

Of Seeming Wise

IT HATH been an opinion, that the French are wiser than they seem, and the Spaniards seem wiser than they are. But howsoever it be between nations, certainly it is so between man and man. For as the Apostle saith of godliness, Having a show of godliness, but denying the power thereof; so certainly there are, in point of wisdom and sufficiency, that do nothing or little very solemnly: magno conatu nugas. It is a ridiculous thing, and fit for a satire to persons of judgment, to see what shifts these formalists have, and what prospectives to make superficieses to seem body, that hath depth and bulk. Some are so close and reserved, as they will not show their wares, but by a dark light; and seem always to keep back somewhat; and when they know within themselves, they speak of that they do not well know, would nevertheless seem to others, to know of that which they may not well speak. Some help themselves with countenance and gesture, and are wise by signs; as Cicero saith of Piso, that when he answered him, he fetched one of his brows up to his forehead, and bent the other down to his chin; Respondes, altero ad frontem sublato, altero ad mentum depresso supercilio, crudelitatem tibi non placere. Some think to bear it by speaking a great word, and being peremptory; and go on, and take by admittance, that which they cannot make good. Some, whatsoever is beyond their reach, will seem to despise, or make light of it, as impertinent or curious; and so would have their ignorance seem judgment. Some are never without a difference, and commonly by amusing men with a subtilty, blanch the matter; of whom A. Gellius saith, Hominem delirum, qui verborum minutiis rerum frangit pondera. Of which kind also, Plato, in his Protagoras, bringeth in Prodicus in scorn, and maketh him make a speech, that consisteth of distinction from the beginning to the end. Generally, such men in all deliberations find ease to be of the negative side, and affect a credit to object and foretell difficulties; for when propositions are denied, there is an end of them; but if they be allowed, it requireth a new work; which false point of wisdom is the bane of business. To conclude, there is no decaying merchant, or inward beggar, hath so many tricks to uphold the credit of their wealth, as these empty persons have, to maintain the credit of their sufficiency. Seeming wise men may make shift to get opinion; but let no man choose them for employment; for certainly you were better take for business, a man somewhat absurd, than over-formal.

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