which being closely pent-in, through it's owne violence and abundance, can not finde issue at an open gullet. In this condition of nature, whereof I now speake, this also is joyned unto it, that it desireth not to be pricked forward by these strong passions, as the anger of *Cassius* (for that motion woulde be over-rude) it ought not to be violently shaken, but yeeldingly solicited: it desireth to be rouzed and prick't forward by strange occasions, both present and casuall. If it goe all-alone, it dooth but languish and loyter behinde: agitation is her life and grace. I cannot well containe my selfe in mine owne possession and disposition, chaunce hath more interest in it than myselfe; occasion, company, yea the change of my voice, drawes more from my minde than I can finde therein, when by my selfe I found and endeavor to employ the same. My wordes likewise are better than my writings, if choice may be had in so worthlesse things. This also happeneth unto me, that where I seeke my selfe, I finde not my selfe: and I finde my selfe more by chaunce, than by the search of mine owne judgement. I shall perhappes have cast-forth some sottletie in writing, happily dull and harsh for another, but smoothe and curious for my selfe. Let us leave all these complements and quaintnesse. That is spoken by every man, according to his owne strength. I have so lost it, that I wot not what I would have saide, and strangers have sometilnes found it before me. Had I alwaies a razor about me, where that hapneth, I should cleane raze my selfe out. Fortune may at some other time make the light thereof appeare brighter unto me, than that of mid-day, and will make mee wonder at mine owne faltring or sticking in the myre.