Essays, Book I

Michel de Montaigne

1580

[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. —Montaigne kept adding to this work. Following most modern editions, the present version uses tags in the following way:

[A]: material in the first edition (1580) or added soon thereafter,
[B]: material added in the greatly enlarged second edition (1588),
[C]: material added in the first posthumous edition (1595) following Montaigne's notes in his own copy.

The tags are omitted where they seem unimportant. The ones that are retained are kept very small to make them neglectable by readers who aren't interested in those details. Sometimes, as on pages 34 and 54, they are crucial. —The footnotes are all editorial. —Montaigne's spellings of French words are used in the glossary and in references in the text to the glossary. —In the original, all the quotations from Latin writers are given in Latin.

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Glossary

coutume: Where the *coutume* is social, it is translated as 'custom'; where it is individual, as 'habit', especially in Essay 23.

essai: An *essai* (French) may be a test, or an attempt, or an exercise, or a certain kind of literary production. The last meaning came solely from Montaigne's way of labelling these 'attempts' or 'exercises' of his, and occasionally in the text there is some play on the word.

magistrate: In this work, 'a magistrate' is any official who applies the law; 'the magistrate' of a given nation is its system of such officials.

moeurs: The *moeurs* of a people include their morality, their basic customs, their attitudes and expectations about how people will behave, their ideas about what is decent. . . and so on. This word—rhyming approximately with 'worse'—is left untranslated because there's no good English equivalent to it. The Oxford *English* dictionary includes it for the same reason it has for including *Schadenfreude*.

pédant: Montaigne uses this to mean 'schoolmaster' much more than to mean what 'pedant' does to us, 'person who parades excessively academic learning [or] insists on strict adherence to formal rules' (OED). His title for Essay 25 is *Du pédantisme* = 'On pedantry', which is seriously misleading because the essay extends beyond •schoolmasters and •pedants to •learned men generally.

prince: Like the English 'prince', this in early modern times could refer to any rank up to that of king (or monarch; Queen Elizabeth I referred to herself as a 'prince'), though the phrase *un Prince ou un Roi* on page 57 seems to belie that. Anyway, *prince* is translated by 'prince' throughout.

rêverie: This can be a day-dream, or a fancy, or a straggling thought (page 63) or (perhaps on page 38) a mental set.

science: Translated as 'branch of learning' or simply 'learning', except in a few cases where those seem stylistically impossible. Then 'science' is used, but it never means anything much like 'science' in our sense.

To the reader

[A] This is a book written in good faith, reader. It warns you from the start that my only goal here is a private family one. I have not been concerned to serve you or my reputation: my powers are inadequate for that. I have dedicated this book to the private benefit of my relatives and friends, so that when they have lost me (as they must do soon) they can find here some outlines of my character and of my temperament, thus keeping their knowledge of me more full, more alive. If I had wanted to seek the favour of the world, I would have decked myself out in borrowed beauties. Here I want to be seen in my simple, natural, everyday fashion, without cunning or artifice, for it is my own self that I am painting. Here, drawn from life, you will read of my defects and my native form so far as respect for social convention allows. If I were among the peoples who are said still to live under the sweet liberty of nature's primal laws, I assure you that I would most willingly have portrayed myself whole, and wholly naked. Thus, reader, I myself am the subject of my book: there is no good reason for you to employ your leisure on such frivolous and vain topic. Therefore, farewell from Montaigne 1.iii.1580

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1. We reach the same end by different means

[A] The most common way of softening the hearts of those we have offended, once they have us at their mercy with vengeance in their hand, is to move them to commiseration and pity [C] by our submissiveness. [A] Yet bravery, steadfastness and resolution—flatly contrary means—have sometimes produced the same effect.

Edward Prince of Wales—the one who long governed our Guyenne and whose rank and fortune had many notable marks of greatness—having been offended by the people of Limoges, took their town by force. The lamentations of the townsfolk, the women and the children left behind to be butchered, crying for mercy and throwing themselves at his feet, did not stop him until deep in the town he saw three French noblemen who with incredible bravery were, *alone*, resisting the thrust of his victorious army. Deference and respect for such remarkable valour at first blunted the spear of his anger; then starting with those three he showed mercy on all the other inhabitants of the town.

Scanderbeg, Prince of Epirus, was pursuing one of his soldiers in order to kill him. The soldier, having tried to appease him by all kinds of submissiveness and supplications, as a last resort resolved to await him, sword in hand. Such resolution stopped his master's fury short; having seen him take such an honourable course he pardoned him. (This episode might be differently interpreted by those who have not read of the prodigious strength and courage of that prince.)

The Emperor Conrad III had besieged Guelph, Duke of Bavaria; no matter how base and cowardly were the satisfactions offered him, the gentlest condition he would grant was to allow the noblewomen who had been besieged with the Duke to come out honourably on foot, with whatever

they could *carry*. They, with greatness of heart, carried out on their shoulders their husbands, their children and the Duke himself. The Emperor took such pleasure at seeing their lovely courage that he wept for joy and quenched all the bitterness of his mortal deadly hatred against the Duke; from then on he treated him and his people kindly.

[B] Both of these means would have swayed me easily, for I have a marvellous weakness towards mercy and clemency—so much so that I would more naturally surrender to compassion than to admiration. Yet for the Stoics pity is a bad emotion: they want us to help the afflicted but not to soften and commiserate with them.

[A] Now, it seems to me that these episodes are made more instructive by the fact that ·in them· souls that have been assaulted and tested by both those methods are seen to resist one without flinching, only to bow to the other.

It could be said that yielding one's soul to pity is an effect of affability, meekness, softness, which is why weaker natures such as those of women, children and the common people are more subject to it, whereas disdaining tears and supplications and then yielding only out of respect for the holy image of valour is the action of a strong, unbending soul that offers its affection and honour only to stubborn, masculine vigour. However, in less lofty souls admiration and amazement can produce a similar effect. Witness the citizens of Thebes, who had impeached their generals on the capital charge of having stayed in their posts beyond the period they had prescribed and preordained for them. ·Of the two generals·,

> Pelopidas, bending beneath the weight of such accusations, used only pleas and supplications in his defence; and they could hardly bring themselves to pardon him;
>
> Epaminondas gloriously related the deeds he had done, and proudly and arrogantly reproached the people with them; and they had no heart for even taking the ballots into their hands; the meeting broke up, greatly praising the man's level of courage.

[C] The elder Dionysius had after long delays and great difficulties captured the town of Rhegium together with its commander Phyton, a fine man who had stubbornly defended it. He resolved to make Phyton a terrible example of vengeance. Dionysius first told him how he had had his son and all his relatives drowned on the previous day. Phyton merely replied that they were one day happier than he was. Next he had him stripped, seized by executioners and dragged through the town while being cruelly and ignominiously flogged, and also being subjected to harsh and shameful insults. But Phyton's heart remained steadfast and he did not give way. On the contrary, with his face set firm he loudly recalled the honourable and glorious cause of his being condemned to death—his refusal to surrender his country into the hands of a tyrant—and threatened Dionysius with prompt punishment from the gods. Dionysius read in the eyes of his army's rank and file that rather than being provoked by the taunts of this vanquished enemy, they were •thunder-struck by such rare valour, •beginning to soften, •wondering whether to mutiny and even to rescue Phyton from the hands of his guards; so he brought Phyton's martyrdom to an end and secretly sent him to be drowned in the sea.

[A] Man is indeed a wonderfully vain, various and wavering thing. It is hard to find a basis for any steady and uniform judgement on him. Look at Pompey pardoning the whole city of the Mamertines, against which he was deeply incensed, because of the valour and great-heartedness of Stheno, a citizen who took all the blame for the public wrong-doing and asked for no other favour than to bear the punishment

for it alone. Then look at the army of Sylla, which showed similar bravery in the city of Praeneste, and gained nothing by that for itself or for the others ·in the city·.

[B] And directly against my first examples, Alexander—the bravest of men and the most generous towards the vanquished—took with great difficulty the town of Gaza. In it he came across Betis who commanded it and of whose courage during the siege Alexander had witnessed amazing proofs; now Betis was alone, deserted by his own men, his weapons shattered; all covered with blood and wounds, he was still fighting inside a cluster of several Macedonians who were slashing at him on every side. Alexander was angered by how dearly won his victory had been (among other set-backs he had received two fresh wounds in his own body); he said to him: 'You shall not die as you wanted to, Betis; prepare to suffer every kind of torture that can be thought up against a prisoner!' Betis, with an expression that was not only assured but insolent and haughty, said not a word in reply to these threats. Then Alexander, seeing his stubborn silence said: 'Has he bent his knee? Has he let a word of entreaty slip out? I will overcome this silence; if I cannot force a word from it I will at least force a groan.' And as his anger turned to fury he ordered Betis's heels to be pierced, a rope threaded through them, and had him lacerated and dismembered by being dragged alive behind a cart.

Was it because strength of courage was so natural and usual to him that he was never struck with wonder by it and therefore respected it less? [C] or because he thought it to be so exclusively *his* that he could not bear to see it at such a height in anyone else without anger arising from an emotion of envy? or because the natural surge of his anger swept everything aside?

Truly if his anger could ever have been bridled one would think this would have happened in the capture and sacking of Thebes, at the sight of so many valiant men cruelly put to the sword, men lost and with no remaining means of collective defence. For a good six thousand of them were killed, none of whom was seen to run away or beg for mercy; on the contrary all were seeking through the streets, some here, some there, to confront the victorious enemy and to provoke them into giving them an honourable death. None was seen who wasn't trying with his last breath to get revenge and—armed with despair—to find consolation for his own death in the death of an enemy. Yet their afflicted valour evoked no pity; a day was not long enough to satisfy Alexander's desire for vengeance. This slaughter continued until the last drop of blood remained to be spilt; it stopped only at those who were unarmed, old men, women and children, so that 30,000 of them could be taken as slaves.

2. Sadness

[B] I am among those who are most free from this emotion; [C] I neither like it nor respect it, though the world as though by common consent has decided to honour it with special favour. Wisdom is decked out in it—a stupid and monstrous adornment—as are virtue and conscience. . . . The Stoics forbid this emotion to their sages as being base and cowardly.

[The remaining two or three pages of this essay are mostly occupied by reports on episodes of extreme grief, and some of extreme happiness manifested in a similar way. Montaigne winds up the essay thus:] Violent emotions like these have little hold on me. By nature my sense of feeling has a hard skin, which I daily toughen and thicken by arguing with people.

3. Our feelings reach out beyond us

[B] Those who accuse men of always gaping towards the future, and who teach us to grasp and be satisfied with present goods because we have no grip on what is to come (less indeed than on what is past), touch on the most common of human errors—if we dare describe as an 'error' something that nature itself brings to us in the furtherance of its handiwork, [C] impressing on us this false idea along with many others, more concerned with how we act than with what we know. [B] We are never *at home*; we are always *out* somewhere. Fear, desire, hope, impel us towards the future; they rob us of feelings and thoughts about what *is*, in order to preoccupy us with what *will be*—including what will be when we no longer exist. [C] 'Dreadful is the state of a soul that is anxious about the future' (Seneca).

'Do what you have to do, and know yourself'—this great precept is often cited by Plato; each of its clauses generally takes in our entire duty, and similarly takes in the other clause. Anyone wanting to do what he has to do will see that the first thing he must learn is to know *what he is and what is his*. And whoever does know himself never regards external affairs as his: he loves himself and cultivates himself above all other things; he rejects superfluous occupations and useless thoughts and projects. 'Just as folly will not be satisfied even when it gets what it wants, so also wisdom is happy with what is to hand and is never vexed with itself' [Cicero; Montaigne gives this in French].

[The half-dozen pages of this essay focus on attitudes to people who have died. **(a)** Political orderliness requires that monarchs—even very bad ones—not be judged during their reign, but it is right that 'what justice could not bring down on *them* can rightly be brought down on their reputations and on the goods of their heirs—things we often prefer to life itself.' This practice might even act as a deterrent to potential tyrants. Displeasingly, ancient Sparta went the opposite way, lamenting each royal death and 'declaring that the dead king was the best they had ever had'. **(b)** Commenting on the saying that no man can be called happy until he has died, Montaigne says that in that case no man can be called happy at all, because you can't be happy when you don't exist. **(c)** Several anecdotes illustrating the widespread willingness 'to project beyond this life the care we have for ourselves, and to believe moreover that divine favours often accompany us to the tomb and extend to our remains', e.g. carrying a dead king's bones into battle 'as though it were fated by destiny that victory should reside in his joints'. **(d)** A weird story about a monarch who never let anyone see him using a toilet = lavatory, and who 'commanded in his will that linen drawers should be tied on him when he was dead', to which Montaigne adds 'He should have added a codicil saying that the man who pulled them on ought to be blindfold!' The real interest here is in Montaigne's confession: 'I myself, so shameless in speech, have nevertheless in my make-up a touch of such modesty: except when strongly moved by necessity or pleasure I rarely let anyone's eyes see the members or actions that our customs ordain to be hidden. I find this all the more constraining in that I do not think it becoming in a man, above all in one of my profession.' [Montaigne once did military service, and is here thinking of himself as a soldier.] **(e)** Anecdotes about dying people fussing over their funeral arrangements: wanting them to be grand ('vanity'), or very inexpensive, which Montaigne also disapproves, citing with approval the philosopher who 'wisely prescribed that his friends should lay his body where they thought best, and make the funeral neither excessive nor niggardly'. **(f)** In ancient Athens it was a capital offence for a commander to fail to collect his dead soldiers' bodies for burial, even at the

expense of failing to pursue an advantage against the enemy. Montaigne explodes with anger at this: 'I can almost enter into an implacable hatred against all democratic rule (even though it seems to me to be the most natural and the most fair) when I think of the inhuman injustice of the people of Athens' who executed some military commanders under this rule, without giving them a hearing. He also thinks the rule was stupid: a few years later one of their commanders after winning a sea-battle, 'rather than lose a few dead bodies of his friends floating in the water, allowed to sail away in safety a vast array of living enemies, who later on made them pay dearly for such a grievous superstition'.]

4. How the soul discharges its emotions against false objects when lacking real ones

[A] A local gentleman who is wondrously subject to gout would answer his doctors quite amusingly when asked to give up salted meats entirely. He would say that he liked to have something to blame when tortured by the onslaughts of that illness: the more he yelled out curses against the saveloy or the tongue or the ham, the more relief he felt. Seriously though, when our arm is raised to strike, it pains us if the blow lands nowhere and merely beats the air; similarly, if a prospect is to be made pleasing it must not be dissipated and scattered over an airy void but have some object at a reasonable distance to sustain it. . . .

It seems that the soul too, in the same way, loses itself in itself when shaken and disturbed, unless it is given something to grasp onto; and so we must always provide it with an object to butt up against and to act upon. . . .

[This short essay is devoted to anecdotes illustrating this theme: episodes in which people tear their hair in grief, flog the ocean in anger, shoot arrows into the sky 'to bring God to his senses', and so on.]

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[Essays 5 and 6 concern uses of trickery to achieve military success, with many anecdotes illustrating different attitudes to this in different times and places.]

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7. Our deeds are judged by the intention

[A] 'Death', they say, 'settles all obligations'. I know some who have taken that in a perverse sense. King Henry VII of England made an agreement with Don Felipe, the son of the Emperor Maximilian—or (to place him more honourably) the father of the Emperor Charles V—by which Don Felipe would hand over to him his enemy the Duke of Suffolk. . . .who had fled into hiding in the Low Countries, in exchange for which he promised to make no attempt on the Duke's life. Yet as he lay dying Henry ordered his son in his testament to have the Duke killed as soon as his own death was over.

Recently in the tragedy put on for us by the Duke of Alba with the deaths of Count Horn and Count Egmont [who were both beheaded in 1568], there were many noteworthy events, including this: Count Egmont, on whose faith and assurances Count Horn had put himself into the hands of the Duke of Alba, insistently begged that he be executed first, so that his death should free him from his obligation to Count Horn.

It seems ·to me· that death did not free King Henry from his sworn undertaking, but that Count Egmont was quit of his even before he died. We cannot be held to promises

beyond our power and means. That is why—since we have no power to *achieve* anything, and nothing is *really* in our power but our will—all the rules and duties of man have to be based and established on the will. And so, since Count Egmont held his soul and his will to be in debt to his promise, though it was not in his power to carry it out, he would doubtless have been absolved of his obligation even if he had survived Count Horn. But the King of England, by breaking his word intentionally, cannot be excused just because he put off the act of treachery until after his death—any more than can the mason in Herodotus who loyally kept the secret of the treasures of his master the king of Egypt during his lifetime, only to reveal it to his children on his death-bed.

[C] I have seen several men in my time, convicted by their conscience of having withheld other men's goods, arrange in their testaments to put things right after they are dead. This does no good: postponing such an urgent matter, or wanting to right wrongs with so little feeling or sacrifice. They owe more of what is *theirs*. The more burdensome and inconvenient their payment is, the more just and deserving is their restitution. Repentance begs for burdens.

Even worse are those who reserve for their dying wish some hate-ridden provision aimed at a near one, having concealed this hatred during their lifetime. They show little regard for their own honour when they stir up hatred against their memory; and even less regard for their conscience, because they have not been able, even out of respect for death, to make their animosities die with them. They are unjust judges, postponing judgement until they can no longer hear the facts of the case.

If I can, I will prevent my death from saying anything that was not first said openly by my life.

8. Idleness

[A] Just as fallow lands, when rich and fertile, are seen to abound in a hundred thousand different kinds of useless weeds, so that to make them do their duty we must subdue them and keep them busy with seeds chosen for our service; and just as women left alone are seen to produce shapeless lumps of flesh, and need to be fertilised by another seed to produce good natural offspring; so too with our minds. If we do not keep them busy with some definite subject that can serve as a bridle to reign them in, they stamp around uncontrollably, ranging to and fro over the wastelands of our thoughts: [B] 'As when ruffled water in a bronze pot reflects the light of the sun and the shining face of the moon, sending shimmers flying high into the air and striking against the panelled ceilings' (Virgil). [A] And there is no mad or idle fantasy that they do not produce when that happens: 'They form vain apparitions as in a sick man's dreams' (Horace). When the soul has no definite aim it gets lost, because—as they say—being everywhere is being nowhere. . . .

Recently I retired to my estates, determined to devote myself exclusively, as far as I could, to spending what little life I have left quietly and privately. It seemed to me that the greatest favour I could do for my mind was to leave it in total idleness, caring for itself, concerned only with itself, calmly thinking of itself. I hoped it could do that more easily from then on, since with the passage of time it had become weightier and more mature. But I find—'Idleness always produces wandering thoughts' [Lucan]—that on the contrary it bolts off like a runaway horse, giving itself a hundred times freer rein over itself than it ever did over anyone else; it gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monstrosities, one after another without order or fitness, that I have started to keep a record of them so as to contemplate at my ease their

stupidity and strangeness, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself.

9. Liars

[A] No-one is less suited than I am to get involved in talking about memory. I can find almost no trace of it in myself; I doubt if any other memory in the world is as grotesquely faulty as mine. All my other abilities are low and ordinary; but where memory is concerned I think I am singular and very rare, worthy of both name and reputation!

[B] Apart from the natural inconvenience I suffer because of this—[C] for memory is so necessary that Plato was right to call it a great and mighty goddess—[B] in my part of the world when they want to say that a man has no sense they say that he 'has no memory'. When I complain that my memory is defective they reproach me and disbelieve me, as though I were accusing myself of being witless. They see no difference between memory and intelligence. That makes me seem worse than I am.

But they do me wrong. Experience shows us that it is almost the contrary: excellent memories are apt to be associated with weak judgement. They also do me another wrong, taking it that the words that I use to acknowledge that I have this affliction signify *ingratitude*—I who am better at friendship than at anything else! They judge my affection by my memory and turn a natural defect into a deliberate one. 'He has forgotten' they say 'this request or that promise. He has forgotten his friends. He did not remember—even for my sake—to say this, to do that or not to mention something else.' I certainly do easily forget things, but treating with indifference a charge a friend has entrusted me with—that is something I do not do. Let them be satisfied with my misfortune without turning it into a kind of malice, the kind that is so greatly the enemy of my character.

I find ways of consoling myself. **First** by the fact that [C] a poor memory is an evil that has enabled me to correct a worse one that might easily have arisen in me: *ambition*. A bad memory is an intolerable defect for anyone concerned with worldly affairs.

Also, nature has strengthened other faculties of mine to match the weakening of this one (it does this in other contexts also). If my memory had always kept other people's discoveries and opinions before me, I would have found it easy to let my intellect and my judgement idle along behind other men's footsteps without using their own powers.

Then again [B] I talk less; for the storehouse of memory contains more stuff than the storehouse of invention. [C] (If my memory had stood fast, I would have deafened my friends with my chatter, as the subjects themselves would have stimulated my faculty, such as it is, for arranging and exploiting them, warming up my arguments and leading them on.) [B] It is a pity ·that remembering is easier than thinking·. I see this confirmed by some of my closest friends: to the extent that their memory supplies them with the thing as present and entire, they push their narrative further and further back , loading it with so many pointless details that if their story is a good one they smother its quality, and if it is not good you are left cursing either their good memory or their bad judgement.

[C] Once you are off, it is hard to cut it short and stop talking. Nothing tells you more about a horse's power than its ability to pull up short. Even among men who are speaking to the point, I have seen some who wanted to stop their gallop but did not know how to do so. While looking for a way to stop, they stumble on like men fainting from weakness. Especially dangerous are old men who

remember the past but do not remember having told you about it already. I have seen several amusing tales become boring in one nobleman's mouth because his listeners have had their fill of it a hundred times already.

[B] A **second** consolation ·for having a bad memory· is that. . . .I remember less any insults received. [C] I would need a prompter, as Darius did: so as not to forget an insult suffered at the hands of the Athenians he made a page intone three times in his ear, every time he came to sit at table: 'Sire, remember the Athenians.' [B] And when I revisit books and places they always smile at me with a fresh newness.

[A] There is truth in the saying that someone who does not feel his memory to be strong enough has no business lying. I am well aware that grammarians distinguish *telling an untruth* from *lying*; they assert that 'to tell an untruth' is to say something false that one takes to be true, and that the definition of the Latin *mentiri* [= 'to lie'], which our French *mentir* comes from, implies going against one's conscience, which restricts it to those who say something that conflicts with what they know—and they are the ones I am talking about.

Now, a liar either •makes up a story out of the whole cloth or •takes something true and disguises and spoils it. In the latter case you can normally hobble the liar by making him tell the same tale several times over. Since the real facts were lodged in his memory first and were printed there by means of awareness and knowledge, it is hard for those facts not to spring to his mind and dislodge the falsehoods, which cannot gain such a settled and firm a footing there; hard too for the details as he first learned them not to make him—by continually flowing into his mind—lose all memory of the false additions and distortions.

When the whole thing has been made up, the liar might seem to have less reason to be afraid of getting things wrong because there is ·in his mind· no counter-impression to clash with his falsehoods. Yet even here the lie is an empty thing that is hard to get a grip on, and can easily slip out of any but a very strong memory.

[B] Experience has often shown me this, amusingly, at the expense of men whose profession requires them always to make their speech fit whatever business is being negotiated at the time, and to please the great ones with whom they are speaking. The details for which they are prepared to sacrifice their honour and their conscience are apt to change, and their words must vary accordingly. They have to call one thing first grey then yellow, saying one thing to this man and another to another. If the persons who receive such contrary reports happen to compare their haul, what becomes of this fine ·diplomatic· art?

Apart from that, they very often imprudently betray themselves; for what memory could ever suffice for them to remember all the various shapes they have given to the same subject? I have seen several of my contemporaries hankering after a *reputation* for this fine sort of prudence; they don't see that if the reputation is there, the effect cannot be!

Lying is truly an accursed vice. It is only our words that bind us together and make us human. If we realised the horror and gravity of lying we would send liars to the stake—more justly than other criminals. I find that people normally waste time quite inappropriately punishing children for innocent faults, tormenting them for thoughtless actions that lead nowhere and leave no trace. It seems to me that the only faults we should vigorously attack as soon as they arise and start to develop are •lying and, just behind that, •obstinacy of opinion. Those faults grow with the child; once let the tongue set off on this wrong track and it is astonishing how impossible it is to call it back. That is why

some otherwise decent men are abject slaves to it. . . .

We would be in better shape if a lie, like truth, had only one face, for we could take as certain the opposite of what the liar said. But the reverse side of truth has a hundred thousand shapes and a limitless field. The Pythagoreans make good to be certain and finite; evil they make infinite and uncertain. A thousand directions miss the bull's-eye; one goes straight to it.

I am not sure that I could bring myself to tell a solemn and shameless lie, even to ward off some obvious and immense danger. One of the old Church Fathers says that a dog we do know is better company than a man whose language we do not know. 'Just as any foreigner is not fully human' [Pliny]. How much less companionable the language of falsehood is than silence!

[After a wearyingly long anecdote about a king's exposure of a lying ambassador by tangling him in his inconsistencies, Montaigne offers this shorter one to the same effect:]

Pope Julius II sent an ambassador to the King of England to rouse his animosity against King Francis. The ambassador having been heard out, the King of England in his reply dwelt on the difficulties he could see in making all the preparations needed for waging war against such a powerful monarch, and cited some of the reasons. The ambassador answered, most inappropriately, that he too had thought of these and had pointed them out to the Pope. These words were so different from the case he had just put forward, which was to urge the English to go headlong into war, that the King of England began to suspect (what he later found to be actually true) that the private inclinations of the ambassador leaned towards the French. The Pope, being informed of this, confiscated his property and the man nearly lost his life.

10. Prompt or slow speech

[A] 'Never to all men were all graces given' [La Boétie]. So we see that in the case of eloquence some have such a prompt facility and such ease in 'getting it out' (as they say) that they are ready at every turn; others, slower, never speak without thinking and working it all out beforehand.

In the spirit in which ladies are advised to take up sports and physical exercises that show off their charms, if I had to give advice relating to these two aspects of eloquence—which seems in our time to be mainly the province of preachers and lawyers—I would advise the slow man that he would do better as a preacher and the other man that he would do better as a lawyer. The preacher's duties allow him as much time as he wishes to make things ready, and ·in his sermon· he runs an uninterrupted race in a straight line; whereas the lawyer's needs can require him to enter the fray at a moment's notice; and the unforeseeable replies of the opposite party can throw him off his stride into a situation where a new decision has to be made as he goes.

Yet in the meeting between Pope Clement and King Francis at Marseilles the reverse applied. Monsieur Poyet, a man whose whole life had been nurtured at the bar and who was highly regarded, had the duty of making the oration before the Pope; he had given it long thought and was said to have brought it from Paris already prepared; but on the very day that it was to be delivered the Pope (fearing that something in it might give offence to the other princes' [see Glossary] ambassadors who were in attendance) notified the king of the topic that seemed to him most proper to that time and place, which happened to be totally different from the one Monsieur Poyet had toiled over; so his oration was now useless and he had to be quickly ready with another. But as he realised that he was incapable of doing that, Cardinal du

Bellay had to take on the task.

[B] The lawyer's work is harder than the preacher's, and yet in France at least we can find more passable lawyers, in my opinion, than passable preachers.

[A] It seems to be the special feature of *l'esprit* [the mind, here = 'the intellect'] that it acts readily and quickly, while the special feature of the judgement is that it is slow and poised. But •the man who is struck dumb if he has no time to prepare his speech and •the man who cannot profit by the advantage of more time and speak better are equally abnormal cases. They say that ·the ancient orator· Severus Cassius spoke better when he had not thought about it beforehand; that he owed more to fortune than to hard work; that he profited from being interrupted; that his opponents were afraid of provoking him, for fear that anger would make him redouble his eloquence.

I know from experience this kind of character that cannot bear intense and laborious preparation, that cannot go anywhere worth going unless it runs along gaily and freely. We say that some books 'stink of lamp-oil' because of the harshness and roughness that are stamped by *work* on writings that have involved a lot of it. But in addition to that the anxiety to do well, and the tension in the soul that is unduly bent and strained towards its purpose, make the soul inoperative—like water that is rushing so fast and so abundantly that it cannot find its way through an open outlet.

One aspect of the character I am speaking of is that it wants to be roused and warmed up by events that are external, immediate, and fortuitous. Leave it to act by itself and it will merely drag along languidly. Its life and its grace consist in activity. (It does not want to be driven and spurred on by strong passions such as Cassius's too-violent anger; it wants to be not jolted but drawn out.)

[B] I have little control over my faculties and my moods. Chance plays a greater part in all this than I do. The occasion, the company, the very sound of my voice, draw from my mind more than I find in it when I draw from it without outside help.

[A] Thus spoken words are worth more than written ones—if a choice can be made between things of no value.

[C] Something else that happens in my case: I do not find myself in the place where I look; I find myself more by chance encounter than by searching my judgement. I will have tossed off something subtle as I write—

> I mean, of course, something that would be dull in others, sharp in me. Enough of these courtesies! Anyone who says such things is speaking by the standard of *his* abilities

—then later I'll have so completely lost it that I do not know what I meant to say; and sometimes someone else rediscovers my meaning before I do. If I took my razor to every passage where that happened, there would be nothing left. The chance encounter may recur, making what I wrote clearer than the noon-day sun; and that will make me astonished at my former hesitations.

11. Prognostications

[A] As for oracles, it is certain that they had begun to lose their credit well before the coming of Jesus Christ, because we see Cicero labouring to find the cause of their decline.

[Then a couple of pages about supposed methods of foretelling the future, especially ones based on the entrails of sacrificial animals. Montaigne quotes various writers who were sceptical about these, and adds his own scepticism:]

[B] I would rather order my affairs by the outcome of throwing

dice than by such fanciful nonsense. [C] And indeed in all republics a good share of authority has been left to chance. Plato, freely drawing up his constitution as he pleased, left many important decisions to lots. . . .

[B] I know people who study and annotate their almanacs, citing their authority in current events. But almanacs say so much that they are bound to tell both truth and falsehood. [C] As Cicero wrote: 'Who can shoot all day without striking the target occasionally?' [B] I think none the better of them when I see them sometimes happen to hit the truth; there would be more certainty in it if it were the rule that they always lied. [C] Besides, no-one keeps a record of their mistakes, because there are so many of them and they are so ordinary; and their correct divinations are made much of because they are rare, incredible, and prodigious.

[C] When Diagoras 'the Atheist' (as they called him) was in Samothrace, he was shown many vows and votive portraits from those who have survived shipwreck and was asked, 'You who think that the gods are indifferent to human affairs, what do you say about so many men saved by their grace?', and he replied: 'There are no portraits here of the much larger number of those who drowned!' Cicero says that among all the philosophers who believed in gods only Xenophanes of Colophon tried to eradicate all forms of divination. This makes it less surprising that we have [B] seen some of our princely souls linger on this empty nonsense, occasionally to their disadvantage.

[C] I would like to have seen with my own eyes those two marvels: •the book of Joachim, the Calabrian abbot, which predicted all the future popes, their names and appearance; and •that of the Emperor Leo, which predicted the emperors and patriarchs of Greece. I *have* seen with my own eyes men who were stunned by their fate in our civil disturbances resorting, as to any superstition, to searching ·in books about· the heavens for ancient threats and causes of their ills. They have been so strangely successful in this, in my days, that they have convinced me that (since this is a pastime for sharp minds with time to kill) those who are skilled in the subtle art of wrapping and unravelling would be able to find whatever they want in any piece of writing. But their odds of success are especially favoured by the obscure, ambiguous, fantastical language of prophetic jargon, to which their authors give no clear meaning, so that posterity can give them any meaning it chooses.

[B] The daemon of Socrates was perhaps a certain thrust of the will that presented itself to him without advice from his reason. In a soul like his, well purified and prepared by the continual exercise of wisdom and virtue, it is likely that such inclinations, though [C] intrusive and undigested, were significant and worthy to be followed. Everyone detects in himself signs of such stirrings of a prompt, vehement, accidental opinion. It is open to me to allow them some authority, to me who allow little enough to our prudence! And I have had some—as weak in reason as they were yet violent in persuasion (or in dissuasion, which was more common in Socrates' case)—[B] by which I have allowed myself to be swept along so usefully and so successfully that they could have been judged to contain something of divine inspiration.

12. Constancy

[A] There is no law of resolution and constancy that forbids us to protect ourselves, as far as we can, from the evils and troubles that threaten us, and (therefore) none that forbids us to fear that they may spring upon us. On the

contrary, all honourable means of protecting oneself from evils are not only permissible; they are praiseworthy. The role of constancy consists chiefly in standing firm under misfortunes for which there is no remedy. So there is no bodily agility or handling of weapons that we judge wrong if it serves to protect us from the blow that is struck at us.

[C] Many very warlike nations used flight as a principal resource in their armed encounters; they were more dangerous with their backs turned towards the enemy than when they faced him. The Turks retain something of this.

Socrates in Plato mocks Laches for defining fortitude as 'standing firm in line against the enemy'. 'What!' he says, 'would it be cowardice to beat them by giving ground?' And he cites Homer who praises Aeneas for knowing when to flee. And when Laches, on thinking it over, allows that the Scythians did use that method as do cavalrymen in general, Socrates goes on to cite the example of the infantry of Sparta, a nation trained above all to fight standing their ground: being unable break open the Persian phalanx in the battle of Plataea they decided to disengage and fall back so that the Persians, thinking they were in full flight, would break up their dense formation in pursuing them. By which means the Spartans obtained the victory. . . .

[A] However, in cannonades, once a man is in the direct line of fire (as often happens in a battle), it is unbecoming for him to duck or dodge in fear of a cannon-ball, all the more so as it is thought that cannon-balls have such force and speed that they cannot be avoided. There are many cases of soldiers shielding behind their arms or ducking their heads and at least providing their comrades with a laugh.

Yet in the expedition that the Emperor Charles V led against us in Provence, when the Marquis de Guast went to reconnoitre the city of Arles and suddenly appeared from behind a windmill under cover of which he had made his advance, he was spotted by the seigneur de Bonneval and the seneschal d'Agenois who were strolling along the top of the ·city's· amphitheatre. They pointed him out to the seigneur de Villier, head of the artillery, who aimed a culverin so accurately that if the Marquis had not seen the fuse being lit and jumped aside it was thought he would have been struck in the body. Similarly a few years before, when Lorenzo de' Medici (the Duke of Urbino and the father of our Queen Mother) was laying siege to Mondolfo, a fortress in Italy in the territory they call the Vicariate, he saw fire applied to a cannon pointing right at him and ducked; luckily for him, for otherwise the shot, which only grazed the top of his head, would have certainly struck him in the chest.

To tell the truth, I do not believe that these movements are deliberate; for in such a sudden matter how can you judge whether the aim is high or low? It is easier to believe that they were *lucky* in their fear, and that another time this would have been as good a way to throw oneself into the path of the shot as to avoid it.

[B] I cannot help jumping if, in a place where I would not have expected this, the shattering sound of an arquebus suddenly strikes my ear; I have seen that happen to better men than I am. [C] Not even the Stoics claim that their sage can resist visual stimuli or ideas when they first come upon him; they concede that it is part of man's natural condition that he should become tense and pale when there is a loud noise in the heavens or a building collapses. Likewise for the other passions, provided that his thoughts remain sound and secure, that the seat of his reason is not spoiled in any way, and that he does not *assent* to his fright and suffering. As for anyone who is not a sage, the first part applies to him but not the second. For in his case the impress of the emotions does not remain on the surface but penetrates through to the seat of his reason, infecting and corrupting

it; he judges by his emotions and conforms to them ·in his actions·. Here, very fully and elegantly, is the state of the Stoic sage: 'His mind remains unmoved; the tears all useless flow.' [Virgil]

The Aristotelian sage is not exempt from emotional upsets, but he moderates them.

13. Ceremonial at the meeting of kings

[A] No topic is too minor to deserve a place in this mish-mash.

Our normal rules lay down that it would be a marked discourtesy towards an equal and even more so towards one of the great if you failed to be at home after he had advised you that he planned to pay you a visit. Indeed Queen Margaret of Navarre took this further: she said that it would be impolite for a nobleman to leave his house even (as is frequently done) to go and meet the visitor, no matter how grand he may be; that it is more civil and more respectful to wait to receive him when he does arrive, if only because you might miss him on way; and that ·for the demands of civility· it suffices if you accompany him when he takes his leave.

[B] As for me, I often neglect both these trivial duties, just as I reduce formality as far as I can in my home. Someone takes offence: what of it? It is better to offend him once than to offend myself daily—that would be perpetual! What good do we do in fleeing from the slavery of the court if we drag it back into our lairs?

[A] Another common rule governing all gatherings is that the lesser participants should arrive at the appointment first because it is the privilege of the more prominent to keep others waiting. Yet at the meeting arranged between Pope Clement and King Francis at Marseilles, the King after making the necessary arrangements withdrew from the town, allowing the Pope two or three days to arrive and rest before the King returned to find him. Similarly with the entry of Pope and Emperor into Bologna: the Emperor arranged for the Pope to be there first, himself arriving afterwards. It is the normal courtesy, they say, when princes [see Glossary] such as these arrange a conference that the greatest should arrive at the appointed place before all the others, and even before the person on whose territory the meeting takes place. They look at it this way: it is a way of showing that it is the greater whom the lesser are coming to visit: they call on him, not he on them.

[C] Not only each country but each city and each profession has its own particular forms of politeness. From childhood I was quite carefully trained in these and have lived in sufficiently good company not to be ignorant of the rules of our French civility: I could even teach it. I like to follow those rules, but not so timidly that they constrict my daily life. Some forms of politeness are bothersome; there is no disgrace in *not* following them, provided this is done by discretion and not through ignorant mistake. I have often seen men *rude* from an excess of politeness, *pushy* with courtesies.

Still, the knowledge of social dexterity is very useful knowledge. Like grace and beauty, it smooths the beginnings of fellowship and intimacy; as a result it opens the way •to our learning from the examples of others and •to ourselves producing and showing our own example, if it is worth noting and passing on.

14. That the taste of goods and evils depends largely on our opinion of them

[A] Men, says an old Greek maxim, are tormented by their opinions of things and not by the things themselves. If this could be proved to be universally true, that would be an important point gained for alleviating our wretched human condition. For if evils can enter us only through our judgement, it seems that it would be in our power either to despise them or to deflect them towards the good. If the things themselves are at our disposal, why do we not dominate them or manipulate them to our advantage? If what we call 'evil' and 'torment' is neither evil nor torment in itself but only insofar as our fancy endows it with that quality, then it is for us to change it. And if we have such a choice and are free from constraint—if fortune simply provides the matter, leaving it to us to give it form—we are weirdly crazy to pull in the direction that hurts us most, giving to sickness, poverty or insolence a bad and bitter taste when we could give them a pleasant one. Well, let us see whether this can be maintained:

- what we call evil is not evil in itself

or (this being really the same)

- whatever it is, it's up to us to give it a different flavour, a different look.

If the original essence of the things we fear had the power to lodge itself within us by its own authority, it would lodge alike in all men; for men are all of one kind, and their tools and instruments for thinking and judging are all the same except for differences of degree. But the diversity among our opinions regarding those things shows clearly that they enter us only by *interacting with* us: one man may lodge them within himself in their true essence but a thousand others let them in with a new and contrary essence.

We regard **death**, **poverty** and **pain** as our main enemies. Now, this death that some call the most horrible of horrible things—who does not know that others call it the only shelter from this life's torments, nature's sovereign blessing, the only support of our freedom, the common and ready cure for all ills? Some await it trembling and afraid: others [C] bear it more easily than life. [B] One man complains that death is too available: 'Death, would that you scorned to take the coward's life, and came only to valour!' [Lucan]

But let us set aside such boasting valour. Theodorus replied to Lysimachus who was threatening to kill him, 'What an achievement, matching the force of a poisonous fly!' Most of the philosophers either deliberately went to meet death or else hastened and helped it along. [A] And how many common people we see being led forth to die—and not a simple death but one mixed with disgrace and grievous torments—showing such assurance (some out of stubbornness, others from a natural simplicity) that no difference from their normal behaviour can be seen: they settle their family affairs and commend themselves to those they love, singing, preaching and addressing the crowd—indeed even including a few jokes and drinking the health of their acquaintances every bit as well as Socrates did. [Montaigne now presents a series of anecdotes illustrating death being taken relatively lightly. In some condemned men make jokes. In others they decline offers to spare them from execution in return for their marrying someone who has a limp or an ugly face. Also:] When King Louis XI took Arras, many of the citizens let themselves be hanged rather than cry 'Long live the King!'

[C] Even today in the kingdom of Narsinga the wives of their priests are buried alive with their dead husbands. All other wives are burned alive at their husbands' funeral, not only with fortitude but with gaiety. And when their dead king is burned, all his wives and concubines, his

favourites, and all sorts of officials and servants—a whole people in themselves—run so lightly towards the fire to throw themselves into it with their master that they seem to hold it an honour to be his comrades in death.

[There follow three episodes in which professional comedians joke on their death-beds. Then:]

[A] During our recent wars in Milan with so many captures and recaptures, the people became weary of so many changes of fortune and firmly resolved to die—so firmly that I have heard my father say that he saw a count made of 25 heads of family who took their own lives in a week. . . .

[C] Any opinion is powerful enough for somebody to hold onto it at the cost of his life. In the fine oath that Greece swore and kept in the war against the Medes, the first article was that each man would rather exchange life for death than exchange his country's laws for Persian ones. In the wars of the Turks and the Greeks how many men can be seen accepting a cruel death rather than renouncing circumcision for baptism! An example of which no sort of religion is incapable.

[Montaigne now tells a story about Jews exiled from Castile, given temporary refuge in Portugal, and then faced with a royal decree giving them a choice between •brutal and poverty-stricken exile, •converting to Christianity, and •having their children taken away and brought up as Christians. After a page of this, he brings it around to his present topic.] This is said to have produced a dreadful spectacle: the natural love between fathers and children together with their zeal for their ancient faith rebelling against this harsh decree. It was common to see fathers and mothers killing themselves or (an even harsher example) in love and compassion putting their little children out of reach of the law by throwing them into wells. The remainder, when the stipulated time for their exile had run out, could do nothing but return to slavery. Some became Christians: even today, a century later, few Portuguese are sure of their sincerity or their descendants', though custom and the passage of time are much more powerful counsellors than any other compulsion. Cicero says: 'How often have not only our generals but entire armies charged to certain death!'

[B] I have seen one of my close friends rush towards death with real feeling. He was bound to this by several lines of argument that I could not weaken in his mind; for no apparent reason he seized with a fierce hunger on the first death that came his way crowned with a gleam of honour.

[A] In our own time we have many examples of people—even children—killing themselves for fear of some slight setback. Something one of the ancients said is relevant here: 'What shall we not go in fear of if we fear what cowardice itself has chosen for its refuge?' If I were to *list* the people of both sexes and of social ranks and schools of thought who even in happier times have awaited death with constancy or have willingly sought it—

- •to fly from the ills of this life or merely
- •to fly from a sense of having had enough of life, or
- •in the hope of a better condition elsewhere

—I would never complete the list. The number of them is so infinite that in fact it would be an easier task to list those who *did* fear death. So just this one. The philosopher Pyrrho was on a ship during a mighty storm; he tried to put courage into those whom he saw to be most terrified by pointing out a pig that was there, quite unconcerned with the storm. Will we then venture to say that the benefit of reason—which we celebrate so highly and on account of which we see ourselves as the masters and emperors of all creation—was placed in us for our torment? What good is the knowledge of things if by it we lose the calm and repose we would enjoy without it, and if it makes our condition worse than that of Pyrrho's

pig? Intelligence was given us for our greater good; shall we use it to bring about our downfall, fighting against the plan of nature and the universal order of things which requires each man to use his faculties and resources for his own advantage?

Very well, someone will tell me, your rule holds for **death**, but what will you say about **poverty**? And what will you say about **pain**, which. . . .the majority of sages judge to be the ultimate evil? And those who denied this in words accepted it in practice. Possidonius was extremely tormented by an acutely painful illness; Pompey went to see him and apologised for having picked such a bad time for hearing him talk about philosophy: 'God forbid', said Possidonius, 'that pain should gain such a hold over me as to hinder me from talking about it.' And he launched into this very topic, contempt for pain. But pain played its part and kept pressing on him. At which he cried 'Pain, do your worst! I will never say you are an evil!' This anecdote that they make so much of—what does it imply about contempt for pain? He is arguing only about the word. If those stabbing pangs do not trouble him, why does he interrupt what he is saying? Why does he think it is a big achievement not to call pain an evil?

This is not all a matter of imagination. We also have relevant beliefs that are based on definite knowledge. Our very senses are judges of that: 'If they are not true then all reason is false' [Lucretius]. Are we to make our skin believe that the lash is merely tickling it? or make our palate believe that ·bitter· aloes is sweet wine? In this matter, Pyrrho's pig is one of us: it has indeed no fear of death, but beat it and it squeals and tries to get away. Are we to go against the natural characteristic that can be seen in every living creature under heaven, the characteristic of trembling when in pain? The very trees seem to shudder beneath the axe.

Becoming dead is instantaneous; it is something we are aware of ·not through experience but· only through reasoning. 'It was or it will be; there is nothing of the present in it' [La Boétie]; 'There is less pain in death than in waiting for it' [Ovid]. A thousand beasts, a thousand men, are dead before they are threatened. In truth, **what we say** we chiefly fear in death is what usually precedes it: pain.

[C] Still, if we are to believe a holy Father, 'Death is no evil unless what follows it is' [Augustine]. And I say, still more probably, neither what precedes death nor what follows it has anything to do with death itself. ·In **what we say**· we are making false excuses. I find from experience that our inability to stand the thought of dying is what makes us unable to stand pain, and that we suffer twice as grievously from pain that threatens us with death. But as reason accuses our cowardice of fearing something so momentary, so inevitable, so imperceptible as death is, we seize upon a more excusable pretext. We do not put on the danger list any painful ailment that involves no danger but the pain itself. Toothache and gout, however painful, are not fatal—so who counts them as illnesses?

Now, let us suppose that ·**what we say** is true, and that· where dying is concerned we are chiefly concerned with the pain, [A] just as in poverty there is nothing to fear except its delivering us into the hands of pain by the thirst, hunger, cold, heat and sleepless nights that it makes us suffer.

Thus, let us deal only with pain. I grant people that pain is the worst thing that can happen to us. I say this willingly because of all men in the world I am the most hostile to pain and the most avoidant of it, the more so because I have had little acquaintance with it, thank God. But it lies within us not to eliminate pain but at least to lessen it by patience [= 'by putting up with it calmly'] and, even if the body is disturbed by it, by keeping our soul and our reason in good trim.

If this were not so, what could have brought us to respect manly courage, valour, fortitude, greatness of soul and determination? What role would they play if there were no pain to defy? 'Courage is hungry for danger' [Seneca]. If we do not have to

- sleep rough,
- endure in full armour the midday sun,
- make a meal of horseflesh or donkey,
- watch as they slice us open to extract a bullet from between our bones,
- allow ourselves to be stitched up again, cauterized and probed,

what will give us the superiority that we wish to have over the common herd? Fleeing evil and pain is a far cry from what the sages say, ·namely· that between equally good actions the one that involves more trouble is the one that it is more desirable to perform. [C] 'For people are happy not in gaiety, sensuality, laughter, or in joking (the comrade of levity), but often in sadness through firmness and constancy' [Cicero]. [A] That is why it has been impossible to convince our forebears that conquests made by force of arms with the risks of war were not more advantageous than those achieved quite safely by intrigues and plotting: 'Whenever virtue costs us dear, our joy is greater' [Lucan].

Furthermore, it ought to console us that in the course of nature if pain is violent it is short; if it is long, it is light. . . . You will not feel it for long if you feel it grievously: it will put an end to itself or—the same thing—put an end to you. [C] If you find it unbearable, it will bear you away. 'Remember that the greatest pains are ended by death, the small ones are only intermittent, and we are masters of the moderate ones: if they are bearable we shall bear them; if they are not, we shall leave our life as we leave the theatre if the play does not please us' [Cicero].

[A] What causes us to endure pain so poorly is that we are not accustomed to finding our principal happiness in the soul—[C] not concentrating enough on this one supreme mistress of our condition and our conduct. The body has only one way of moving and one posture, apart from differences of degree. The soul is diversified into all sorts of forms; it takes bodily sensations and everything else that happens to it and shapes them ·to fit· itself and whatever current state it is in. That is why we must study it, inquire into it, and call its all-powerful springs into action. No reason, power, or command can override its inclination and its choice. Out of the thousands of attitudes at its disposal, let us give it one that is conducive to our peace and preservation, and then we are not only sheltered from harm but, if it pleases the soul, gratified and flattered by harms and ills. The soul profits from everything, without distinction. Errors and dreams serve it usefully, being suitable stuff to give us security and contentment.

It is easy to see that what makes pain and pleasure keen in us is the sharpness of our mind. The beasts, which keep the mind on a leash, leave it to their bodies to have their feelings which, being free and untutored, are nearly the same in all species, as we can see from the similarity of their reactions. If we did not interfere with the jurisdiction that our bodies have in such matters, it is to be believed that we would be better off and that nature has given our bodies a just and measured temperance towards pleasure and towards pain. Being equal and common to all, it cannot fail to be just. But since we have freed ourselves from nature's rules and given ourselves over to the vagabond liberty of our imaginations, let us at least help them to turn in the most agreeable direction.

Plato is afraid of our hard bondage to pain and to pleasure because it too firmly shackles the soul to the body; I on the contrary ·fear it· because it detaches and unbinds the soul

from the body.

[A] Just as the enemy becomes fiercer when we retreat, so pain swells with pride when it sees us tremble under it. It will settle for better terms with anyone who stands up to it. We must brace ourselves against it. By backing away in retreat we beckon it on, drawing on ourselves the collapse we are threatened by. [C] As the body is firmer against attacks when it is tense, so is the soul.

[A] But let us to come to examples (which are the right quarry for people with weak backs, like me) in which we shall find that it is with pain as with ·precious· stones that take on brighter or duller colours according to the leaf on which they are lying, and that it occupies only as much space in us as we make for it. Saint Augustine says 'They suffered to the extent that they gave in to pain'. We feel more from one cut of the surgeon's scalpel than from ten sword-cuts in the heat of battle. The pains of childbirth are reckoned to be great by doctors and by God himself, and we surround them with so many ceremonies; yet there are whole nations that take no account of them.

[Montaigne now embarks on several pages of anecdotes illustrating this. •Women who have silently given birth to children and then gone straight back to work. •Spartan boys who endured terrible pains without change of facial expression. •Someone who burned much of his arm off, to show that he could be trusted. •Men who laughed or read books while being tortured to death. •Women who do painful and dangerous things to themselves to improve their appearance. •Men and women who inflict pain on themselves as an act of piety. Most of this is [A] first-edition material. Then we get [C] something that doesn't concern pain:]

[C] With calm faces, betraying no signs of grief, Quintus Maximus buried his son the consul, Marcus Cato buried his son the praetor elect, and Lucius Paulus both of his sons within a few days of each other. . . . I myself have lost two or three children (though before they were weaned), not without grief but without brooding over it. Yet hardly anything that can happen to men cuts them more to the quick. I have seen plenty of other misfortunes that commonly cause great affliction but which I would hardly notice if they happened to me—and when they have done so I have been contemptuous of them, ones that people in general regard as so hideous that I would not venture to boast in public of my indifference to them without blushing. 'From which we may learn that grief lies not in nature but opinion' [Cicero].

[B] Opinion is a powerful performer, bold and immoderate. Who was ever as hungry for security and repose as Alexander and Caesar were for insecurity and hardships? Teres, the father of Sitalces, used to say that when he was not waging war he felt that there was no difference between him and his stable-boy.

[C] When Cato the consul sought to secure a number of Spanish towns, many of their citizens killed themselves simply because he forbade them to bear arms: 'a fierce race for whom life without arms was not life' [Cicero].

[B] How many we know of who have fled from the sweetness of a calm life at home among their friends in order to undergo the horrors of uninhabitable deserts, throwing themselves into humiliation, degradation and the contempt of the world, and have enjoyed these and even sought them out!

Cardinal Borromeo who recently died in Milan was surrounded by debauchery; everything incited him to it: his rank, his immense wealth, the atmosphere of Italy, and his youth; yet his way of life was so austere that the same garment served him winter and summer; he slept only on straw; any time left over after the duties of his office he spent on his knees studying, with a little bread and water beside his book—the only food he took and the only time he took it.

I know some who have knowingly derived profit and advancement from cuckoldry—the mere name of which terrifies so many people.

If sight is not the most necessary of our senses it is at least the most pleasurable; but the most useful and pleasurable of bodily parts are those that serve to beget us. Yet plenty of people have had a mortal hatred for them just because they are so likable; they rejected them because of their value and worth. The man who plucked out his own eyes held the same opinion about *them*.

[C] An abundance of children is a blessing for the commonest and healthiest sort of men; for me and for some others it is an equal blessing not to have any. And when Thales is asked why he does not get married, he replies that he does not want to leave any descendants.

That our opinion is what gives things their value is seen by the many things that we evaluate while attending not to *them* but only to ourselves. We consider neither their qualities nor their uses but only what it cost us to procure them—as if that were a part of their substance. What we call their 'value' is not what they bring but what we bring to them. A propos of that, I note that we are careful accountants of our expenditure. Our value for a thing is tied to what it cost us, and our opinion will never let it be undervalued. The purchase ·price· gives value to the diamond, difficulty to virtue, pain to piety, and bitterness to medicine.

[B] To achieve **poverty** one man threw his money into the same sea that others ransack to fish out riches. Epicurus says that wealth changes our troubles but does not lessen them. Indeed it is not want that produces avarice but abundance. I want to report my experience in this matter.

(i) Since I left childhood I have lived in three kinds of situation. Through the first period (which lasted nearly twenty years) I had only a sporadic income, dependent on the orders of other people and on their help, with no security and no rules. I spent my money all the more easily and cheerfully because it was at the hazard of fortune. I have never lived better. I never found my friends' purses closed to me, since I had instructed myself to put first among all my needs the need to pay back loans on the agreed date. Seeing the efforts I made to do this, my friends extended the terms a thousand times; so I repaid them with a thrifty honesty that was not quite straightforward. It is in my nature to get a sensuous pleasure from paying my debts, as though I were freeing my shoulders from a burdensome weight and from the image of slavery that goes with it; and there is also a gentle satisfaction in doing the right thing and in satisfying others. I make an exception for repayments that involve haggling and bargaining; if I cannot find someone to take charge of them for me I shamefully and harmfully put off such payments as long as I can, for fear of the sort of quarrel that is totally incompatible with my temperament and my way of speaking. There is nothing I hate like bargaining. It is a pure exchange of trickery and effrontery: after an hour of arguing and haggling, each side goes back on his word and his oaths to gain five sous more. So I was always at a disadvantage in borrowing; having no heart to make my request in person, I ran the risk of applying on paper—an approach that is not forceful and makes refusal much easier. Arrangements for my needs I consigned light-heartedly to the stars—more freely than I have since consigned them to my own foresight and good sense.

Most thrifty people regard living in such uncertainty as horrible, not realising **(a)** that most people do live like that. How many honourable men have thrown all their security overboard, and still do so every day, seeking the wind of royal favour and of fortune! Caesar took out an unsecured loan of a million in gold in order to become Caesar.

And how many merchants begin trading by selling up their agricultural estates and dispatching it all to the Indies 'across so many raging seas!' [Catullus]. And in the present drought of devotion we have thousands and thousands of religious communities that easily do without it, looking to the bounty of heaven to provide what they need for dinner.

They also do not realise **(b)** that this certainty that they rely on is hardly less uncertain and chancy than chance itself. From behind an income of two thousand crowns I see misery as close as if I were running right into it. For, besides the fact that

> fate has the means •to make a hundred breaches for poverty to find a way into our riches, [C] there often being no intermediate state between the highest and the lowest fortunes ('Fortune is glass: it glitters, then it shatters' [Publilius Syrus]), and [B] •to turn all our defences and ramparts topsy-turvy,

I find that for various reasons poverty makes a home with those who have possessions as often as with those who have none; and that it is perhaps less troublesome when it is alone than when it is encountered accompanied by riches. [C] Riches are more a matter of careful living than of income: 'Each man is the maker of his own fortune' [Sallust]. [B] And a rich man who is worried, hard up and over-busy seems to me more wretched than one who is simply poor. [C] 'Poverty amid riches is the most grievous form of want' [Seneca]. The greatest and richest of princes are regularly driven by poverty and lack of cash to extreme measures; for what is more extreme than becoming tyrants and unjustly usurping the property of their subjects?

[B] **(ii)** My second situation was to have money. When this happened I soon set aside savings that were considerable for a man in my circumstances; because I •counted as a man's *possessions* only what is over and above his ordinary expenses and •thought that one should not count on what one hopes to get, however clear that hope may be. 'For what if such-and-such a mishap occurred,' I said, 'and took me by surprise?' And in the wake of these vain and pernicious imaginings I put my brain to work using my savings to provide against all emergencies; and if anyone maintained that the number of emergencies was too infinite, I could reply that if I wasn't secure against all I was secure against some, *many*. None of this happened without painful anxiety. [C] I made a secret of it: I, who venture to talk so much about myself, only told lies about my money—like rich people who make out to be poor and poor ones who make out to be rich, dispensing their consciences from ever speaking truthfully about what they own; a ridiculous and shameful prudence!

[B] Going on a journey, I never thought I was adequately provided for. The more loaded I was with money the more loaded I was with fear: wondering whether the roads were safe, and then about the trustworthiness of the men in charge of my baggage (like others that I know, I was only sure enough about my baggage when I had it before my eyes). When I left my strong-box at home, how many suspicions I had, how many thoughts that were thorny and, worse, incommunicable! My mind was always turned in that direction. [C] When you add it all up, there is more trouble in keeping money than in getting it. [B] And if I did not actually do all the things I have spoken of, there was a cost to me in stopping myself from doing them.

My affluence gave me little or nothing: [C] I had more to spend, but spending weighed no less heavily on me, [B] because, as Bion used to say, having a hair pulled out is as annoying to a man with plenty of hair as to one who is nearly bald; once you have grown used to having a certain pile and set your fancy on it, it is no longer available to you; [C] you wouldn't dare to make a dent in it. [B] It strikes you as

a building that will fall to bits if you touch it. You will not cut into it unless necessity takes you by the throat. Back then I would pawn my clothes and sell a horse far less unwillingly and with less regret than I would have drawn on that beloved purse that I was keeping in reserve. But the danger lay in its not being easy to put definite limits on such desires ([C] limits are hard to find for things we think to be good) [B] and so to know when to stop saving. You go on making your pile bigger, increasing it from one sum to another until, like a peasant, you sordidly deprive yourself of the enjoyment of your own goods, standing guard over them and never actually using them. [C] If this is 'using' money, then the richest in cash are the guards on the walls and gates of a good city! To my way of thinking, any man with money is a miser.

Plato ranks physical or human goods in this order: health, beauty, strength, wealth. And wealth, he says, is not blind but extremely clear-sighted when enlightened by wisdom. [B] The younger Dionysius did a graceful thing in this connection. He was told that one of his Syracusans had hidden a treasure by burying it. He commanded the man to bring it to him, which he did, secretly keeping back a part of it which he went off to spend in another city. While there he lost his taste for hoarding and began to live more expensively. When Dionysius heard about this he had the remainder of the man's treasure returned to him, saying that he was welcome to have it now that he had learned how to use it.

I remained like this for [C] a few years; then some good daemon or other [B] pushed me out of it—most usefully, like the Syracusan—and scattered all my parsimony to the winds, when the pleasure of a certain very expensive journey forced that stupid notion to *dismount*.

(iii) That is how I have dropped into a third way of life which (I really do feel this) is certainly much more enjoyable and also more orderly; it consists in keeping my expenditures in step with my income; sometimes one pulls ahead, sometimes the other, but they are never far apart. I live from day to day, and content myself with having enough to meet my present and ordinary needs: extraordinary ones could not be met by all the provision in the world.

[The present version omits this paragraph's *four* shifts from [C] to [B] and back again.] And it is madness to look to fortune to arm us adequately against itself. We have to fight it with our own weapons. Fortuitous ones will let us down at the crucial moment. If I do save up now, it is only because I hope to use the money soon—not to buy lands that I have no use for, but to buy pleasure. 'Not being covetous is *money*; not being extravagant is *income*' [Cicero]. I have no fear, really, that my money will run out, and no desire to increase it. 'The fruit of riches consists in abundance; abundance is shown by having enough' [Cicero]. I am especially gratified that this amendment of life has come to me at an age that is naturally inclined to avarice, and that I see myself rid of this malady that is so common among the old and is the most ridiculous of all human manias.

[C] Pheraulas had experienced both kinds of fortune, and found that an increase in goods was not an increase in appetite for eating, drinking, sleeping or lying with his wife; and on the other hand he did feel the troubles of running his household pressing heavily on his shoulders (as it does on mine); so he decided to gratify a poor young man, a faithful friend, who was baying after riches; he made him a gift of all his own, which were great, as well as of everything that was daily coming in through the generosity of his good master Cyrus and also through the wars; on condition that the young man would maintain him and feed him as an honoured guest and friend. Thus they lived thereafter very happily and equally pleased with the change in their circumstances. That is a course I would love to imitate!

And I highly praise the situation of an old bishop whom I know to have so completely entrusted his purse, his income and his expenditures to a succession of chosen servants that for many long years he has known as little of the financial affairs of his own household as an outsider would. Trust in others' goodness is no slight testimony to one's own goodness, which is why God looks favourably on it. As for that bishop, I know no household that is run more worthily or more smoothly than his. Happy the man who has ordered his needs so appropriately that his wealth can satisfy them without his care and trouble, and without the spending and the gathering of his wealth interrupting his other pursuits that are better suited to him, quieter, and more congenial.

[B] So affluence or poverty depend on each man's opinion: wealth, fame and health have no more beauty and pleasure than he who has them lends to them. [C] Each man is as well or badly off as he thinks he is. A happy man is not one who is believed ·by others· to be so but one who himself believes he is so. And by that fact the belief acquires reality and truth.

Fortune does us neither good nor harm: it only offers us the matter and the seeds for good or harm, and our soul, more powerful than fortune is, moulds the matter or sows the seeds as it pleases. It alone causes and controls our happy or unhappy state. [B] Whatever comes to us from outside takes its savour and its colour from our inner constitution, just as our garments warm us not with their heat but with ours, which they are fitted to preserve and sustain. Shelter a cold body under them and they will help it preserve its coldness; that is how snow and ice are preserved.

[A] Indeed, just as •study is a torment to a lazy man, •abstinence from wine to a drunkard, •frugal living to a pleasure-lover, and •exercise to a languid idle man, so it is with the rest. Things are not so painful or difficult in themselves: our weakness and slackness makes them so. To judge great and lofty things we need a soul of the same calibre; otherwise we attribute to them faults that are our own. A straight oar seems bent in water. What matters is not just *that* one sees the thing but *how* one sees it.

Well then, why is it that among so many arguments that persuade men in various ways to despise death and to endure pain we never find one that applies to ourselves? And of all the many kinds of fancies that have persuaded others, why cannot each person find—and apply to himself—the one that best suits his own temperament? If a man cannot digest the strong purgative drug to root out the malady, let him at least take a palliative one to relieve it. [C] 'As much in pain as in pleasure, our opinions are trivial and womanish; when we have been melted and dissolved by wantonness, we cannot even endure the sting of a bee without making a fuss. The whole thing is to be master of yourself' [Cicero].

[A] For the rest, we do not evade philosophy by over-stressing the sharpness of pain and human frailty. For that will force philosophy to fall back on these unanswerable replies: •If it is bad to live in need, at least there is no need to live in need. [C] •No-one suffers long except by his own fault. •If a man has not the courage to endure either living or dying—if he has no will either to resist or to run away—what is to be done with him?

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[Essay 15 is a brief discussion of the (capital) punishments inflicted on soldiers who have continued defending their positions long after it became clear that they could not succeed. It ends: '[B] Above all, then, you must avoid (if you can) falling into the hands of a judge who is your enemy, victorious and armed.']

16. Punishing cowardice

[A] I once heard a prince [see Glossary], a very great general, maintain that a soldier could not be condemned to death for faint-heartedness; he was at table, being told about the trial of the seigneur de Vervins who was sentenced to death for having surrendered Boulogne.

In truth it is right to make a great distinction between faults that come from our weakness and those that come from our wickedness. In the latter we deliberately brace ourselves against the rules of reason that nature has imprinted on us; in the former it seems we could call on nature itself to speak for us, having left us so weak and imperfect. That is why many people have thought that only what we do against our conscience can be held against us. On this rule is partly based the opinion of those who condemn the capital punishment of heretics and misbelievers, and the opinion that a lawyer or a judge cannot be blamed for failures in duty that come from ignorance.

As for cowardice, it is certain that the commonest way to punish it is by shame and ignominy. It is said that this rule was first introduced by the legislator Charondas, and that before him the laws of Greece condemned to death those who had fled from battle. He ordered merely that they be made to sit for three days in the public square dressed in women's clothes, hoping he could still make use of them once he had restored their courage by this shame. 'Bring a bad man's blood to his cheeks rather than shedding it' [Tertullian].

[A] It seems too that in ancient times Roman laws condemned deserters to death. For Ammianus Marcellinus says that the Emperor Julian was 'following the ancient laws' when he condemned ten of his soldiers, who had turned away from a charge against the Parthians, to be stripped of their rank and then to suffer death. Yet elsewhere for a similar fault he condemns others merely to be held among the prisoners under the ensign in charge of the baggage. [C] The Roman people's harsh punishment of soldiers who had fled at Cannae, and of those who in that war followed Gnaeus Fulvius in his defeat, did not go so far as death.

Yet it is to be feared that shame will make men desperate, turning them not merely into estranged friends but into enemies.

[A] In our fathers' time the seigneur de Franget. . . ., having surrendered Fuentarabia (of which he was governor) to the Spaniards, was sentenced to be deprived of his nobility, and he and his descendants were declared to be commoners, liable to taxation and unfit to bear arms. . . . Later all the noblemen who were in Guise when the Count of Nassau entered it suffered a similar punishment; and subsequently others still.

At all events, if there were a case of ignorance or cowardice that was so flagrant and obvious that it went beyond all the ordinary examples, it would be right to take that as sufficient proof of wickedness and malice and to punish it as such.

17. A thing that certain ambassadors do

[A] On my travels, in order to be always learning something from conversations with others (which is one of the best schools there can be), I maintain this practice: I always steer those with whom I am talking back to the subjects they know best. 'Let the sailor talk only of the winds, the farmer of oxen, the soldier of his wounds, the herdsman of his cattle' [Propertius, quoted by Montaigne in an Italian translation].

For what usually happens is the opposite of that, with

each man choosing to hold forth about someone else's occupation rather than his own, reckoning that this will increase his reputation; witness Archidamus's reproach to Periander, that he was abandoning the glory of a good doctor to acquire that of a bad poet.

[C] See how broadly Caesar spreads himself to make us understand his ingenuity in building bridges and siege-machines, and how narrowly he goes when talking of the functions of his profession, his valour, his handling of his army. His exploits sufficiently testify to his being an excellent general; he wants to be known as an excellent engineer, a somewhat different matter.

The other day a professional jurist was taken to see a library furnished with every sort of book including many kinds of legal ones. He had nothing to say about them. But he stopped to make blunt and lordly comments on a defence-work at the head of the library's spiral staircase; yet a hundred officers and soldiers came across it every day without comment or displeasure.

The elder Dionysius was a great leader in battle, as befitted his rank, but he laboured to be famed principally for his poetry—about which he knew nothing. [A] 'The lumbering ox wants the saddle; the horse wants the plough' [Horace].

[C] Going that way you will never achieve anything worthwhile. [A] So we should always make the architect, the painter, the shoemaker etc. stay on the track of his own quarry. A propos of that: in my reading of histories (an activity that is everyone's business) I make it a habit to attend to who the authors are:

- if they are persons whose only profession is writing I chiefly learn style and language from them;
- if they are medical men I am more willing to believe what they tell us about the climate, the health and constitution of princes, wounds and illnesses;
- if they are legal theorists we should accept what they say about legal controversies, laws, the bases of systems of government and the like;
- if theologians, church affairs, ecclesiastical censures, dispensations and marriages;
- if courtiers, manners and ceremonies;
- if warriors, whatever concerns war and chiefly detailed accounts of great actions at which they were present in person;
- if ambassadors, intrigues, understandings or negotiations, and how they were conducted.

The last of those are matters with which the seigneur de Langey was very well informed; which is why I noted and weighed in his history something I would have passed over in another's. He reports on the *edifying* remonstrances made by the Emperor Charles V to the Roman Consistory in the presence of our ambassadors the bishop of Mâcon and the seigneur du Velly. They included several outrageous remarks addressed to us.

> Among other things •the emperor declared that if his own officers and soldiers had been no more loyal or skilled in warfare than our king's were, he would have put a halter around his own neck and gone to beg our king for mercy. (It seems he may have to some extent meant this, for he said it again two or three times since then.) •He then challenged our king to single combat, with sword or poniard, in a boat, wearing only a doublet.

[This essay now starts to fit Montaigne's title for it!] The seigneur de Langey, continuing his history, adds that when these two ambassadors sent their dispatch to the king, they disguised most of it and even hid the preceding two items from him.

Now I found it very strange that an ambassador should have the power to *select* what he should tell his master,

especially in material of such importance, coming from such a person, and spoken in such a large assembly. I would have thought that the servant's duty is fully and faithfully to report events just as they occurred, leaving it to his master to arrange, judge and select for himself. Altering or hiding the truth from someone out of fear that he might take it otherwise than he should and be pushed by it into some bad course of action, meanwhile leaving him ignorant of his own affairs—I would have thought that this was for the lawgiver and not the subject, for the appointed guardian and the schoolmaster and not to someone who ought to consider himself as being on a lower level not merely in authority but also in prudence and good judgment. Be that as it may, I would not care to be served in that way in my little affairs.

[C] We are so eager to find some pretext for getting out from under command and usurp mastery—it is so natural for each person to aspire to freedom and authority—that to a superior no quality should be dearer in those who serve him than simple, straightforward obedience.

The function of command is corrupted when we obey at our discretion not from subordination. When Publius Crassus (the one the Romans considered to be 'five-times blessed') was consul in Asia, he wrote to a Greek engineer ordering him to bring him the larger of two ship's masts he had seen in Athens for some battering machine he wanted to make. The engineer, on the strength of his scientific knowledge, allowed himself to choose otherwise, bringing the smaller one which was more suitable according to the rules of his craft. After listening patiently to his reasons, Crassus had him well whipped, putting the interests of discipline ahead of those of the work.

On the other hand, one might think that such strict obedience is appropriate only to precise orders previously given. Ambassadors have a freer commission, much of which depends ultimately on their own judgment; they do not simply carry out their master's will, but shape it and direct it by their counsel. In my time I have seen persons in authority reprimanded for having followed the king's dispatches to the letter rather than adapting them to local circumstances. Men of understanding still condemn the practice of the kings of Persia who used to break down their orders to their agents and representatives into such fine detail that they had to be consulted for rulings on the most trivial matters; this slowed things down, and that—over so wide an empire—often did notable harm to their affairs.

As for Crassus, when he told the specialist what the mast was to be used for, did he not seem to be consulting his judgment and inviting him to use his own discretion?

18. Fear

[A] 'I stood stunned; my hair stood on end and my voice stuck in my throat' [Virgil].

I am not much of a 'naturalist' (that is the term they use); I have hardly any idea of the springs that drive fear in us; but anyway it is a strange passion, and the doctors say that no passion more readily carries our judgement away from its proper seat. Indeed, I have seen many men driven out of their minds by fear, and while fear lasts it creates terrible bewilderment in the most stable men.

I leave aside simple folk, for whom fear sometimes conjures up visions of their great-grandfathers rising from their tombs still wrapped in their shrouds, of werewolves, goblins or chimeras. But even among *soldiers*, where fear ought to occur less, how often it has changed a flock of sheep into a squadron of knights in armour! reeds and rushes into men-at-arms and lancers! our friends into our enemies!

a white cross into a red one!

[Now **two** anecdotes about standard-bearers: one was so overcome by fear that he rushed out towards the enemy, and came to himself just in time to scuttle back to safety; the other did something similar and was not so lucky. Then:] And in the same siege there was a memorable case when the heart of a certain nobleman was so strongly seized, held and frozen by fear that he dropped dead in the breach without a wound.

[B] A similar fear sometimes takes hold of a whole multitude. In one of the engagements between Germanicus and the Allemani, two large troops of soldiers took fright and fled opposite ways, one going to the place the other had just left.

[A] Sometimes fear puts wings on our heels, as in the first **two** examples; at others it hobbles us and nails our feet to the ground. This happened to the Emperor Theophilus in a battle he lost against the Agarenes; we read that he was so stunned and paralysed that he could not make up his mind to flee—[B] 'so much is fear afraid even of help' [Quintus Curtius]—[A] until Manuel, one of the principal commanders in his army, tugged and shook him as though rousing him from a deep sleep, and said 'If you do not follow me I will kill you; for it is better for you to lose your life than as a prisoner to lose the empire.'

[C] Fear expresses its utmost force when in its own service it throws us back on the courage that it has snatched away from our duty and our honour. In the first pitched battle that the Romans lost to Hannibal during the consulship of Sempronius, a body of at least ten thousand infantrymen took fright and, seeing no other way to make their cowardly escape, fought their way through the thick of the enemy, driving right through them with by a wonderful effort, with great slaughter of Carthaginians, buying a shameful flight for the price they would have paid for a glorious victory.

What I have most fear of is fear.

In harshness it surpasses all other disorders. . . . Men who have been mauled in a military engagement, still all wounded and bloody, can be brought back to the attack the following day. But those who have a healthy fear of the enemy cannot be brought even to look at them again. People with a pressing fear of losing their property, or of being driven into exile or enslaved, live in constant anguish, going without drink, food, and sleep. Whereas paupers, exiles and slaves often enjoy life as much as anyone else. And ever so many people, unable to endure the stabbing pains of fear, have hanged themselves, drowned themselves or jumped to their deaths, showing us that fear is even more unwelcome and more unbearable than death.

The Greeks recognise another sort of fear that does not come from any failure of our reason but, they say, comes without any apparent cause from some celestial impulsion. Whole peoples have been seized by it, and whole armies. Such was the fear that brought amazing desolation to Carthage. Nothing was heard but shouts and terrified voices; people were seen dashing out of their houses as if an alarm had been sounded, attacking, wounding and killing each other as though they were enemies coming to occupy their city. All was disorder and tumult until they calmed the anger of their gods with prayer and sacrifice. Such outbursts are called 'panic terrors'.

19. That we should not be deemed happy until after our death

'You must always await a man's last day: no-one should be called happy before his death and last funeral rites' [Ovid].

There is a story about this that children know: King

Croesus, having been captured by Cyrus and condemned to death, he cried out as he awaited execution 'O Solon, Solon!' This was reported to Cyrus who asked what it meant and was given to understand that Croesus was now encountering, at his cost, a warning Solon had once given him, namely

> that men, no matter how fortune may smile on them, can never be called happy until they have been seen to pass through the last day of their life, because of the uncertainty and variability of human affairs, which the slightest shift changes from one state to an entirely different one.

That is why Agesilaus replied to someone who called the King of Persia happy because he had come very young to such a powerful estate, 'Yes: but Priam was not wretched when he was that age.' Kings of Macedonia (successors to Alexander the Great) become cabinet-makers and clerks in Rome; tyrants of Sicily become schoolmasters in Corinth; a conqueror of half the world and commander of many armies becomes a wretched suppliant to the worthless officials of a king of Egypt (that is what it cost Pompey the Great to add five or six months to his life). And in our fathers' time Ludovico Sforza, tenth duke of Milan, who had kept all Italy unsettled for so many years, died a prisoner at Loches—but after living there for ten years, which was the worst part of his bargain. [C] The fairest queen, widow of the greatest king in Christendom—·Mary Queen of Scots·—has she not just died by the hand of an executioner? Unworthy and barbarous cruelty! [A] And many other examples.

For it seems that just as storms and tempests rage against the pride and arrogance of our buildings, there are also spirits above us that envy any greatness here below. 'Some hidden force topples the affairs of men, trampling the gleaming rods and fierce axes, all that speaks of human eminence, and laughs them all to scorn' [Lucretius]. And it seems that fortune sometimes lies in ambush for the last day of our life, in order to display its power by overturning in a moment what it had built up over many years, and to make us echo Laberius's cry 'Truly this day I have lived one day longer than I should have' [Macrobius].

Solon's good advice could reasonably be understood in that way. But given that

> he is a philosopher, one of those for whom fortune's favours and disfavours do not rank as happiness or unhappiness, and for whom grandeurs, riches and powers are non-essential properties that hardly count for anything,

I think that he was probably looking beyond that, and that he meant that happiness in life—depending as it does on the tranquility and contentment of a well-born spirit and on the resolution and assurance of an orderly soul—should never be attributed to a man until we have seen him act out the last scene in his play, which is indubitably the hardest. Throughout all the rest of life it may be that

- we are wearing an actor's mask, or
- those fine philosophical arguments are nothing but a pose, or
- events that do not touch us to the quick give us a chance to keep our face still composed.

But in that last scene played between death and ourselves there is no more pretending; we must talk plain French; we must show whatever is good and clean at the bottom of the pot: 'Only then are true words uttered from deep in our breast. The mask is ripped off; reality remains' [Lucretius].

That is why all the other actions in our life must be tried on the touchstone of this final episode. It is the master-day, the day that judges all the others; it is (says one of the ancients [Seneca]) the day that should judge all my past years. I leave it to death [here = 'my dying'] to test the fruits of my

studies. That will show whether my reasonings come from my mouth or from my heart.

[B] I know of several men who by their death gave a good or bad reputation to their entire life. Scipio, Pompey's father-in-law, redressed by a good death the poor opinion people had had of him until then. Epaminondas, asked which of the three—Chabrias, Iphicrates or himself—he admired most, replied 'Before deciding that you must see us die.' Indeed, you would rob him of a great deal if you weighed his worth without the honour and greatness of his end.

God has willed it as he pleased; but in my own times three of the most execrable and infamous men I have known in every abomination of life had deaths that were ordered and perfectly composed in all respects.

[C] Some deaths are fine and fortunate. I knew a man whose thread of life was progressing towards a brilliant career that was in full flower when it was snapped; his end was so splendid that in my opinion his ambitious and courageous designs had nothing as lofty about them as their interruption. Without *going* there he *reached* the goal he aimed at, more grandly and gloriously than he had desired or hoped for. His fall took him beyond the power and reputation towards which his course aspired.

[B] When judging another's life I always look to see how its end was borne; and one of my main concerns for my own is that it be borne well—that is, without fuss or noise.

20. Philosophising is learning to die

[A] Cicero says that philosophising is nothing other than getting ready to die. That is because study and contemplation draw our soul somewhat outside ourselves, keeping it occupied away from the body, a state that is a kind of apprenticeship for death and even resembles it. Or it is because all the wisdom and argument in the world eventually come down to this one point—to teach us not to be afraid to die.

In truth, either reason does not care either way or its only target should be our happiness, and all its work should be to make us live well and at our ease, as Holy Scripture says. All the opinions in the world agree on this—[C] that pleasure is our goal—[A] though they take different routes to it; otherwise they would be thrown out right away, for who would listen to someone whose goal was pain and discomfort for us?

[C] The quarrels among the philosophical sects about this are verbal. 'Let us skip over such frivolous trivialities' [Seneca]. There is more stubbornness and nagging ·in them· than is appropriate for such a dedicated profession. But whatever role a man undertakes to play he always plays the role of *himself* along with it.

[One dominant meaning of the word *volupté* is 'sexual pleasure'. This is presumably 'the lower one' that Montaigne will speak of. You'll see why the word is left untranslated.] Whatever they say, even in virtue our ultimate aim is *volupté*. I enjoy assaulting their ears with that word, which runs so strongly against their grain. When it means the most profound delight and excessive contentment, virtue is a better companion for it than anything else is. This *volupté* is no less seriously voluptuous for being more lusty, taut, robust and manly. We ought to have given it [i.e. virtue] the more favourable, sweet and natural name 'pleasure', rather than (as we have done) a name derived from *vigour*.

As for that other *volupté*, the lower one, which if it deserved that fine name should have won it in a competition rather than merely being handed it: I find it less free of drawbacks and obstacles than virtue is. Apart from the fact that its enjoyment is more momentary, elusive, and weak,

it has its vigils, its fasts, and its hardships, its sweat and blood. It also has so many different sorts of sufferings, and is accompanied by a satiety so heavy that it feels like penance.

We are thoroughly mistaken when ·in connection with this pleasure· we reckon

- that obstacles serve as a spur and a spice to its sweetness, as in nature things are enhanced by their contraries,

and also when we turn to virtue and say

- similar consequences and difficulties oppress it, making it austere and inaccessible.

In fact, they ennoble, sharpen and enhance the divine and perfect pleasure that virtue provides for us, much more thoroughly than they enhance *volupté*. Someone who weighs what he can get out of virtue against what it will cost him to be virtuous is clearly quite unworthy of an acquaintance with virtue, knowing neither its graces nor its use. Those who go on teaching us that the quest after it is rugged and wearisome whereas the enjoyment of it is agreeable—what are they saying but that it is always disagreeable? For what human means have ever brought anyone to the enjoyment of having it? The most perfect of men have been satisfied with aspiring to virtue—drawing near to it without possessing it. But they—·i.e. those who go on teaching us etc.·—are wrong, because with every pleasure known to man the mere pursuit of it is pleasurable. The undertaking is tinctured by the quality of the object it has in view; it is a large proportion of that object and is inseparable from it. The happiness and blessedness that shine in virtue fill everything that is related to it and all the routes to it, right back to the first way in, the very entrance.

Now, one of virtue's principal benefits is disdain for death. If we have this, it provides our life with a gentle tranquility, giving us a pure and friendly enjoyment of it; if we do not have it, every other pleasure is snuffed out. [A] That is why all the rules meet and agree at this one point. [C] And though they also lead us by common accord to despise pain, poverty and the other misfortunes human lives are subject to, they do not do so with the same care. That is partly because such misfortunes are not inevitable (most of mankind spend their lives without tasting poverty, and some without experiencing pain or sickness, like Xenophilus the musician, who reached the age of 106 in good health), and partly because at worst death can end our misfortunes whenever we like. But as for death itself, that is inevitable. [B] 'We are all forced down the same road. Our fate, shaken in the dice-cup, will be thrown out sooner or later, sending us into everlasting exile via Charon's boat' [Horace]. [A] So if death makes us afraid, that is a subject of continual torment which nothing can alleviate. [C] There is no place where death may not come to us. We may continually twist our head this way and that as in suspicious territory: 'It is like the rock for ever hanging over the head of Tantalus' [Cicero]. [A] Our law courts often send prisoners to be executed at the scene of their crimes. On the way there, take them past fine houses and ply them with good cheer as much as you like,. . . .do you think they can enjoy it? and that having the final purpose of their journey steadily before their eyes won't have changed and spoiled their taste for such entertainment? 'He hears it as it comes, counts the days; the length of his life is the length of those roads. He is tortured by fear of what is to come' [Claudian].

[A] The goal of our journey is death, the necessary object of our aim; if it frightens us how can we possibly go one step forward without anguish? The common herd's remedy is not to think about it; but what brutish stupidity can produce so gross a blindness? They lead the donkey by the tail, 'walking forward with their heads turned backwards' [Lucretius].

No wonder that they often get caught in a trap! You can frighten such people simply by mentioning death—most of them cross themselves as when the devil is named. And since death is mentioned in wills, don't expect those folk to write one up until the doctor has pronounced the death-sentence. And then, between pain and terror, God only knows with what good judgement they will concoct it!

[B] Because this syllable 'death' struck their ears too roughly—it was thought to bring ill-luck—the Romans learned to soften it or spread it out in periphrases. Instead of 'He is dead' they said 'He has ceased to live' or 'He has lived'. They found consolation in living, even in a past tense!. . . .

[A] Perhaps it is true, as the saying goes, that the delay is worth the money. I was born between eleven and noon on the last day of February 1593. . . .; just two weeks ago I turned 39, and I need at least that long again. In the meantime it would be folly to be troubled by the thought of something so far off. After all, young and old leave life on the same terms. [C] No-one goes out otherwise than as though he had just come in; [A] and no-one is so decrepit that he does not—seeing Methuselah ahead of him—think he has another twenty years left in his body. Poor fool that you are! Who has assured you of the term of your life? You are relying on doctors' tales; look rather at facts and experience. As things usually go, you have been extraordinarily lucky to live as long as you have. You have already exceeded the usual term of life; to prove it, just count how many more of your acquaintances have died before reaching your present age than have reached it. And even for people who have ennobled their lives by fame—make a list of them and I'll wager that we shall find more who died before 35 than after. It is completely reasonable and pious to take the example of the humanity of Jesus Christ: his life ended at 33. So did that of Alexander, the greatest man who was simply a man.

Death can surprise us in so many ways! 'No man knows what dangers he should avoid from one hour to another' [Horace]. [Montaigne now gives a page of examples of famous deaths that occurred in surprising ways or at surprising times, ending with the death of his brother Arnaud:] He died at the age of 23 while playing tennis; he was struck by a ball just above the right ear. There was no sign of bruising or of a wound; he did not even sit down or take a rest; yet five or six hours later he was dead from an apoplexy caused by that blow. When such frequent and ordinary examples as these pass before our eyes, how can we ever rid ourselves of thoughts of death, or stop imagining that death has us by the collar at every moment?

You will say 'But what does it matter how it comes, provided we do not worry about it?' I agree with that; and whatever way there is to shelter from blows—even under calf's skin—I am not the man to shrink from it. It is enough for me to spend my time contentedly. I take the best game I can give myself, however inglorious and unexemplary it may be: 'I would rather be a contented lunatic—with my faults pleasing me or at least deceiving me—than be a snarling wise man' [Horace]. But it is folly to think you can get through ·life· in that way. They go, they come, they trot, they dance: and never a word about death. All well and good; but when death does come—to them or to their wives, children, friends—surprising them unawares and unprepared, then what torments, what cries, what fury and what despair overwhelms them! Have you ever seen anything brought so low, so changed, so confused?

We should think about this earlier. This brutish nonchalance—even if it lodged in the head of an intelligent man (which I find quite impossible)—sells its wares too dearly. If it were an enemy that could be avoided, I would advise borrowing the arms of cowardice. But since that cannot be

done; since

> [B] death catches a coward on the run just as easily as an honourable man: [A] 'It hounds the man who runs away, and it does not spare the legs or fearful backs of unwarlike youth' [Horace],

[B] and since

> no tempered steel protects you: 'It is no use a man hiding cautiously behind iron or brass; death will make him stick out his cowering head' [Propertius],

[A] let us learn to stand firm and to fight it.

To begin removing death's greatest advantage over us, let us go the opposite way from the usual one. Let us remove its strangeness, get to know it, get used to it, have nothing as often in mind as death. At every moment let us picture it in our imagination in all its aspects. At the stumbling of a horse, the fall of a tile, the slightest pin-prick, let us immediately chew on the thought *what if that were death itself?* With that, let us brace ourselves and make an effort. In the midst of joy and feasting let our refrain be one that recalls our human condition, and let us never be carried away by pleasure so strongly that we fail to recall sometimes in how many ways our joys are subject to death and with how many clutches it threatens them. That is what the Egyptians did: in the midst of all their banquets and good cheer they would bring in a mummified corpse to serve as a warning to the guests. 'Believe that each day is your last; then each unexpected hour will be welcome indeed' [Horace].

It is uncertain where death awaits us; let us wait for it everywhere. Preparing for death is preparing for liberty. A man who has learned to die has unlearned being a slave. Knowledge of death frees us from all subjection and constraint. [C] Life has no evil for him who has thoroughly grasped that loss of life is not an evil. [A] Paulus Aemilius was sent a messenger by that miserable king of Macedon who was his prisoner, begging not to be led in his triumphant procession. He replied: 'Let him ask himself for that.'

The truth is that art and industry do not progress far unless nature lends a hand. I myself am not melancholy but dreamy; there is nothing I was ever concerned with more than images of death—even in the most licentious period of my life, [B] 'when blossoming youth rejoiced in the spring' [Catullus]. [A] Amid the women and the games, some thought I was standing apart chewing over some jealousy or the uncertainty of some hope, when I was actually reflecting on someone or other who a few days earlier had been overtaken by a burning fever, and by his end when leaving festivities just like these, his head full of idleness, love and merriment—just like me; ·thinking· that the same could be close to me. [B] 'It will soon be past, never to be recalled' [Lucretius].

[A] I did not wrinkle my forehead over that thought any more than over any other. It is impossible not to feel the sting of such ideas at first, but in handling them and running through them one eventually tames them—no doubt about that. Otherwise for my part I would be in continual fear and frenzy; for no man ever had less trust in his life, no man ever counted less on his life's duration. Up to now I have enjoyed robust good health almost uninterruptedly, but that does not lengthen my hopes for life any more than sickness shortens them. At every moment it seems to me that I am slipping away from myself. [C] And I constantly sing to myself the refrain 'Anything that can be done another day can be done today'. [A] In truth, risks and dangers do little or nothing to bring us nearer to our end. And if when one threat seems especially menacing we think how many other threats still hang over us, we shall realise that death is equally near when we are vigorous or feverish, at sea or at home, in battle or in repose. [C] 'No man is frailer than another, no man more

certain of the morrow' [Seneca]. [A] If I have only one hour's work to do before I die, I am not sure I have time to finish it.

The other day someone going through my notebooks found a memorandum about something I wanted done after my death. I told him truthfully though I was hale and healthy and only a league away from my house, I had hastened to write it there because I was not certain of reaching home. [C] As someone who broods over my thoughts and stores them up inside me, I am always about as well prepared as I can be; and the coming of death will teach me nothing new.

[A] We ought always to have our boots on and be ready to go, as far as we are up to it; above all we should take care to have no outstanding business with anyone else—'Why for such a brief span of life tease ourselves with so many projects?' [Horace]—for we shall have enough to do then without adding to it. One man complains less of death itself than of its interrupting the course of a fine victory; another, that he has to depart before marrying off his daughter or supervising the upbringing of his children; one laments ·losing· the company of his wife, another of his son, as chief comforts of his life.

[C] I am now, thank God, ready to move out whenever he pleases, regretting nothing whatsoever. I am disengaging on all sides; I have already half-said my adieus to everyone but myself. No man ever prepared to leave the world more simply and completely, or detached himself more comprehensively, than I plan to do. [B] '"Wretch that I am," they say, "one dreadful day has stripped me of all life's rewards"' [Lucretius]. [A] And the builder says: 'My work—huge battlements and walls—remains unfinished' [Virgil]. We ought not to plan anything that takes so long, at least not with the idea of flying into a passion if we cannot see it through to the end.

We are born for action: 'When death comes, let it find me at my work' [Ovid]. I want us to be doing things, [C] prolonging life's duties as much as we can; [A] and I want •death to find me planting my cabbages, not worrying about •it, still less about the unfinished gardening. I once saw a man die who at the end kept lamenting that the thread of the history he was writing was being cut at the fifteenth or sixteenth of our kings! [Linking with the [B]-tagged Lucretius quotation in the preceding paragraph:] [B] 'They never add that desire for such things does not linger on in one's remains!' [Lucretius].

[A] We should rid ourselves of these vulgar and harmful humours. Our graveyards have been located next to churches and in the busiest parts of town (says Lycurgus) so that common people, women and children should get used to seeing a dead man without panicking, and so that this continual spectacle of bones, tombs and funeral processions should remind us of our condition—

> [B] 'It was once the custom, moreover, to enliven feasts with human slaughter and to entertain guests with the cruel sight of gladiators fighting: they often fell among the goblets, flooding the tables with their blood' [Silius Italicus]

—[C] so too, after their festivities the Egyptians used to display before their guests a huge portrait of death, held up by a man crying 'Drink and be merry: once dead you will look like this'. [A] In the same spirit I always have death not only in my imagination but on my lips. There is nothing I inquire about more readily than how men have died: what they said, how they looked, what their bearing was; and there are no ·other· passages in the history books that I note as attentively. [C] That I have a particular liking for such matters is shown by how I cram in examples of them. If I were a maker of books I would make a register, with comments, of various deaths; he who would teach men to die would teach them to live. Dicearchus did write a book with some such title, but for another and less useful purpose.

[A] I will be told that the reality of death so far exceeds

our thought of it that any fine footwork ·in advance· will amount to nothing when we actually get there. Let them say so: thinking about death in advance certainly brings great advantages; and anyway, is it nothing to get at least that far without disturbance and fever? Furthermore, nature itself lends us its hand and gives us courage. For a short and violent death there is no time to feel afraid; if it is not like that, I have noticed that as an illness progresses I naturally slip into a kind of disdain for life. I find that willingness to die is harder to digest when I am in good health than when I am feverish, especially since I no longer hold so firmly to the pleasures of life once I begin ·through illness· to lose the use and enjoyment of them, and can look on death with far less fear. That leads me to hope that the further I get from good health and the nearer I approach to death the more easily I will exchange one for the other. Just as I have in several other contexts found the truth of Caesar's assertion that things often look bigger from afar than close up, I have found that illness frightened me more when I was well than when I felt ill. Being in a happy state, all pleasure and vigour, leads me to get the other state so out of proportion that I mentally increase all its discomforts by half and imagine them heavier than they prove to be when I have the burden of them on my shoulders. I hope it will be like that when I come to death.

[B] Let us see how, in those ordinary changes and declines that we suffer, nature prevents us from seeing our loss and decay. What does an old man retain of the vigour of his youth and of his earlier life? 'Alas, what little of life's portion remains with the aged!' [Maximianus]. [C] When a soldier of Caesar's guard, broken and worn out, came up to him in the street and asked leave to kill himself, Caesar looked at his decrepit bearing and said with a smile: 'So you think you are alive?' [The 'Caesar' who produced this brutal joke was Caligula.]

[B] If we were plunged ·into old age· all of a sudden, I do not think we could bear such a change. But nature leads us by the hand down a gentle almost imperceptible slope, little by little, one step at a time; it enfolds us in that wretched state and makes us at home in it. So we feel no jolt when youth dies in us, although that—in essence and in truth—is a harsher death than the total death of a languishing life or the death of old age. For the leap from a wretched existence to non-existence is not so cruel as the change from a sweet existence in full bloom to a grievous and painful existence.

[A] The body when bent and bowed has less strength for carrying burdens; so too for our soul. We must straighten and raise it against the assault of this adversary, ·death·. For the soul cannot be at peace while it remains afraid of death; but once it finds assurance it can boast of something that almost surpasses our human condition, namely that it is impossible for anxiety, anguish, fear or even the slightest dissatisfaction to lodge within it. [B] 'Nothing can shake such firmness: neither the threatening face of a tyrant, nor the south wind (that tempestuous master of the stormy Adriatic), nor even the mighty hand of thundering Jove' [Horace].

[A] The soul has come to be in charge of its passions and lusts, to dominate destitution, shame, poverty and all other injuries of fortune. Let us get this advantage, those of us who can; this is that true and sovereign freedom that enables us to thumb our noses at force and injustice and to laugh at prisons and chains: '"I will shackle your hands and feet and keep you under a cruel gaoler."—"God himself will set me free as soon as I ask him to." I think he means "I will die"; for death is the bottom line' [Horace].

Our religion has no surer human foundation than contempt for life. We are summoned to such contempt **not only** by rational argument—

- Why should we fear to lose something which, once lost, cannot be regretted?

•Since we are threatened by so many kinds of death is it not worse to fear them all than to bear one?[1]

—**but also** by Nature driving us that way. It says:

·START OF A SPEECH BY NATURE·

[Quotations in this are from Lucretius except where otherwise indicated. The speech as a whole is mainly from Lucretius, secondarily from Seneca.] Leave this world just as you entered it. The same passage from death to life that you once made without suffering or fear, make it again from life to death. Your death is one of the working parts of the order of the universe; it is a part of the life of the world: [B] 'Mortal creatures live lives dependent on each other; like runners in a relay they pass on the torch of life.' [A] Shall I change *for you* this beautiful interwoven structure? It is a condition of your being; death is a part of you; you are running away from yourselves. This existence that you enjoy is equally divided between death and life. The first day of your birth puts you on the path to death as well as to life: 'Our first hour gave us life and began to devour it' [Seneca]; 'In being born we die; the end depends on the beginning' [Manilius]. [C] You have stolen from life everything in your life; you live at life's expense. Your life's continual task is to build death. You are in death while you are in life, for when you are no longer in life you are *after* death. Or if you prefer this way of putting it: after life you are dead, but during life you are dying; and death touches the dying more harshly than the dead, more keenly and essentially.

[B] 'If you have profited from life, you have had your fill; go your way satisfied: 'Why not withdraw from life's feast like a well-fed guest?' If you have not known how to use life—if it was useless to you—what does losing it matter to you? What do you still want it for? 'Why seek to add more, just to lose it again, wretchedly, without joy?' [C] Life itself is neither good nor bad; it is where good and bad things find a place, depending on how you make it for them.

[A] And if you have lived a day, you have seen everything. One day equals all days. There is no other light, no other night. This sun, this moon, these stars, this arrangement of them—it is the very one that was enjoyed by your ancestors and will entertain your descendants: 'Your fathers saw no other; nor will your grandsons' [Manilius]. [A] And at the worst estimate, the division and variety of all the acts of my play

[1] Montaigne later inserted at this point a passage that splits 'not only. . . ' from 'but also'. Here it is: [C] Death is inevitable: does it matter when it comes? When Socrates was told that the thirty tyrants had condemned him to death he retorted, 'And nature, them!' What stupidity to torment ourselves over our passing into freedom from all torment! Just as our birth brought us the birth of all things, so our death will be the death of them all. So it is as stupid to weep because we shall not be alive a hundred years from now as to weep because we were not alive a hundred years ago. Death is the origin of another life. Just so did we weep, just so did we struggle against entering this life, just so did we strip off our former veil when we entered it. Nothing can be grievous that occurs only once. Is it reasonable to fear for such a long time something that lasts for such a short time? Long life, short life, death makes them one. For things that no longer exist are neither long nor short. Aristotle says that there are tiny animals on the river Hypanis that live for only a day. Those that die at 8 a.m. die in youth; those that die at 5 p.m. die in decrepitude. Which of us would not laugh to see anyone considering the happiness or unhappiness of this momentary span? Yet if we compare our own span against eternity or even against the duration of mountains, rivers, stars, trees or even some animals, then 'shorter' or 'longer' is equally ridiculous.

are complete in one year. If you have noticed the revolution of my four seasons they embrace the infancy, youth, manhood and old age of the world. It has played its part; it knows no trick other than to begin again. [B] 'We turn in the same circle, for ever.' 'And the year rolls around, following its own track' [Virgil]. [A] I have no plan to create new pastimes for you. 'For there is nothing else I can make or discover to please you: all things are the same forever.'

Make way for others as others did for you. [C] Equality is the principal part of equity. Who can complain of being included where all are included? And you will do yourself no good by going on living; it will not shorten the time you will stay dead. It is all for nothing; you will be in that state you fear just as long as if you had died at the breast: 'Triumph over time, and live as long as you please: eternal death will still be waiting for you.'

[B] And I shall arrange that you have no unhappiness. 'Do you not know that when death comes there will be no other *you* left alive to mourn you and stand over your corpse?' *You* will not desire the life that now you so much lament. 'Then no-one mourns his life or himself;. . . we feel no regret for our own being.' Death is less to be feared than *nothing*—if there were anything less than nothing: 'We should think death to be less—if anything is *less* than what we can see to be nothing at all.' [C] Death does not concern you, dead or alive; alive, because you exist; dead, because you no longer exist.

[A] No-one dies before his time; the time you leave behind was no more yours—and no more concerns you—than the time that passed before you were born: 'Look back and see that past eternities have been nothing to us.'

Wherever your life ends, it is all there. [C] The value of a life lies not in its length but in the use made of it. Some have lived long and lived little. Attend to it while you are in it. Whether you have lived enough depends not on the number of years but on your will. [A] 'Did you think you would never arrive at the place you were ceaselessly heading towards? [C] Yet every road has its end. [A] And if it comforts you to have company, is not the whole world keeping pace with you? 'All things will follow you when their life is done.'

[A] Does not everything move with your movement? Is there anything that does not grow old along with you? A thousand men, a thousand beasts, a thousand other creatures die at the same instant when you die. 'No night has ever followed day, no dawn has ever followed night, without hearing along with the wails of newborn infants the cries of pain attending death and sombre funerals.'

[C] Why do you recoil when you cannot retreat? You have seen enough men who were better off for dying, avoiding great miseries by doing so: but have you seen anyone who was worse off? How simple-minded it is to condemn something that neither you nor anyone else has experienced. [Nature here switches—for the rest of this paragraph and in the last paragraph of the speech—from *vous* addressing people in general to *tu* addressing an individual.] Why do you complain of me and of destiny? Do we do you wrong? Is it for you to govern us, or us you? You may not have finished your stint but you have finished your life. A short man is a complete man, like a tall one. Neither men nor their lives are measured by the ell.

Chiron refused immortality when he was told of its characteristics by his father Saturn, the god of time and of duration. Think about having a life that lasted for ever—how much less bearable and more painful it would be for man than the life I have given him! If you did not have death, you would constantly curse me for depriving you of it. Seeing what advantages death holds, I have deliberately mixed a little anguish into it to stop you from embracing it too greedily and injudiciously. To lodge you in the moderation that I ask of you—neither fleeing life nor fleeing death—I have tempered

each of them between sweetness and bitterness.

I taught Thales, the first of your sages, that living and dying were matters of indifference; so that when asked why he did not die he very wisely replied 'Because it makes no difference.'

Water, earth, air and fire and the other parts of this structure of mine are no more instruments of your life than instruments of your death. Why are you afraid of your last day? It brings you no closer to your death than any other did. The last step does not create fatigue; it reveals it. All days lead toward death; the last one gets there.

·END OF NATURE'S SPEECH·

[A] Those are the good counsels of our mother, Nature.

I have often pondered how it happens that the face of death, seen in ourselves or in others, appears incomparably less terrifying to us in war than in our own homes—otherwise armies would consist of doctors and weepers!—and why, given that death is always the same, there is always more assurance ·against it· among village-folk and the lower orders than among all the rest. I truly believe that what frightens us more than death itself are those dreadful faces and trappings with which we surround it; a quite new way of life; mothers, wives and children weeping; visits from people dazed and benumbed; the presence of a number of pale and tear-stained servants; a room without daylight; lighted candles; our bedside besieged by doctors and preachers; in short, all about us horror and terror. Look at us—already shrouded and buried! Children are afraid even of their friends when they see them masked. So are we. We should rip the masks off things as well as off people. When it is off, we shall find underneath only that same death that a valet or chambermaid got through recently without fear. Blessed the death that leaves no time for preparing such ceremonies!

21. The power of the imagination

[A] 'A strong imagination creates the event', as the scholars say. I am one of those who experience the strength of the imagination. Everyone is hit by it, but some are bowled over. [C] It cuts a deep impression into me; I lack the power to resist it; so my skill consists in avoiding it, living among people who are healthy and cheerful. The sight of others' sufferings produces physical suffering in me; and my feelings are often taken over by the feelings of someone else. A persistent cougher irritates my lungs and my throat. I visit less willingly the sick to whom duty directs me than those towards whom I am less attentive and concerned. When I attend to a disease I catch it and install it within myself. I do not find it strange that imagination brings fevers and death to those who give it a free hand and encourage it.

Simon Thomas was a great doctor in his time. I remember that, encountering me at the home of a rich old consumptive and discussing with his patient ways to cure his illness, told him that one of these would be to provide occasions for *me* to enjoy his company, and that

> he could then fix his eyes on the freshness of my countenance and his thoughts on the overflowing cheerfulness and vigour of my young manhood; by filling all his senses with the flower of my youth, his condition might improve.

But he forgot to say that mine might get worse.

[A] Gallus Vibius so strained his soul to understand the essence and impulses of insanity that he dragged his own judgement off its seat and could never get it back again; and could boast of having become mad through wisdom.

There are some who through fear forestall the hand of their executioners; one man was being unbound on the scaffold so that his pardon could be read to him, when he fell

dead on the scaffold, struck down solely by his imagination. When our imaginations strike, we sweat, we tremble, we grow pale or flush crimson; and reclining in our feather-beds we feel our bodies agitated by them, sometimes to the point of expiring. And boiling youth, fast asleep, grows so hot in the harness that it consummates its sexual desires in a dream. 'So that, as though they had actually completed the act, they pour great floods and pollute their garments' [Lucretius].

[Now some anecdotes about imagination leading to a man growing horns, to women turning into men, and to various events—e.g. the stigmata of St Francis of Assisi—taken to be miracles. Montaigne continues:] It is likely that the credit given to miracles, visions, enchantments and such extraordinary events mainly comes from the power of the imagination acting chiefly on the more malleable souls of the common people. Their credence has been so strongly gripped that they think they see what they do not see.

I am moreover of the opinion that those comic bonds that our society thinks itself to be so held back by that nothing else is talked of are probably effects of apprehension and fear.[1] For I know by experience that a man I can vouch for as though he were myself—a man against whom there is no suspicion of sexual inadequacy or being under any spell—heard a friend tell of an extraordinary impotence that struck him just when he could least afford it; and then, on a similar occasion, the horror of this story struck his own imagination so harshly that he incurred a similar fate. [C] And from then on he was subject to relapses, this ugly memory of his mishap nagging him and tyrannising over him. He found some remedy for this *rêverie* [see Glossary] in another *rêverie*: he openly admitted to this infirmity in advance, thereby relieving the tension in his soul. Through his announcing this trouble as something to be expected, his sense of responsibility grew less and weighed less heavily upon him. When he had a chance of his own choosing—with his mind unencumbered and relaxed and his body in good trim—to have his bodily powers first tested, then seized, then surprised with a partner who knew what was going on, he was clean cured. A man is never incapable, unless from genuine impotence, with a woman with whom he has once been capable.

[A] This mishap is to be feared only in enterprises where our soul is immoderately tense with desire and respect, especially when the opportunity is unexpected and pressing. There is no way of recovering from this trouble. I know one man who found it useful to bring to it a body already partly satisfied elsewhere, [C] in order to quieten the ardour of this frenzy; and this man as he grows older is, though less potent, also less impotent.

[Now a long, tiresome story about a friend of Montaigne's who was worried about wedding-night impotence, and whom Montaigne helped with an elaborate pretence of magical aid. He concludes:] It was a sudden odd whim that led me to do this deed, which is foreign to my nature. I oppose all subtle pretence, and hate sleight of hand, whether recreational or for profit. If the action is not bad, the route to it is.

Amasis, king of Egypt, married Laodice, a very beautiful Greek girl. He was a pleasant companion in every other way, but fell short when it came to enjoying her; he thought that witchcraft had been at work, and threatened to kill her. As is usual in matters of fantasy, she referred him to religion; and having made his vows and prayers to Venus he found that

[1] This refers to the practice of knotting to a wedding ring a strip of material that was supposed to have the effect of preventing a consummation of the marriage until the knot was untied. [Note taken from the Cotton/Hazlitt edition of the work.]

very night, after his sacrificial oblations, that he had been divinely restored.

Women are wrong to greet us with those threatening, quarrelsome and coy countenances that extinguish us in setting fire to us. Pythagoras's daughter-in-law used to say that a woman who goes to bed with a man should take off her modesty with her skirt and put it on again with her petticoat. [A] The assailant's soul, troubled by many different alarms, is easily dismayed. And when imagination has once made a man suffer this shame—which it does only in those first encounters, because they are more boiling and eager and also because in this first intimacy the man is most afraid of failing—this occurrence then puts him into a feverish moodiness which persists on later occasions.

[C] Married men, who have plenty of time, should not press their undertaking, should not try it out if they are not ready. It is better to

> fail indecently to use the marriage-bed, full as it is of feverish agitation, waiting for a more private and less challenging opportunity ·when there are not wedding-guests in the next room·

than to

> fall into perpetual wretchedness by being struck with despair by the first refusal ·of the penis to become erect·.

Before taking possession, the patient man should try himself out and offer himself lightly, by little sallies at different times, without bringing pride and obstinacy to definitively proving himself. Those who know that their members are naturally obedient should take care only to counteract the tricks of their fancies.

We are right to note the disobedient liberty of this member which thrusts itself forward so inopportunely when we have nothing for it to do, so inopportunely lets us down when we most want to make use of it, and so imperiously battles our will for authority, stubbornly and proudly refusing all our solicitations, both mental and manual.

Yet if this member's rebelliousness were being used to make a case against it, and it retained me to plead on its behalf, I might cast suspicion on our other members—its companions—for having, out of envy of the importance and pleasure of its work, deliberately brought a trumped-up charge, plotting to arm everybody against it and maliciously accusing it alone of their common fault. I invite you to think about whether there is any part of our body that does not often refuse to function when we want it to, yet often does so when we want it not to. Our bodily parts have passions of their own that arouse them or quieten them down without our leave. How often do forced facial movements bear witness to thoughts that we were keeping secret, so betraying us to those who are with us! That same cause that animates this member also—without our knowing it—animates the heart, the lungs and the pulse, when the sight of a pleasing object imperceptibly spreads right through us the flame of a feverish desire. Is it only *these* veins and muscles that stand up and lie down without the consent of our will or even of our thoughts? We do not command our hair to stand on end or our skin to quiver with desire or fear. The hand often goes where we do not send it. The tongue is paralysed, the voice congealed, when this suits them. Even when we have nothing for the pot and would like to order the appetite for food and drink *not* to do so, it nevertheless goes ahead and stirs up the bodily parts that are subject to it—just like that other appetite—and it also deserts us inappropriately whenever it wants to. The organs that serve to discharge the stomach have their own dilations and contractions, beyond and against our wishes; as do those whose role is to discharge the kidneys.

[Then a short paragraph about farting, after which:] But as for our will, on behalf of whose rights we advance this complaint, how much more plausibly can we charge *it* with sedition and rebellion because of its unruliness and disobedience! Does it always will what we will it to? Does it not often will what we forbid it to—and that to our evident disadvantage? Is it any more amenable to the decisions of our reason?

Finally, on behalf of my honorable client, may it please the court to consider that in this matter my client's case is indissolubly conjoined to an accessory—·the female sexual organ·—from whom my client cannot be separated. Yet the suit is addressed to my client alone, employing arguments and making charges that cannot possibly be brought against the aforesaid accessory. Which shows the manifest animosity and legal impropriety of the accusers.

Be that as it may, nature will go its own way, protesting that the lawyers' arguments and the judges' sentences are in vain. It would have acted rightly if it had endowed this member with some special privilege, this author of the only immortal work of mortals. According to Socrates this is divine work, and love is a desire for immortality and is itself an immortal daemon.

[Montaigne returns to his earlier theme of imagination's role in enabling worthless medical materials and procedures to get good results, with several more illustrative anecdotes. Then:] [A] Even animals are subject as we are to the power of the imagination. Witness dogs that grieve to death when they lose their masters. We can also see dogs yapping and twitching in their dreams, while horses whinny and struggle about.

But all this can be attributed to the close stitching of mind to body, each communicating its fortunes to the other. Something different is going on when, as sometimes happens, a person's imagination acts not merely on his own body but on someone else's. One body can inflict an illness on a neighbouring one, as can be seen in the case of the plague, the pox, and soreness of the eyes, which are passed on from one person to another—'Looking at sore eyes can make your own eyes sore; and many ills are spread by bodily infection' [Ovid]—and similarly when the imagination is vigorously shaken up it launches darts that can harm an external object. In antiquity it was held that when certain Scythian women were animated by anger against anybody they could kill him just by looking at him. Tortoises and ostriches hatch out their eggs by sight alone—a sign that their eyes have a power to send something out. And as for sorcerers, they are said to have aggressive and harmful eyes: 'An eye, I know not whose, has bewitched my tender lambs' [Virgil].

For me magicians provide poor authority. All the same we know from experience that mothers can transmit marks of their fancies to the bodies of children in their womb—witness that woman who gave birth to a black child. And the Emperor Charles, King of Bohemia, was shown a girl from the Pisa neighbourhood who was all bristly and hairy; her mother claimed to have conceived her like this because of a portrait of John the Baptist hanging above her bed. It is the same with animals: witness Jacob's sheep [Genesis 30:37–9], and the partridges and hares that are turned white by the snow in the mountains. Recently at my house a cat was seen watching a bird perched high up a tree; they stared fixedly at each other for some time, when the bird let itself fall, as though dead, between the cat's paws—either intoxicated by its own imagination or drawn by some attracting power of the cat. Those who are fond of hawking know the tale of the falconer who fixed his gaze purposefully on a kite as it flew and wagered that he could bring it down by the sheer power of his sight, which he did—or so they say. ·I don't vouch

for the truth of this story·. When I borrow anecdotes I refer them to the consciences of those I took them from. [B] The arguments are my own, and depend on rational proof, not on experience; everyone can add his own examples; if anyone has none of his own he should nevertheless believe that there are plenty, given the number and variety of ·reported· events. [C] If I do not apply them well, let someone else do it for me.

In the study I am making of our *moeurs* and motives, fabulous testimonies serve as well as true ones, provided they are possible. Whether it happened or not, to Peter or John, in Rome or in Paris, it still remains within the compass of human capacity; it tells me something useful about that. I can see this and profit by it just as well when it is a shadow as when it is the real thing. There are often different versions of a story: I use the rarest and most memorable one. There are some authors whose goal is to relate what happened; mine, if I could manage it, would be to relate what can happen. Schoolmen are rightly permitted to *suppose* examples when there are none at hand; but I do not. In this respect I excel all historical fidelity in my devoted scrupulousness. Whenever my examples concern what I have read, heard, done or said, I have not allowed myself to venture to change even the slightest and most useless details. I do not consciously falsify one iota. Unconsciously? I don't know.

In this connection, I sometimes fall to thinking about whether it can be fitting for theologians, philosophers and such people, with their exquisite and exacting consciences and wisdom, to write history [here presumably meaning 'contemporary history']. How can they stake their fidelity on the fidelity of ordinary people? How can they be responsible for the thoughts of unknown people, and offer their own *conjectures* as coin of the realm? Concerning complicated events that occurred in their presence, they would refuse to testify under an oath administered by a judge; and they do not know any man well enough to undertake to give a full account of his intentions. I think it less risky to write about the past than the present, since the author has only to account for borrowed truth.

Some urge me to write about contemporary events, reckoning that my view of them will be •less distorted by passion than another man's and •closer because of the access fortune has given me to the heads of various parties. What they do not say is that

- •for all the glory of Sallust I would not give myself the trouble, being a sworn enemy of obligation, of continuous toil, of perseverance; or that
- •nothing is so contrary to my style as an extended narration; or that
- •with my freedom being so very free, I might publish judgements which even I would reasonably and readily hold to be unlawful and deserving of punishment.

[Montaigne amplifies the second of those: 'I have to break off so often from shortness of wind; I have neither composition nor development that is worth anything; I am more ignorant than a child of the words and phrases used in the most ordinary affairs. That is why I have undertaken to say only what I *can* say, fitting the subject-matter to my powers. If I took a subject-matter that led me along, I might not measure up to it.'] Plutarch would freely admit that if in his writings all the examples are wholly true, that is the work of his sources; if they are useful to posterity, presenting them with a lustre that lights our path to virtue, that is his work.

With an old story—unlike a medicinal drug—there is no *danger* in its being this way rather than that.

22. One man's profit is another man's loss

[A] Demades condemned a fellow Athenian whose trade was to sell funeral requisites, on the grounds that he demanded too much profit, and that this profit could come to him only from the deaths of many people.

That judgement seems ill-founded, since no profit is made except through somebody's loss; by this standard you would have to condemn every sort of gain. The merchant does well in his business only by the extravagance of youth; the ploughman by the high price of grain; the architect by the collapse of buildings; legal officials by men's lawsuits and quarrels; the honour and function of ministers of religion, even, are drawn from our deaths and our vices. 'No doctor takes pleasure in the good health even of his friends', says the ancient Greek comic writer, 'no soldier in his city's being at peace', and so on for all the others. And, what is worse, if each of us sounds his inner depths he will find that our private wishes are mostly born and nurtured at other people's expense.

Reflecting on this I had the thought that nature here is not belying its general policy; for natural philosophers hold that the birth, nourishment and growth of each thing is the alteration and corruption of another. 'For when anything is changed and moves out from its confines, it instantly brings death to something that previously existed' [Lucretius].

23. Custom, and not easily changing a traditional law

[A] The power of habit[1] was very well understood, it seems to me, by the man who first made up that story about a village woman who, having learned to pet and carry in her arms a calf from the time it was born, and having continued to do so, *gained* by this habit so that she could still carry it when it was a fully grown bull. For, in truth, habit is a violent and treacherous schoolteacher. It establishes in us, little by little and stealthily, the foothold of its authority; and then, having planted it by this gentle and humble beginning with the help of time, it soon reveals to us a furious and tyrannical face against which we no longer have the liberty of even raising our eyes. At every turn we find habit infringing the rules of nature: [C] 'Habit is the most effective teacher of all things' [Pliny].

·I believe that habit explains·:[2]

- •the cave in Plato's *Republic*,
- •the doctors who so often yield the reasonings of their art to the authority of habit,
- •that king who habituated his stomach to drawing nourishment from poison, and
- •the maiden whom Albertus reports as having habituated herself to living on spiders.

[B] In that world of the new Indies, great nations were found in widely different climates that lived on spiders, kept them and fed them; as they also did grasshoppers, ants, lizards and bats: and a toad was sold for six crowns when food was scarce. They cook them and prepare them, with various sauces. Other peoples were found for whom our meats and

[1] For *coutume*, translated as 'custom' or 'habit', see the Glossary.

[2] This line replaces the phrase *J'en croy*, which has defeated all the translators

foods were fatally poisonous. [C] 'Great is the power of habit: huntsmen spend nights in the snow, and endure sunburn in the mountains; boxers bruised by studded gloves do not even groan' [Cicero].

These examples from strange lands are not strange if we consider our everyday experience of how habit stuns our senses. . .

> We need not look to what is said about those who live near the cataracts of the Nile; or to the philosophers' conclusions about the music of the spheres, namely that those solid material circles rub and lightly play against each other as they roll, and so *must* produce a wonderful harmony. . . .that no creatures in the universe can hear, loud though it is, because our hearing (like that of the Egyptians ·living near the Nile cataracts·) has been dulled by the continuity of the sound.

. . . Blacksmiths, millers and armourers could not put up with the noise that strikes them if they were stunned by it as we are. My scented collar is for my pleasure, but after I have worn it for three days in a row it is noticed only by others.

What is more strange is that habit can link and establish the effect of its impression on our senses across long gaps and intervals, as those who live near belfries discover. At home I live in a tower where an enormous bell rings the Ave Maria at dawn and sunset every day. This din makes my tower itself tremble. At first I found it unbearable; but after a short time I was broken in, so that I can now hear it without annoyance and often without waking.

Plato scolded a boy for playing at cobnuts. He replied: 'You are scolding me for a small matter.' 'Habit' said Plato 'is not a small matter'. I find that our greatest vices take shape during our tenderest infancy, and that our most important training is in the hands of our wet-nurses. Mothers think their boy is playing when they see him wring the neck of a chicken or find sport in wounding a dog or a cat. And a father may be so stupid as to think that •it is a sign of a martial spirit when he sees his son outrageously striking a peasant or a lackey who is not defending himself, or that •it is a charming prank when he sees him cheat a playmate by some cunning deceit or a trick. Yet those are the true seeds and roots of cruelty, of tyranny, of treachery. They germinate there, and then shoot up and flourish, thriving in the grip of habit. Making excuses for such ugly tendencies because of the weakness of childhood or the triviality of the subject—that is a most dangerous educational policy. Firstly, ·when these things are thought to be wrong· it is nature speaking, with a voice that is all the more clear and truthful for being thin and new. Secondly, cheating's ugliness does not come from the difference between money and pins; it comes from cheating.

I find it more sound to conclude 'Since he cheats over pins, why wouldn't he cheat over money?' than to conclude as they do 'They are only pins; he would not do that with money.'

Children should be carefully taught to hate vices for what they *are*; they should be taught the natural ugliness of vices, so that they flee them not only in their actions but above all in their hearts, so that the very thought of them—whatever mask they wear—will be odious.

I know very well—

> having been trained from boyhood always to stride along the open highway and to find it repugnant to use cunning or deceit in my childish games (and note that children's games are not *games* and should be judged in the same way as their more serious activities)

—that there is no pastime so trivial that I do not bring to it an internalised, natural, automatic *revulsion* against cheating.

When playing cards I treat pennies like doubloons, just as much when playing with my wife and daughter (when winning or losing does not matter to me) as when I am gambling in earnest. Everywhere and in everything my own eyes suffice to keep me on track; there are none that watch me so closely or that I respect more.

[A] [Montaigne now reports on a man who, having no arms, cultivated habits enabling him to do dexterous things with his feet; and a boy, also armless, who managed weapons and a whip with his neck.]

But we can discover the effects of habit far better from the impressions it makes on our souls, where it encounters less resistance. What can it *not* do to our judgements and beliefs? Is there any opinion so bizarre—

> and I am leaving aside that coarse deceit of religions by which so many great nations and so many learned men are seen to be besotted. Those lie beyond the bounds of human reason, so that a man is excusable for going astray with them unless he is extraordinarily enlightened by divine favour

—that custom has not planted and established it by laws in regions where it saw fit to do so? [C] And this is totally right: 'Is it not a disgrace that the natural philosopher, that observer and tracker of nature, should seek evidence of the truth from minds stupefied by custom?' [Cicero].

[B] I reckon that no notion that can occur to the imagination of men is so wild that it is not put into public practice somewhere with no basis in or support from our discursive reason. [He gives examples, including that of a French nobleman who always blew his nose with his fingers, maintaining that the accepted procedure of collecting mucus in a handkerchief and then putting that in one's pocket was disgusting. Montaigne concludes:] I considered that what he said was not totally unreasonable, but custom had prevented me from noticing the strangeness that we find so hideous when it is reported in another country. . . . Habituation puts to sleep the eye of our judgement. Barbarians are no more astonishing to us than we are to them; nor with better reason, as each of us would admit if after running through examples from far away he could focus on his own and sanely compare them. Human reason is a tincture infused in about equal strength through all our opinions and *moeurs* [see Glossary], whatever their form—infinite in matter, infinite in diversity.

I now return to the subject. There are peoples [B] where the king cannot be directly addressed by anyone but his wife and his children. In one and the same nation virgins openly display their private parts, and married women carefully cover theirs and conceal them. [This continues through several pages of accounts—mostly [B]- or [C]-tagged—of weird-to-our-eyes customs of various nations. Views about bodily decoration, breast-feeding, cannibalism, death, infanticide, patricide, promising, property, sexual propriety, table manners, urination, the worth of women, and on and on. Gradually winding down:] [A] And what all philosophy cannot implant in the heads of the wisest men, does not unaided custom teach the crudest of the common herd? For we know of whole nations where death was not merely scorned but rejoiced in; where seven-year-old children endured being flogged to death without changing their expression; where riches were held in such contempt that the most wretched citizens of the town would not deign to reach down to pick up a purse full of crowns. And we know of regions that were fertile in all sorts of food where nevertheless the usual and the most savoury dishes were bread, mustard-cress and water. [B] Did not custom produce a miracle in Chios where after 700 years there is no record of a woman or girl losing her honour?

[A] In short, to my way of thinking there is nothing that custom does not do, nothing that it cannot do; and Pindar rightly calls it (so I have been told) the queen and empress of the world.

[C] The man found beating his father replied that such was the custom in his family; that his father had beaten his grandfather; his grandfather, his great-grandfather; and—pointing to his own son—'this boy will beat me once he has reached my present age'.

And the father whom the son was dragging and bumping along the street ordered him to stop at a certain doorway, for he had not dragged his own father beyond that point; it marked the limit of the hereditary ill-treatment of fathers practised by the sons of that family.

It is by custom as often as by derangement, says Aristotle, that women tear out their hair, gnaw their nails, eat earth and charcoal; and it is more by custom than by nature that males have sexual relations with males.

The laws of conscience that we say are born of nature are born of custom. Each person inwardly venerates the opinions and *moeurs* approved and accepted in his environment, so he cannot free himself from them without remorse, or conform himself to them without self-congratulation.

[B] When the Cretans in times past wanted to curse someone, they prayed to the gods to make him contract a bad habit.

[A] But the principal effect of custom's power is to seize us and take us over in such a way that we hardly have what it takes to struggle free and get back into ourselves to reason and argue about its ordinances. Because we drink them in with our mothers' milk, and because they shape the world as we first see it, it seems to us that we were *born into* the condition of thinking along those lines. And the ideas that we find to be held in common and in high esteem about us, and that were infused into our souls by our fathers' seed, seem to be universal and natural. [C] That is why anything that is off the hinges of custom is thought to involve reason's being unhinged; God knows how unreasonably most of the time! If each man on hearing a wise maxim automatically looked to see how it applied to him in particular—as we who study ourselves have learned to do—he would find that it was not so much a good saying as a good whiplash to the ordinary stupidity of his judgement. But the advice of truth and its precepts are taken to be addressed to *people*, never to *oneself*: each man, instead of incorporating them into his *moeurs*, stupidly and uselessly incorporates them into his memory.

Let us get back to the sovereignty of custom.

·More on the sovereignty of custom·

Peoples nurtured on freedom and self-government regard any other form of government as deformed and unnatural. Those who are used to monarchy do the same. And when (with great difficulty) they have rid themselves of the oppression of one master, even if they have a chance to move easily ·to different form of government·, they hurry to establish (with equal difficulty) another master, because they cannot bring themselves to hate mastery. . . .

[A] Darius asked some Greeks what it would take to persuade them to adopt the Indian custom of eating their dead fathers (for that was their way, reckoning that the most auspicious burial they could give their fathers was within themselves); they told him that nothing on earth would make them do it. But when he tried to persuade the Indians to abandon their way and adopt that of Greece (which was to cremate their fathers' corpses), he horrified them even more. Each of us is like this; usage hides the true aspect of things from us. 'Nothing seems at first so great or wonderful that

we do not all wonder at it less and less' [Lucretius].

I once had the duty of justifying one of our practices that is accepted as having established authority far and wide around us; I did not want to maintain it in the usual way solely by force of law and examples, and tracked it back to its origin, where I found its basis to be so weak that I nearly became disgusted with it—I who was supposed to confirm it in others.

[C] This is Plato's prescription—he regards it as supreme and fundamental—for driving out the unnatural and perverted loves of his time: public opinion should condemn them, poets and everyone else should give dreadful accounts of them. This would have the result that not even the fairest daughters would attract the love of their fathers, or the most handsome brothers the love of their sisters. The myths of Thyestes, of Oedipus and of Macareus would have planted this useful *creance* [here = 'moral attitude'] in the tender brains of children by the charm of the poetry.

Indeed, chastity is a fine virtue whose usefulness is well enough known; but to discuss and justify it from •nature is as hard as it is easy to do so from •tradition, laws and precepts. The basic universal reasons for it are hard to examine thoroughly. Our teachers either skim over them lightly or, not being game even to touch them, throw themselves immediately into the sanctuary of custom, and preen themselves on easy victories. Those who will not let themselves be dragged out of this original source fail even worse and commit themselves to savage opinions, as Chrysippus did; he strewed throughout his writings his low opinion of incestuous unions of any kind.

[A] A man who wants to free himself from the violent prejudice of custom will find many things accepted as being indubitably settled that have nothing to support them except the hoary whiskers and wrinkles of usage that come with them; but with that mask torn off and things brought back to truth and reason, he will feel his judgement turned upside-down, yet restored by this to a much surer state.

I will ask him, for example, what could be stranger than seeing a people obliged to obey laws that they have never understood; governed in all their household concerns—marriages, gifts, wills, sales, purchases—by regulations that they cannot know because they are neither written nor published in their own language; they have to *pay* to have them interpreted and applied. [C] Not according to

- the ingenious opinion of Isocrates, who advises his king to make his subjects' trades and negotiations free, unfettered and profitable, and to make their quarrels and disputes onerous, loading them with heavy taxes,

but according to

- a monstrous opinion that puts reason itself on the market and treats laws as merchandise.

[A] I am grateful to fortune that it was, so our historians say, a Gascon gentleman from my part of the country who first opposed Charlemagne when he wanted to give us Latin and imperial laws.

What is more barbarous than a nation [France] where

- by legal custom the office of judge is up for sale and verdicts are simply bought for cash? where
- quite legally justice is denied to anyone who cannot pay for it? where
- this trade is so lucrative those who deal in it constitute a fourth estate to add to the three ancient estates of Church, Nobility and People—an estate which, having charge of the laws and sovereign authority over properties and lives, forms a body distinct from that of the nobility?

From which it comes about that there are two sets of laws—of honour and of justice—which

> are strongly opposed in many matters. The former condemns anyone who is called a liar and does not take revenge, the latter condemns the revenge. By the law of arms, a man who *endures* an insult is stripped of his rank and nobility; by the civil law a man who *avenges* an insult is liable to the death penalty. . . .

and where

> •of these two estates, so different from each other yet joined to a single head, one is responsible for peace, the other for war; one concerns profit, the other honour; one learning, the other virtue; one words, the other deeds; one justice, the other valour; one reason, the other force; one in a long robe, the other a short one?

As for neutral things such as clothing, if you want to think of this in terms of its true purpose (which is its usefulness and comfort for the body, on which its original grace and fitness depend), I will offer as examples of what I think to be the most monstrous clothes imaginable: •our square bonnets, •that long tail of pleated velvet hanging down from our women's heads with its motley fringes, and •that silly and useless model of a member that we cannot even decently mention by name, which however we show off in public.

These considerations, however, do not deter a thinking man from following the common fashion. It seems to me, on the contrary, that all peculiar and out-of-the-way modes of dress derive from folly and ambitious affectation rather than from true reason, and that internally a wise man should withdraw his soul from the crowd, maintaining its power and freedom to judge things freely, and that externally he should wholly follow the accepted fashions and forms.

Public society has no use for our thoughts; but everything else—our actions, our work, our fortunes, our life—should be lent and abandoned to its service and to the community's opinions; just as that great and good man Socrates refused to save his life by disobeying the magistrate [see Glossary], even a most unjust and iniquitous magistrate. For the rule of rules, the universal law of laws, is that each man should obey those of the place where he lives. . . .

·Changing the laws·

New topic. It is very doubtful whether the profit that can come from changing an accepted law, whatever it may be, is as evident as the harm of disturbing it; for a government is like a building made of interlocked pieces joined in such a way that if one is shaken the whole structure feels it. The lawmaker of the Thurians ordained that anyone wanting to abolish an old law or establish a new one should appear before the people with a rope around his neck, so that if *anyone* failed to approve of his novelty he would be strangled at once. And the lawmaker of the Spartans gave his life to extract from the citizens a solemn promise not to infringe any of his ordinances. The ·Spartan· magistrate who so roughly cut the two extra strings that Phrynis added to music is not worried about whether music is improved or whether its chords are richer; for him to condemn them it suffices that this is a departure from the old style. . . .

[B] I hate innovation, in whatever guise, and with reason, because I have seen some of its disastrous effects. The innovation that has been oppressing us for so many years—·the Reformation·—is not the sole author of our troubles, but it seems to have accidentally caused and engendered them all, even the evils and destruction that have subsequently happened without it, and *against* it; it has itself to blame for them. 'Alas, I suffer wounds made by my own arrows' [Ovid].

Those who give the first shock to the state are apt to be the first to be swallowed up in its ruin. [C] The fruits of

disturbance rarely go to the one who began it; he beats and disturbs the water for other fishermen. [B] Once innovation has dislocated and dissolved the unity and organisation of this monarchy, this great structure—especially in its old age—the gates are opened as wide as you wish to similar attacks. . . .

[C] But if innovators do more harm, their imitators are more at fault for rushing to follow examples after they have experienced the horror of them and punished them. And if there is some degree of honour even in evil-doing, the imitators must concede to the others the glory of innovation and the courage to make the first attempt. [The 'imitators' referred to here are the members of the anti-protestant French Catholic League, who have 'punished' conduct that they then copy.]

[B] All kinds of new depravity gleefully draw, from this first abundant source, ideas and models for disturbing our government. In the very laws that were made to remedy the original evil, men read an apprenticeship and excuse for all sorts of wicked actions; and we are experiencing what Thucydides said of the civil wars of his own time, that public vices were baptised with gentler names to excuse them, adulterating and softening their true titles. Yet this is supposed to reform our consciences and our beliefs!. . . . But even the best pretext for novelty is exceedingly dangerous: [C] 'So true it is that no change from ancient ways is to be approved' [Livy].

[B] To speak frankly, it seems to me that there is much self-love and arrogance in rating one's opinions so highly that in order to establish them one is willing to •disturb the public peace and introduce so many unavoidable evils and such horrifying corruption of *moeurs* [see Glossary] as civil wars and political upheavals bring in a matter of such weight, and •introduce them into one's own country. [C] Is it not bad management to advance so many certain and known vices in order to combat alleged and disputable errors? Is any kind of vice more wicked than those that clash with a man's conscience and natural knowledge?

The ·Roman· Senate, in its dispute with the people about the administration of their religion, dared to palm them off with the evasion that 'this was less a matter for them than for the gods, who would see that their rites were not profaned' [Livy]. That fits what the oracle replied to the men at Delphi in their war against the Medes; fearing a Persian invasion, they asked the god what they should do with the holy treasures in his temple—hide them or carry them off? He told them to move nothing; they should look after themselves; he was able to take care of what belonged to him.

[B] The Christian religion has all the marks of the utmost justice and utility, but none is more obvious than the precise injunction to obey the magistrate and to uphold the government. What a wonderful example of this was left for us by God's wisdom when, to establish the salvation of the human race and to conduct his glorious victory over death and sin, God wanted to do this only through the operations of our political order. He subjected its progress—the conduct of such a lofty and *saving* enterprise—to the blindness and injustice of our observances and usages, letting flow the innocent blood of so many of the beloved elect, allowing a long loss of years in ripening this priceless fruit.

There is a huge gulf between the cause of the man who follows the forms and laws of his country and the cause of the man who undertakes to control and change them. The former justifies himself on grounds of simplicity, obedience and example; whatever he does cannot be from malice, only from misfortune, at the worst. [C] 'Who is not swayed by an antiquity attested and certified by the clearest records?' [Cicero] —apart from what Isocrates said, that in finding the happy mean it is better to fall short than to go to excess.

[B] The other is in a much tougher position [C] because anyone who undertakes to chop and change usurps the right to judge and must be very sure that he sees the defect in what he is throwing out and the good in what he is bringing in. The following plain consideration has strengthened me in my position and kept me in check even in my rasher youth:

> Not to load my shoulders with the heavy burden of claiming knowledge of such importance ·as theology·, or to venture to do •in this area what I could not with a level head venture to do •in the easiest of the disciplines I had been instructed in, where rashness of judgment does no harm.

It seems to me very iniquitous to want to subject immutable public regulations and observances to the instability of private ideas (private reasoning having jurisdiction only in private matters), and to attempt against divine laws something that no government would tolerate against civil ones. These last, though human reason has much more to do with them, are still the sovereign judges of their judges; judicial discretion is limited to explaining and extending accepted usage; it cannot deflect it or make innovations.

If divine Providence has sometimes passed over the rules to which it has necessarily constrained us, this was not to dispense *us* from them. These are strokes of the divine hand, for us not to imitate but to admire. They are extraordinary examples—-marked by an express and particular sign—of the kinds of miracles that Providence gives us in witness of its omnipotence, miracles

- •that are above our categories and our powers,
- •that it is madness and impiety to try to reproduce, and
- •that we should not to follow but should contemplate with awe.

They are acts of *its* character, not ours. . . .

[B] In our present quarrel, where a hundred great and profound articles ·of religion· are to be removed or restored, God knows how many men can boast of having mastered in detail the reasons and fundamental positions of both sides. It is a number—if it is indeed a *number*!—that would not have much power to disturb us. But all the rest of the crowd, where are they going? Under what banner do they rush to the battlements? Their remedy acts like other weak and badly prescribed medicines: those humours it was meant to purge from us have been heated, irritated and aggravated by the conflict, while the potion remains in the body. It was too weak to purge us, but it has weakened us in such a way that we cannot evacuate it either—we get from its operation nothing but prolonged internal pains.

[A] Yet fortune, always reserving its authority above our reasonings, sometimes presents us with a need that is so urgent that the laws have to make room for it.

[B] If you are resisting the growth of an innovation that has recently been introduced by violence, it is a dangerous and lopsided handicap to keep yourself everywhere and always in check and within the rules in your struggle against those who run loose, for whom anything is permissible that advances their cause, and who have neither law nor order except to follow their own advantage: [C] ‘To trust an untrustworthy man is to give him power to harm’ [Seneca]. [B] For the ordinary discipline of a state that is in a healthy condition does not provide for these extraordinary events; it presupposes a body that holds together in its principal parts and functions, and a common consent to acknowledge and obey it. [C] The law-abiding pace is cold, weighty, and constrained; it cannot hold up against a pace that is lawless and unbridled.

[Picking up from ‘. . . make room for it.’] [A] It is well known that two great figures in civil wars—Octavius against Sulla and Cato against Caesar—are still reproached for having let their

country suffer any extremity rather than disturb things by rescuing it at the expense of the law. For truly in these ultimate necessities, when all you can do is to hold on, bowing your head and letting the blow fall might be wiser than struggling to let nothing go, when this is impossible, giving violence the opportunity to trample everything underfoot; it would be better to make the laws will what they can do, since they cannot do what they will. That was the solution of the man who ordered that the laws sleep for 24 hours, of the one who for one occasion removed a day from the calendar, of the one who turned the month of June into a second month of May. Even the Spartans, such religious adherents to the ordinances of their country, when they were caught between •a law forbidding them to elect the same man admiral twice and •a pressing emergency requiring Lysander to reassume that office, made someone called Aracus 'admiral' and made Lysander 'superintendent of the navy'! And similar subtlety was shown by one of their ambassadors who was dispatched to the Athenians to negotiate a change in some law, and was told by Pericles that it was forbidden to remove a tablet once a law had been inscribed on it; he advised him turn the tablet over, which was not forbidden. This is what Plutarch praises Philopoemen for: being born to command, he knew how to issue commands according to the laws and, when public necessity required it, to issue commands to the laws.

24. Same design, differing outcomes

·CLEMENCY·

[A] [This essay starts with a story about a French prince—François, duke of Guise—who had been warned that a certain (named) gentleman in his household was planning to kill him. The story continues:] He summoned the man to appear before him. When the man was in his presence the prince saw him pale and trembling from the alarms of his conscience, and said: 'Monsieur So-and-so, you know well enough what I want you for; your face shows it. There is nothing you can hide from me, because I am so thoroughly informed about your business that you would only make your plight worse by trying to conceal it. You know quite well such-and-such matters;'—referring to the ins and outs of the most secret parts of this undertaking—'if you value your life you had better tell me the whole truth about this scheme.' When the wretched man realised he had been caught and convicted (for one of his accomplices had revealed everything to the Queen Mother), he could only clasp his hands and plead with the prince for pardon and mercy. He began to throw himself at his feet but the prince stopped him, and continued with what he had been saying: 'Come now! Have I ever done anything against you? Have I harmed any of your family out of private hatred? I haven't known you for three weeks; what reason can have induced you to plot my death?' The man replied in a trembling voice that he had no private cause but only the general interest of his party, since some had persuaded him that it would be an act of piety to eradicate somehow such a powerful enemy of their ·protestant· religion. 'Well,' continued the prince, 'I want to show you how much gentler the religion I hold is than the one you profess. Yours has advised you to kill me without a hearing, though I have done you no wrong; mine commands me to forgive you, convicted though you are of having wanted to murder me without reason. Go away, get out, don't let me see you here again; and if you are wise you will from now on take more decent men to counsel you in your enterprises.'

The Emperor Augustus while in Gaul received conclusive evidence of a conspiracy that Lucius Cinna was brewing against him.[1] He thought about revenge, and for that purpose called a council of his friends for the next day. But he spent the night in great agitation, reflecting that he was to put to death a young man of good family and nephew to the great Pompey, groaning out several conflicting arguments:

> 'What! Shall it be said that I live in fear and alarm, leaving my murderer to go about at his ease? Shall he go scot-free after attacking my head, which I have brought back safe from so many civil wars, so many battles on land and sea? After I have brought peace to the whole world, shall he be absolved after having planned not merely to murder me but to *sacrifice* me?'

(The conspiracy was to kill him while he was performing a sacrifice.) He remained silent for a while, and then berated himself in a firmer voice:

> 'Why go on living if it matters to so many people that you should die? Will there be no end to your vengeances and cruelties? Is your life worth all the harm done to preserve it?'

His wife Livia, sensing his anguish, asked 'Are women's counsels to be accepted? Do what the doctors do when the usual prescriptions fail; they try the opposite. Up to now severity has done nothing for you: after Salvidienus there was Lepidus; after Lepidus, Murena; after Murena, Caepio;

[1] Actually, it was his son, Gnaeus Cornelius Cinna.

after Caepio, Egnatius. Start now to explore how mildness and clemency succeed. Cinna is convicted; pardon him. He can harm you no more, but he can contribute to your glory.'

Augustus was well pleased to have found an advocate after his own heart; having thanked his wife and rescinded the order for his friends to come to Council, he ordered that Cinna be brought before him quite alone. After sending everyone from the room and giving Cinna a chair, he addressed him thus: 'In the first place, Cinna, I ask you to hear me peaceably. Do not interrupt me. I shall give you time and opportunity to respond to what I shall say. You know, Cinna, that after I took you in the camp of my enemies—not as having *become* my enemy but as having been *born* so—I spared you and restored all your property, making you so comfortable and prosperous that the victors envy the condition of the vanquished. I granted you the priestly office that you asked for, having refused it to others whose fathers had always fought at my side. Under such strong obligations to me, you have planned to kill me.'

> At this, Cinna exclaimed that he was far from any such wicked thought. Augustus continued: 'You are not keeping your promise: you assured me that I would not be interrupted.

Yes, you have planned to kill me. . . ' and he gave details of the intended place, time and manner of the assassination, and of the other conspirators.

Seeing Cinna paralysed by this news, and silent—not now so as to keep his undertaking to be so, but from the pressure of his conscience—Augustus added: 'Why are you doing this? Is it to become Emperor? Truly the commonwealth is in a bad way if I am the only obstacle to your gaining the imperial office! You cannot even look after your own household, and recently lost a lawsuit through the influence of a mere freedman. What, do you really have no means or power to do anything except take on Caesar? If I am the only one frustrating your hopes, I give up! Do you think you will be endured by Paulus, Fabius, the Cossii and the Servilii, or the great band of noblemen who are not merely noble in name but who honour nobility itself by their deeds?' After many more remarks (for he spoke to him for more than two hours) he said: 'Now go, Cinna. I give you now as a traitor and a parricide the life I once gave you as an enemy. Let friendship between us begin today; let us compete for which of us will act in better faith—I in granting you your life or you in accepting it.' And with that he left him. Some time later he granted the consulship to Cinna, reproaching him for not daring to ask for it. From then on Cinna was a firm friend to Augustus, and made him the sole heir to all his property.

After this incident, which occurred when Augustus was in his fortieth year, there was no further conspiracy or attempt against him, and he received a just reward for his clemency. But the same did not apply to our French prince, for his mildness could not save him from falling into the snare of another similar act of treachery.[1] So vain and worthless is human prudence; in defiance of all our projects, counsels and precautions, the outcome remains in the possession of fortune.

·THE ROLE OF FORTUNE·

We call doctors 'lucky' when they get a good result, as though their art alone could not stand on its own feet, its foundations being too fragile for it to support itself by its own strength, and as though no other art needed a helping hand from fortune in its operations. Regarding medicine I believe all the

[1] The duke of Guise—the hero of the first story in this essay—was assassinated a few months later.

bad or good you like, for we have, thank God, no dealings with each other. I am at the opposite pole from others: I despise it always, but when I am ill instead of coming to terms with it I begin also to hate it and to fear it. I tell those who urge me to take medicine that they should at least wait until I am restored to my health and strength so as to have more resources for resisting the impact and the danger of their potion. I let nature run its course; I take it for granted that it is armed with teeth and claws to protect itself from attacks launched against it and to maintain this structure, ·my body·, whose dissolution it shuns. Instead of going to nature's aid when it is wrestling at close grips with the illness, I fear we are loading extra tasks on it and helping its adversary instead.

I say that not only in medicine but in many more certain arts fortune plays a large part. Poetic sallies that transport their author and carry him outside himself in rapture—why do we not attribute them to his good luck? He himself confesses that they surpass his own abilities and strength, and acknowledges that they come from outside him and are in no way within his own power; any more than orators say they have in theirs those extraordinary impulses and agitations that drive them beyond what they had planned ·to say·. The same applies to painting, where sometimes there escape from the painter's hand touches that surpass his own conception and knowledge and bring even him to wonder and astonishment. But even more clearly ·than in what the artists say· fortune's part in all these works is revealed in the works themselves—in graces and beauties that are found there, not only without the artist's intention but even without his knowledge. A competent reader often find in other men's writings perfections other than those the author put in or perceived, and endows them with richer meanings and aspects.

As for military exploits, everyone sees how fortune plays a large part in them. Even in our reflections and deliberations there is certainly some chance and good luck mixed in; all that our wisdom can do is not much; the sharper and more lively it is, the more frailty our wisdom finds within itself and the more it distrusts itself. I share Sylla's opinion: when I look *closely* at the most glorious exploits of war, it seems to me that I see that the leaders engage in deliberation and reflection only as a formality; they abandon the best part of the enterprise to fortune and, relying on its aid, go beyond the limits of all reason at every turn. There occur amid their deliberations fortuitous rejoicings and extraneous frenzies which usually impel them towards the least likely course and swell their courage beyond reason. That explains why many great ancient captains, in order to give credit to these rash plans, told their men that they had been led to them by some inspiration, by some sign and prognostication.

That is why, when the various circumstances and details of a matter create difficulties that leave us undecided and perplexed, unable to see and choose the best course of action, I think that the surest way (even if no other consideration invited us to it) is •to throw ourselves into the course in which there is most decency and justice and, since we are in doubt about the shortest road, •to keep always on the straight one. Thus, in the two examples I have just presented, it was for the man who had received the offence clearly finer and more generous to forgive than not to. If the first of them came to grief, that is no reason to condemn his good plan; and if he had taken the opposite decision we do not know that he would have escaped the end his destiny called him to; and thus he would have lost the glory of such exceptional kindness.

·Responses to hostile conspiracies·

History tells of many people who, faced with such fears, have chosen the way of rushing to meet conspiracies against them with vengeance and punishment; yet I see very few who were well served by this remedy; witness so many Roman emperors. Someone who finds himself in this peril should not expect much from his strength or his vigilance. For how hard it is to protect ourselves from an enemy who is concealed behind the face of the most dutiful friend we have, and to know the inner thoughts and intentions of those around us! It is no use employing foreigners as a guard and being always surrounded by a hedge of armed men; anyone who holds his own life cheap will always be master of the life of others.

Also, the continual suspicion that leads a prince to distrust everyone must be an extraordinary torment to him. [B] Which is why Dion, when told that Callipus was on the lookout for ways to have him killed, had no heart to look into the matter, saying that he would rather die than live in the misery of having to be on guard not only against his enemies but also against his friends.

Alexander acted this out even more vividly and more daringly: having been warned in a letter from Parmenion that his beloved doctor Philip had been bribed by Darius to poison him, he gave the letter to Philip to read and at the same time swallowed the drink Philip had brought him. Was he not showing his resolve that if his friends wanted to kill him he consented to their doing so? Alexander is the supreme model of daring deeds, but I doubt whether any episode in his life showed more courage than this one or a beauty shining in so many aspects.

Those who preach to princes [see Glossary] such a watchful distrust, in the guise of preaching them security, preach them their ruin and their shame. Nothing noble is done without risk. I know a man, [C] of a very martial courage by nature, and enterprising, [B] whose fine career is being daily corrupted by such persuasions:

- to keep himself surrounded by his own men;
- not to hear of any reconciliation with his former enemies;
- to keep apart and not entrust himself to stronger hands, no matter what promises are made or what advantage he sees in doing so.

[C] I know another who has improved his fortune beyond all expectations by following a wholly opposite plan.

When the need arises, the bravery whose glory men seek so avidly can be shown as magnificently in a doublet as in armour, in a room as in a camp, with arm down as with arm raised.

[Carrying on from '. . . in doing so':] [B] Such tender and circumspect prudence is a mortal enemy of great undertakings.

[C] To gain the support of Syphax, Scipio left his army, abandoned Spain while its recent conquest was still doubtful, crossed to Africa with two small ships, and in enemy territory entrusted himself to the power of a barbarian king whose faith was unknown—without obligation, without hostage, under the sole security of the greatness of his own courage, his good fortune, and the promise of his high hopes: 'Our own trust generally wins the trust of others' [Livy].

[Carrying on from '. . . enemy of great undertakings':] [B] For a life ambitious for fame, a man must on the contrary yield little to suspicions and keep them on a tight rein: fear and distrust attract and invite attack. The most mistrustful of our kings made himself secure mainly by. . . .committing his life and his liberty into the hands of his enemies, showing complete trust in them so that they might pick up this trust from him. To his legions, mutinous and in arms against him, Caesar opposed only the authority of his countenance and

the pride of his words; he trusted so much in himself and in his good fortune that he did not fear to commit his fate to a rebellious and seditious army. 'Intrepid and erect, he stood on a grassy mound, deserving to be feared since he feared nothing' [Lucan].

[B] But it is quite true that this strong confidence can be displayed, entire and natural, only by those who do not take fright at the thought of death or of the worst that can eventually happen to them. Nothing worthwhile is achieved if one seeks an important reconciliation through a trembling, doubtful, uncertain display of 'confidence'. An excellent way to win the heart and will of someone else is to trust him, put oneself in his power—provided that it is done freely and without the constraint of any necessity, and that the trust one brings is clear and pure and one's face free of any misgivings.

When a boy I saw a gentleman, the military governor of a great city, in difficulties from the violence of an enraged populace. To stop this disturbance from the outset he decided to leave a safe place he was in and to put himself in the power of that mutinous mob; things went badly for him and he was wretchedly killed. But it seems to me that his error lay not in going out to them—the blame usually attached to his memory—but in adopting a course of submission and softness, trying to quieten that frenzy by following rather than by guiding, by asking rather than by remonstrating. I believe that a gracious severity, along with a military bearing full of assurance and confidence suitable to his rank and the dignity of his office would have succeeded better for him, or at least more honourably and fittingly. Humanity and gentleness are the last things to be expected from that monster, ·the mob·, when it is thus aroused; it is much more accessible to awe and fear. I would also reproach him for something else. Having made a decision—in my opinion a brave decision rather than a rash one—to cast himself into that stormy sea of furious men, weak and without armour, he should have drunk the whole cup and abandoned the role he was playing. Whereas when he saw the danger at close quarters his nose started to bleed, and the deflated and fawning look he had assumed changed into a frightened one, his voice and his eyes full of alarm and contrition. By trying to creep away and hide he inflamed them and called them down on himself.

Once it was planned to have a general review of various troops under arms—such being just the place for secret plans of revenge: nowhere can they be carried out with greater security. There were public and widely known signs that things would go badly for some of those who had the principal and necessary responsibility for the reviewing. [This was in Bordeaux when Montaigne was its mayor.] Various plans were proposed, this being a difficult matter with much weight and consequence. Mine was that they should above all give no sign of this fear, and show up and mingle with the ranks with heads high and faces open; and that instead of cutting anything out ·of the reviewing ceremony· (as the other opinions mostly aimed to do) they should on the contrary urge the captains to tell their men to make their welcoming volleys fine and hearty in honour of the spectators, not sparing their powder. This pleased the suspect troops, and engendered from then on a useful mutual confidence.

[A] The course adopted by Julius Caesar seems to me the finest possible. First he tried by mildness and clemency to make himself loved even by his enemies; when conspiracies were uncovered, he let it be known that he had been told about them. Then he made the very noble resolve to await the outcome without fear and without anxiety, surrendering himself to the protection of the gods and of fortune. For that is the state he was in when he was killed.

[B] A foreigner told all and sundry that in return for a good sum of money he could teach Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, an infallible way of sniffing out and revealing any machinations of his subjects against him. Dionysius, hearing of this, had him sent for to enlighten him about an art so necessary for his survival. The foreigner told him that his art was this: Dionysius should pay him one talent, and then boast of having learned from him a singular secret. Dionysius found this device good, and had six hundred crowns paid over to him. It was not likely that he would give so much money to an unknown man except as a reward for teaching him something very useful; and this belief served to keep his enemies in fear.

Princes are wise to *publish* information they receive warning them of plots against their life, so as to make people believe that they are well informed and that nothing can be undertaken that they do not get wind of. [C] The duke of Athens did many stupid things when consolidating his recent tyranny over Florence, but the most noteworthy was this: when he first received warning of the conspiracies that people were forming against him, getting this from Matteo di Morozo, one of the accomplices, he had him killed so as to suppress this information and not let it be known that anyone in the city was discontented with his rule.

[A] I remember reading an account of a Roman of high rank who was fleeing from the tyranny of the Triumvirate; he had already escaped his pursuers a thousand times by subtle tricks he had invented. One day a troop of horsemen responsible for arresting him passed close by some bushes behind which he was crouching; they failed to spot him. But at this point, considering

> the toil and hardships he had already endured for so long to save himself from the continual careful searches they were making for him everywhere, the little pleasure he could hope for from such a life, how much better it was for him to take the step once and for all than to remain forever in such dread,

he called them back and revealed his hiding place, voluntarily abandoning himself to their cruelty to relieve both them and himself of further trouble. Calling out for enemy hands is a rather extreme measure, but I believe it would be better to take it than to remain in a continual sweat over an outcome that cannot be remedied. Since any precautions we can take are full of uneasiness and uncertainty, it is better to prepare with fair assurance for whatever *can* happen, getting some consolation from not being sure that it *will*.

25. Being a schoolmaster, being learned, being wise

[Re the title of this essay, see Glossary on *pedant*.]

[A] In my childhood I was often annoyed to see that

- in Italian comedies that there was always a schoolmaster treated as a joke, and that
- the ·Latin· title 'Magister' [= 'schoolmaster'] was not accorded much more respect among us ·Frenchmen·.

Placed as I was under their control, the least I could do was to defend their reputation. I tried to make excuses for them in terms of the natural incompatibility between the common herd and people of rare and excellent judgement and learning, the two going in totally opposite directions. But in ·writing· this I was wasting my Latin; it was the most civilised men who held them in the greatest contempt, witness our good Du Bellay: 'But most of all I loathe pedantic learning.' [B] And this attitude is ancient, for Plutarch says that *Greek* and *scholar* were terms of reproach and contempt among the Romans.

[A] As I grew older I found that they were absolutely right and that 'the most biggest clerks aren't the most wisest' [quoting the bad Latin of an ignorant monk in a story by Rabelais]. Yet how it can happen that a soul enriched by knowledge of so many things should not be made by that keener and more alert, and that a crude and commonplace mind can harbour within itself, without being improved, the reasonings and judgements of the best minds the world has produced—that still has me puzzled.

[B] A young woman, the foremost of our princesses, said to me concerning a particular man: 'For him to absorb so many other brains, and such great and powerful ones, his own brain has to squeeze up close, crouch down, and shrink to make room for them all!' [A] ·in that spirit· I would have thought that

- just as plants are swamped by too much water and lamps by too much oil, so the action of the mind is stifled by too much study and by too much matter; that
- being caught and entangled in a great variety of things, the mind loses the ability to sort itself out, and that
- it is bent and huddled down under the load.

But that is not what happens, for the more our souls are filled the more they *expand*. Examples from far-off times show that men who were able in the handling of public affairs—great captains and great statesmen—have also been very learned.

·ANCIENT PHILOSOPHERS·

As for philosophers, remote from all public occupations, they have indeed sometimes been mocked by the comic licence of their times, [C] their opinions and conduct making them ridiculous.

> Do you want to make *them* judges of rights in a lawsuit, of a man's deeds? They are indeed well prepared for that! They are still trying to find out whether there is life, whether there is motion, whether man differs from ox, what it is to act and be acted on, what kind of animals law and justice are! When they talk about—or talk *to*—the magistrate [see Glossary], they do it with an uncouth and disrespectful freedom. When they hear praise for a prince or a king, to them he is a mere shepherd, an idle shepherd who milks and shears his animals; but much more harshly ·than a real shepherd does·. If you consider someone grander because he owns two thousand acres of land, they laugh at that because they customarily regard the whole world as their own. If you pride yourself on your nobility because you have seven rich forebears, they think little of you as having no conception of the universality of nature or of how many predecessors each of us has—rich, poor, kings, servants, Greeks, barbarians. If you were fiftieth in line from Hercules, they would think you empty-headed to value such a gift of fortune.[1]

Thus the common herd despised them as ignorant of the elementary common things, as presumptuous and insolent.

But that portrait drawn by Plato is far removed from what applies to our folk. [A] The ones portrayed by Plato were envied as being *above* common ways, as being *contemptuous* of public duties, as having set up a particular inimitable way of life governed by lofty and unusual principles; the men I am talking about are despised as being *below* common ways, as being *incapable* of public duties, as having base lives and *moeurs* dragging along behind the common herd. [C] 'I hate

[1] The point of 'fiftieth' is not the remoteness of the connection but the supposedly valuable length of the family's known history.

men whose words are philosophical but whose deeds are base' [Pacuvius].

[A] As for those ·ancient· philosophers, I say, they were great in learning and even greater in every kind of action. And just as it is reported concerning that geometrician of Syracuse [Archimedes] that

> having been turned aside from his contemplation in order to put some of it to practical use in the defence of his country, he immediately set about producing frightful machines and incredible effects, all the while disdaining this handiwork of his in which he thought he spoiled the dignity of his art, of which his works were mere apprentice work and toys,

so too with them: whenever they were put to the test of action they were seen to fly on such a soaring wing that it was clear that their heart and soul had been wondrously enriched by their understanding of things.

But [C] some, seeing the citadel of political power taken over by incompetents, withdrew from it. The man who asked Crates how long one had to go on philosophising, was told 'Until our armies are no longer led by mule-drivers.' Heraclitus made over the monarchy to his brother; and to the citizens of Ephesus who reproached him for spending his time playing with the children in front of the temple he retorted: 'Isn't it better to be doing this ·with them· than to be sharing the control of affairs with you?' [A] Others, whose imagination was set above fortune and above the world, found the seats of justice and even the thrones of kings to be low and vile. [C] Empedocles rejected the offer of kingship made by the men of Agrigentum. [A] When Thales condemned the preoccupation with thrift and money-making, he was accused of being like the fox ·in Aesop's fable about 'sour grapes'·, being unable to achieve these things. He decided to amuse himself by trying this out: making his knowledge, just this once, stoop to the service of profit and gain, he set up a trade which in one year brought in such riches that the most experienced in that business could hardly have made as much in a lifetime.

·Contemporary philosophers·

[C] Aristotle reports that some people described Thales, Anaxagoras and their like as 'wise but not prudent', because they did not care enough about the more useful things. I am suspicious of that verbal distinction, but anyway the ·contemporary· people I am talking about cannot be excused in that way; judging from the base and needy fortune they settle for, we would be justified in saying both things—they are not wise and not prudent.

[A] But leaving aside this first explanation ·of the bad repute of learning, namely that 'the common herd' is stupid·, I think it is better to say that the trouble comes from their going about their knowledge in a wrong way, and that given how we are taught, it is no wonder that neither students nor their teachers become more capable though they make themselves more erudite. In truth the care and expense of our fathers aim only at furnishing our heads with knowledge; nobody talks about judgement or virtue. [C] When someone passes by, try exclaiming 'Oh, what a learned man!' and of another 'Oh, what a good man!' Our people will not fail to turn their gaze respectfully towards the first. There ought to be a third exclamation 'Oh, what blockheads!'

[A] We are eager to inquire: 'Does he know Greek or Latin?' 'Does he write in verse or in prose?' But what matters most is what we put last: 'Has he become better and wiser?' We ought to have asked who is *better* learned, not *more* learned.

·Borrowed knowledge·

We work merely to fill the memory, leaving the understanding [C] and the conscience [A] empty. Just as birds sometimes go

in search of grain, carrying it in their beak without tasting it to give a beakful to their young, so our pedants go foraging for knowledge in books and lodge it on the edge of their lips, only to spit it out and scatter it to the winds.

[C] It is wonderful how snugly this folly fits my own case. Is it not doing the same thing, what I do in most of this composition ·of my essays·? I go about rummaging in this book and that for sayings that please me—not to store them (for I have no storehouse) but to carry them into this book, where—if the truth be told—they are not *mine* any more than they were in their original place.

What makes us learned, I believe, is what we know now—not what we once knew any more than what we shall know some day.

[A] [Picking up from '. . . to the winds.'] But what is worse, their students and *their* little charges are not nourished and fed by it either. It is passed from hand to hand for the sole purpose of showing it off, entertaining others with it, and adding up amounts of it ·in this or that head·, like coinage that is useful only for adding up and throwing away. . . .

We know how to say 'This is what Cicero said', 'Such are the *moeurs* of Plato', 'These are Aristotle's exact words.' But what do we ourselves say? What do we do? What do we judge? A parrot could say as much.

This behaviour reminds me of the rich Roman who went to much trouble and great expense to round up experts in all branches of learning, keeping them always within reach so that when in conversation with friends he needed to speak of one thing or another they would take his place and all be ready to provide him one with an argument, another with a verse of Homer, each according to his assignment. He thought that this knowledge was his because it was in the heads of his people. It is the same with those whose ability is stored in their sumptuous libraries. . . .

We take the opinions and knowledge of others into our keeping, and that is all; we should make them our own. It is as though someone needed a fire, went next door to get a light, found a big blaze there and stayed to warm himself, forgetting to take any back home. What good do we get from having a belly full of meat if it is not digested, if it is not transformed into *us*, if it does not make us bigger and stronger? Lucullus was made and fashioned into such a great captain by books, not by experience—do we think that he treated books in our way?

[B] We let ourselves lean so heavily on other men's arms that we annihilate our own powers. Do I want to arm myself against the fear of death? I do it at Seneca's expense. Do I want consolation for myself or for someone else? I borrow it from Cicero; I would have found it in myself if I had been trained to do so. I do not like this 'ability' that is dependent on others and borrowed.

[A] Even if we could be learned with other men's learning, we absolutely cannot be wise with any wisdom but our own. [Montaigne follows this with four short classical quotations and an anecdote about Diogenes. Then:] If our learning does not make our soul move with a better motion, if it does not give us healthier judgement, then I would just as soon my student spent his time playing tennis: that would at least make his body more agile. But after his fifteen or sixteen years of study just look at him! There is nothing so unfit for use; the only 'improvement' you can see in him is that his Latin and Greek have made him more conceited and more arrogant than when he left home. [C] He ought to have brought back a full soul; he brings back a swollen one; he has merely inflated it instead of enlarging it.

Protagoras told his pupils that they should either •pay him on his terms, or •swear in the temple how much they valued the profit they had received from his teaching, and

compensate him accordingly. If this were done today, these pedagogues of mine would be in for a disappointment if they had to rely on the sworn testimony of my experience.

My Perigordian patois very comically calls these youthful savants *lettre-ferits* ('word-struck'), men whom reading has whacked with a hammer, as the saying goes. In truth, they usually seem to have sunk even below common sense. You see a peasant and a shoemaker go about their business simply and naturally, talking about what they know; whereas these fellows—through wanting to exalt themselves and swagger around with this knowledge that floats on the surface of their brain—are for ever getting confused and tripping themselves up. Fine words break loose from them, but let someone else apply them! They know Galen well, but the patient not at all. They have already filled your head with laws before understanding what the case is really about. They know the theory of everything; *you* find someone who will put it into practice.

Whoever will look closely at persons of this sort (and they are spread about everywhere) will find as I do that most of the time they understand neither themselves nor anyone else, and that they have a full enough memory but an entirely hollow judgement; unless their own **nature** has designed it differently. I saw this in the case of Adrian Turnebus; he had no other profession but letters (in which he was, in my opinion, the greatest man for a millennium), but he had nothing schoolmasterish [*pedantesque*] about him except the way he wore his gown and some superficial mannerisms that might not be civilised by a courtier's standard but amount to nothing. [B] And I hate our people who find it harder to tolerate a gown askew than a soul askew, and who judge a man by how he bows, by his dignity, and by his boots. [A] For inside Turnebus was the most polished soul in the world. I often intentionally launched him on topics remote from his profession; and he saw into them so clearly, with so quick a grasp, with so sound a judgement, that it seemed as if that he had never had any other profession but war and affairs of state. It is fair and strong **natures**—[B] 'the ones whose hearts are made by Titan with gracious art and from a better clay' [Persius]—[A] that keep their integrity through a bad education.

Now, it is not enough that our education does not spoil us; it should change us for the better. Some of our appellate courts, when they are to admit new members, examine only their knowledge; others add a test of their judgment, by giving them a case to judge. The latter seem to me to have a much better procedure. And although both parts are necessary and must occur together, the fact is that knowledge is less valuable than judgment. The latter can do without the former, but not vice versa. As the Greek verse says 'What use is knowledge if there is no understanding?' [Stobaeus]. Would to God that, for the good of our justice, those bodies were as well provided with understanding and conscience as they are with knowledge! [C] 'We are taught for the schoolroom, not for life' [Seneca].

[A] Now, knowledge should be not merely attached to the soul but incorporated into it; we should not sprinkle but dye. And if knowledge does not change the soul, making its imperfect state better, then it would be much better to leave it alone. Knowledge is a dangerous sword that gets in its master's way and wounds him if it is in a weak hand that does not know how to wield it. . . .

Perhaps that is why neither we ·French· nor theology require much learning in women; and why ·a certain nobleman·. . . ., when told that his intended bride. . . .had been brought up simply and never taught to read, replied that he liked her the better for that and that a woman knew enough if she knew the difference between her husband's undershirt and his doublet.

So it is not as great a wonder as they proclaim it to be that our ancestors thought little of book-learning and that even now it is found only by chance in the chief councils of our kings; for even today if book-learning were not kept in credit by the only goal that is set before us these days by such branches of it as jurisprudence, medicine, *pedantisme* [see Glossary], and even theology, namely to get rich by them, you would see it in as wretched a condition as it ever was. And what loss would that be, given that it teaches us neither to think well nor to act well? [C] 'Now that so many are learned, it is good men that we lack' [Seneca]. To a man who has no knowledge of what is good, all other knowledge is harmful.

But perhaps the reason I was looking for just now—·i.e. the explanation for the bad repute of learning [see page 58]·—comes also from this: since studies in France have almost no other goal than the making of money, few of those whom nature brought into the world for noble rather than lucrative duties devote themselves to learning; or else they do so quite briefly, withdrawing (before getting a taste for it) to a profession that has nothing in common with books; so that ordinarily few are left to devote themselves entirely to study except people of humble means trying to make a living from it. And the souls of those people, being—by nature, by their home upbringing, and by example—of the basest alloy, bring forth false fruits of learning. For learning is not there to give light to a soul that has none, or to make a blind man see. Its task is not to provide him with sight but to direct the sight he has, to put it through its paces, provided that it already has sound and capable feet and legs.

Knowledge is a good medicine, but no medicine is strong enough to preserve itself from taint and corruption by defects in the jar that contains it. Here is a man who sees clearly but does not see straight; so he sees what is good and does not follow it; he sees knowledge and does not use it. Plato's main statute in his *Republic* is to give its citizens employments according to their natures. Nature can do all, and does do all. Cripples are ill-suited to physical exercises, and crippled souls to mental ones. Bastard and vulgar souls are unworthy of philosophy.

When we see a man ill-shod, we say it is no wonder, if he is a shoemaker! Likewise it seems that experience often presents us with a doctor worse doctored, a theologian less reformed, a scholar less competent, than anyone else.

Aristo of Chios had reason to say long ago that philosophers harm their hearers, inasmuch as most souls are not fit to profit from such teaching, which when it does not work for good works for evil: 'Debauchees come from Aristippus's school, boors from Zeno's' [Cicero].

·Educating for virtue·

[A] In that fine education that Xenophon ascribed to the Persians, we find that they taught their children virtue just as other nations teach letters. [C] Plato says that the eldest son in their royal succession was brought up as follows. At birth he was entrusted not to women but to eunuchs holding highest authority in the king's entourage on account of their virtue. They took charge of making his body fair and healthy. After seven years they taught him horse-riding and hunting. When he reached fourteen they put him in the hands of four men: the wisest, the most just, the most temperate, and the most valiant man in the nation. The first taught him religion; the second, to be always truthful; the third to make himself master of his appetites; the fourth to fear nothing.

[A] It is a thing worthy of great consideration that in Lycurgus's excellent form of government, one truly prodigious in its perfection, despite the emphasis on the education of children as the state's principal responsibility, little mention is made of learning. . . .; as if those high-souled youths,

disdaining any yoke except that of virtue, had to be provided not with our masters of knowledge but only with masters of valour, prudence and justice—[C] an example followed by Plato in his Laws. [A] Their teaching consisted in posing questions about their judgements of men and their actions; if the pupils condemned or praised this or that person or action they had to reason out what they said; by this means they sharpened their understanding while also learning what is right.

In Xenophon, Astyages asks Cyrus for an account of his last lesson. He replies: 'In our school a big boy had a small coat that he gave to a smaller classmate and took his coat, which was larger. Having been told by our teacher to judge this quarrel, I judged that things should be left as they were and that each boy seemed to be better off. He showed me that I had done badly by considering only what seemed *better*, whereas I should first have taken care of *justice*, which required that no-one should be forced in regard to something that belonged to him.' And he says he was whipped for this, just as we are in our village schools for forgetting how to conjugate $\tau\mu\pi\tau\omega$ [the Greek word for 'thrash'].

My schoolmaster would treat me to a fine harangue in the demonstrative mode before he would persuade me that his school was worth that one! They wanted to shorten the journey, and since it is true that learning, even when done properly, can only teach us wisdom, integrity and resolution, they wanted to put their children from the outset in contact with actual cases, teaching them not by hearsay but by the test of action, forming and moulding them in a living way, not only by word and precept but chiefly by examples and works; in order to create not merely their soul's knowledge but its very essence and temperament, not an acquisition but a natural possession. . . .

It is said that people used to go to other Greek cities to find rhetoricians, painters and musicians, but to Sparta for legislators, magistrates, and military generals.

- In Athens one learned to talk well; •here [= in Sparta] to act well;
- there to disentangle oneself from bad arguments and confront the imposture of trickily intertwined words; •here to disentangle oneself from the snares of sensual pleasure and to boldly confront the menaces of fortune and of death;
- those were busy with words; •these with things;
- there it was a continuous exercise of the tongue; •here a continuous exercise of the soul.

So it is not strange that when Antipater demanded from them [i.e. the Spartans] fifty children as hostages they replied—quite the opposite to what we would do—that they preferred to give twice that many adults, so important did they consider the loss ·to the hostage children· of their country's education. When Agesilaus invites Xenophon to send his sons to be brought up in Sparta, it is not to learn rhetoric or dialectic there but, he says, to learn the finest science there is, namely the science of obeying and commanding. [Then [C] an anecdote in which Socrates pokes fun at Hippias, eventually getting him to admit that his learned arts are useless.]

Both in that martial government and in all others like it, examples show that learned study makes hearts soft and effeminate more than it makes them strong and warlike. The strongest state that we see in the world at present is that of the Turks, a people equally trained to respect arms and to despise letters. I consider Rome more valiant before it became learned. In our time the most warlike nations are the most crude and ignorant: the Scythians, the Parthians, Tamerlane give us evidence of that. When the Goths sacked Greece, what saved all the libraries from being burned down was the idea spread by one of the invaders that this item should be left intact for the enemy, to deflect them from

military exercises and make them spend time on sedentary and idle occupations.

When our own King Charles VIII saw himself master of the kingdom of Naples and a large part of Tuscany, almost without drawing his sword from its scabbard, the noblemen in his suite attributed this unhoped-for ease of conquest to the fact that the Italian princes and nobility spent more time in becoming clever and learned than in becoming vigorous and soldierly.

26. Educating children

TO MADAME DIANE DE FOIX, COMTESSE DE GURSON

[A] I have never known a father fail to acknowledge his son as his own, no matter how hunchbacked or mangy he was. It is not that he does not see his infirmities (unless he is quite besotted by his affection), but the boy is his! Myself too; I see better than anyone else that these ·writings of mine· are only the *rêveries* [see Glossary] of a man who has only tasted the outer crust of the sciences [see Glossary] during his childhood and has retained only a vague undetailed picture of them: a little of everything and nothing thoroughly, French style. For, to sum up, I do know that there is such a thing as medicine, jurisprudence, four parts in mathematics, and roughly what they aim at. [C] And perhaps I also know the sciences' general claim to be of service to our life. [A] But as for digging deeper into them, biting my nails over the study of Aristotle, [C] the monarch of modern doctrine, or stubbornly persevering in any branch of learning, I have never done it; [C] nor could I sketch even the bare outlines of any art. There is not a child half-way through school who cannot claim to know more than I do; I am not equipped even to test him on his first lesson. If I am forced to do so, I am constrained—·being ignorant of all the details·—to draw from it (rather ineptly) something of universal scope, and test his natural judgement on that—a lesson as unknown to the boys as theirs is to me.

·USES OF PAST WRITERS·

I have not had regular dealings with any solid book except Plutarch and Seneca, where I draw like the Danaïds, constantly filling and then pouring out. I get some of it to stick to this paper; to myself, next to nothing.

[A] When it comes to books, my quarry is history, or poetry, which I love with a special affection; for (as Cleanthes said) just as the trumpet's voice rings out clearer and stronger from being forced through a narrow tube, so it seems to me that when a thought is compressed into the constraints of poetic rhythm it springs out much more vigorously and gives me a stiffer jolt. As for my own natural faculties, of which *this* is the *essai* [see Glossary], I feel them bending under the load. My conceptions and my judgement move only by groping, staggering, stumbling and blundering; and when I have gone as far as I can, I am far from satisfied; I still see country further on, but with a confused vision, in a cloud that I cannot sort out. When I undertake to speak indiscriminately of everything that comes to my fancy, using only my own natural resources, then if I happen (as I often do) to come across in good authors the same topics I have tried to treat—as in Plutarch I have just this very moment come across his discourse on the power of the imagination—I see myself to be, compared with those men, so weak and paltry, so heavy and sluggish, that I feel pity or scorn for myself.

Still I am pleased •that my opinions have the honour of often coinciding with theirs [C] and that at least I **follow** them a long way behind, saying 'Yes indeed!'; and [A] •that I know (as many do not) the vast difference there is between them and me, yet still allow my weak and lowly thoughts to run

on without plastering or patching the faults this comparison has shown me. [C] You would need good muscles to undertake to march **abreast** of those folk!

[A] Those rash authors of our own century who scatter whole passages from ancient writers throughout their own nugatory works, to do themselves honour, do the opposite. The infinite difference in brilliance gives such a pale, sallow, ugly face to their own contributions that they lose much more than they gain.

[C] There were two contrasting approaches. Chrysippus the philosopher mixed into his writings not merely passages but entire books from other authors—in one the whole of the *Medea* of Euripides—and Apollodorus said that if you removed the borrowings the page would be left blank. Epicurus, on the contrary, in the three hundred volumes that he left included not a single borrowed quotation.

[A] [Picking up from '. . . than they gain.] The other day I chanced upon such a passage. I had dragged along languidly behind some French words—words so bloodless, so fleshless and so empty of matter and sense that indeed that's all they were, *French words*—when at the end of a long and boring road I came upon a passage that was high, rich, soaring to the clouds. If the slope had been gentle and the climb slower,

next clause: *cela eust esté excusable*;

literally meaning: that would have been excusable;

what Montaigne presumably had in mind: that would have made it sensible for the author to include the quoted passage in his own work;

but it was a precipice so straight and so steep that when I was six words into it I knew I was flying off into another world. From there I saw the bog I had come out of, so low and so deep that I never again had the stomach to go back into it. If I stuffed one of my chapters with such rich spoils, that would reveal all too clearly the stupidity of the others.

[C] Criticising others for having my faults seems to me no more inconsistent than (as I often do) criticising myself for having other people's. Faults should be condemned everywhere and not allowed any place to hide. Yet I know how audaciously I strive to measure up to my stolen wares, to keep in step with them, not without some rash hope of deceiving the eyes of judges who might identify them. But ·I have two partial defences against this conduct·. •I do this is as much by virtue of how I apply my borrowings as by virtue of ·matching them through· my inventiveness or my power. •And I do not wrestle with those old champions wholesale, ·but come at them one at a time·; and I do not fight body against body, but proceed by snatches, little light attacks. I do not grapple with them; I merely try them out; and never engage with them as far as I make a show of doing. If I could stand up to them I would really be something! because I take them on only where they are toughest.

As for what I have caught some people doing—

> covering themselves with other men's armour, not even their fingertips showing; and carrying out their plan (as it is easy for the learned to do on common subjects) with ancient inventions patched together here and there

—for those who want to pass their borrowings off as their own, **(i)** this is unjust and cowardly; having nothing worthwhile of their own to show off, they try to present themselves in false colours; and **(ii)** it is very stupid to be content with getting through deceit the ignorant approval of the common herd, while losing all credit among men of understanding—the only ones whose praise has any weight—who turn up their noses at this borrowed marquetry. For my part there is nothing that I would want to do less. I do not speak the minds of others except to speak my own mind better. . . .

[A] [Picking up from '. . . the stupidity of the others.'] . . . .Whatever these futilities of mine may be, I have not planned to hide them, any more than I would a bald and graying portrait of myself in which the artist had painted not a perfect face but my own. These are *my* humours and opinions; I offer them as what I believe, not as to be believed. My only aim here is to reveal myself, and I may be different tomorrow if I learn something new that changes me. I have no authority to be believed, nor do I want it, feeling myself too ill-instructed to instruct others.

·Educating children·

Well, someone who had seen the preceding chapter ·on schoolmasters etc.· was telling me at my home the other day that I should have enlarged a little on the subject of children's education. If I did have any competence in this matter, Madame, I could not put it to better use than to make a present of it to that little man who is giving signs that he will soon come bravely out of you (you are too great-souled to begin otherwise than with a male). Having played so large a part in bringing about your marriage, I have a certain rightful interest in the greatness and prosperity of whatever comes out of it; in addition to which your former claim on my service obliges me to desire honour, wealth and success to everything that concerns you. But in truth I know nothing about it except this: that the biggest and most important difficulty in the branch of learning whose topic is humanity seems to lie in the area that deals with the upbringing and education of children.

[C] Just as in farming: the operations that precede the planting are certain and easy, as is the planting itself; but as soon as what is planted springs to life, raising it involves many methods and much difficulty. So too with men: it is not much work to plant them; but as soon as they are born, there is a variety of cares—full of bustle and worry—in their training and upbringing.

[A] At that early age the signs of their inclinations are so slight and obscure, the promise they show is so uncertain and misleading, that it is hard to base any solid judgement upon them. [B] Look at Cimon, look at Themistocles and a thousand others, how unlike themselves they became! Bear-cubs and puppies show their natural inclinations, but men, plunging headlong into habits, into opinions, into laws, easily change or disguise themselves.

[A] Still, it is difficult to force natural propensities. That is why people, having failed to choose their children's road well, often waste their time spending years in training children for things in which they cannot get a foothold. At all events my opinion is that in this difficulty they should be put on the path towards the best and most rewarding goals, and that little heed should be paid to those trivial conjectures and prognostications that we base on their childish actions. [C] Even Plato in the *Republic* seems to me to give them too much authority.

[A] Madame, learning is a great ornament and a wonderfully useful tool, especially for people raised to such a degree of fortune as you are. In truth it is not used properly in mean and lowborn hands. It is prouder to lend its resources to

- conducting a war,
- governing a people, or
- gaining the friendship of a prince or of a foreign nation

than to

- drawing up dialectical arguments,
- pleading an appeal, or
- prescribing a mass of pills.

Thus, Madame, because I believe you will not forget this element in the education of your children, you who have tasted its sweetness and who belong to a literary race—

> for we still have the writings of those early counts de Foix from whom his lordship the count your husband and yourself are descended, while your uncle François de Candale daily produces writings that will extend the knowledge of this family trait through centuries

—I want to tell you of just one fancy of mine that is contrary to normal practice; it is all I can contribute to your service in this matter.

The task of the tutor that you will give your son—and your choice of *him* will determine the whole outcome of your son's education—will have many other important parts on which I say nothing because on them I have nothing worthwhile to say; as for this matter on which I take it on myself to give him advice, he will accept it only as far as he finds it convincing. For a child of noble family who

> seeks learning not •to make money (for such an abject goal is unworthy of the grace and favour of the Muses, and besides it looks to others and depends on them), or •for external advantages, but rather •for advantages that are truly his own, that inwardly enrich and adorn him, wanting to become an able man rather than a learned one,

I would urge that •care be taken to choose a tutor with a well-made rather than a well-filled head, that •both be required of him but with more emphasis on *moeurs* [see Glossary] and intelligence than on any branch of learning, and that •the tutor go about his job in a new way.

·How the tutor should proceed·

Teachers are for ever bawling into our ears as though pouring liquid down a funnel, our task being merely to repeat what we have been told. I would want him—·your son's tutor·—to correct this practice. Right from the start, according to the capacity of the soul he has in hand, he should begin to put it through its paces, making it taste things, choose them, discern them by itself; sometimes clearing the way for the boy, sometimes letting him clear it for himself.

I do not want the tutor to do all the thinking and talking; I want him also to *listen* when the pupil's turn comes to speak. [C] Socrates and later Archesilaus used to make their pupils speak first; they spoke afterwards. 'The authority of those who teach is often an obstacle to those who want to learn' [Cicero].

It is good to make him trot in front of his tutor, letting the latter judge the child's pace and judge how far he has to hold back to adapt himself to the child's ability. If that proportion is wrong we spoil everything. And finding it and going along in it evenly is one of the hardest tasks I know. It is the work of a lofty and powerful soul to slow down to the child's pace and to guide his footsteps. I walk more firmly and surely uphill than down.

Those who follow our ·French· practice of trying to regulate many minds with such different capacities and forms by a single lesson and a similar degree of guidance—it is no surprise if in a whole race of children they can find barely two or three who reap any proper fruit from their education.

[A] [Picking up from '. . . comes to speak.'] Let him ask the pupil for an account not merely of the lesson's words but of its sense and substance; in judging how the child profits, let him go by the testimony not of his memory but of his life. Let him be made to show what he has just learned in a hundred aspects and apply it to that many different subjects, to see whether he has really grasped it and made it his own,

the rest of the sentence: [C] *prenant l'instruction à son progrez, des pædagogismes de Platon.*

translated by Florio: taking his instruction from the institution given by Plato.

by Cotton/Hazlitt: taking instruction of his progress by the pedagogic institutions of Plato.

by Frame: planning his progress according to the pedagogical method of Plato.

by Screech: judging the boy's progress by what Plato taught about education.

[A] Disgorging food exactly as you have swallowed it is a sign of rawness and indigestion; the stomach has not done its work if it has not changed the substance and the form of what it is given to cook.

[B] Our soul moves only on faith, being shackled and constrained to the whims of other people's fancies—a slave and captive under the authority of their teaching. We have been so subjected to leading strings that we no longer have a free stride; our vigour and liberty have been quenched. . . . [B] I had a private meeting in Pisa with a decent man who is so Aristotelian that the most sweeping of his dogmas is that

- the touchstone and measure of all solid speculation and all truth is conformity with Aristotle's teaching;
- outside of that there are only chimeras and emptiness;
- he saw everything, said everything.

When that position was taken too broadly, and unfairly, it once put him in great danger from the Roman Inquisition, and kept him there for a long time.

[A] Let him make his pupil pass everything through a filter and never lodge anything in his head simply by authority and on trust. Let not Aristotle's principles be *principles* for him, any more than the Stoics' or the Epicureans'. Set all these judgements before him; he will choose if he can; if not, he will remain in doubt. [C] Only fools are certain and assured. [A] 'Doubting pleases me as much as knowing' [Dante].

For if he embraces the opinions of Xenophon and Plato through his own reasoning, they will no longer be theirs; they will be his. [C] He who follows another follows nothing. He finds nothing; indeed he seeks nothing. . . . Let him at least know that he knows. [A] He should imbibe their ways of thinking, not learn their precepts. And let him boldly forget where he got them from if he wants to, but let him know how to make them his own. Truth and reason are common to all; they no more belong to the man who first expressed them than to anyone who did so later. [C] It is no more 'according to Plato' than 'according to me', since he and I understand and see it the same way. [A] Bees plunder these flowers and those, but then of them they make honey that is entirely theirs; it is no longer thyme or marjoram. Even so with the pieces borrowed from others, he—·the pupil·—will transform and blend them so as to make of them a work that is entirely his—namely, *his judgement*. The forming of this is the only aim of his education, his work and study.

[C] Let him hide all the help he has had, and show only what he has made of it. Pillagers, borrowers, parade their buildings and purchases, not what they get from others. You do not see the sweeteners given to an appeal-court judge; you see the alliances he has gained and the honours for his children. No-one makes public his receipts; everyone makes public his acquisitions. The profit we get from study is to have become better and wiser by it.

[A] As Epicharmus used to say, it is the understanding that sees and hears; it is the understanding that makes profit of everything, that arranges everything, that acts, dominates, and reigns; everything else is blind, deaf, and soulless. Certainly we make it servile and cowardly by not leaving it free to do anything by itself. Who ever asked his pupil what *he* thinks about [B] rhetoric or grammar, or [A] this or that saying of Cicero? They are shoved into our memory. . . .as though they were oracles, in which letters and syllables are the substance of the matter.

[C] To know by heart is not to *know*; it is to store in our memory something that we have been given. What we really *know* we can avail ourselves of without looking at the model, without turning our eyes towards our book. Sad competence, a purely bookish competence! I look to it to provide decoration, not foundation, following Plato's view that true philosophy consists in steadfastness, faith and sincerity, the other branches of learning—with other aims—being merely cosmetic.

[Half a page on the need for the pupil to be active, and the desirability that young people be introduced to foreign lands and languages at an early age. Then:]

·KEEP IT TOUGH·

[A] Everyone agrees that it is not right to bring up a child in the lap of his parents. Natural affection makes them too tender and lax, even the wisest of them. They are not capable of punishing his faults or of seeing him brought up roughly, as he ought to be, and dangerously. They could not bear to see him riding back sweating and dusty from his training,. . . . or see him on a skittish horse, or up against a tough fencer foil in hand, or with his first arquebus [a portable firearm]. But there is no way around it; if you want to make a real man of him you must certainly not spare him in his youth, and must often flout the laws of medicine. 'Let him live beneath the open sky, and dangerously' [Horace].

[C] It is not enough just to toughen his soul; his muscles must also be toughened. The soul is too hard-pressed if it is not seconded, and has too great a task doing two jobs unaided. I know how much mine labours in company with a body so tender and so sensitive, which leans so heavily on it. I often notice in my reading that in their writings my masters present, as fine examples of great spirit and the power of courage, acts that usually owe more to thickness of skin and hardness of bones. I have seen men, women and children who are naturally so constituted that a beating is less to them than a flick of the finger is to me; who move neither tongue nor eyebrow at the blows they receive. When athletes imitate philosophers in endurance, it is strength of sinews rather than of heart.

Now, getting used to enduring work is getting used to enduring pain: 'Work hardens one against pain' [Cicero]. The boy must be broken into the pain and harshness of training, to ready him for the pain and harshness of dislocation, of colic, of cauterizings; and also of the dungeon and of torture. For he may be a prey to the last two, which at certain times threaten the good man as well as the bad. We are finding this now: whoever fights the laws threatens righteous men with the scourge and the noose.

[A] [Picking up from the paragraph about parents.] And then the authority of the tutor, which should be sovereign for the pupil, is interrupted and hampered by the presence of the parents. Add the fact that the respect the whole household pays the boy, and his awareness of the resources and status of his family, are in my opinion disadvantages at that particular age, and not trivial ones.

·CONDUCT IN CONVERSATION·

In this school of conversation among men I have often noticed a flaw: instead of learning about others we labour only to teach them about ourselves, and take more pains to peddle our wares than to acquire new ones. Silence and modesty are very good qualities in social intercourse. This boy will be trained to be sparing and thrifty about his ability when he has acquired it, and not to take exception to stupid things and wild tales that will be told in his presence—for it is unmannerly and impolite to hit at everything that is not to our taste. [C] Let him settle for correcting *himself*, and not

seem to reproach others for ·doing· things that he refuses to do, or speak against common *moeurs*: 'A man may be wise without ostentation, without arousing envy' [Seneca].

Let him shun these domineering and uncivil airs, and the childish ambition to try to •seem more clever by being different and—as though criticisms and novelties were the finest merchandise—to •gain a reputation by producing them. Just as it is appropriate only for great poets to use poetic licence, so also it is tolerable only for great and illustrious souls to take unusual liberties. 'If Socrates and Aristippus have acted contrary to the rules of behaviour and custom, do not think it is all right for you to do the same: they gained that privilege by great and sublime merits' [Cicero].

[A] He will be taught not to enter into discussion or argument except when he sees an opponent worth wrestling with—and even then not to make all the moves that can help him but only those that can help him most. Let him be made fastidious in sorting out and selecting his arguments, and fond of relevance and thus of brevity.

Above all let him be taught to throw down his arms and surrender to truth as soon as he perceives it, whether it is in his opponent's hands or within himself through reconsideration. For he will not be placed at a lectern to read out a prescribed text; the only thing that pledges him to a cause is his approval of it. He is not going to take up the profession in which men sell for ready cash the freedom to retract and think again. . . .

[C] If the tutor is of my disposition, he will form the boy's will to be a very loyal, very affectionate, very brave subject of his prince; but will cool in him any desire to attach himself to him otherwise than as a public duty. Apart from several other drawbacks,. . . .when a man's judgement has been hired and bought it is either •partial and less free or •tainted with imprudence and ingratitude. A full-time courtier cannot have the right or the will to speak and think other than favourably of a master who has chosen him, out of so many thousands of subjects, to train and raise up with his own hand. This favour and advantage corrupt his freedom, not without some reason, and dazzle him. So we generally find that what those folk say is at variance with what anyone else says in the state, and is little to be trusted in such matters.

[A] Let his conscience and his virtue shine forth in his speech, and be guided only by reason. Make him understand that •confessing the flaw he finds in his own argument—even if no-one else has noticed it—is an act of judgement and sincerity, which are the main qualities he pursues, and [C] that •obstinacy and quarrelsomeness are vulgar qualities, most often seen in the lowest souls. And that to think again and change his mind, to give up a bad case at the height of his ardour, are rare, strong and philosophical qualities.

·The world as the pupil's book·

[A] He will be warned that when he is in company he should have his eyes everywhere; for I find that the chief places are commonly seized by the least able men, and that greatness of fortune is hardly ever combined with ability. While talk at the top end of the table was about the beauty of a tapestry or the flavour of the malmsey, I have seen many witty remarks at the other end pass unnoticed.

He will sound out the capacity of each person: a herdsman, a mason, a passer-by; he should put everything to use, and borrow from each according to his wares; for there *is* a use for everything; even the stupidity and weakness of others will teach him something. By noting each man's graces and manners he will create in himself a desire for the good ones and contempt for the bad.

Put into his mind an honest spirit of inquiry about everything: he will see whatever is unusual around him:

a building, a fountain, a man, the field of an ancient battle, the place where Caesar or Charlemagne passed. . . . He will inquire into the *moeurs*, the resources, and the alliances of this prince and that. These are very enjoyable to learn about and very useful to know.

In this association with men I mean to include—and foremost—those who ·now· live only in the memory of books. By means of histories he will associate with those great souls of the best ages. It is a waste of time, if you will: but also, if you will, it is a study of inestimable value. . . . In this field what profit he will get out of reading the *Lives* of our Plutarch! But let my guide remember the goal of his task, and let him impress on his pupil not so much the date of the fall of Carthage as the *moeurs* of Hannibal and Scipio; not so much the name of the place where Marcellus died as why his death there showed him unworthy of his duty. Let him be taught not so much •the histories as •how to make judgments relating to them.

[Now a page or more containing •remarks about the richness and commendable brevity of Plutarch's works, and •a jumble of remarks about human foolishness. Then:] This great world. . . .is the mirror we should look into, so as to know ourselves from the proper angle. In short, I want it to be the book my young scholar reads. So many humours, sects, judgments, opinions, laws and customs teach us to judge sanely of our own, and teach our judgement to acknowledge its imperfection and natural weakness, which is not an easy learning experience. So many state disturbances and changes of public fortune teach us not to regard our own as any great miracle. So many names, so many victories and conquests buried in oblivion, make it ridiculous to hope to perpetuate our name by capturing ten armed brigands and a chicken-coop known only by its fall. The pride and arrogance of so many foreign displays of pomp, the inflated majesty of so many courts and dignities, strengthens and steadies our sight so that it can sustain the brilliance of our own without blinking. So many millions of men buried before us encourage us not to be afraid of going to join such good company in the other world. And so on.

[C] Our life, Pythagoras used to say, is like the vast throng assembled for the Olympic games. Some use their bodies to win fame from the contests; others bring merchandise to sell for profit. Some—and they are not the worst—seek no other gain than to see how and why everything is done, and to be spectators of other men's lives so that they can judge and regulate their own.

[A] The examples ·he will draw from his study of human history· will illustrate all the most profitable lessons of philosophy, which ought to be the rule and measure of men's actions. He will be told. . . .

- •what it is to know and not to know (which ought to be the goal of study);
- •what valour, temperance, and justice are;
- •what the difference is between
  - •ambition and greed,
  - •slavery and submission,
  - •licence and liberty;
- •by what signs we can recognise true and solid contentment;
- •how far we should fear death, pain and shame;
- •'how we can flee from hardships and how we can endure them' [Virgil];
- •what springs move us, and the causes of so many different impulses in us.

For it seems to me that the first lessons in which we steep his mind should be those that regulate his *moeurs* and his sense, that teach him to know himself and to know how to die well and to live well.

[C] Among the liberal arts, let us start with the art that liberates us. They are indeed all in some way serviceable in the regulation and practice of our lives, just as everything else is, in some way; but let us choose the one that leads there directly and professes to do so.

If we could confine our life's furnishings to their right and natural limits, we would discover that the greater part of the sciences[see Glossary] now in use are not useful to us; and that even in those that *are*, there are very useless stretches and depths that we would do better to leave alone; following what Socrates taught, we should limit our study of subjects that lack utility. [A] 'Dare to be wise. Start now. To hesitate about this is to act like the bumpkin who wants to cross but waits for the stream to dry up; time flows and will flow for ever, as an ever-rolling stream' [Horace]. . . .

After he has been taught what serves to make him wiser and better, he will be taught the elements of logic, physics, geometry, rhetoric; and he will soon get to the bottom of any branch of learning he chooses, because his judgement will already have been formed. He will be taught sometimes through discussions, sometimes through books; the tutor will sometimes provide him with verbatim passages from authors suited to his purposes; sometimes he will give him the marrow and the substance, predigested. If the tutor does not know enough books to provide him with all the fine things that would serve his purposes, he can be associated with a scholar to provide him, as the need arises, with material for him to sort out and dispense to the growing boy. . . .

·PHILOSOPHY AND ITS GOAL, VIRTUE·

It is a significant fact that in our century things have reached a state where even among men of understanding *philosophy* is an empty and fantastical name, without use or value—in common opinion and in fact. I believe that the cause of this lies in the chop-logic sophistries that block the approaches to it. It is very wrong to portray philosophy as inaccessible to the young and as having a surly, frowning and terrifying face. Who has masked it with this false face, pale and hideous? There is nothing more cheerful, more lusty, more sprightly—I almost said more frolicsome. What it preaches is all feast and fun. A sad and gloomy expression shows that you have come to the wrong place.

The soul in which philosophy dwells should by its health make the body healthy too. It should make its tranquility and ease shine out; should use its own mould to shape the ·person's· outward bearing, thus arming it with graceful pride, with an active and joyous demeanour, and with a contented and good-natured face. . . . [C] Its goal is virtue, which is not (as the schoolmen say it is) perched at the top of a steep, rugged, inaccessible mountain. Those who have come close to it hold that on the contrary virtue lives on a beautiful plateau, fertile and flowering, from which it clearly sees all things beneath it; but you can get there, if you know the way, by paths that are shaded, grassy, sweetly flowering, smooth and gently rising like tracks in the vaults of heaven.

It is because they have not spent much time with this virtue—

> this supreme, beautiful, triumphant, loving virtue, as delightful as it is courageous, a professed and implacable foe to sourness, displeasure, fear and constraint, having nature as its guide, fortune and pleasure as its companions

—that there are men who in their weakness have •fashioned this absurd portrait of it, sad, quarrelsome, sullen, threatening and scowling, and •placed it on a rock, in a solitary place, among brambles, a spectre to terrify people.

This tutor of mine, who knows that he should fill his pupil's mind with at least as much love for virtue as reverence

for it, will be able to tell him that the poets' attitudes follow those of the mob, and to get him to learn from experience that the gods make men sweat harder on the approaches to the chambers of Venus [goddess of love] than to those of Pallas [goddess of wisdom]. And when he begins to feel for himself, and is faced with a choice, as a mistress to be enjoyed, between ·two characters in Ariosto's poem *Orlando furioso*, namely·

- Bradamante, with her **natural** beauty, active, noble, virile though not mannish; dressed as a boy, wearing a shining helmet, and
- Angelica, her beauty soft, dainty, delicate, **artificial**; robed as a maiden with pearls in her headdress,

the tutor will think his pupil to be manly even in love if his choice is flat contrary to that of the effeminate Phrygian shepherd [Paris, who in a beauty-contest awarded the prize to Aphrodite, which amounts to choosing Angelica].

He will teach him this new lesson, that the value and height of true virtue lies in the ease, usefulness and pleasure of being virtuous, which is so far from being difficult that children master it as well as adults, and simple folk as well as clever ones. Virtue's tool is ·self·control, not effort. Socrates, its prime favourite, deliberately gives up effort so as to slip into the naturalness and ease of its progress. Virtue is the nursing mother of human pleasures. By making them just, it makes them sure and pure. By moderating them, it keeps them in breath and appetite. By withdrawing the pleasures that it denies to us it sharpens our appreciation of those it leaves us, and it leaves us an abundance of all those that nature consents to. . . . If virtue lacks the ordinary kind of good fortune, it rises above it, or does without it and creates a different fortune that is all its own, no longer fluctuating and unsteady. It knows how to be rich, powerful and learned, and lie on perfumed pillows. It loves life; it loves beauty, glory and health. But its own particular task is to know how to enjoy those blessings temperately and to lose them with fortitude; a task much more noble than harsh, without which the whole course of our life is denatured, turbulent, and deformed—and then you can indeed tie *it* to those rocky paths, those brambles and those spectres.

If this pupil's disposition is so weird that

- he would rather listen to a fable than hear an account of a fine voyage or a wise conversation,
- when the drum sounds calling the youthful ardour of his comrades to arms he turns aside for the drum of a troupe of jugglers, and
- he finds it no more pleasant and sweet to return dusty and victorious from a combat than from tennis or a dance with the prize from that exercise,

then I see no remedy except for his tutor to strangle him early when no-one is looking, or apprentice him to a pastry cook somewhere—even if he is the son of a Duke—following Plato's precept that children should be placed not according to the *facultés* [here = occupations] of their father but according to the *facultés* [here = abilities] of their soul.

[A] Since it is philosophy that teaches us to live, and since there is a lesson in it for childhood as well as for other ages, why is it not imparted to children? [B] 'At this moment you are moist soft clay. You ought to be taken now, *now*, and fashioned without end by the rapid wheel' [Persius]. [A] We are taught how to live when life is over. A hundred students have caught the pox before reaching Aristotle's lesson on temperance. [C] Cicero used to say that if he lived the life of two men he would not spend time studying the lyric poets. I find these chop-logic merchants even more pathetically useless. Our boy is in much more of a hurry; he owes only the first fifteen or sixteen years of his life to school-learning; the rest is owed to action. Let us use so short a time for the *necessary* teachings. [A] Get rid of those thorny subtleties, of

dialectics, abuses by which our lives cannot be amended. Take the simple arguments of philosophy; learn to choose and apply them at the right time; they are easier to grasp than a tale by Boccaccio. A child is capable of it as soon as he leaves his wet-nurse, much more than of learning to read and write. Philosophy has lessons for men's birth as well as for their decrepitude. . . .

·TEACHING SHOULD NOT BE GRIM·

For all this, I do not want the boy to be imprisoned. I do not want him to be given up to the anger and surly temperament of a furious schoolmaster. I do not want to spoil his mind by keeping him in torture and hard labour, as others do, for fourteen or fifteen hours a day—like a porter. [C] And if because of some solitary or melancholy streak he were seen to be indiscriminately addicted to the study of books, I do not think it would be good to encourage him in this. It unfits them for social intercourse and distracts them from better occupations. And how many men I have known in my time made stupid by rash greed for knowledge! Carneades was so mad about it that he no longer had time to tend to his hair or his nails.

[A] Nor do I want to ruin his noble *moeurs* [see Glossary] by the incivility and barbarism of others. French wisdom used to be proverbially a wisdom that took hold early but had little staying power. Indeed we still see that there is nothing as fine as the little children in France; but usually they disappoint the hopes placed in them, and as grown men they have no distinction. I have heard intelligent men maintain that it is these schools they are sent to—and there are plenty of them—that make them so brutish.

For our boy a room, a garden, his table, his bed, alone, in company, morning and evening—all hours will be the same, all places will be his study; because philosophy, which (as the shaper of judgment and *moeurs*) will be his principal study, has the privilege of being at home everywhere. When during a feast the orator Isocrates was asked to talk about his art he replied: 'What I can do, this is not the time for; what it is the time for, I cannot do.' Everyone thinks he was right about this, for presenting harangues and rhetorical debates to a company gathered for laughter and good cheer would produce too discordant a mixture. And as much could be said of all the other sciences [see Glossary]; but as for philosophy, in the part that treats of man, his duties and his tasks, it has been the common judgment of all the sages that because of the sweetness of its society it should not be excluded from feasts or from games. . . .

In this way he will certainly be less idle than others. But just as the steps we take strolling in a gallery tire us less than a third as many steps on a set journey, so too our lessons—occurring as if by chance, not bound to any time or place, and mixed in with all our activities—will slip by without being felt. Even games and exercises will be a good part of his studies; running, wrestling, [C] music, [A] dancing, hunting, handling horses and weapons. His outward grace, social ease and physical dexterity should be fashioned along with his soul. What is being trained is not a soul or a body, but a man, who must not be split into two. . . .

This education should be conducted, moreover, with severe gentleness, not as it usually is. Instead of being invited to letters, children are actually shown nothing but horror and cruelty. Away with violence and compulsion! In my view nothing so strongly depraves and stupefies a wellborn nature. If you want him to fear disgrace and punishment do not harden him to them ·by subjecting him to them·. Harden him to sweat and to cold, to wind and to sun, and to dangers that he ought to scorn. Rid him of all softness and delicacy about dress and about sleeping, eating

and drinking. Get him used to *everything*. Let him not be an effeminate pretty boy, but a boy who is fresh and vigorous.

[C] Boy, man, old man, I have always believed and judged in the same way. But among other things I have always disliked the discipline of most of our schools. If they had leaned towards ·undue· indulgence, that might have been a less harmful failure. They are a real prison for captive youth. By punishing boys for depravity before they are depraved, you make them so. Go there at lesson time: you hear nothing but screams—from tortured children and from masters drunk with rage. . . .

It is wonderful how concerned Plato is in his *Laws* with the gaiety and pastimes of the youths of his city, and how much he dwells on their races, games, singing, jumping and dancing, the control and patronage of which was entrusted in antiquity, he said, to the gods themselves: Apollo, the Muses and Minerva. He extends himself to a thousand precepts for his gymnasia. He spends little time on book-learning; and seems to recommend poetry in particular only for the ·sake of the· music.

[A] Anything idiosyncratic or strange in our *moeurs* and conduct is to be avoided as inimical to social intercourse. . . . I have seen men fly from the smell of apples more than from gunfire; others who are terrified of a mouse, or who vomit at the sight of cream. . . . Some occult property may be involved in this, but in my opinion anyone who got onto this young enough could stamp it out.

One victory my education has achieved over me (admittedly not without some trouble) is that except for beer my appetite adapts itself indiscriminately to everything that people consume. While the body is still supple, it should for that reason be made pliant to all manners and customs. Provided his appetites and his will can be kept in check, a young man should be suited to all nations and companies, even to dissoluteness and excess if the need arises. [Montaigne devotes a page to •expanding this last point, emphasising (with a quotation from Seneca) the difference between wanting to act badly and knowing how to do so, and •presenting a rapid-fire series of quotations all addressed to the idea that philosophising is a manner of living rather than of learning or talking. Then:]

[C] My pupil will not so much *say* his lesson as *do* it. He will repeat it in his actions. [A] We will see if there is prudence in his enterprises, if there is goodness and justice in his conduct, [C] if there is judgment and grace in his speaking, fortitude in his illnesses, modesty in his games, temperance in his pleasures, order in his economy, [A] unconcern in his tastes, whether of flesh or fish, wine or water. 'Who regards his learning as the law of his life, not a means of showing off; who obeys himself and submits to his own injunctions' [Cicero]. The true mirror of our thinking is the course of our lives. . . .

·Dethroning rhetoric·

The ·social· world is nothing but chatter; I never see a man who does not say more than he should rather than less. Yet half our life is wasted on that. They keep us for

- four or five years learning the meanings of words and stringing them into sentences,
- as many more in learning how to arrange them into a long composition, divided into four or five parts, then
- another five years, at least, learning how to mix and weave them concisely into verbal subtleties.

Let us leave that to those who make a living doing it. . . .

Provided our pupil is well equipped with substance, words will follow only too easily; if they will not come, he will drag them out. I hear people who excuse themselves for not being able to express themselves, pretending that their heads are

full of many fine things that they cannot deliver for lack of eloquence. That is rubbish. Do you know what in my opinion that ·stuff in their heads· is? It consists of shadows that come to them from some shapeless conceptions that they cannot deliver outwardly because they cannot untangle and clarify them within themselves. They don't themselves yet know what it[1]—·the stuff in their heads·—means. Just watch them stammer on the point of giving birth to it; you will judge that they are labouring not for delivery [C] but for conception, and [A] that they are only licking this imperfect matter into shape. For my part I maintain—[C] and Socrates makes it a rule—[A] that whoever has a vivid and clear thought in his mind will express it, even ·if necessary· in the Bergamask dialect; or, if he is dumb, by signs. 'Once you have mastered the things, the words will come freely' [Horace]. And as another said just as poetically in his prose: 'When things have taken hold of the mind, words come thick and fast' [Seneca]; [C] and another: 'The things themselves carry the words along' [Cicero].

[A] He knows nothing of ablatives, conjunctives, substantives, or grammar; nor does his footman or a Petit-Pont fishwife, yet they will talk your ear off, if you like, and will probably stumble as little over the rules of their language as the best master of arts in France. He does not know rhetoric, or how in a preface to capture the benevolence of the gentle reader; nor does he care to know it. The fact is that all that fine painting is easily eclipsed by the light of a simple natural truth. . . . [There follow three ancient anecdotes in which rhetoric is laughed at. Then:]

Whether introducing or summing up, a useful saying or a pithy remark is always in season. [C] If it does not suit what comes after it or what comes before, it is good in itself. [A] I am not one of those who think that good rhythm makes a good poem. Let him lengthen a short syllable if he wants to; it does not matter. If the inventions are happy and wit and judgement have done their work well, I shall say: 'There is a good poet, but a bad versifier.' 'He has the flair, though his verses are harsh' [Horace]. Let his work, says Horace, lose all its seams and measures—

> [B] 'Take away rhythm and measure; change the order of the words putting the first last and the last first; you will still find the poet in those scattered remains.'

—[A] he will still not belie himself for all that; the very fragments will be beautiful. That is what Menander replied when the day was near for his promised comedy and he was chided for not having yet set his hand to it: 'It is composed and ready; it remains only to add the verses.' Having thought the things through and arranged them in his mind, he took little account of the rest. Since Ronsard and Du Bellay have brought renown to our French poetry, I don't see any apprentice—however minor—who does not swell his words and arrange his rhythms almost as they do. [C] 'More sound than sense' [Seneca]. [A] Common people think there were never so many poets. But just as it has been easy for them to copy their rhymes, so they fall far short of imitating the rich descriptions of the one and the delicate inventions of the other.

[Now more than a page of further denigration of showy rhetoric. Then:] [C] Just as in dress it is pettiness to seek attention by some peculiar or unusual fashion, so too in speech the search for novel phrases and little-known words comes from a schoolmasterish ambition that is just puerile. If only I could limit myself to words used in the markets of Paris! The grammarian Aristophanes did not know what

[1] Taking *s'entendent* to be a slip for *l'entendent*.

he was talking about when he criticized Epicurus for his simple words and for the aim of his oratorical art, which was nothing but clarity of language.

Imitating speech is easy: it can be quickly picked up by an entire people; imitating judgement and invention does not come so fast. Most readers when they find a similar robe very wrongly think they have hold of a similar body. Strength or sinews are not borrowed; the attire and the cloak are borrowed.

Most of the people whose company I keep talk like these Essays; I do not know whether they think like them.

[A] Athenians (says Plato) give their attention to fullness and elegance in speech, Spartans to brevity, Cretans to fertility of thought rather than of language—and they are the best. Zeno said he had two sorts of followers: •those he called *philologous*, who cared for real learning and were his favourites, and •those he called *logophilous*, who cared only for language. [This is a pun involving the two senses of *logos* in Greek—'reason' and 'word'.] This is not to deny that speaking well is a beautiful and fine thing; but it is not as fine as it is made out to be, and it makes me angry that our whole life is taken up by it. I would want first to know my own language and that of the neighbours I have regular dealings with.

·LATIN AS A FIRST LANGUAGE·

There is no doubt that Greek and Latin are handsome and great arrangements; but they are bought too dear. I will tell you here about a way of getting them that is cheaper than the usual one; it was tried out on me. Anyone who wants to can use it.

My late father, having made all the inquiries a man can make among men of learning and understanding about a superlative form of education, became aware of the drawbacks of the current system; he was told that the sole reason why we cannot attain the greatness of soul and knowledge of the ancient Greeks and Romans was the length of time we spend learning languages, [C] which cost *them* nothing. [A] I do not believe that to be the only reason. Anyway, the expedient my father hit upon was to place me, while still at the breast and before the first loosening of my tongue, in the care of a German, who has since died a famous doctor in France, wholly ignorant of our language and very well versed in Latin. This man, who had been sent for expressly and was very highly paid, had me continuously on his hands. There were also two others with him, less learned, to attend me and relieve him. They spoke to me only in Latin. As for the rest of my father's household, it was an inviolable rule that neither he nor my mother nor a manservant nor a housemaid ever uttered in my presence anything except such words of Latin as each had learned in order to chat with me.

It is wonderful how each of them profited from this. My father and my mother in this way learned enough Latin to understand it and became fluent enough to speak it when they had to, as did the servants who were most attached to my service. Altogether, we became so Latinised that it spilled over into the neighbouring villages, where many tools and artisans still have Latin names that have taken root through usage. As for me, I was more than six years old before I knew any more French or Perigordian that I knew Arabic. And so without art, without books, without grammar or rules, without whips and without tears I had learned a Latin quite as pure as what my schoolmaster knew—for I could not have corrupted it or contaminated it. A test that other boys do in the colleges by translating from *French* into Latin they had to give me by requiring me to turn some *bad Latin* into good. ·At the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux, where I was sent after studying at home·, I had as private tutors Nicholas Grouchy (who wrote *De comitiis Romanorum*), Guillaume Guerente

(who wrote a commentary on Aristotle), George Buchanan, that great Scottish poet, and Marc-Antoine Muret, whom France and Italy recognise as the best orator of his time; they have often told me that as a child I had that language so fluent and so ready that they were afraid to approach me. Buchanan, whom I subsequently met in the retinue of the late Marshal de Brissac, told me that he was writing a book on educating children and was taking my education as his model, for he was then tutoring the Count de Brissac whom we have since seen so valiant and brave.

As for Greek, of which I have scarcely any knowledge, my father planned to have it taught to me artificially, but in a new way, as a sort of debate or sport. We volleyed our declensions back and forth, like those who learn arithmetic and geometry through certain board-games. For among other things he had been advised to enable me to love knowledge and duty by my own choice, and to educate my soul in all gentleness and freedom, without forcing my will. He did this so religiously that—

> because some people hold that it disturbs the tender brains of children to wake them in the morning with a jolt, snatching them suddenly and violently out of their sleep, in which they are much more deeply submerged than we are

—he had me woken up by the sound of some musical instrument; and I always had a man to do this for me.

This example will suffice to judge all the rest by, and also to commend the prudence and affection of so good a father, who is not to be blamed if his wonderful cultivation did not produce a harvest worthy of it. There were two causes for that, the first being the sterile and unfit soil. My health was sound and solid, and my nature gentle and tractable, but I was also so sluggish, lax and drowsy that they could not drag me out of my idleness even to make me play. Whatever I saw I saw well, and beneath this inert appearance I nourished bold ideas and opinions in advance of my age. I had a slow mind that would go only as far as it was led, a slow understanding, a weak imagination, and an incredible lack of memory. No wonder he could get nothing worthwhile from all this!

Secondly, just as people impelled by frantic desire to be cured will try any sort of advice, so that good man—terrified of failing in something so close to his heart—at last let himself be carried away by the common opinion. . . ., fell in line with standard practice, and sent me when I was about six to the Collège de Guyenne, then very flourishing and the best in France. (He no longer had about him the men who had given him those first educational ideas, which he had brought back from Italy.) It is impossible to add anything to the care he took there over choosing competent personal tutors for me and over all the other details of my education, in which he held out for certain particular practices contrary to school usage. But for all that, it was still school. My Latin promptly degenerated, and since then I have lost all use of it from lack of practice. And the only thing this novel education of mine did for me was to have me skipped immediately into the upper classes. When I left College at thirteen I had 'completed the course' (as they put it), in truth without any benefit that I can put in evidence now.

·READING FOR PLEASURE·

My first taste for books arose from my pleasure in the fables of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; when I was about seven or eight I would sneak away from any other pleasure to read them, Latin being my mother-tongue and this being the easiest book I knew and the one best suited by its content to my tender age.

(As for the likes of *Lancelot du lac*, *Amadis*, *Huon de Bordeaux* and such trashy books that children spend time on, I did not even know their titles—and still do not know their substance—so exact was the way I was taught.)

This ·love for Ovid· made me more casual about studying my set books. I was particularly lucky at this stage to have an understanding tutor who adroitly went along with this passion and others like it; for I read in succession Virgil's *Aeneid*, then Terence, then Plautus and the Italian comedies, always lured on by the charm of the subject. (If he had been so foolish as to stop this way of doing things, I think I would have acquired from school nothing but a hatred for books, as do most of our nobility.) He went about it cleverly, pretending not to see what was going on. He whetted my appetite, letting me devour such books only in secret, while gently keeping me at work on my prescribed lessons. For the chief qualities my father sought in those he put in charge of me were good nature and an easy-going disposition. And my own disposition had no vices except inertia and laziness. The danger was not that I should do wrong but that I should do nothing. Nobody forecast that I would become bad, only useless; they foresaw loafing, not knavery.

[C] I am aware that that is how it has turned out. The complaints that ring in my ears are like this:

- •Lazy!
- •Cool in the duties of friendship and kinship, and in public duties!
- •Too fond of his own opinions!
- •Too apt to look down on others!

Even the most insulting accusers do not say

- •Why did he take that? or
- •'Why hasn't he paid what he owes?

but rather

- •Why doesn't he cancel the debt that is owed to him?
- •Why doesn't he give more?

I would be glad if people found me to be wanting only in such works of supererogation [i.e. actions that go beyond—are in a sense better than—what is morally required]. But it is wrong for them to *demand* what I do not owe—much more rigorously than they demand of themselves what they *do* owe! By blaming me ·for not performing it· they turn the deed into one which, ·if I had performed it·, would not have gratified them and would not have brought me the gratitude I deserved. Also, any active generosity on my part should have greater weight because I have never been the passive recipient of any. I may dispose of my fortune the more freely the more it is mine; and of *myself* the more *I* am mine. Still, if I were a great polisher of my actions I might well beat off such reproaches, informing some of these people that their annoyance comes not so much from my not doing enough for them as from my inability to do enough *more*.

[Picking up from '. . . loafing, not knavery'.] [A] Nevertheless, my soul had strong stirrings of its own, and confident and open judgements on topics that it knew, quietly digesting them without telling anyone else. Among other things, I believe that it was incapable of surrendering to force and violence.

[Then a [B]-tagged passage about young Montaigne's precocious talents as an actor, followed by:] [B] I have always held that those who condemn such entertainments are unreasonable, and that those who refuse to let deserving troupes of actors into our self-governing towns—begrudging the people these public pleasures—are unjust. Good governments take care to assemble the citizens, bring them together for sports and games just as they do for solemn worship: sociability and friendliness are increased by this. . . .

[A] Returning now to my subject: there is nothing like arousing appetite and affection; otherwise you simply produce asses loaded with books. They are whipped into retaining a pocketful of learning; but if learning is to do us any good it must not merely lodge within us; we must marry it.

27. It is folly to judge the true and the false from our own capacities

[A] It is not perhaps without reason that we attribute to simple-mindedness and ignorance a readiness to believe and be convinced. For it seems to me that I once learned that belief was a kind of impression stamped on our soul; and the softer and less resistant the soul was, the easier it was to print anything on it: [C] 'Just as a weight placed on a balance must weigh it down, so the mind must yield to evident things' [Cicero]. The more empty and free of counterweights a soul is, the more easily it gives beneath the weight of the first persuasive argument. [A] That is why children, common people, women and the sick are more apt to be led by the ears.

But then, on the other hand, it is stupid presumption to despise and condemn as false everything that seems to us improbable, a vice that is widespread among those who think they have some uncommon ability.

I used to do that once: whenever I heard tell of ghosts walking, or of prophecies, enchantments, sorcery, or some other tale that I could not get my teeth into. . . ., I felt compassion for the wretched folk who were taken in by these follies. Now I find that I was at least as pitiable. Not that experience has since shown me anything surpassing my first beliefs (and not for lack of curiosity on my part), but reason has taught me •that to condemn something thus dogmatically as false and impossible is to claim the privilege of knowing the bounds and limits of God's will and of the power of our mother nature; and •that there is no greater folly in the world than reducing these things to the measure of our own capacity and competence.

If we describe as 'prodigies' or 'miracles' anything that our reason cannot reach, how many of these are continually coming into view! Let us consider through what clouds, and how gropingly, we are led to our acquaintance with most of the things we hold in our hands; and we will certainly find that what stops them from being strange to us is not knowledge but familiarity,. . . .and that if they were presented to us for the first time we would find them at least as incredible as any others [and a quotation from Lucretius saying the same thing].

He who had never seen a river thought that the first one he encountered was the ocean; and we think that the biggest things we have encountered are the utmost that nature produces in that category. [A quotation from Lucretius making the same point, and then:] [C] 'When we grow used to seeing anything it accustoms our minds to it and we cease to be astonished by it; we never seek the causes of things like that' [Cicero]. What makes us seek the causes of things is not so much their grandeur as their novelty.

[A] We should judge the infinite power of nature with more reverence and more awareness of our own ignorance and weakness. How many improbable things have been testified to by trustworthy people! If we cannot bring ourselves to believe them, we should leave them undecided; for condemning them as impossible is claiming—with rash presumption—that we know the limits of possibility. [C] If people rightly understood the difference between the impossible and the unusual, and between what is contrary to the orderly course

of nature and what is contrary to the common opinion of men, so that they neither rashly believed nor glibly disbelieved, they would be observing Chilo's rule: *Nothing in excess*.

[A] When we read in Froissart •that the count of Foix knew the following morning in Béarn of the defeat of King John of Castille at Juberoth, and •*how* he is alleged to have known this, we can laugh at that; and also at the story our annals tell, that on the very day when King Philip-Augustus died at Mante, Pope Honorius celebrated a public requiem for him and ordered the same to be done throughout Italy; for the authority of such witnesses is perhaps not high enough to keep us in check.

But wait! When Plutarch. . . .says that he knows with certain knowledge that

> in the time of Domitian, the news of the battle lost by Antonius in Germany was publicly announced in Rome, several days' journey away, and spread through all the world on the very day that it was lost;

and when Caesar maintains that

> often the news of an event actually preceded the event itself,

shall we say that these simple folk let themselves be hoaxed like the common herd because they were not clear-sighted as we are?

Is there anything more delicate, clear-cut and alert than the judgement of Pliny when he sees fit to put it into play? anything further from triviality? Leaving aside the excellence of his knowledge, which I count for less, in which of those two qualities do we surpass him? Yet every little schoolboy convicts him of lying, and lectures him about the march of nature's handiwork.

When we read in Bouchet about the miracles done by the relics of Saint Hilary, let it go; his credit is not great enough to take away our right to challenge him; but to condemn wholesale all similar stories seems to me to be impudent in the extreme. The great saint Augustine testifies that he saw

- •a blind child recover its sight on the relics of Saint Gervais and Saint Protasius at Milan;
- •a woman in Carthage cured of cancer by a sign of the cross that a newly baptised woman made over her;
- •his friend Hesperius, whose house was infested by spirits, driving them off with a little soil taken from our Lord's sepulchre, and
- •that same soil, later carried to church, promptly curing a paralytic;
- •a long-blind woman recovering her sight when she rubbed her eyes with flowers that she had touched Saint Stephen's shrine with during a procession;

and many other miracles at which he says he was personally present. What shall we to accuse him of—him and the two holy bishops, Aurelius and Maximinus, whom he calls on as witnesses? Will it be ·**(i)**· ignorance, simple-mindedness, credulity, or ·**(ii)**· knavery and imposture? Is any man in our century so impudent as to think himself comparable with them for ·**(ii)**· virtue and piety, or for ·**(i)**· knowledge, judgement and ability? [C] 'Who, even if they gave no reasons, would crush me by their mere authority' [Cicero].

[A] It is a dangerous and fateful presumption—besides the absurd rashness it implies—to disdain what we do not understand. For after you have used that fine understanding of yours to establish •the limits of truth and error, and it then turns out you *must* believe some things even stranger than the ones you reject, you are obliged from then on to abandon •them.

Now, what seems to me to bring so much disorder into our consciences, in these religious troubles that we are in, is this ·partial· surrender of their beliefs by Catholics. They see themselves as moderate and understanding when they

yield to their enemies some of the disputed articles of faith. They do not see what an advantage you give an adversary when you begin to yield ground, or how that encourages him to press his attack; but apart from that, the articles they select as being the least weighty are sometimes extremely important. We should either totally submit to the authority of our ecclesiastical government or totally release ourselves from it. It is not for us to decide what part of it to obey.

Moreover I can say this because I tried it ·and found that that was the upshot·. Having previously exercised this freedom of personal choice and selection, neglecting certain details in the observances of our Church that seem more empty or more strange ·than the rest·, and then coming to discuss them with learned men, I found that those things have a massive and very solid foundation, and that it is only stupidity and ignorance that make us receive them with less reverence than the rest.

Why do we not remember how much we sense contradiction even within our own judgement, and how many things were articles of faith for us yesterday that are fables for us today? Vainglory (leading us to stick our noses into everything) and curiosity (forbidding us to leave anything unresolved and undecided) are the scourges of our soul.

28. Friendship

[In the original, this essay concerns *l'amitié*, a word which in Montaigne's day covered a wide range of affectionate relationships.]

[A] As I was considering the way a painter I employ goes about his business, I felt a desire to copy him. He chooses the best place, the middle of each wall, on which to put a picture executed with all his skill; and fills the empty space all around it with grotesques, which are fantastic paintings whose only charm is their variety and strangeness. And what in truth are these things of mine, ·these essays·, if not grotesques, monstrous bodies pieced together from a variety of limbs, without any definite shape, having no order, sequence, or proportion except by accident?. . . .

I match my painter in this second part, but I fall short of him in the first and better part; for my ability does not go so far as to venture to undertake a rich polished picture fashioned according to ·the rules of· art. So I decided to borrow one from Etienne de La Boétie, which will bring honour to the rest of this work.[1] It is a **discourse** to which he gave the title 'Voluntary Servitude', but those who did not know this have very fitly rebaptised it as 'Against One Man'. He wrote it in his early youth as a kind of *essai* [see Glossary] in honour of freedom against tyrants. It has long circulated among men of understanding—not without great and well-merited commendation, for it is a fine thing, and as full as it could possibly be. Still, it is far from being the best he could do; if at the more mature age when I knew him he had adopted a plan like mine of writing down his thoughts, we would have seen many rare things bringing us very close to the glory of antiquity; for, particularly in the matter of natural gifts, I know no-one comparable with him. But nothing of his survives apart from •this treatise (and that by chance; I think he never saw it after it left his hands) and •some observations on that Edict of January,[2] made famous by our civil wars, which will perhaps find their place elsewhere. That is all I have been able to recover of his

[1] La Boétie's dates are 1530–63. Montaigne's: 1533–92.

[2] A decree of limited tolerance towards protestants, issued in January 1562 by Catherine de' Medici, regent of France.

literary remains—[C] I, the heir to whom, with death on his lips, he so lovingly willed his books and his papers—[A] apart from the slim volume of his works that I have had published.

I am especially indebted to **this discourse**, because it led to our meeting for the first time. For it was shown to me long before I met him, and gave me my first knowledge of his name; thus putting us on the path towards the friendship that we fostered, as long as God willed, so entire and so perfect that you will find few parallels in the whole of literature and no trace of it among men of today. So much coming-together is needed to build up such a friendship that it is a big thing if fortune can do it once in three centuries.

Nature seems to have put us on the path to society more than to anything else. [C] And Aristotle says that good legislators have had more care for friendship than for justice. [A] Now, the ultimate point in society's perfection is this [i.e. friendship]. [C] For in general all associations that are forged and fostered by pleasure or profit, by public or private needs, are less beautiful and noble—and less *friendships*—to the extent that they throw into the mix some cause and object and reward other than friendship itself. Nor do those four ancient species ·of love·—natural, social, hospitable and erotic—come up to real friendship, either separately or together.

·Between members of the same family·

[A] From children towards fathers it is rather *respect*. Friendship is fostered by ·free and open· communication, which cannot exist between them because of they are too unequal, and might interfere with the duties of nature, because

- fathers' secret thoughts cannot all be shared with their children for fear of begetting an unbecoming intimacy; and
- the counsels and corrections that are one of the chief duties of friendship cannot be offered by children to their fathers.. . . .

Truly *brother* is a beautiful name and full of affection, which is why he and I made our alliance a brotherhood. But the solder of brotherhood is enormously melted and weakened by the complexities of ownership, the division of property, one brother's wealth being the other's poverty. Since brothers have to advance their careers along the same path and at the same speed, it is inevitable that they often jostle and bump into each other. Moreover, why should there be found between them the harmony and kinship that engender these true and perfect friendships? Father and son can have totally different characters; so can brothers. 'He is my son, he is my kinsman, but he is wild' or '. . . but he is wicked' or '. . . but he is a fool'! And to the extent that they are loving relationships commanded by the law and the bonds of nature, there is less of our own choice and *liberté volontaire*.[1] Our *liberté volontaire* produces nothing more properly its own than affection and friendship. It is not that I haven't experienced all the friendship that can exist in that situation, having had the best most indulgent father who ever was, even into extreme old age, and coming from a family famous and exemplary from father to son in the matter of brotherly harmony: [B] 'And myself known for my fatherly concern for my brothers' [Horace].

·Between men and women·

[A] You cannot •compare it—·i.e. the true friendship I am talking about·—with affection for women, even though it is born

[1] Conservatively translated this = 'voluntary freedom'; whatever Montaigne means by that, it is presumably a counterpart to La Boétie's *Servitude volontaire* = 'voluntary servitude'.

of our own choice, or •put them in the same category. I admit that the fire of passion—'I am not unknown to the goddess who concocts the bitter-sweet anguish of love' [Catullus]—is more active, more scorching and more intense. But it is an impetuous and fickle fire, fluctuating and variable, a feverish fire, subject to attacks and relapses, which gets hold of only a corner of us. In friendship it is a general universal warmth, also moderate and even, a constant and settled warmth, all gentleness and smoothness with nothing bitter and biting about it. What is more, ·sexual· love is nothing but a frantic desire for something that escapes us: 'Like the hunter who chases the hare through heat and cold, over hill and dale, yet thinks nothing of it once he has bagged it; only while it flees does he pound after it' [Ariosto]. As soon as it enters the territory of friendship (i.e. in the agreement of wills) it languishes and grows faint. Because it has a **fleshly** end, it is subject to satiety, so that enjoyment of it destroys it. Friendship on the other hand is enjoyed in proportion to the desire for it; it is bred, nourished and increased only when enjoyed, because it is **spiritual**, and the soul becomes better at it through practice. Under this perfect friendship those fleeting passions also once found a place in me (not to mention *him*, who in his verses admits to all too many of them). So those two emotions came into me, each aware of the other; but never to be compared, the first keeping its course in a proud and lofty flight, disdainfully watching the other exhausting itself far below.

As for marriage, for one thing it is a bargain where only the entrance is free, its continuance being constrained and forced, depending on things outside our will; and a bargain ordinarily made for other purposes. For another, a thousand tangled threads come into it from outside, enough to break the continuity and trouble the course of a lively affection; whereas in a friendship there are no dealings or business with anything outside the friendship. Besides, to tell the truth, the ordinary capacity of women is inadequate for the communion and fellowship that sustain this sacred bond, nor does their soul seem firm enough to endure the strain of such a tight and durable knot. And indeed if it were not for that—

> if it were possible to fashion such a willing and free relationship, where not only the souls had this full enjoyment but the bodies would also share in the union, [C] i.e. where the whole man [here = 'human being'] was involved

—[A] it is certain that the resulting friendship would be fuller and more complete. But there has never yet been an example of the ·female· sex achieving this, [C] and by the common agreement of the ancient schools it is excluded from it.

·Between old men and youths·

[A] And that other licence of the Greeks is rightly abhorred by our *moeurs*. [C] Moreover, since it involved, according to their practice, such a necessary difference of age and divergence of roles between the lovers, it did not correspond closely enough to the perfect union and harmony that I am asking for here. 'What is this friendship-love? Why does no-one ever love an ugly youth or a handsome old man?' [Cicero]. For even the picture the Academy paints of it will not contradict me, I think, when I say the following about it.

•The first frenzy inspired by Venus's son ·Cupid· in the lover's heart at the sight of the flower of tender youth—in which they allow all the excessive and passionate acts that an immoderate ardour can produce—was simply based on **physical beauty**, a false image of **bodily generation** [here = 'sexual activity']. For it could not have been based on *l'esprit* [here =? 'the intellect'], which had yet to show itself—which was still being born, before the age of budding.

•If this frenzy seized a base heart, the means of his courtship were riches, presents, favours in advancement to high office, and other such base merchandise, which were generally condemned.

•If it fell on a nobler heart, the means were likewise nobler: •instruction in philosophy, •lessons teaching reverence for religion, obedience to the law and dying for the good of one's country, •examples of valour, wisdom, justice. The lover worked to make himself acceptable by the grace and beauty of his soul, that of his body having long since faded, and hoping by this mental fellowship to establish a firmer and more durable pact.

When this courtship achieved its effect—

> *eventually*; for while they do not require the lover to devote time and discretion to his enterprise they strictly require it of the loved one, because he had to reach a judgement about an internal beauty that is hard to recognize and hidden from discovery

—there was then born in the loved one the desire for **spiritual conception** through the medium of **spiritual beauty**. This was the main thing here; corporeal beauty secondary and contingent—quite the opposite of the lover. For this reason they prefer the loved one and show that the gods also prefer him; and they severely rebuke the poet Aeschylus for having given, in the love of Achilles and Patroclus, the role of the lover to Achilles, who was in the first beardless bloom of his youth, and the handsomest of all the Greeks.

Once this general communion was established, with the stronger and worthier part of it exercising its functions and predominating, they say that it produced fruits very useful for private and public life; that it was the strength of the countries where it was an accepted practice, and the main defence of equity and liberty. Witness the salutary loves of Hermodius and Aristogeiton. So they call it sacred and divine, and reckon that the hostility to it comes only from the violence of tyrants and the cowardice of the common people. In short, all that can be conceded to the Academy is that it was a love ending in friendship—which pretty well fits the Stoic definition of love: 'Love is the attempt to form a friendship inspired by beauty' [Cicero].

·Between Montaigne and La Boétie·

the next sentence: *Je revien á ma description, de façon plus equitable et plus equable.*

apparently meaning: I return to my description in a more balanced and calm manner.

what Montaigne may have meant: I return to my description of a more balanced and calm kind of friendship.

'Only what has been strengthened and matured by judgment and the passage of time should be judged to be a friendship' [Cicero].

[A] Moreover what we normally call friends and friendships are only acquaintances and familiar relationships created by some chance or convenience, by means of which our souls enter into conversation. In the friendship I am talking about, souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they erase the seam joining them and cannot find it again. If you press me to say why I loved him, I cannot reply [C] except by saying: 'Because it was he, because it was I.'

[A] Beyond all my reasoning, beyond anything I can say specifically about it, there was I know not what inexplicable and fateful force mediating this union.

[C] We were seeking each other before we met, because of the reports we heard of each other, which had more effect on our affection than was reasonable from what the reports said; I think it was by some ordinance of heaven. We embraced each other by our names. And at our first meeting, which chanced to be at a great crowded town-festival, we found

ourselves so taken with each other, so known to each other and so bound together, that from then on nothing was as close to us as we were to each other. He wrote an excellent Latin satire, which has been published, in which he excuses and explains the suddenness of our mutual understanding, which so quickly reached perfection. Having so short a period to last, having begun so late—for we were both grown men, he a few years older than I—it had no time to waste.[1] It did not have to follow the pattern of mild and regular friendships that need so many precautions in the form of long preliminary association. This friendship has no model but itself, no comparison with anything but itself.

[Picking up from '. . . mediating this union.] [A] There is no one special consideration—nor two nor three nor four nor a thousand of them—but rather I know not what quintessence of this whole mixture that seized my will and brought it to plunge into his and lose itself, [C] and that seized his will and brought it to plunge into mine and lose itself, with equal hunger and rivalry. [A] I say 'lose', in truth; for we kept nothing back; nothing was his or mine.

·THE FUSION, ESPECIALLY OF WILLS·

After the condemnation of Tiberius Gracchus, the Roman consuls were prosecuting those who had been in his confidence; and Laelius asked Caius Blossius, Gracchus's closest friend, how much he would have done for him. He replied:

> 'Anything.'
> 'What, anything? What if **he ordered you** to set fire to our temples?'
> 'He would never have ordered me to do that.'
> 'But what if he had?'
> 'I would have obeyed.'

If he was such a perfect friend of Gracchus as the histories say, he had no need to provoke the consuls with that last rash assertion, and ought not to have abandoned the certainty he had of Gracchus's will. Still, those who condemn his reply as seditious do not fully understand this mystery ·of friendship· and do not grasp that he had Gracchus's intentions up his sleeve,

end of the sentence: *et par puissance et par cognoissance*.

literally meaning: both by power and by knowledge.

Montaigne's point: ??

[C] They were more friends than citizens; friends ·of one another· more than friends or foes of their country, or than friends of ambition and civil strife. Having perfectly committed themselves to one other, each had a perfect hold on the reins of the other's inclination; assume that this team was guided by virtue and led by reason (without which it could not be harnessed together), and Blossius' reply is what it should have been. If their actions flew off in different directions they were by my measure neither friends of each other nor friends to themselves.

Moreover [A] that reply sounds no better than mine would if I were asked 'If **your will ordered you** to kill your daughter would you kill her?' and I said Yes. For that is no witness that I would consent to do so, because I do not doubt what my will is, any more than I doubt the will of such a friend. All the arguments in the world have no power to dislodge me from my certainty about my friend's intentions and decisions. Not one of his actions could be set before me, no matter what it looked like, without my immediately finding its motive. Our souls pulled together in such unity, and regarded each other with such ardent affection—with a like affection revealing

[1] La Boètie died about four years after he and Montaigne first met.

themselves to each other right down to the very core—that not only did I know his soul as well as I knew my own but I would certainly have trusted myself to him more readily than to myself.

Do not let those other common friendships be placed in this rank. I have as much acquaintance with them as the next man, including ones that are the most perfect of that kind. [B] But I advise you not to confuse the rules of the two; you would be making a mistake. In those other friendships one must walk, bridle in hand, with prudence and caution; the bond is not tied in such a way that there is no question of doubting it. 'Love him' Chilo used to say 'as if you are to hate him some day; hate him as if you are to love him.' That precept, which is so detestable in this sovereign and ruling friendship ·I have been talking about·, is healthy in the conduct of ordinary [C] and customary friendships, in regard to which we must employ the remark that Aristotle often repeated: 'O my friends, there is no friend.'

[A] In this noble relationship the services and benefits that other friendships feed on do not even merit being taken into account. That is because of the total fusion of our wills. For just as my friendship toward myself is not increased—no matter what the Stoics say—by the help I give myself in time of need; and just as I feel no gratitude for the service do myself; so too the union of such friends, being truly perfect, makes them lose the sense of such duties, to hate and banish from between them these words of separation and distinctness: 'benefit', 'obligation', 'gratitude', 'request', 'thanks', and the like. Everything actually being in common between them—wills, thoughts, judgments, goods, wives, children, honour and life—[C] and their relationship being that of one soul in two bodies, according to Aristotle's very apt definition, [A] there can be neither lending nor giving between them. That is why lawmakers, so as to honour marriage with some imagined resemblance to this divine union, forbid gifts between husband and wife, wanting to imply by this that everything should belong to each of them and that they have nothing to divide and split between them.

In a friendship of the kind of am talking about, if one could give to the other it would be the one who received the benefit who obliged his companion. Because each of them seeks above all to benefit the other, the one who furnishes the means and the occasion for this is in fact the liberal one, giving his friend the satisfaction of doing for him what he most wants to do. [Montaigne illustrates this with an obscure quotation from Diogenes and an anecdote from ancient Greece, and then turns to a different aspect of the ideal kind of friendship he is writing about.]

Common friendships can be divided up: one may love in this one his beauty, in that one his easy-going *moeurs*, in another generosity, in another his role as a father, in another his role as a brother, and so on. But this friendship that takes possession of the soul and reigns there supreme cannot possibly be double. [C] If two asked for help at the same time, which would you run to? If they asked for conflicting favours, how would you decide on priority? If one entrusted to your silence something it would be useful for the other to know, how would you extricate yourself? A single dominant friendship dissolves all other obligations. The secret that I have sworn to reveal to no other, I can without perjury reveal to him who is not another; he is myself. It is a great enough miracle to be doubled; those who talk about tripling themselves do not realise the loftiness of the thing. Nothing that can be matched is extreme. And anyone who supposes that of two men I love each as much as the other, and that they love each other and me as much as I love them, is multiplying into a group the most singular and unified of all things, of which even one is the rarest thing in the world. . . .

In alliances that get hold of us only by one end we need to watch only for imperfections that specifically concern that end. It cannot matter to me what the religion of my doctor or my lawyer is: that consideration has nothing in common with the friendly services they owe to me. And in domestic relations with my servants I have the same attitude. I scarcely inquire in the chastity of my footman; I try to find out if he is diligent. I am less afraid of a gambling mule-driver than of a weak one, or of a profane cook than an incompetent one. I do not make it my business to tell the world how to behave—enough others do that—but how I behave in it: 'This is what I do: do what serves you' [Terence]. For the intimate company of my table I choose the agreeable not the wise; in my bed, beauty before virtue; in social conversation, ability—even without integrity. And so on.

·How I miss him!·

[A] . . . .I would like to address this to people who have experienced what I am talking about; but knowing how far removed from common practice such a friendship is—and how rare it is—I do not expect to find any good judge of it. For even the writings that antiquity has left us on this subject seem to me weak compared to what I feel. This is a matter in which the actuality surpasses even the precepts of philosophy: 'While I am in my right mind, there is nothing I will compare with a delightful friend' [Horace].

If I compare •all the rest of my life—

> although by the grace of God I have lived it sweetly and easily, exempt (save for the death of such a friend) from grievous affliction, in full tranquility of mind, settling for the natural endowments I was born with and not looking for others

—to •the four years that were granted me to enjoy the sweet company and fellowship of that man, it is nothing but smoke, nothing but a dark and dreary night. Since the day when I lost him—'which I shall ever recall with pain, ever with honour (since the gods ordained it so)' [Virgil]—I merely drag wearily on. Even the pleasures that come my way—rather than consoling me they redouble my grief for his loss. We went halves in everything; it seems to me that I am robbing him of his share: 'Nor is it right for me to enjoy pleasures, I decided, while he who shared life with me is gone' [Terence]. I was already so formed and accustomed to everywhere being

the next word: *deuxiesme*

translated by Florio: two

by Cotton: his double

by Frame: a second self

by Screech: one of two

that I now seem to be no more than a half. [B] 'If a superior force has taken that part of my soul, why do I, the remaining one, linger behind? What is left is not so dear, nor an entire thing. That day was the downfall of us both' [Horace].

[A] There is no action or thought in which I do not miss him—as he would have missed me; for just as he infinitely surpassed me in every other ability and virtue, so he did in the duty of friendship. [Montaigne now quotes two lines from Horace and ten from Catullus expressing the kind of grief that he feels over La Boétie; continues 'But let us listen a while to this eighteen-year-old boy', which had been intended as a lead-in to republishing his friend's *Voluntary Servitude*; and then explains that he won't do that because this work has been exploited for evil ends. He continues: 'So instead of that serious work I will substitute another one, more gallant and more playful, written in the same season of his life.' This was to introduce something which in every non-posthumous edition of the *Essays* constituted no. 29. Its content was a set of twenty-nine sonnets by La Boétie,

dedicated by Montaigne to the comtesse de Guiche. There is clear evidence that Montaigne had intended in the next edition to omit these poems, but not that he had worked out any repair for this mention of them in essay 28.]

30. Moderation

[A] By our handling of things that are in themselves beautiful and good we corrupt them, as if our touch were infectious. We can grasp virtue in a way that will make it vicious if we embrace it with too sharp and violent a desire. Those who say that there is never any excess in virtue because it is no longer virtue if there is excess in it are playing with words. 'The wise man counts as mad, and the just man as unjust, if in their strivings after virtue they go beyond what is sufficient' [Horace]. That is a subtle observation on the part of philosophy: one can both love virtue too much and behave with excess in an action that itself is just. The voice of God goes along with this: 'Be not wiser than you should, but be soberly wise' [Romans xii.3].

[C] I have seen a man of high rank harm the reputation of his religion by showing himself religious beyond any example of men of his sort.

I like temperate and moderate natures. Immoderateness even towards the good, if it does not offend me it astonishes me and leaves me unsure what to call it. Pausanias's mother (who gave the first information and brought the first stone for her son's death) and the dictator Posthumius (who had his own son put to death because his youthful ardour had driven him successfully against the enemy a little in advance of his squadron) seem to me not so much *just* as *strange*. And I like neither to advise nor to follow a virtue so savage and so costly.

The archer who overshoots the target *misses*, just as does the one who falls short. And my eyes trouble me when I suddenly come up into a strong light, just as they do when I plunge into darkness.

Callicles says in Plato that philosophy at its extremes is harmful, and advises us not to push into it beyond what is profitable. He says that taken in moderation philosophy is pleasant and useful, but that it can eventually make a man

- wild and vicious,
- contemptuous of religions and common laws,
- an enemy of social intercourse,
- an enemy of human pleasures,
- incapable of any political administration, of helping others, or of helping himself, and
- fit to be slapped with impunity.

What he says is true, for in its excess philosophy enslaves our natural freedom and by logical trickery leads us astray from the fine level road that nature has traced for us.

[A] Our affection for our wives is entirely legitimate; yet theology nevertheless bridles it and restrains it. It seems to me that I once read in Saint Thomas, in a passage where he is condemning marriages between relatives within the forbidden degrees, several reasons including this one: There is a risk that the love felt for such a wife might be immoderate; for if the conjugal love between them is full and perfect (as it ought to be), and added to that is the further affection proper among kinsfolk, there is no doubt that this extra will carry such a husband beyond the limits of reason.

The branches of knowledge that regulate men's *moeurs* [see Glossary], like theology and philosophy, involve themselves with everything. No activity is so private or so secret as to escape their attention and jurisdiction. . . . So on their behalf I want to teach husbands—if there are still any who are too eager—that even the pleasures they enjoy when lying with

their wives are condemned if not kept within moderation; and that in this relationship as in unlawful ones one can err through licentiousness and debauchery. [C] Those shameless caresses that our first heat suggests to us in this sport are not only indecently but harmfully practised on our wives. At least let them learn shamelessness from some other hand! They are always aroused enough for our need. In that context I have merely followed nature's simple instruction.

[A] Marriage is a religious and holy bond; which is why the pleasure we get from it should be restrained and serious, with some austerity mixed in; its sensuousness should be somewhat prudent and conscientious. And because its chief end is procreation, some people question whether it is permissible to seek intercourse when there is no hope of conception, as when the woman is beyond child-bearing age or already pregnant. . . . [B] Certain nations ([C] including the Mahometans) [B] abominate intercourse with pregnant women; many also with those who are menstruating. [Montaigne now offers a page of anecdotes from ancient times, mostly illustrating different views about what is permissible in sexual relations within marriage. His 'summing up' of all this—'there is no pleasure, however proper, that does not become a matter of reproach when excessive and intemperate'—has only a loose fit with the anecdotes. He continues:]

[A] But to speak in good earnest, is not man a miserable animal? His natural condition makes him hardly able to taste one single pleasure pure and entire; yet he uses reasoning to curtail even that; he is not wretched enough until he has used skill and hard work to increase his misery: [B] 'The wretched paths of fortune we make worse by art' [Propertius]. [C] Human wisdom is behaving stupidly when it works to diminish the number and sweetness of our sensual pleasures, as it is behaving favourably and industriously when it works to trick out and disguise our ills and make us feel them less. If the decision had been up to me, I would have taken another route;[1] it would have been more natural—i.e. true, practicable and holy—and perhaps I would have made *myself* strong enough to set limits to it.

[A] Consider the fact that the physicians of our minds and bodies, as though plotting together, find no way to a cure—no remedy for the illnesses of body and soul—except through torment, pain and tribulation. Vigils, fasting, hair-shirts and banishments to distant solitary places, endless imprisonments, scourges and other sufferings have been introduced for that purpose; but on condition that the suffering is real and the pain bitter. . . . For if a man's health and liveliness were sharpened by fasting, if he found fish more tasty than meat, fasting would cease to be a salutary prescription; just as in the other sort of medicine drugs have no effect on anyone who takes them with appetite and pleasure. The bitter taste and the difficulty are attributes that help them to work. A constitution that accepted rhubarb as ordinary food would spoil its efficacy; to cure our stomach it must be something that hurts it; and here the common rule that things are cured by their opposites breaks down; for in this case one ill cures another ill.

[B] This notion is somewhat like that other very ancient one, universally embraced by all religions, of thinking that we can please heaven and nature by our massacres and murders. [The essay concludes with a page of truly gruesome illustrations of this.]

[1] He means: other than the one dictated by theology and philosophy, the one recommended by human wisdom when it is 'behaving stupidly'.

31. Cannibals

[A] When King Pyrrhus crossed into Italy, after surveying the formation of the army the Romans were sending against him, he said 'I do not know what barbarians these are' (for that is what the Greeks called all foreigners) 'but there is nothing barbarous about the ordering of this army that I see!' The Greeks said as much about the army that Flaminius brought into their country, [C] as did Philip when he saw from a knoll in his kingdom the order and layout of the Roman camp under Publius Sulpicius Galba. [A] That is the way to guard against clinging to common opinions, and to judge things by the way of reason, not by popular vote.

I had with me for a long time a man who had lived for ten or twelve years in that other world that has been discovered in our century, in the place where Villegaignon landed and which he named Antarctic France [we call it Brazil]. This discovery of a boundless territory seems to be worth thinking about. I don't know if I can guarantee that no other such discovery will be made in the future, since so many persons greater than ourselves were wrong about this one. I fear that we have eyes bigger than our bellies, and more curiosity than capacity ·to take things in·. We embrace everything but clasp only wind.

[Montaigne now presents two pages concerning changes over the centuries in coastlines and the courses of rivers; different theories about what put sea between Sicily and Italy; the improbability that the transatlantic new world is the fabled island of Atlantis; and recent events in Médoc, where the sea had pushed up sand dunes burying good land, some belonging to Montaigne's brother.]

That man of mine was a simple, rough fellow—a character fit to bear true witness. For the clever folk observe more things and take in more detail, but they *interpret* them; and to give weight and conviction to their interpretations they cannot help altering history a little. They never show you things purely as they are; they bend and disguise them to fit with their way of seeing them; and to make their judgement more credible and to win you over, they emphasize their own side, amplify it and extend it. What is needed is a man who is either very honest or else so simple that he has nothing *in* him on which to build false inventions and make them plausible; and who has not committed himself to anything [here = 'to any doctrine']. Such was my man; moreover he at various times introduced me to seamen and merchants whom he had met on that voyage. So I settle for his information, without asking what the cosmographers say about it.

There is a need for topographers who would give us detailed accounts of places where they have been. But ·actual voyagers·, because they have over us the advantage of having seen Palestine, want to enjoy the privilege of bringing us news about all the rest of the world! I wish everyone would write about what he knows—and as much as he knows—not only on this topic but on all others. For a man can have specialised knowledge or experience of the nature of a river or of a fountain, without knowing more than anyone else about anything else. Yet to parade his little scrap of knowledge he will undertake to write a book on the whole of physics! From this vice spring many great abuses.

·In praise of naturalness·

Now, to return to my topic, I find (from what I have been told) that there is nothing barbarous and wild[1] in that nation ·of Antarctic France [= Brazil]·,

[1] In this paragraph, 'wild' translates *sauvage*, which often = 'savage', but not, of course, in application to fruit.

> except that each man labels as 'barbarism' anything he is not accustomed to. Indeed we have no other test for truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in. *There* is always the perfect religion, the perfect government, the perfect and accomplished way of doing everything!

They are wild, just as we call 'wild' •fruits that nature has produced in its ordinary course; whereas really it is •the ones we have artificially perverted and turned away from the common order that we ought to call 'wild'. •The former retain the powers and properties that are alive and vigorous, genuine, most useful and natural, which we have debased in •the latter by adapting them to gratify our corrupt taste. [C] And given that some uncultivated fruits of those countries have a savour and delicacy that our taste finds excellent in comparison with our own, [A] it is not reasonable that artifice should win the place of honour over our great and powerful mother nature. We have so overloaded the richness and beauty of its products by our inventions that we have quite smothered it. Yet wherever its purity shines forth, it wonderfully puts to shame our vain and frivolous enterprises: [B] 'Ivy grows best when left untended; the strawberry tree flourishes more beautifully in lonely grottoes, and birds sing the sweeter for their artlessness' [Propertius]. [A] All our efforts cannot even manage to reproduce the nest of the tiniest little bird, its texture, it beauty, its fitness for its purpose; or the web of the puny spider. [C] All things, Plato says, are produced by nature, by fortune, or by art; the greatest and loveliest by one or other of the first two, the least and most imperfect by the last.

[A] These nations, then, seem to me to be 'barbarous' in having been very little shaped by the human mind and still being very close to their original naturalness. They are still ruled by nature's laws, very little corrupted by ours. But their purity is such that I am sometimes annoyed that they were not known earlier, at a time when there were men who could have judged them better than we. I am sorry that Lycurgus and Plato did not know of them; for it seems to me that what we see in those nations surpasses not only

- •all the pictures with which poetry has decorated the 'golden age', and
- •all its inventions in imagining a happy state of man,

but also

- •the conception and the desire of philosophy itself.

They could not *imagine* a naturalness as pure and simple as the one we actually *see*; nor could they believe that our society could be maintained with so little artifice and human solder. This is a nation, I would say to Plato, in which there is

- •no buying and selling,
- •no knowledge of writing,
- •no science of numbers,
- •no terms for 'magistrate' or 'political superiority',
- •no system of servants, or of riches or poverty,
- •no contracts,
- •no inheritances,
- •no divisions of property,
- •no occupations but leisure ones,
- •no concern for kinship, except what is common to them all,
- •no clothing,
- •no agriculture,
- •no metal,
- •no use of wine or of wheat.

As for lying, treachery, cheating, avarice, envy, slander, forgiveness—they don't even have words for them. How remote from such perfection would Plato find the Republic

that he thought up!—[C] 'men fresh from the gods' [Seneca]—[B] 'These are the ways that nature first ordained' [Virgil].

·THE WAY OF LIFE OF THE 'BARBARIANS'·

[A] For the rest, they live in a land with a delightful countryside and a temperate climate; so that according to my sources it is rare to see a sick man there; they have assured me that they never saw anyone trembling, blear-eyed, toothless or bent with age. They are settled along the sea-shore, shut in on the land side by great high mountains about a hundred leagues away. They have in abundance fish and meat that have no resemblance to ours; and they eat them with no preparation except cooking. The first man who rode a horse there, though he had had dealings with them on several previous voyages, so horrified them in that seat that they killed him with their arrows before they could recognise him.

Their dwellings are immensely long, capable of holding two or three hundred souls; they are covered with a roof of tall trees, fixed into the earth at one end and leaning against each other in support at the top; like some of our barns whose roof reaches to the ground and serves as a side. They have wood so hard that they cut with it and make from it their swords and grills on which to cook their meat. Their beds are woven from cotton and slung from the roof, like those on our ships, one per person; for the wives sleep apart from their husbands.

They rise with the sun and immediately have their meal for the day; for they have no other meal but that one. They drink nothing with it. . . . They drink several times a day, and copiously. Their drink is made from some root and has the colour of our claret. They always drink it lukewarm; it keeps for only two or three days; it tastes a bit sharp, is not in the least heady, is good for the stomach, and is laxative for those who are not used to it; for those who are, it is a very pleasant drink. In place of bread they use a certain white stuff resembling preserved coriander. I have tried some; it tastes sweet and somewhat insipid.

The whole day is spent in dancing. The younger men go hunting animals with bows, while some of the women are occupied in warming their drink, which is their main task. In the morning, before their meal, one of their elders walks the length of the building (their buildings are a good hundred paces long) preaching to the whole barnful of them by repeating the same thing over and over again, recommending two things only: bravery against enemies and love for their wives. And they never fail to stress this second duty, with the refrain that it is their wives who keep their drink warm and seasoned.

In many places, including my own house, you can see specimens of their beds, of their ropes, of their wooden swords and the wooden bracelets with which they cover their wrists in battle, and of the big canes, open at one end, by the sound of which they keep time in their dances. They shave off *all* their hair, cutting it much more cleanly than we do, with a wood or stone razor.

They believe that souls are immortal; and that those who have deserved well of the gods are lodged in the part of the sky where the sun rises; the damned in the west.

They have some sort of priests and prophets, who live in the mountains and rarely show themselves to the people. On their arrival there is held a great festival and solemn assembly of several villages (each barn, as I have described it, constitutes a village; they are about one French league apart). The prophet then addresses them in public, exhorting them to be virtuous and dutiful, but their entire ethical doctrine contains only these two articles—resoluteness in battle and affection for their wives. He foretells what is to happen and the upshots they should expect from their undertakings;

he puts them on the path to war or deflects them from it; but if he fails to prophesy correctly and things turn out other than he foretold, they condemn him as a false prophet and hack him to pieces if they catch him. For this reason one who gets it wrong once is not seen again.

[C] Prophecy is a gift of God. That is why abusing it should be a punishable deceit. Among the Scythians, whenever their soothsayers failed to hit the mark they were shackled hand and foot and laid in ox-carts full of bracken where they were burned. Those who treat subjects under the guidance of human limitations can be excused if they have done their best; but those others who come and cheat us with assurances of powers beyond the natural order, should they not be punished for not making good their promise and for the foolhardiness of their deceit?

·THEIR REASONS FOR CANNIBALISM·

[A] They have their wars against the nations beyond their mountains, further inland; they go to war quite naked, with no other arms but their bows and their wooden swords sharpened to a point like that of our hunting pikes. They are astonishingly steadfast in ·one-on-one· combats, which always end in killing and bloodshed: as for routs and terror, they know nothing of either.

Each man brings back as a trophy the head of the enemy he has killed, and sets it up at the entrance of his dwelling. After treating their captives well for a long period, providing them with all the comforts they can think of, the master of each captive summons a great assembly of his acquaintances. He ties a rope to one of his prisoner's arms and—[C] holding him by it a few steps away for fear of being hurt by him—[A] allows his dearest friend to hold him the same way by the other arm; then these two before the whole assembly kill him with their swords. This done, they roast him and make a meal of him, sending chunks of his flesh to absent friends.

This is not, as people think, done for food—as it was with the ancient Scythians—but to symbolize ultimate revenge. As evidence for this: when they saw that the Portuguese who were allied to their enemies inflicted a different kind of death on those they took prisoner—namely to bury them up to the waist, to shoot showers of arrows at their exposed parts, and then hang them—they. . . .began to abandon their former method and follow that one.

I am not sorry that we note the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am very sorry that while judging their faults rightly we are so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity

in •eating a man alive than in •eating him dead,

•in •lacerating by rack and torture a body still full of feeling, in having him roasted bit by bit, in having him bitten and mangled by dogs and pigs

(as we have not only read about but have seen in recent memory, not among enemies in antiquity but among neighbours and fellow-citizens and, what is worse, on the pretext of piety and of religion)

than in •roasting him and eating him after his death.

Chrysippus and Zeno, heads of the Stoic sect, thought that there was nothing wrong with using our carcasses for whatever purpose we needed, even for food—as our own forebears did when, beleaguered by Caesar in the town of Alesia, they resolved to relieve the hunger of the besieged with the flesh of old men, women and others who were no use in battle: [B] 'The Gascons notoriously prolonged their lives by eating such food' [Juvenal]. [A] And physicians do not flinch from using human flesh in all sorts of ways, both internally and externally, for our health. Yet there was never an opinion so wrong as to excuse treachery, disloyalty, tyranny, cruelty, which are our ordinary vices.

So we can indeed call them barbarians by the standard of the rules of reason, but not by comparison with us who surpass them in every kind of barbarism. Their warfare is wholly noble and magnanimous, and is as justified and beautiful as that human disease can be; it has among them no other foundation than rivalry in valour. They are not fighting for the conquest of new lands, for they still enjoy the natural abundance that provides them without toil or trouble with all they need, in such profusion that there would be no point in pushing back their frontiers. They are still in that happy state of desiring nothing beyond what their natural necessities demand; for them anything beyond that is superfluous.

They generally call those of the same age *brothers*, those who are younger *children*; and the old men are *fathers* to all the others. These bequeath all their goods indivisibly to all their heirs in common, with no title except the one that nature gives to its creatures by bringing them into the world.

If their neighbours cross the mountains to attack them and win a victory, the victors' gain is glory and the advantage of having proved the master in valour and virtue; for apart from this they have no use for the goods of the vanquished, and return to their own country, where they do not lack anything necessary and do not lack that great thing, the ability to enjoy their condition happily and be content with it.

These people—·the ones between the mountains and the sea·—do the same in their turn. The only ransom they demand from their prisoners is that they should admit and acknowledge their defeat. But there is not one in a century who does not prefer to die rather than to show by look or by word any falling away from the grandeur of an invincible courage; not one who does not prefer being killed and eaten to merely asking not to be. They treat them very freely, so as to make them love life more; and *support* them with threats of their coming death, of the torments they will have to suffer, and of the preparations being made for this, of limbs to be lopped off and of the feast they will provide. All that has only one purpose: to extort some weak or unworthy word from their lips or to make them want to escape—so as to gain the advantage of having terrified them and broken down their firmness. [Remarking that this is what 'true victory' consists in, Montaigne offers a page of reflections on (and anecdotes relating to) that. Then, 'to return to our story':]

These prisoners are so far from giving in, despite all that is done to them, that during the two or three months of their captivity they maintain a cheerful expression, they urge their captors to hurry up and put them to the test, they defy them, insult them, reproach them for their cowardice and for all the battles they have lost against *their* country.

I have a song composed by a prisoner, in which the following occurs:

> Let them all boldly come together to feast on me; for they will be feasting on their own fathers and ancestors who have served as food and sustenance for this body. These sinews, this flesh and these veins—poor fools that you are—are your very own; you do not realise that the substance of your ancestors' limbs is still contained in them; savour them well, for you will find that they taste of your own flesh!

—a composition that does not come across as barbarous! Those who paint these people dying, and who show the execution, portray the prisoner spitting at his killers and making faces at them. Indeed, to the last gasp they never stop braving and defying them by word and look. Truly here are real savages by our standards; for either they must be thoroughly so or we must be; there is an amazing distance between their characters and ours.

·POLYGAMY AND JEALOUSY·

The men there have several wives, and the higher their reputation for valour the more wives they have. A notable beauty in their marriages is this: whereas our wives are anxious to **keep us from** the affection and kindness of other women, their wives are anxious to **bring them to** it. Being more concerned for their husband's honour than for anything else, they take care and trouble to have as many companions as they can, that being a testimony to their husband's valour.

[C] Our wives will cry 'Astonishing!', but it is not so. It is a properly matrimonial virtue, but one of the highest order. In the Bible Leah, Rachel, Sarah and the wives of Jacob made their beautiful handmaidens available to their husbands, and Livia put the lusts of Augustus ahead of her own interests. . . .

[A] Lest anyone should think that they do all this out of a simple slavish subjection to usage and through the pressure of the authority of their ancient customs, without reasoning and without judgement, because their souls are so dull that they could not go any other way, I should cite a few examples of their capacity. [He gives just one, a few lines of a love-song; he says that they are not barbarous, and that they are worthy of Anacreon, a famous love-poet of the 6th century BCE.]

·BRINGING NEW WORLD NATIVES TO EUROPE·

Three of them, not knowing •how much the knowledge of our corruptions will some day cost them in peace and happiness and •that this contact will lead to their ruin, which I suppose is already far advanced—

> poor wretches, letting themselves be tricked by the desire for novelty, and leaving the serenity of their sky to come and see ours!

—were at Rouen at the same time as the late King Charles IX. The king talked with them for a long time: they were shown our ways, our splendour, the aspect of a beautiful city; after which someone asked for their opinion, and wanted to know what they had found most amazing. They mentioned three things; I am afraid I have forgotten the third of them, but I still remember the other two. In the first place they said that they found it very strange that so many grown men—bearded, strong and armed—in the king's entourage (probably referring to the Swiss guard) should submit to obeying a child rather than choosing one of themselves as commander.[1] Second (they have an idiom in their language that calls all men *halves* of one another), they had noticed that there were among us men fully bloated with all sorts of comforts while their halves were begging at their doors, emaciated with hunger and poverty; they found it strange that the destitute halves could endure such injustice and not take the others by the throat or burn down their houses.

I had a very long talk with one of them, but I had an interpreter who followed my meaning so badly, and was in his stupidity so blocked from taking in my ideas, that I could not get anything worthwhile from the man. When I asked him what profit he got from his high position among his people (he was a commander among them; our sailors called him a king), he told me that it was to go in front into battle. How many men followed him? He pointed to an open space to signify as many as it would hold—it could have been four or five thousand men. Did all his authority expire in peace-time? He said that he still had this: when he was visiting villages that depended on him, paths were cut for him through the thickets in their forests, so that he could easily walk through them.

[1] Charles IX was 12 years old at the time.

All this is not too bad—but what's the use? They don't wear breeches.

* * * * * *

[Essay 32 is a short warning against too confidently claiming to know what God's wishes are. In it Montaigne condemns the practice of 'trying to support and confirm our religion by the success of our undertakings'.]

[Essay 33, even shorter, criticises a weird view that Montaigne says he has found in Seneca, urging that one should express one's contempt for death by giving up worldly pleasures.]

[Essay 34, three pages long, is a set of anecdotes in each of which a course of events ends up—by chance, luck, fortune—with a result that is so shapely that one would have thought it to be produced by design.]

* * * * * *

35. A lack in our administrations

[A] My late father, a man of very clear judgement for one who was aided only by experience and his natural gifts, once told me that he had wanted to arrange that towns should have a certain designated place where those who needed something could go and have their business registered by a duly appointed official; for example:

- [C] I want to sell some pearls,
- I want to buy some pearls,
- [A] so-and-so wants company for a trip to Paris,
- so-and-so wants a servant with such-and-such qualifications,
- so-and-so wants an employer,
- so-and-so wants a workman;

one man this, another man that, each according to his need. And it seems that this method of informing one another would bring no slight advantage to public dealings; for at every turn there are ·interlocking· needs looking for each other, and because they do not find each other men are left in extreme need.

I hear with great shame for our century that under our very eyes two outstanding scholars have died so poor that they did not have enough to eat: Lilius Gregorius Giraldus in Italy and Sebastian Castalio in Germany. And I believe that there are a thousand men who, if they had known, would have sent for them on very favourable terms, [C] or sent help to them where they were.

[A] The world is not so generally corrupted that I do not know such a man, one who would •wish with all his heart to see his inherited wealth used (as long as fortune lets him enjoy it) to provide shelter from want for persons who are rare and remarkable in some way and have been battered by misfortune, sometimes reduced to extreme poverty; and would at least •set them up in such a way that it would be unreasonable for them not to be content.

[C] In domestic administration my father had this system that I can praise but in no way follow: besides the record of household accounts kept by a domestic bursar—with entries for small bills and payments or transactions that did not need the signature of a notary—he told the servant he used as his secretary to keep a journal covering all noteworthy events and the day-to-day history of his household. It is very pleasant to read when time begins to efface memories, and also useful for answering questions. When was such-and-such a thing begun? When finished? What retinues came? How long did they stay? Our journeys, our absences, marriages, deaths; the receipt of good or bad news; changes among our chief servants—things like that. An ancient

custom that I think it would be good to revive, each man in his own home.[1] I think I am a fool to have neglected it.

36. The custom of wearing clothes

[A] Whichever way I want to go, I have to break through some barrier of custom, so thoroughly has it blocked all our approaches. In this chilly season I was wondering whether the fashion of those newly discovered peoples [see essay 31] of going stark naked is forced on them by the hot climate, as we say of the Indians and the Moors, or whether it is the original way of mankind. Men of understanding. . . ., faced with questions like this where natural laws have to be distinguished from contrived ones, usually consult the general order of the world, where nothing can be counterfeit.

Well, then: since everything else is provided with the exact amount of thread and needle required to maintain its being, it is not credible that we alone should have been brought into the world in a deficient and needy state, in a state that can be maintained only with outside help. So I hold that just as plants, trees, animals and all living things are naturally equipped with adequate protection from the rigour of the weather. . . , so too were we; but like those who extinguish the light of day by artificial light, we have extinguished our natural means by borrowed means. And it is easy to see that it is custom that makes possible things impossible for us. For some of the peoples who have no knowledge of clothing live under much the same sky as ourselves, and even under a harsher sky. And, besides, our most delicate parts are always left uncovered : [C] the eyes, the mouth, the nose, the ears, and for our peasants as for our forebears the chest and the belly. If we had been born with natural petticoats and breeches, there can be no doubt that nature would have armed with a thicker skin the parts of us that it was leaving exposed to the violence of the seasons, as it has done for our fingertips and the soles of our feet.

[C] Why does this seem hard to believe? Between my way of dressing and that of a peasant of my region I find a much greater distance than there is between his way and that of a man dressed only in his skin.

How many men, especially in Turkey, go naked as a matter of religion!

[The rest of this essay is a three-page jumble of anecdotes illustrating •differences between rich and poor in how protective their clothing is, •the supposed advantages to health of keeping one's head covered, •laws about clothing, •idiosyncrasies about it, and •cases of very extreme cold.]

37. Cato the Younger

[A] I do not suffer from that common failing of judging another man by how I am. I easily believe in things different from myself. [C] Just because I feel myself tied down to one form, I do not oblige everyone to have it, as all others do; I conceive and believe in a thousand different ways of living, and unlike the common run of men I more easily admit differences among us than similarities. I am as ready as you please to acquit another being from sharing my attributes and drives, looking at him simply as he is, without comparisons, sculpting him after his own model. I am not continent; nevertheless I sincerely acknowledge the continence of the Feuillants and Capuchins, and think well of their way of life. I imagine my way right into their place, and I love and honour them all the more for being different from me. I have

[1] The French is *chacun en sa chacuniere* = (jokingly) 'each in his eachery'. The word gained some currency in the following century.

a special wish that each of us be judged separately, and that conclusions about me not be inferred from common patterns.

[A] My weakness in no way alters the opinions I am bound to have of the strength and vigour of those who have it. [C] 'There are those who praise nothing but what they are sure they can match' [Horace]. [A] Crawling in the slime of the earth, I nevertheless observe away up in the clouds the unmatchable height of certain heroic souls. It is a great deal for me to have •my judgement rightly controlled, if my actions cannot be so, and to maintain at least •that sovereign part free from corruption. It is something to have my will good when my legs fail me. This century we live in, at least in our latitudes, is so *leaden* that it lacks not only the practice but even the idea of virtue; it seems to be nothing but a bit of scholastic jargon—

> [C] 'They think that virtue is just a word and that sacred groves are mere matchwood' [Horace]

—'Something they ought to revere even if they cannot understand it' [Cicero]. It is a trinket to hang as an ornament in a display-case or at the end of the tongue, like an earring dangling from the ear.

[A] Virtuous actions are no longer to be seen; actions that have virtue's face do not have its essence, because what leads us to perform them is profit, reputation, fear, custom, or other such extraneous causes. The 'justice', the 'valour', the 'good nature' that we exercise in them can be so-called in the view of others, and from their public face, but in the doer it is no sort of virtue. There is a different goal, [C] a different motivating cause. [A] Now, virtue acknowledges nothing that is not done by and for itself alone. [Illustrated by a [C]-tagged anecdote about the Spartans not honouring one who had been the bravest in battle, because he had been trying to wipe out his shame from previous cowardice.]

Our judgements are still sick, and follow the depravity of our *moeurs*. I see most of the wits of my time using their ingenuity to darken the glory of the beautiful and noble actions of ancient times, giving them some vile interpretation and fabricating frivolous causes and occasions for them. [B] What great subtlety! Give me the purest and most excellent action and I will plausibly provide fifty vicious motives for it. God knows what a variety of interpretations our inner wills can be subjected to by anyone who takes the trouble. [C] In all their calumny these wits are acting not so much maliciously as clumsily and crudely.

The same pains that they take to detract from those great names, and the same licence, I would willingly take to lend them a shoulder to raise them higher. These great figures whom the consensus of the wise has selected as examples to the world I shall not hesitate to restore to their places of honour,

the rest of the sentence: *autant que mon invention pourroit, en interpretation et favorable circonstance.*

translated by Florio: as high, as my invention would give me leave with honour, in a plausible interpretation, and favourable circumstance.

by Cotton: as far as my invention would permit, in all the circumstances of favourable interpretation.

by Frame: as far as my ingenuity allows me to interpret them in a favourable light.

by Screech: insofar as my material allows, by interpreting their characteristics favourably.

And we ought to believe that our powers of invention are far below their merit. It is the duty of good men to portray virtue as being as beautiful as possible. And it would not be unbecoming if passion carried us away in favour of such sacred models.

[Picking up from '. . . and occasions for them.'] What these people—·these wits·—do to the contrary [A] they do either through malice or through that defect of dragging their belief down to the level of their capacity, which I have just spoken of; or else (as I rather think) because their perception is not strong enough and clear enough, or properly trained, to conceive of the splendour of virtue in its native purity. Plutarch says that some men in his time attributed the death of the younger Cato to his fear of Caesar, which he was right to be angered by. And we can judge from that how much offended he would have been by those who attributed it to ambition. [C] Idiots! He would rather have performed a beautiful, noble and just action that brought him shame than do it for the sake of glory. [A] That man was truly a model chosen by nature to show how far human virtue and constancy could go.

But I am not equipped to treat this rich subject here. I want only to make lines from five Latin poets rival each other in their praise of Cato, [C] both in Cato's interest and incidentally in their own. Now, a well-educated boy ought to find the first two monotonous compared with the others; the third livelier but overcome by its own excessive power. He will think there is room for one or two more degrees of inventiveness before reaching the fourth, at which point he will clasp his hands in wonder. At the last one—which is first by quite a space that he will swear no human mind can fill—he will be thunderstruck, he will be transfixed.

. . . .Good, supreme, divine poetry is above rules and reason. . . . It does not soberly work on our judgement, it ravishes it and overwhelms it. The frenzy that goads the man who can penetrate it also strikes a third person who hears him relate and recite it, just as a magnet attracts a needle *and* infuses into it its own power to attract others. It is more easily seen in the theatre that the sacred inspiration of the muses, having first aroused the poet to anger, to grief, to hatred, etc., then through the poet strikes the actor, and then through the actor a whole crowd in succession. It is the chain of our needles, hanging one from the other.

From my earliest childhood poetry has had the power to pierce and transport me. But this lively feeling that is natural to me has been variously affected by the variety of ·poetic· forms—not so much higher or lower (for each was the highest of its kind) as different in colour: first a delightful and ingenious fluency, then a sharp and lofty subtlety, and finally a mature and constant power. . . . But here are our poets waiting to compete:

(1) [A] *Sit Cato, dum vivit, sane vel Caesare major*

says one of them.

(2) *Et invictum, devicta morte, Catonem*

says another. And the next, telling of the civil wars between Caesar and Pompey:

(3) *Victrix causa diis placuit, sed victa Catoni.*

And the fourth, when praising Caesar:

(4) *Et cuncta terrarum subacta / Praeter atrocem animum Catonis.*

And then the master of the choir, having listed and displayed the names of all the greatest of the Romans, ends thus:

(5) . . . *his dantem jura Catonem.*[1]

[1] Because of Montaigne's comments on them considered as poetry, the fragments are left in Latin in the main text. Translated: **(1)** Let Cato while he lives be greater even than Caesar [Martial]. **(2)** Then undefeated, death-defeating Cato [Manilius]. **(3)** The winning cause pleased the gods, but the losing one, Cato [Lucan]. **(4)** He conquered the whole world / Except for the unyielding soul of Cato [Horace]. **(5)** . . . and then, giving them their laws, Cato [Virgil, the 'master of the choir'].

38. How we cry and laugh at the same thing

[A] When we read that •Antigonus was very displeased with his son for having presented to him the head of his enemy King Pyrrhus who had just been killed fighting against him, and that on seeing it he began to weep copiously; and that •Duke René of Lorraine also lamented the death of Duke Charles of Burgundy whom he had just defeated, and wore mourning at his funeral; and that •at the battle of Auray which the count of Montfort won against Charles of Blois, his rival for the duchy of Brittany, the victor showed great grief when he happened upon his dead enemy's corpse, we should not at once exclaim: 'And thus it happens that each soul conceals, / Showing the opposite, now cheerful, now sad, / Of the passion that it really feels.' [Petrarch]

When they presented Caesar with the head of Pompey, the histories say, he turned his eyes away as from an ugly and unpleasant sight. There had been between them such a long understanding and co-operation in the management of public affairs, such great community of fortunes, so many mutual services and so close an alliance, that we should not believe that he was showing a false and counterfeit front, as this other ·poet· thinks it was: 'And now he thought it safe to be the good father-in-law; he poured out unspontaneous tears, and forced out groans from his happy breast' [Lucan]. For although most of our actions are indeed only mask and cosmetic, and it may sometimes be true that 'Behind the mask, the tears of an heir are laughter' [Publilius Syrus], nevertheless when judging such events we ought to consider how our souls are often shaken by conflicting passions. Just as (they say) a variety of humours is assembled in our bodies, of which the dominant one is what normally prevails according to our constitution, so too in our soul: although different emotions shake it, there has to be one that remains master of the field. But its victory is not so complete that it prevents—in our talkative and flexible soul—the weaker ones from sometimes regaining lost ground and making a brief attack in their turn.

Hence we see that not only *children*, who quite spontaneously follow nature, often cry and laugh at the same thing, but none of *us* can boast that he does not, when parting from his family and his friends at the start of a journey he wants to take, feel a tremor in his heart; and if he does not actually shed tears, at least he puts his foot into the stirrup with a sad and gloomy face. And however sweet the flame that warms the heart of well-born maidens, still they have to be pulled by force from their mother's neck to be delivered to their husband, no matter what this good fellow says: 'Is Venus really hated by new brides, or are they mocking their parents' joy with false tears that they pour forth in torrents at their bedroom door? No—so help me, gods—their sobs are false ones' [Catullus]. So it is not strange to lament the death of a man whom one would by no means want to be still alive.

[B] When I scold my valet I scold with all my heart; those are real curses, not feigned ones. But when the smoke has cleared, if he needs help from me I am glad to give it; I immediately turn the page. [C] When I call him a 'dolt', 'a calf', I do not mean to stitch these labels onto him for ever; nor do I contradict myself when I later call him an honest fellow.

No quality embraces us purely and universally. If talking to oneself did not look crazy, no day would go by—hardly an *hour* would go by—without my being heard snarling at myself, against myself, 'Silly shit!', but I don't intend that to be my definition.

[B] If anyone sees me look at my wife sometimes coldly, sometimes lovingly, and thinks that one look or the other is feigned, he is a fool. Nero taking leave of his mother: he was

sending her to be drowned, yet he felt the emotion of this maternal farewell—both horror and pity.

[A] They say that the sun's light is not one continuous flow; that it darts at us a ceaseless series of new rays, so fast that we cannot perceive any gap between them. . . . So, too, our soul darts its arrows separately but imperceptibly.

[C] Artabanus happened upon his nephew Xerxes, and scolded him for his sudden change of countenance. Xerxes was thinking about the immeasurable size of his forces crossing the Hellespont for the expedition against Greece. He first quivered with joy at seeing so many thousands of men devoted to his service, and showed this by the happiness and delight on his face. And at the very same moment he suddenly had the thought of all those lives coming to an end within a century at most, and knitted his brow and was saddened to tears.

[A] We have resolutely pursued revenge for an injury, and felt a singular satisfaction in gaining it; yet we weep. It is not for our victory that we weep; nothing has changed; but our soul looks on the thing with a different eye, and sees it from another aspect; for each thing has many angles and many lights. Kinship, old acquaintance and friendships seize our imagination and briefly energise it each according to its character; but the turn is so quick that it escapes us: [B] 'Nothing is known to match the rapidity/of the thoughts the mind produces and initiates./The soul is swifter than anything/the nature of our eyes allows them to see.' [Lucretius] [A] For that reason, we deceive ourselves if we want to make a single whole out of this *series*. When Timoleon weeps for the murder he committed with such mature and noble determination, he does not weep for the liberty he has restored to his country; he does not weep for the tyrant: he weeps for his brother. One part of his duty has been performed; let us allow him to perform the other.

39. Solitude

[A] Let us leave aside the usual long comparison between the solitary life and the active one. And as for that fine adage under which greed and ambition take cover—that we are born not for our private selves but for the public—let us boldly appeal to those who have joined in the dance; let them cudgel their conscience to see whether, on the contrary, the titles, the offices, and all the bustling business of the world are not sought to gain private profit from the public. The evil *means* men use in our day to get ahead show clearly that the *end* is not worth much.

Let us reply to ambition that *it* is what gives us a taste for solitude. For what does it shun as much as society? what does it seek as much as elbow-room? Ways of doing good or evil can be found anywhere, but if Bias ·of Priene· was right in saying that the worse part is the larger one, or Ecclesiastes was right in saying 'Not one man in a thousand is good'—

> [B] 'Good men are rare; about as many as gates in the walls of Thebes or mouths to the fertile Nile' [Juvenal]

—[A] then there is a great danger of contagion in crowds. One must either imitate the wicked or hate them. Both these things are dangerous: becoming like them because they are many, or hating many of them because they are unlike ·oneself·.

[C] Sea-going merchants are right to ensure that dissolute, blasphemous or wicked men do not sail in the same ship with them, regarding such company as unlucky. That is why Bias joked with those who were undergoing the perils of a great storm with him and calling on the gods for help: 'Be quiet', he said, 'so that they don't realise that you are here with me.' And (a more pressing example) when Albuquerque, the viceroy in the Indies for King Manuel of Portugal, was

in great peril of a shipwreck at sea, he took a young boy on his shoulders for one purpose only—so that in their linked perils the boy's innocence might serve him as a warrant and a recommendation to divine favour, so as to bring him to safety.

[A] It is not that the wise man cannot live happily anywhere, being alone in a crowd of courtiers; but if he has a choice, he says, he will avoid the very sight of them. He will endure it if need be, but if it is up to him he will choose solitude. He does not see himself as sufficiently free of vice if he still has to contend with the vices of others. [B] Charondas chastised as evil those who were convicted of keeping evil company.

[C] There is nothing as unsociable and sociable as man—one by his vice, the other by his nature. And Antisthenes does not seem to me to have given an adequate reply to the person who reproached him for associating with the wicked, when he replied that doctors live well enough among the sick. For if they improve the health of the sick, they impair their own health by contagion, constantly treating diseases.

·MISUNDERSTANDING WHAT SOLITUDE IS·

[A] Now, the aim ·of solitude· is, I think, always the same: to live more at leisure and at one's ease. But people do not always find the right way to this. Often they think they have left business behind when they have merely changed it. There is hardly less trouble in governing a family than in governing a whole country. Wherever our soul is in difficulties it is *all* there. Domestic tasks are less important but that does not make them less demanding. Anyway, by ridding ourselves of the court and the market-place we do not rid ourselves of the principal torments of our life: 'It is reason and wisdom that take away cares, not villas with wide ocean views' [Horace]. Ambition, greed, irresolution, fear and sexual desires do not leave us because we change our landscape. 'Behind the horseman sits black care' [Horace]. They often follow us all the way into the cloisters and the schools of philosophy. Neither deserts nor rocky caves nor hair-shirts nor fastings disentangle us from them. . . . Socrates was told that some man had not been improved by travel. 'I am sure he was not,' he said. 'He took himself along with him.' 'Why do we leave for lands warmed by a foreign sun? What fugitive from his own land gets away from himself?' [Horace]

If a man does not first unburden his soul of the load that weighs on it, movement will cause it to be crushed still more, as in a ship the cargo is less troublesome when it is settled. You do more harm than good to a sick man by moving him about; you embed his illness by disturbing him, like driving stakes into the ground by pushing and waggling them. So it is not enough to withdraw from the crowd, it is not enough to move to somewhere else; what is needed is to withdraw from the

the next phrase: *conditions populaires*

translated by nearly everyone as: popular conditions

translated by Frame as: gregarious instincts[1]

that are within us; we have to sequester ourselves and repossess ourselves.

[B] '"I have broken my chains", you say. But a struggling dog may snap its chain, only to escape with a great length of it fixed to its collar' [Persius]. We take our fetters along with us. Our freedom is not complete; we still turn our gaze towards the things we have left behind, our fancy is full of them. 'But unless the mind is purified, what internal combats and dangers must we incur in spite of all our efforts!

[1] It is not clear what 'popular conditions' could refer to, whereas Frame's rendering is clear and fits the context beautifully. The only question is whether the French could mean that.

How many bitter anxieties, how many terrors, follow upon unregulated passion! What destruction befalls us from pride, lust, petulant anger! What evils arise from luxury and sloth!' [Lucretius]

[A] It is in our soul that evil grips us; and it cannot escape from itself: 'The soul is at fault that never escapes from itself' [Horace]. So we must bring it back and withdraw it into itself. That is true solitude. It can be enjoyed in the midst of towns and of royal courts, but it is enjoyed more conveniently alone.

·Solitude and self-sufficiency·

Now, since we are undertaking to live alone, and do without company, let us make our contentment depend on ourselves. Let us cut loose from all the ties that bind us to others; let us gain power over ourselves to live really alone—and to live that way at our ease.

After Stilpo had escaped from the burning of his city in which he had lost wife, children and goods, Demetrius Poliorcetes, seeing him with his face undismayed amid so great a ruin of his country, asked him if he hadn't suffered any harm; he replied that No, thank God, he had lost nothing of his own. [C] The philosopher Antisthenes put the same thing amusingly: a man should provide himself with provisions that would float on the water and could swim ashore with him from a shipwreck.

[A] Certainly, a man of understanding has lost nothing if he still has himself. When the city of Nola was sacked by the barbarians, the local bishop Paulinus—having lost everything and been taken prisoner—prayed thus to God: 'Lord, keep me from feeling this loss. You know that they have not yet touched anything of mine.' The riches that made him rich and the good things that made him good were still intact. That is what it is to choose wisely the treasures that can be secured from harm, and to hide them in a place that no-one can enter and that can be betrayed only by ourselves.

We should if possible have wives, children, property and, above all, good health; but we should not be attached to them in such a way that our happiness depends on them. We should set aside a room behind the shop—just for ourselves, entirely free—and establish there our real liberty, our principal retreat and solitude. Here our ordinary conversation should be between us and ourselves, and so private that no outside association or communication finds a place in it; talking and laughing as though we had no wife, no children, no possessions, no retinue, no servants, so that when the time comes to lose them it will be nothing new for us to do without them. We have a soul that can turn in on itself; it can keep itself company; it has the means to attack and the means to defend, the means to receive and the means to give. Let us not fear that in this solitude we shall be crouching in tedious idleness: 'In lonely places, be a crowd unto yourself' [Tibullus]. . . .

Among our customary actions not one in a thousand concerns ourselves. That man you see there scrambling up the ruins of that battlement, frenzied and beside himself, the target of so many arquebus shots; and that other man, all covered with scars, faint and pale from hunger, determined to die rather than open the gate to him; do you think they are there for themselves? They are there for someone they have perhaps never seen, someone who, plunged in idleness and pleasures, has no interest in what they are doing.

This fellow, all dirty, with running nose and eyes, whom you see coming out of his study after midnight—do you think he is looking in his books for ways to be a better, happier, wiser man? That is not the story. He will teach posterity how to scan a verse of Plautus, and how to spell a Latin word, or die in the attempt.

Who does not willingly barter health, leisure and life in exchange for reputation and glory, the most useless, worthless and false coin that is current among us? Our own death has not frightened us enough? Let us burden ourselves with ·fears for· the deaths of our wives, our children and our servants. Our own affairs have not been causing us enough worry? Let us start tormenting ourselves and racking our brains over those of our neighbours and friends. 'Ah! to think that any man should take it into his head to get a thing that is dearer to him than he is to himself! [Terence]

[C] Solitude seems to me more appropriate and reasonable for those who have given to the world their more active and flourishing years, following the example of Thales.

[A] We have lived enough for others; let us live at least this tail-end of life for ourselves; let us bring our thoughts and plans back to ourselves and our well-being. It is no small matter to arrange our retirement securely; it gives us enough trouble without bringing in other concerns.

·RETIREMENT·

Since God gives us time to make things ready for our departure, let us prepare for it; let us pack our bags; let us take leave of our company in good time; let us break free from those violent clutches that engage us elsewhere and distance us from ourselves. We should untie these bonds that are so powerful, and from now on love this and that but be wedded only to ourselves. That is to say, let the rest be ours, but not joined and glued to us in such a way that it cannot be detached without tearing off our skin and some of our flesh as well. The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself.

[C] It is time to untie ourselves from society since we can contribute nothing to it. A man who cannot lend should keep himself from borrowing. Our powers are failing us: let us draw them in and concentrate them on ourselves. Whoever can turn around the offices of friendship and fellowship and pour them into himself should do so. In this decline, which makes him useless, a burden, and troublesome to others, let him avoid becoming troublesome—and a useless burden—to himself. Let him pamper and care for himself, and above all *govern* himself, so respecting his reason and so fearing his conscience that he cannot make a false step in their presence without shame: 'For it is rare for anyone to respect himself enough' [Quintilian].

Socrates says that youth should get educated; grown men should employ themselves in doing good; old men should withdraw from all civil and military occupations, living as they please without being tied down to any definite office.

[A] Some temperaments are more suited than others to these precepts [C] for retirement. [A] Those whose susceptibility is weak and lax and whose affection and will are choosy and slow to enter service or employment—and I am one of them, both by nature and by conviction—will comply with this advice better than will the active and busy souls who embrace everything, engage themselves everywhere, who grow passionate about all things, who offer, present, and give themselves on all occasions. We should make use of these accidental and external conveniences so far as they are agreeable to us, but without making them our mainstay; they are not; neither •reason nor •nature will have them so. Why would we, against •their laws, enslave our contentment to the power of others?

To anticipate the accidents of fortune, depriving ourselves of good things that are in our grasp,

> as **(i)** many have done out of devotion and **(ii)** a few philosophers out of rational conviction,

acting as their own servants, sleeping rough, putting out their own eyes, throwing away their wealth, seeking pain—

> **(i)** to win bliss in another life by torment in this one, or **(ii)** to make themselves safe against a new fall by settling on the bottom rung

—these are actions of virtue taken to excess. Let tougher sterner natures make even their hiding-places glorious and exemplary: 'When I lack money, I praise the possession of a few secure things; I am content with humble goods; but when anything better, more sumptuous, comes my way, then I say that the only ones who live wisely and well are those whose income is grounded in handsome acres.' [Horace]

I have enough on my hands without going that far. It is enough for me when fortune favours me to prepare for its disfavour, and when I am in comfort to picture future ills, as far as my imagination can reach; just as we accustom ourselves to jousts and tournaments, counterfeiting war in a time of peace. . . .

I see how far natural necessity can extend; and when I reflect that the poor beggar at my door is often more cheerful and healthy than I am, I put myself in his place and try to give my soul a slant like his. Then running similarly through other examples, though I may think that death, poverty, contempt and sickness are at my heels, I easily resolve not to be terrified by what a lesser man than I accepts with such patience. I am not willing to believe that meanness of understanding can do more than vigour, or that the effects of reason cannot match the effects of habit. And knowing how precarious these incidental comforts are, even while fully enjoying them I nevertheless make it my sovereign request to God to make me content with myself and the good things I bring forth. I see young men who, though they are in vigorous good health, keep a mass of pills in their chest to use when they get a cold, fearing this less since they know they have a remedy at hand. That is the right thing to do; and further, if we feel ourselves subject to some more serious illness, we should provide ourselves with medicines to benumb and deaden the ·affected· part.

The occupation we choose for such a life should be neither laborious nor boring; otherwise there would be no point in coming to it in search of rest. This depends on each man's individual taste; mine is quite unsuited to household management. Those who do like this should do it in moderation: 'They should try to subordinate things to themselves, not themselves to things' [Horace]. Anyway, management is a *servile* task, as Sallust calls it. . . . A mean can be found between that base and unworthy anxiety, tense and full of worry, seen in those who immerse themselves in it, and that deep and extreme neglect one sees in others, who let everything go to rack and ruin: 'Democritus leaves his herds to ravage fields and crops while his speeding soul wanders outside his body' [Horace].

But let us hear the advice about solitude that the younger Pliny gives to his friend Cornelius Rufus: 'I advise you in this ample and thriving retreat of yours, to leave to your people the degrading and abject care of your household, and to devote yourself to the study of letters so as to derive from them something totally your own.' He means reputation, his temperament being like that of Cicero, who says he wants to use his solitude and rest from public affairs to gain immortality through his writings.

[B] 'Does knowing mean nothing to you unless somebody else knows that you know it? [Persius]

[C] It seems reasonable that when a man talks about retiring from the world he should look away from it. These men. . . .arrange their affairs for when they will no longer be there, but they claim to get the fruit of their project from the world after they have left it—a ridiculous contradiction.

The idea of those who seek solitude for devotion's sake, filling their hearts with the certainty of divine promises for

the life to come, is much more harmoniously organised. Their focus is on God, an object infinite in goodness and in power. In him the soul has the wherewithal to satisfy its desires in perfect freedom. Afflictions, sufferings are profitable to them, being used to acquire eternal health and joy. Death is welcome as the passage to that perfect state. The harshness of their rules is quickly smoothed by habit, and their carnal appetites are blocked and put to sleep by denial, for nothing keeps them up but use and exercise. Only this goal of another life, blessedly immortal, genuinely merits our abandoning the comforts and pleasures of this life of ours. Anyone who can really and constantly set his soul ablaze with the fire of that living faith and hope builds for himself in solitude a life that is voluptuous and delightful beyond any other kind of life.

·MIXED PLEASURES·

[A] [Picking up from '... through his writings.'] So I am satisfied neither with the end nor the means of Pliny's advice.... This occupation with books is as laborious as any other, and—what should be our main concern—as much an enemy to health. We should not let ourselves be put to sleep by the pleasure we take in it; it is the same pleasure that destroys the penny-pincher, the miser, the voluptuous man, and the ambitious man.

The sages teach us often enough to beware of the treachery of our appetites, and to distinguish true and complete pleasures from pleasures mixed and streaked with a preponderance of pain. Most pleasures, they say, tickle and embrace us so as to throttle us, like those thieves the Egyptians called Philistas. If the headache came *before* the drunkenness, we would take care not to drink too much; but pleasure, to deceive us, walks in front and hides its consequences from us. Books give pleasure; but if keeping company with them eventually leads to our losing joy and health, our best working parts, then let us leave them. I am one of those who believe that their benefits cannot outweigh that loss.

As men who have long felt weakened by some illness at last put themselves at the mercy of medicine, and have certain rules of living prescribed for them by art, rules that are never to be transgressed, so too someone who retires, bored and disgusted by the common life, should shape this ·new life· according to the rules of reason, ordering it and arranging it with forethought and reflection. He should have taken leave of every kind of work, whatever it looks like, and should flee from all kinds of passion that impede the tranquility of body and soul, and choose the way best suited to his temperament....

In household management, in study, in hunting, and in all other pursuits, we should take part to the utmost limits of pleasure, but beware of going further to where it begins to be mingled with pain. We should retain just as much business and occupation as is needed to keep ourselves in trim and protect ourselves from the drawbacks that follow from the other extreme, slack and sluggish idleness.

There are sterile and thorny branches of learning, most of them made for the busy life; they should be left to those who serve society. For myself, I like only pleasant easy books that tickle my interest, or books that console me and counsel me on how to regulate my life and my death. 'Walking in silence through the health-giving forest, pondering questions worthy of the wise and good' [Horace]. Wiser men with a strong and vigorous soul can make for themselves a wholly spiritual repose. But I, who have a commonplace soul, must help to support myself with bodily comforts; and since age has lately robbed me of the ones that were more to my fancy, I am training and sharpening my appetite for the ones that

remain and are more suited to this later season. We should hold on, tooth and nail, to our enjoyment of the pleasures of life that our years are tearing from our grasp, one by one. [B] 'Let's grab our pleasures, life is all we have; you'll soon be ashes, a ghost, a tale' [Persius].

[A] Now, as for the goal that Pliny and Cicero offer us—*glory*—that is right outside my calculations. The attitude most directly contrary to retirement is ambition. Glory and repose cannot lodge under the same roof. As far as I can see, these men have only their arms and legs outside the crowd; their soul, their intention, remains more in the thick of it than ever. . . . They step back only to make a better jump and to get a stronger impetus to charge into the crowd.

·Pliny and Cicero versus Epicurus and Seneca·

Would you like to see how they (·Pliny and Cicero·) shoot a tiny bit short? Let us weigh against them the advice of two philosophers (·Epicurus and Seneca·) of two very different sects, one of them writing to his friend Idomeneus and the other to his friend Lucilius, to persuade them to give up handling affairs and their great offices and to withdraw into solitude. They say:

> 'You have lived until now floating and tossing about; come away and die in port. You have given the rest of your life to the light; give this part to the shade. It is impossible to give up your pursuits if you do not give up the fruits of them; so rid yourself of all concern for reputation and glory. There is the risk that the radiance of your past actions will cast too much light on you and follow you right into your lair. Give up, along with other pleasures, the one that comes from other people's approval. As for your learning and competence—don't worry, it will not lose its effect if it makes you a better man. . . . You and one companion are audience enough for each other; so are you for yourself. . . . It is a base ambition to want to derive glory from one's idleness and one's concealment. One should act like the animals that scuff out their tracks at the entrance to their lairs.
>
> 'You should no longer be concerned with what the world says of you but with what you say to yourself. Withdraw into yourself, but first prepare to receive yourself there. It would be madness to entrust yourself to yourself if you cannot govern yourself. There are ways to fail in solitude as in company; until you have made yourself such that you would not dare to trip up in your own presence, and until you feel shame and respect for yourself. . . ., always keep in mind Cato, Phocion and Aristides (in whose presence even fools would hide their faults), and make them controllers of all your intentions. If your intentions get off the track, reverence for those men will set them right again. The path they will keep you on is that of being content with yourself, of borrowing only from yourself, of arresting and fixing your soul on definite and limited thoughts in which it can take pleasure; and then, having understood the true goods that are enjoyed in proportion as they are understood, of being content with them, with no desire to extend your life or fame.'

That is the advice of a true and natural philosophy, not an ostentatious and chattering philosophy like that of those other two.

40. Thinking about Cicero

[This essay continues, in a fashion, the contrast Montaigne was running at the end of Essay 39, voicing a further complaint against Cicero and the younger Pliny, namely that they thought and hoped that their 'vulgar' desire for immortal fame would come from the excellence of their writing; he jeers at their publishing their correspondence, and insists that what matters in writing is the content and not the style. To praise a monarch for his skill as a writer is just one instance of the more general 'kind of mockery and insult' of praising someone for something that is below his rank. He decorates this theme with some ancient anecdotes, and then interrupts this mostly [A]-tagged diatribe with a paragraph about his own writing in the essays:]

[C] I know well that when I hear someone dwell on the language of these essays I would prefer him to keep quiet. He is not so much praising the words as devaluing the content; it is all the more irritating for being done obliquely. I am much mistaken if many other writers provide more graspable material and. . . .if any has sown his materials more substantially or at least more thickly on his pages. To make room for more, I pile up only the headings of subjects. If I went into their consequences I would increase the size of this volume several times over. And how many stories have I scattered through the volume that don't *say* anything but which, if anyone sifts through them a bit more carefully, will give rise to countless essays? Neither they nor my quotations serve always simply for example, authority or ornament; I do not value them solely for their usefulness to me. They often carry, outside of my topic, the seeds of something richer, bolder, and (often obliquely) subtler in tone—both for myself, who do not wish to make them say anything more here, and also for those who get my drift.

[He pursues his earlier theme for a while, in a mostly [A]-tagged passage, and then returns to himself, this time as a letter-writer:]

[B] On the subject of letter-writing, I want to say this: it is a kind of work in which my friends think I have some ability. [C] And I would have preferred to publish my chatter in this form, if I had had somebody to address the letters to. I needed what I once had, a certain relationship to draw me out, to sustain me and raise me up. For to correspond with thin air as others do is something I could only do in my dreams; nor, being the sworn enemy of all deception, could I treat serious matters using fictitious names. I would have been more attentive and confident with a strong friend to address than I am now when I consider the various tastes of a whole public; and if I am not mistaken I would have been more successful.

[B] My natural style is that of comedy, but one whose form is personal to me, a private style unsuited to public business—as is my language in all its aspects, being too compact, ill-disciplined, disjointed and individual; and I know nothing about formal letter-writing where the only content is a fine string of courtly words. I have neither the gift nor the taste for lengthy offers of affection and service. [The final page of the essay elaborates on this theme, including: 'I mortally hate to sound like a flatterer, and so I naturally drop into a dry, plain, blunt way of speaking which to anyone who does not otherwise know me may seem a little haughty.']

* * * * * *

[Essay 41, 'On not sharing one's glory', is a couple of pages of anecdotes—ancient and recent—mainly illustrating self-lessness concerning fame.]

* * * * * *

42. The inequality that is between us

[A] Plutarch says somewhere that he finds less distance between beast and beast than he finds between man and man. He is talking about the capacity of the soul and the inward qualities. Truly, I find Epaminondas, as I conceive him to be, so far above some men I know—I mean men capable of common sense—that I would willingly outdo Plutarch and say that there is more distance from this man to that one than from this man to that beast. . . ., and that there are as many—countlessly many!—mental levels as there are fathoms from here to heaven.

·How to evaluate a man·

[A] But a propos of judging men, it is a wonder that everything except ourselves is evaluated by its own qualities. We praise a horse for its vigour and nimbleness—'It is the swift horse that we praise, the one which to the noisy shouts of the spectators easily wins the prize' [Juvenal]—not for its harness; a greyhound for its speed, not for its collar; a hawk for its wing, not for its leg-straps and bells. Why do we not similarly evaluate a man by what is really his own? He has a great retinue, a beautiful palace, so much influence, so much income; that is all around him, not in him. You don't buy a cat in a bag. If you are bargaining for a horse, you take off its trappings, you examine it bare and uncovered.

> (Or if it is covered in the way they used to cover a horse being offered for sale to royalty, that was only to cover the least important parts, so that you do not waste time on the beauty of its coat or the breadth of its crupper but mainly concentrate on its legs, eyes and feet—the parts that matter most: 'This is how kings do it: when they buy horses they inspect them covered, lest they as buyers may be tempted (as often happens with lame horses with a fine mane) to gape at their broad cruppers, their neat heads or their proud necks' [Horace].)

Why in judging a man do you judge him all wrapped up in a package? He displays to us only parts that are not at all his own, and hides the only ones by which we can truly judge his worth. You want to know the worth of the sword, not of the scabbard; unsheathe it and perhaps you won't give a penny for it. He should be judged by himself, not by his finery. . . . The pedestal is not part of the statue. Measure his height with his stilts off; let him lay aside his wealth and his decorations and present himself in his shirt. Has he a body fit for its functions, healthy and lively? What sort of soul has he? Is it beautiful, capable, happily furnished with all its working parts? Is it rich with its own riches or with those of others?. . . . If he faces drawn swords with a steady gaze, if he does not care whether his life expires by the mouth or by the throat, if his soul is calm, unruffled and contented—that is what we should see, as a basis for judging the extreme differences there are between us. Is he

> 'Wise, master of himself; not afraid of poverty, death or shackles; firm against passions; disdaining honours; wholly self-contained; like a smooth round sphere that no foreign object can adhere to and invulnerable to the attacks of fortune' [Horace]?

Such a man is five hundred fathoms above kingdoms and duchies. He is his own empire. . . .

Compare with him the mob of men today, stupid, base, servile, unstable, and continually swirling in the storm of conflicting passions that drive them to and fro, depending entirely on others; there is more distance ·between them and him· than between the earth and the sky; and yet our practice is so blind that we take little or no account of it. When we come to consider a king and a peasant,

[C] a nobleman and a commoner, a magistrate and a private citizen, a rich man and a pauper, [A] we immediately see an extreme disparity between them, though they are different, so to speak, only in their breeches. . . .

Like actors in a comedy—you see them on the stage imitating a duke or emperor, but immediately thereafter there they are in their natural and original condition of wretched valets and porters—so too with the emperor whose pomp in public dazzles you—

> [B] Big emeralds of green light are set in gold; and rich sea-purple dress by constant wear grows shabby and all soaked with Venus's sweat' [Lucretius]

—[A] see him behind the curtains and look at him; he is nothing but an ordinary man, baser perhaps than the least of his subjects. [C] 'This man is inwardly blessed; that man's happiness is a veneer' [Seneca]. [A] Like anyone else he is shaken by cowardice, wavering, ambition, spite and envy. . . .

·THE VULNERABILITY OF THE 'GREAT'·

Do fever, migraine or gout spare him any more than us? When old age weighs on his shoulders will the archers of his guard carry it for him? When he is paralysed by the fear of dying, will he be calmed by the presence of the gentlemen of his chamber? When he is jealous and jumpy, will our doffed hats soothe him? That bed-canopy all bloated with gold and pearls has no power to allay the gripings of an acute colic: 'Nor do burning fevers quit your body sooner if you lie under embroidered bedclothes in your purple than if you are covered by plebeian sheets' [Lucretius].

The flatterers of Alexander the Great were getting him to believe that he was the son of Jupiter; but when he was wounded one day and saw the blood flow from his wound he said, 'Well, what do you say about this? Isn't this blood crimson and thoroughly human? It is not like the blood that Homer has flowing from the wounds of gods!' Hermodorus the poet wrote verses in honour of Antigonus in which he called him son of the sun. Antgigonus contradicted him, saying: 'The man who slops out my chamber-pot knows well that that is wrong.'

All in all, he is a man; and if there is something wrong with his intrinsic make-up, ruling the world will not remedy it. [B] 'Let girls fight over him; let roses grow wherever his feet tread' [Persius]—what of it, if he is a coarse and stupid soul? Even sensual pleasure and happiness are not felt without vigour and spirit: 'These things reflect the mind that possesses them; for the mind that knows how to use them rightly they are good, for the mind that does not, bad' [Terence].

[A] The goods of fortune, such as they are, need the right kind of feeling if they are to be enjoyed; what makes us happy is the enjoying, not the possessing: 'It is not house and lands nor piles of bronze and gold that banish fevers from their owner's sickly body or anxieties from his sickly mind. He must be healthy if he wants to enjoy his acquisitions. For a frightened or greedy man, house and goods are as helpful as paintings are to blind eyes or baths are to the gout' [Horace]. He is a fool; his taste is dull and numb; he enjoys things no more than a man with a cold enjoys the sweetness of Greek wine or than a horse enjoys the rich harness it has been adorned with. . . .

And then, where body and mind are in bad shape, what good are those external advantages, seeing that the merest pinprick or a passion of the soul is enough to deprive us of the pleasure of being monarch of the world? At the first stab of the gout,. . . . does he not lose all memory of his palaces and his grandeur? And if he is angry, does his royal status keep him from turning red, turning pale, grinding his teeth like a madman?

And if he is an able and well-constituted man, royalty adds little to his happiness—'If your stomach, lungs and feet are all right, a king's treasure can offer you no more' [Horace]—he sees that it is nothing but illusion and deceit. And perhaps he will agree with the opinion of King Seleucus, that anyone who knew the weight of a sceptre would not bother to pick it up if he found it lying on the ground. He said this because of the great and painful responsibilities weighing on a good king.

·THE GRIND OF BEING IN COMMAND·

Indeed it is no small thing to have to rule others, since there are so many difficulties in ruling ourselves. As for being in command, which appears so pleasant: given the weakness of human judgement and the difficulty of choice in new and doubtful matters, I am strongly of the opinion that it is much easier and pleasanter to follow than to lead, and that it is a great rest for the mind to have only to stay on an indicated road and be responsible only for oneself: [B] 'Quiet obedience is far better than wanting to rule in state' [Lucretius].

Add to that what Cyrus used to say, namely that no man is fit to command who is not better than those he commands. [A] But King Hieron in Xenophon takes it further: he says that even in the enjoyment of sensual pleasures kings are worse off than private citizens, since ease and accessibility rob them of the bittersweet tang that we find in them: [B] 'Too strong and rich a love-affair soon turns loathsome, just as sweet food sickens the stomach' [Ovid].

[A] Do we think that choirboys take great pleasure in music? Not so; satiety makes it boring to them. Feasts, dances, masquerades, tournaments delight those who do not often see them and have been wanting to see them; but for anyone who makes them an ordinary pastime, the taste of them becomes insipid and disagreeable; nor do women titillate the man who has his fill of them. Someone who does not take time off to become thirsty cannot enjoy drinking. The farces of the mountebanks delight us, but to the players they are drudgery. As evidence of this, it is an occasional treat for princes, a holiday for them, to put on disguises and to drop down to a low and plebeian way of living. 'Often a change is pleasant to princes; a clean and frugal meal beneath a poor man's modest roof, without tapestries and purple, has smoothed the worried brow' [Horace].

[C] There is nothing as hampering, as cloying, as abundance. What appetite would not balk at the sight of three hundred women at its mercy, such as the Grand Turk has in his seraglio? And the one of his ancestors who never took to the field with fewer than seven thousand falconers—what appetite for hunting, and what appearance of it, did he reserve for himself?

[A] And besides that, I believe that this *shine* of greatness brings drawbacks to the enjoyment of the sweeter pleasures: they are too brightly lit, too much on show.

[B] Also. . . the great are more obliged ·than we are· to hide and cover up their faults. They are judged by the populace to be guilty of tyranny, contempt, and disdain for the laws because of something that is a ·mere· indiscretion when we do it. Apart from the inclination to perform wrong acts, they do seem to take additional pleasure in bullying public decency and trampling it underfoot. . . . For that reason the flaunting of their wrong conduct gives more offence than the conduct itself. Every man fears being spied on and controlled; but *they* are, right down to their facial expressions and their thoughts, because the entire populace thinks it has reasons giving them a right to judge them. And blemishes are magnified according to how high and well-lighted their location is; a mole or wart on the forehead shows up more than a scar elsewhere.

[A] That is why poets imagine Jupiter's amours to have been conducted in disguise; and of all the amorous adventures they attribute to him there is only one, it seems to me, where he appears in his grandeur and majesty.

But let us get back to Hieron. He tells of how many disadvantages he feels in his royal state, from not being able to go about and travel freely, being like a prisoner within the borders of his own country, and ·complains that· in all his actions he is hemmed in by an annoying crowd. Indeed, seeing our kings *alone* at their tables, besieged by so many unknowns talking and staring, I have often felt more pity for them than envy.

[B] King Alfonso said that donkeys were better off than kings in this way: their masters let them eat in peace, whereas kings cannot get that favour from their servants.

[A] And it has never struck me that it was a notable addition to the life of a man of understanding to have a score of official witnesses when he uses his toilet, nor that the services of a man worth ten thousand pounds a year or a soldier who has taken Casale or defended Siena are more convenient and acceptable to him than those of a good and experienced valet.

·IMAGINARY QUASI-ADVANTAGES·

[B] The advantages of monarchs are imaginary quasi-advantages. Each degree of fortune has some semblance of royalty. Caesar calls 'kinglets' all the lords having jurisdiction in the France of his time. Indeed—·switching now to those of *our* time·—apart from the title 'Sire' they pretty much keep pace with our kings. In the provinces remote from the court—in Brittany, say—see the retinue, the subjects, the officials, the pastimes, the service and ceremony, of a retired and stay-at-home lord, brought up among his servants; and see how high his imagination ·of himself· can soar—there is nothing more royal. He hears his own feudal master mentioned once a year, on a par with the king of Persia; he acknowledges him merely because of some ancient cousinship of which his secretary keeps a record. In truth our laws are free enough; and a French nobleman feels the weight of the sovereign power barely twice in a lifetime. Real effective subordination is only for those among us who welcome it and who like to gain honour and wealth by such servitude; because the man who is content to squat by his hearth and can govern his household without squabbles or law-suits is as free as the Doge of Venice. [C] 'Slavery holds on to few: many hold on to slavery' [Seneca].

[A] But Hieron regrets above all that he finds himself deprived of all mutual friendship and companionship, in which consists the most perfect and the sweetest fruit of human life. [We are to think of the rest of this paragraph as being said by Hieron.] For what evidence of affection and good-will can I get from a man who willy-nilly owes me everything he can do? Can I make anything of his humble speech and reverent courtesy, given that he cannot refuse them to me? The honour we receive from those who fear us is not honour; these respects are due to royalty, not to me: [B] 'The greatest advantage of being a king is that his people are forced not only to endure whatever their master does but to praise it' [Seneca]. [A] Do I not see that the bad king and the good one—the hated king and the loved one—have the same outward show, the same ceremonial, that my predecessor was served with and my successor will be? If my subjects do not insult me, that is no evidence of any good will; why should I take it to be so, since they could not insult me if they wanted to? No-one follows me for any friendship there might be between us, for friendship cannot be knit when there are so few points of contact, so little matching. My high rank has put me outside human relationships: there

is too much disparity and disproportion. They follow me for the look of the thing and by custom—or rather than me, my fortune, so as to increase their own. All they say and do for me is merely cosmetic, their freedom being everywhere bridled by the great power I have over them; everything I see around me is covered and masked.

Courtiers were praising the Emperor Julian one day for administering such good justice: 'I would readily take pride in such praises', he said, 'if they came from persons who would dare to condemn or censure my unjust actions if there were any.'

[B] All the real prerogatives of monarchs are shared with men of moderate wealth (it is for the gods to mount winged horses and to feed on ambrosia!); they have no other sleep, no other appetite, but ours; their steel is not better tempered than that of our swords; their crown does not protect them from sun or from rain. Diocletian, who wore a crown of such honour and good fortune, resigned it to retire to the pleasure of a private life; some time later when a crisis of state required him to return and take up his burden, he replied to those who were begging him to do so: 'You would not try to persuade me to do that if you had seen the ordered beauty of the trees I have planted in my garden and the fine melons I have sown there.'. . . .

[A] When King Pyrrhus was planning to cross over into Italy his wise counsellor Cyneas, wanting to make him realise the emptiness of his ambition, asked him:

- 'Well, Sire, what is your goal in this great project?'
- 'To make myself master of Italy'

he immediately replied. Cyneas continued:

- 'And when that is done?'
- 'I will cross into Gaul and Spain.'
- 'And then?'
- 'I will go and subjugate Africa. And finally, when I have brought the whole world under my subjection, I shall rest and live content and at my ease.'

Cyneas shot back:

- 'In God's name, Sire, tell me what keeps you from being in that condition right now, if that is what you want. Why do you not settle down at this very moment in the state you say you aspire to, sparing yourself all the intervening toil and danger?'. . . .

I shall close this piece with an old line that I find particularly beautiful and apt: 'Each man's character shapes his fortune' [Cornelius Nepos].

43. Sumptuary laws

[Two pages about laws setting limits to extravagance. Montaigne dislikes showy extravagance, but thinks it is hard for laws to limit it. His account of one success is memorable:]

[A] Let kings start to abandon such expenses and it will all be over in a month, without edict or ordinance; we shall all follow suit. The law should say. . . .that gold ornaments and crimson are forbidden to all ranks of society except mountebanks and whores. With a device like that Zeleucus corrected the debauched *moeurs* of the Locrians. His ordinances were these:

> 'No free-born woman may be attended by more than one chambermaid, except when she is drunk. No woman may leave the city by night, or wear gold jewels about her person or an embroidered dress, unless she is a public prostitute. Except for pimps, no man may wear a gold ring on his fingers or wear an elegant robe like those tailored from cloth woven in Miletus.'

And thus by these shaming exceptions he cleverly diverted his citizens from pernicious superfluities and luxuries.

44. Sleep

[A] Reason orders us always to go on the same road but not always at the same rate. And although the wise man should not allow human passions to make him stray from the right path, he can without prejudice to his duty let them quicken or lessen his pace, not planting himself like some immobile and unfeeling Colossus. If Virtue itself were incarnate, I believe that its pulse would beat stronger going into battle than going into dinner. . . . For that reason I have been struck by the rare sight of great men, engaged in high enterprises and important affairs, remaining so entirely poised that they do not even cut short their sleep.

[Then a page and a half of ancient anecdotes illustrating this, with a notable coda:] The doctors will tell us whether sleep is such a necessity that our life depends on it; for we are certainly told that King Perseus of Macedonia, when a prisoner in Rome, was killed by being deprived of sleep. . . .

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[Essay 45, 'The battle of Dreux', is a commentary on one episode in that 1562 battle, comparing it with two battles in ancient Greece.]

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46. Names

[A] Whatever the variety of greenstuffs we put in, the whole thing is brought under the name 'salad'. Likewise, under the consideration of 'names' I shall here cook up a stew of various articles.

Each nation has some names that are taken—I don't know why—in a bad sense: with us Jean, Guillaume, Benoît.

Item: in the genealogy of monarchs there seem to be some names earmarked by fate, as the Ptolemys in Egypt, Henrys in England, Charleses in France, Baldwins in Flanders and in our ancient Aquitania the Williams [*Guillaumes*], from which they say the name of Guyenne is derived. . . .

Item: a trifling thing, but worth remembering for its strangeness, and recorded by an eye-witness: when Henry duke of Normandy, son of Henry II king of England, held a feast in France, such a huge crowd of the nobility came that it was decided for amusement to divide them into groups according to similarity of names. The first troop consisted of the Williams, comprising 106 knights of that name seated at table, without counting the ordinary gentlemen and servants. . . .

Item: it is said to be a good thing to have a 'good name', i.e. credit and reputation; but it is also a real advantage to have a name that is easy to pronounce and to remember, for then kings and grandees recognise us more easily and are less apt to forget us; and even with our servants, we more ordinarily summon and employ those whose names come most readily to the tongue. I noticed that King Henry II was never able to call a nobleman from this part of Gascony by his right name; and he even decided to call one of the Queen's maids of honour by the general name of her clan because the name of her father's branch of it seemed to him too awkward. [C] And Socrates thinks it worthy of a father's care to give his children attractive names.

[A] Item: it is said that the founding of Notre dame la grand' at Poitiers started with this:

> A local dissolute young man picked up a wench and asked what her name was; it was *Mary*. He felt himself so strongly gripped by reverence and awe at that name of the virgin mother of our Saviour that he not only sent the girl away but reformed the rest of his life;

in consideration of which miracle there was built, on the square where the young man's house stood, a chapel with the name 'Notre Dame' and then later the church we see there.

[C] That conversion by word and hearing, of a religious sort, went straight to the soul; this next one, of the same sort, was worked through the bodily senses. Pythagoras was in the company of some young men whom he heard plotting—heated with the feast—to go and violate a house of chaste women; he ordered the minstrel-girl to change her tone; and by a weighty, grave and spondaic music he gently cast a spell on their ardour and put it to sleep.

[A] Item: will not posterity say that our present-day reformation has been fastidious and precise, not only having fought against error and vice, filling the world with piety, humility and obedience, peace and every kind of virtue, but having gone so far as to fight against our ancient baptismal names of Charles, Louis and François, so as to populate the earth with Methuselahs, Ezekiels and Malachis, names so much more redolent of our faith? A nobleman neighbour of mine, estimating the advantages of former times in comparison with ours, did not forget to include the pride and magnificence of the names of the nobility in those days—Don Grumedan, Quedragan, Agesilan—and said that in merely *hearing* them he felt that those had been men of a different kind from Pierre, Guillot and Michel.

Item: I am deeply grateful to ·the translator· Jacques Amyot for leaving Latin names intact in the course of a French oration, without colouring and changing them to give them a French cadence. It seemed a little harsh at first, but already usage, by the authority of his Plutarch, has removed all the strangeness for us. I have often wished that those who write histories in Latin would leave all our names just as they are; for when they turn Vaudemont into Vallemontanus, transforming them so as to dress them in the Greek or Latin style, we do not know where we are and are do not recognise them.

To end my account, it is a base practice, with very bad results in our France, to call an individual by the name of his land and lordship; nothing in the world does more to create muddle and confusion about families. The younger son of a good family, having received as his portion lands by whose name he is known and honoured, cannot honourably dispose of them; but ten years after his death the estate goes to a stranger, who does the same with it [i.e. names himself after it]; guess where this leaves us in our knowledge of who these men are! For other examples of this we need only to look to our own royal family: so many divisions, so many surnames; and meanwhile the origin of the stock has escaped us.

[B] There is so much liberty in these ·name-·changes that in my own time I have not seen anyone elevated by fortune to some notably high rank who has not immediately been given new genealogical titles of which his father knew nothing, and grafted onto some illustrious stock. . . . The most obscure families are the best suited to falsification. How many gentlemen[1] have we in France who are of royal stock by their own reckoning? More, I think, than the ones who are not!

[Now, still [B]-tagged, •a quite long anecdote about a lord who tried by laughing to shame his hangers-on who were quarrelling over which of them had the best royal pedigree, and •remarks about coats of arms, which Montaigne says are not proof against confusion because they can be bought and sold.]

[1] *gentils-hommes*; often meaning 'noblemen', but perhaps not here.

[A] [Picking up from '. . . has escaped us.'] But this consideration pulls me onto another battle-field. Let us probe a little closer, and for God's sake consider what basis we have for this glory and reputation for which the world is turned upside down. *On what* do we establish this renown that we go looking for with such labour? Well, it is Peter or William who has it, guards it, and who is concerned with it.

> [C] (Oh what a brave faculty is hope, which in a mortal creature and in a moment lays claim to infinity, immensity, eternity, replacing its owner's poverty with everything he can imagine or desire! What a nice little toy nature has given us there.)

[A] And this Peter or William, what is that—when all is said and done—but a sound, or three or four pen-strokes which, **firstly**, are so easily varied that I would like to ask who gets the honour of all those victories: was it Guesquin, Glesquin, or Gueaquin? [Known variants of 'Guesclin', the name of a French commander in the hundred years' war.] . . . .This is a serious business. The question concerns which of those letters should be rewarded for so many sieges, battles, wounds, imprisonments and duties performed for the crown of France by that famous Constable of hers. [Then some examples of name-changes that had the effect of transferring reputations.] And **secondly**, they are pen-strokes shared by a thousand men. How many people are there in every family with the same name and surname? [C] And in different families, centuries and countries, how many? History has known three Socrateses, five Platos, eight Aristotles, seven Xenophons, twenty Demetriuses and twenty Theodores; think how many it has not known!

[A] What prevents my groom from calling himself Pompey the Great? But after all, what means, what powers are there that can attach that glorious sound and those pen-strokes either to my groom, once he is dead, or to that other man whose head was cut off in Egypt, in such a way as to do them any good? 'Do you think that this bothers spirits and ashes in their tombs?' [Virgil] [C] The two who share leadership in valour among men, what feeling do they get from

- Epaminondas: this glorious line that has been on our lips for centuries: 'Sparta's glory was shorn by my plans' [quoted by Cicero]? and
- Scipio Africanus: 'From where the eastern sun rises above the marshes of the Scythian lake there is no man who can match my deeds' [Ennius]?

The survivors are tickled by the sweetness of these sounds; incited by them to rivalry and desire, they unthinkingly imagine the deceased as having this feeling of theirs, and delude themselves into believing that they too will be capable of such feelings in their turn. God knows!. . . .

47. The uncertainty of our judgement

[A] Homer was right when he said that 'Arm'd with truth or falsehood, right or wrong,/So voluble a weapon is the tongue'. [Montaigne quotes this in Greek; this version is, anachronistically, from Pope's great translation of *The Iliad*.] There is indeed much to be said both for and against anything, e.g. for or against 'Hannibal won battles, but did not know how to profit from his victories' [Petrarch].

·**On one hand**·: Anyone who wants to take that side and get our people to see the error of not following up our recent victory at Montcontour, or who wants to accuse the king of Spain of failing to use the advantage he had over us at Saint-Quentin, can say that this error comes from a soul drunk with its good fortune and from a heart that has gorged itself full on this beginning of success and lost its appetite for more, already finding it hard to digest what it has taken in.

- His arms are full and he cannot take anything else, unworthy that fortune should have placed such a prize in his hands.
- What profit does he expect from it if he then gives his enemy the means of recovery?
- What hope can one have of his daring to attack his enemies later, after they have rallied and recovered and are newly armed with anger and vengeance, when he did not dare to—or did not know to—hunt them down when they were all routed and terrified?. . . .
- What opportunity can he expect better than the one he has just lost?

It is not like a fencing-match, where the number of hits decides the victory; as long as the enemy is on his feet, you have to start over again; it is not a victory if it does not end the war. . . .

But why not take the opposite line? ·**On the other hand**·:

- It is a headlong and insatiable mind that does not know how to set a limit to its greed.
- It is abusing God's favours to try to stretch them beyond the measure that he has prescribed for them.
- To rush back into danger after a victory is to place the victory again at the mercy of fortune.
- One of the wisest pieces of wisdom in the military art is not to drive your enemy to despair.

Sulla and Marius, after defeating the Marsi in the social war, saw a group of survivors returning in despair to charge them like infuriated beasts, and did not think it best to await them. If Monsieur de Foix had not been led by his ardour to pursue too fiercely the stragglers from the victory of Ravenna, he would not have spoiled it by his death. However, the memory of his recent example saved Monsieur d'Enghien from a similar misfortune at Ceresole.

It is dangerous to attack a man whom you have deprived of all means of escape except weapons, for necessity is a violent schoolmistress: [C] 'When necessity is aroused her bites are most grievous' [Porcius Latro]. [B] 'Someone who provokes his enemy by showing his throat will not be beaten easily' [Lucan]. [C] That is why Pharax prevented the king of Sparta, who had just won the day against the Mantineans, from provoking a thousand Argives who had escaped intact from the defeat, letting them slip away freely so as not to test a valour goaded and infuriated by misfortune. [A] King Clodomir of Aquitania was pursuing the fleeing King Gondemar of Burgundy whom he had just defeated, forcing him to turn back and face him; but his obstinacy cost him the fruit of his victory, for he died there.

·THE PROS AND CONS OF. . . ELABORATE ARMAMENT·

If one had to choose between keeping one's soldiers armed •richly and sumptuously or •only with the bare necessities, the former option (that of Sertorius, Philopoemen, Brutus, Caesar and others) can be supported by the point that it is always a spur to honour and glory for a soldier to see himself adorned, and a stimulus to greater obstinacy in combat because he has to safeguard his arms, as his property and inheritance; [C] the reason, says Xenophon, why the Asiatics in their wars took along wives, concubines, and their richest jewels and treasures.

[A] But the other side could be supported by contending •that this soldier will be doubly afraid of risking himself, and a soldier's care for self-preservation ought to be diminished rather than increased; and •that with such rich spoils the enemy's craving for victory is increased—it was noted that in earlier times this wonderfully encouraged the Romans against the Samnites. [B] When Antiochus was showing off to Hannibal the army he was preparing to fight the Romans,

with all its splendid and magnificent equipment of every kind, he asked: 'Will this be enough for the Romans?' 'Will it be enough for them? Yes indeed,' he replied, 'however greedy they are.' [A] Lycurgus forbade his own men not only to have luxurious equipment but also to despoil their conquered enemies; wanting, he said, their poverty and frugality to shine as brightly as everything else in the battle.

·. . . INSULTING THE ENEMY·

In sieges and other situations that bring us close to the enemy we allow our soldiers full freedom to defy him, taunt and insult him with all sorts of abuse; and there seems to be reason for this. For it is no small thing to deprive our men of any hope of mercy and compromise by showing them that this cannot be expected from enemies whom they have so strongly outraged, and that no remedy remains except victory.

But for Vitellius that turned out badly. He was confronting Otho, whose soldiers were weaker than his because they were no longer used to actual fighting and softened by the pleasures of the city; but he so angered them by his stinging words—mocking them for their timidity and their regrets at leaving the feastings and women of Rome—that he put new heart into them, which no exhortations had managed to do; he pulled them onto him, where no-one had been able to push them. And indeed when they are insults that touch to the quick, they can easily make a man who was slack in his labours in his king's quarrel have a very different feeling about his own quarrel.

·. . . DISGUISING THE COMMANDER·

Considering how important it is to safeguard an army's leader, and the fact that the enemy have their main focus on that head that the rest of the army cling to and depend on, it seems impossible to question the decision—taken by many great military leaders—to change their clothing and disguise themselves at the start of battle. Yet the drawback of this practice is no less than the one that is thought to be avoided; for when the general is not recognised by his men, the courage they derive from his example and from his presence fails them; and not seeing his usual symbols and insignia, they think he is dead or has run away despairing of victory.

As for experience, we see it favour now one side, now the other. What happened to Pyrrhus in his battle against the consul Levinus in Italy can be cited on either side: •by deciding to disguise himself under the armour of Demogacles, and to give him his own, he undoubtedly saved his own life; but he almost fell into the other misfortune of losing the day. [C] Alexander, Caesar and Lucullus liked to stand out on the battlefield in their rich equipment and armour, with their own particular colour gleaming; whereas Agis, Agesilaus and the mighty Gylippus on the other hand went to war in dark colours, without the trappings of command.

·. . . AWAITING THE ENEMY·

[A] Among the criticisms of Pompey at the battle of Pharsalia is that he halted his army and awaited the enemy at a standstill. Because (and here I shall steal Plutarch's exact words, which are better than mine)

> 'Pompey thereby robbed the blows of his weapons of that impetus which a rapid charge would have given them; and as for that rushing counter-charge, which more than anything else fills most soldiers with impetuous enthusiasm as they close with their enemies, and combines with their shouts and running to increase their courage, Pompey deprived his men of this, and thus rooted them to the spot where they stood, and chilled their spirits.'

That is what Plutarch says on the subject. [The quoted passage is from the Loeb Library's Plutarch.]

But if Caesar had lost, might not the contrary have been said just as well? namely

> The strongest and most rigid posture is that in which a man stands stock still. Whoever comes to a halt in his march, sparing and storing his energy for when it is needed, has a great advantage over one who has already wasted half his breath in running.

Besides which, an army, being a body made up of so many different working parts, cannot in this fury move with such precision that its ranks are not weakened or broken so that the more agile soldier is not at grips with the enemy before his comrade comes to his support.

[A [C]-tagged ancient anecdote, and then:] [A] Others have resolved this matter by instructing their armies thus: if the enemies charge you, stand firm; if they stand firm, charge them.

·. . . MAKING WAR ABROAD·

When the Emperor Charles V made his expedition into Provence, King Francis was in a position to choose between •going to confront him in Italy and •waiting for him in his own territory. And although he considered ·**on one hand**·

- •what an advantage it is to keep one's home pure and clear of the troubles of war, so that with its resources intact it can go on furnishing money and help when needed,
- •that the needs of wars involve laying waste at every turn, which cannot easily be done in our own properties; and if the peasants do not endure as mildly this devastation by their own side as by the enemy, it will be easy to stir up seditions and troubles among us,
- •that permission to rob and to pillage, which cannot be allowed in one's own country, is a great compensation for the hardships of war,
- •that when a man has nothing to hope for but his pay it is hard to keep him to his duty when he is only two steps away from his wife and his home,
- •that he who sets the table always pays the bill,
- •that there is more joy in attack than in defence,
- •that the shock of losing a battle within our ·country's· entrails is so violent that it is apt to bring down the whole body, seeing that no passion is as contagious as fear or so easily caught by hearsay or quicker to spread, and
- •that cities that have heard the crashing of this storm at their gates, and have taken in their officers and soldiers, still trembling and breathless, are in danger of rushing into some bad course of action in the heat of the moment;

nevertheless he chose to recall his transalpine forces and to watch the enemy approach.

For he may have thought **on the other hand**

- •that being at home among his friends, he could not fail to have plenty of supplies (the rivers and passes, being his, would bring him provisions and money in complete safety without need of escort),
- •that his subjects would be the more devoted to him, the nearer the danger was to them,
- •that with so many cities and city-gates to protect him, it would be up to him to choose battles according to his opportunity and advantage,
- •that if he decided to play for time, he could remain at ease and under cover, watching his enemy flounder and defeat himself in his battle against the difficulties of a hostile land where everything—in front, behind, on the flanks—was at war with him, with

- no means of resting his army or spreading it out if illness came among them, or sheltering his wounded,
- no money, no food except at lance-point,
- no time to rest and catch his breath,
- no knowledge of the terrain or of the countryside that could save him from ambush and surprise attacks,

and if it did come to a defeat,

- no means of saving the survivors.

And there was no lack of examples for each side. Scipio found it wiser to go and assault the lands of his enemy in Africa than to defend his own and fight in Italy where the enemy was; this worked out well for him. On the other hand, Hannibal in that same war ruined himself by giving up his conquest of a foreign land to go and defend his own.

The Athenians met bad fortune when they left the enemy in their own lands and crossed over to Sicily; but Agathocles, king of Syracuse, had good fortune when he crossed into Africa leaving the war at home.

And so as we often say, rightly, events and their outcomes depend—especially in war—mainly on fortune, which will not fall into line and subject itself to our reasoning and foresight. As these lines say: 'Badly conceived projects are rewarded; foresight fails; for fortune does not examine causes or follow merit, but wanders through everything without making any distinctions. Clearly there is something greater that drives and controls us, and subjects our concerns to its laws' [Manlius]. But if you take it rightly, it seems that our counsels and decisions depend just as much on fortune—that even our reasoning involves fortune's turbulence and uncertainty. [C] 'We argue rashly and unwisely,' says Timaeus in Plato, 'because in our reasoning as in ourselves a great part is played by chance.'

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[Essay 48, 'War horses', eight pages long, is a collection of anecdotes about horses and armaments; the most recent previous translator rightly describes the collection as 'formless'.]

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49. Ancient customs

[A] I would be prepared to forgive our people for having no pattern and rule of perfection except their own *moeurs* [see Glossary] and customs; for it is a common failing, not only of the vulgar but of almost all men, to set their sights within the ways they were born into. I am content that when they see Fabricius or Laelius they find their appearance and bearing barbaric, since they are not clothed or fashioned in our way. But I do complain of people's singular lack of judgement in letting themselves be so thoroughly fooled and blinded by the authority of current usage that **(i)** they are capable of changing opinion and ideas every month if fashion demands it, and **(ii)** they judge themselves so diversely. **(i)** When they wore the busk of their doublet high up on their chests they would maintain with heated arguments that it was in its proper place; then a few years later—look at it! slipped down to between their thighs!—they laugh at their former fashion, finding it absurd and intolerable. Today's fashion makes them promptly condemn the old one with such confidence and such universal agreement that you would think that some kind of mania was making their understanding do somersaults. Because our changes of fashion are so sudden and so fast-acting that the inventiveness of all the tailors in the world could not provide enough novelties, it is inevitable that the despised fashions very often return to favour, and then soon after fall back into contempt. **(ii)** And ·I complain· that one person's judgment should, in the space of fifteen or

twenty years, hold two or three opinions that are not merely different but contrary—an incredible display of instability and frivolity. . . .

I want to pile up here some ancient fashions that I have in my memory—some like ours, others different—so that by picturing this continual variation in human affairs we may strengthen and enlighten our judgement about it.

Fighting with rapier and cloak (as we call it) was already the custom among the Romans, Caesar says: 'They wrap their cloaks over their left arms and draw their swords.' And even back then he notes in our nation (which still has it) the bad practice of stopping travellers we meet on the road, requiring them to tell us who they are, and taking it as an insult and as a pretext for a quarrel if they refuse to answer.

At the baths—which the ancients used every day before meals, as ordinarily as we take water to wash our hands—at first they washed only their arms and legs; but later, by a custom that lasted for many centuries and in most of the nations in the ·Roman· world, they washed stark naked in water that was mixed and perfumed, so that washing in plain water was a sign of the simple life. The more elegant and refined among them perfumed the whole body a good three or four times a day. They often had all their hair plucked out with tweezers, just as French women have for some time done with the hairs on their forehead: 'You tweeze out your hairs from chest, thighs and arms' [Martial], although they had ointments suited for that purpose: 'She gleams with oil or hides behind a mask of vinegar and chalk' [Martial].

They liked to lie softly, and took sleeping on a mattress as a sign of endurance. They reclined on beds for their meals, in about the same posture as the Turks of today: 'Then from his high couch our forefather Aeneas began. . . ' [Virgil]. And they say of the younger Cato that after the battle of Pharsalia, when he was mourning over the lamentable state of public affairs, he always ate seated, adopting a more austere way of life.

They kissed the hands of the great to show them honour and affection; friends greeted each other with a kiss, as the Venetians do: 'I would wish you well with kisses and sweet words' [Ovid]. [C] When greeting a great man or begging his favour, they would touch his knees. The philosopher Pasicles (brother of Crates) instead of placing his hand on the knee placed it on the genitals. When the man he was addressing pushed him roughly aside, he said 'Come now, isn't this yours just as much as the knee?'. . . .

[A] They wiped their arses (we should leave silly squeamishness about words to the women) with a sponge, which is why *spongia* is an obscene word in Latin. The sponge was fixed to the end of a stick: we see this in the story of the man who was being taken to be thrown to the beasts in the sight of the people and who asked permission to go and do his business; having no other means of killing himself he shoved the stick and sponge down his throat and suffocated.

They wiped their prick with perfumed wool after using it ·for sex·: 'I'll do nothing to you till it is washed with wool' [Martial]. At street crossings in Rome there were jars and demijohns for passers-by to piss in: 'Little boys in their sleep often think they are near the public urinal, and raise their coats to make use of it' [Lucretius].

They used to have snacks between meals. In summer there were vendors of snow for cooling the wine. Some used snow in winter too, not finding the wine cool enough even then. The great had their cupbearers and carvers, and their buffoons to amuse them. In winter, dishes were brought to the table on food-warmers; they also had portable kitchens—[C] I have seen some myself—[A] in which they carried about everything needed for preparing a meal. . . .

And in summer they often had fresh clear water flowing

underfoot along channels through their lower rooms, in which there were many live fish which guests would choose and catch in their hands, to have them prepared each according to his taste. Fish has always had this privilege (it still does) that the great get into learning how to prepare it; and indeed its taste is more exquisite than that of meat, at least to me.

In every sort of ostentation, debauchery, sensuous inventions, luxuries, and extravagance we do *what we can* to equal the ancients, for our will is as corrupt as theirs but our ability cannot keep up. Our powers are no more capable of matching them in these vicious activities than in virtuous ones; for each kind derives from a vigour of mind that was incomparably greater in them than in us; the weaker souls are, the less able they are to act really well or really badly. . . .

Ladies in the public baths would receive men there, and employed menservants to massage and oil them: 'A slave, his middle girded with a black apron, stands before you when you take your naked bath' [Martial]. They sprinkled a kind of powder over themselves to stop the sweat.

[The essay ends with a one-page jumble of miscellaneous ancient customs, of which the last one is notable:] [B] The women of Argos and of Rome used to wear white for mourning, as was once the custom of our women—and would be still if my advice had been taken.

50. Democritus and Heraclitus

·How Montaigne goes about his Essays·

[A] Judgement is a tool to use on all subjects, and comes in everywhere. For that reason, in the try-outs [*essais*, see glossary] that I am making of it here I use every sort of occasion. If it is a subject that I do not understand at all, I still try my judgement on it; I use a long line to sound the ford, and if I find I would be out of my depth I stick to the bank. This recognition that I cannot get across is one effect of judgment's action, indeed one of those it is most proud of. Sometimes, when the subject is empty and trivial, I try whether my judgement will find something to give it body, to prop it up and support it. Sometimes I lead it to an elevated and well-worn subject where it can discover nothing new, since the path is so well beaten that judgement can only follow others' tracks. In that case it plays its part by choosing the route that seems best to it; out of a thousand paths it says that this one or that was the best choice.

I take the first subject chance offers; all are equally good for me; and I never plan to develop them in full. [C] For I do not see the whole of anything; nor do those who promise to enable us to do so! Of a hundred parts and facets that each thing has, I take one, sometimes only to touch it with the tip of my tongue, sometimes to run my hand over its surface, and sometimes to pinch it to the bone. I give it a stab, not as wide but as deep as I can. And most often I like to catch them from some unusual angle. I would aim to 'get to the bottom' of some subject if I did not know myself well enough to know that I cannot do that. Scattering a word here, a word there, samples taken out of context, dispersed, with no plan, with no promises, I am not bound to make something of them or even to stick to the subject myself without varying when I please, and surrendering to doubt and uncertainty and to my ruling quality, which is ignorance.

·What reveals a man's soul·

Every movement reveals us. [A] That same soul of Caesar's that is on show ordering and conducting the battle of Pharsalia is also on show conducting idle and amorous affairs. A horse is judged not only by seeing it handled

on a racecourse but also by seeing it walk—indeed, by seeing it resting in the stable.

[C] Among the soul's functions there are some lowly ones; anyone who does not see that side of it does not fully know it. And perhaps it is best observed when it is going at its simple pace. The winds of passion seize it more strongly on its lofty flights; it throws itself wholly and with full concentration into each matter; it never treats more than one at a time; and what shapes its treatment of something is not the something but the soul itself.

Things in themselves may have their own weights and measures and qualities; but once they are inside, once they are *in us*, the soul shapes them according to its understanding of them. Death is terrifying to Cicero, desirable to Cato, a matter of indifference to Socrates. Health, consciousness, authority, knowledge, beauty and their opposites are stripped as they enter the soul, which gives them new clothing and colours of its own choosing—brown, light, green, dark; bitter, sweet, deep, shallow—as it pleases each individual soul. For the souls have not agreed together on their styles, rules and forms; each one is the ruler in its own realm. So let us stop making things' external qualities our excuse; what we make of them is up to us. Our good and our ill depends on us alone. Let us make our offerings and our vows to ourselves and not to fortune; it has no power over our *moeurs*; on the contrary our *moeurs* drag fortune in their wake and mould it to their own pattern.

Why shall I not judge Alexander at table chatting and drinking his fill? Or if he were playing chess, what sinew of his mind is not touched and employed in that silly childish game? I hate and avoid it because it is not sufficiently a *game*, too serious a pastime, being ashamed to give it the attention that would suffice to achieve something good. He was no more absorbed in planning his magnificent expedition into India, nor was this other man in unravelling a passage on which depends the salvation of the human race, ·than either would be in seriously playing chess·. See how this silly pastime stirs up our soul, straining all its sinews; how amply in this game it provides each of us with the means of knowing himself and judging himself rightly. There is no other situation in which I see and check up on myself more thoroughly. What passion does not arouse us in it?—anger, vexation, hatred, impatience! And an intense ambition to win, in something in which it would be more excusable to have an ambition to lose. For rare and extraordinary excellence in frivolous pursuits is unworthy of a man of honour.

What I say in this example can also be said of all the others. Each constituent of a man, each occupation, betrays him and reveals him as well as any other.

·Democritus and Heraclitus·

[A] Democritus and Heraclitus were two philosophers of whom the former, finding the human condition vain and ridiculous, never went out in public without a mocking and laughing look on his face; Heraclitus, feeling pity and compassion for this same condition of ours, always had a sad expression, his eyes full of tears: [B] 'One, whenever he put a foot over his doorstep, was laughing; the other, on the contrary, wept' [Juvenal].

[A] I prefer the former temperament, not because it is pleasanter to laugh than to weep but because it is more disdainful and condemns us more than the other; and it seems to me that we can never be despised as much as we deserve. Pity and compassion are mingled with a sense that the thing we pity has some value; the things we laugh at we consider worthless. I do not think there is as much unhappiness in us as vanity, nor as much malice as

stupidity; we are not as full of evil as of emptiness; we are less miserable than base.

Thus Diogenes, who pottered about by himself, rolling his tub and turning up his nose at Alexander the Great, regarding us as flies or bags of wind, was a sharper and harsher judge (and consequently, for my temperament, a juster one) than Timon, who was nicknamed 'Man-hater'. For what one hates one takes seriously. Timon wished us harm; passionately desired our downfall; shunned contact with us as dangerous, evil, naturally depraved. Diogenes thought us worth so little that contact with us could neither disturb him nor corrupt him; he avoided our company not from fear but from contempt. He thought us incapable of doing good or evil.

Of the same stamp was the reply of Statilius when Brutus spoke to him about joining the conspiracy against Caesar; he thought the enterprise just, but did not find that men were worth taking any trouble over. [C] This fits the teaching of Hegesias, who said the wise man should do nothing except for himself, since he alone is worth doing anything for. And the teaching of Theodorus, that it is unjust for a wise man to risk his life for the good of his country, putting wisdom in danger for the sake of fools.

the last sentence of the essay: *Nostre propre condition est autant ridicule, que risible.*

translated by everyone as something like: Our own specific property is to be as ridiculous as we are able to laugh.

[There seems to be no warrant for that reading of *risible*; but if we follow the dictionaries the sentence comes out as meaning 'Our own specific property is to be as ridiculous as we are ridiculous', which is absurd.]

51. The vanity of words

[A] A rhetorician in former times said that his trade was to make little things seem big and be accepted as such. . . . In Sparta they would have had him flogged for practising the art of lying and deception. [B] And I believe that Archidamus, the Spartan king, was amazed by the answer Thucydides gave when asked whether he was better at wrestling than Pericles: 'That would be hard to establish,' he said, 'for after I have thrown him in the match he persuades those who saw it happen that he did not have a fall, and he is declared the winner.'[1] [A] Those who hide women behind a mask of make-up do less harm, for it is a small loss not to see them in their natural state; whereas those others make a profession of deceiving not our eyes but our judgement, adulterating and corrupting the essence of things. Republics that kept themselves regulated and well governed, such as Crete and Sparta, did not rate orators highly.

[C] Ariston wisely defines rhetoric as the science of persuading the people; Socrates and Plato, as the art of deceiving and flattering. And those who reject this generic description show it to be true throughout their teaching. The Mahometans forbid their children to be taught it because of its uselessness. And the Athenians—realising how pernicious it was, for all its prestige in their city—ordained that the main part of it, which is stirring emotions, should be eliminated, along with formal introductions and perorations.

[A] It is an instrument invented for manipulating and agitating a mob and a disorderly populace; and it is an instrument which, like medicine, is used only in sick states. In states where all the power was held by the vulgar, or the ignorant, or *everyone*—like Athens, Rhodes and Rome—and where

[1] This is not about the historian, but a rival to Pericles in Athenian politics; 'wrestling' is presumably a metaphor for political debate.

things were in perpetual turmoil, the orators flooded in. And in truth few great men in those republics pushed themselves into positions of trust without the help of eloquence: Pompey, Caesar, Crassus, Lucullus, Lentulus and Metellus made it their mainstay for rising to the height of authority that they finally achieved, helped more by rhetoric than by arms,

> [C] (contrary to the opinion of better times; for ·two centuries earlier· Lucius Volumnius, speaking in public in favour of the candidates Quintus Fabius and Publius Decius during the consular elections, declared, 'These are men born for war, who have done great things; clumsy in verbal battles; truly consular minds. Subtle, eloquent, learned men are good ·only· for praetors to administer justice in the city.'

[A] In Rome eloquence flourished most when affairs were in the worst state and agitated by the storms of civil wars; as a free and untamed field bears the lustiest weeds. From that it seems that monarchical governments have less use for it than the others; for the stupidity and gullibility that are found in the masses and enable them to be manipulated and swayed through the ears by the sweet sound of that harmony, without weighing and knowing the truth of things by force of reason—this gullibility, I say, is not so readily found in an individual man; and it is easier to protect him by a good education and counsel from the effects of that poison. No famous orator has ever been seen to come from Macedonia or from Persia.

What I have just said was prompted by my having talked with an Italian who served as chief steward to the late Cardinal Caraffa until his death. I asked him about his job. [Then half a page about kinds of food and ways of preparing and serving them. Although this report was 'inflated with rich and magnificent words', Montaigne admits that it is a distraction from his main topic.]

I don't know whether I am alone in this, but when I hear our architects puffing themselves up with those big words like 'pilasters', 'architraves', 'cornices', 'Corinthian style', 'Doric style' and such-like jargon, I cannot stop my thoughts from immediately latching onto the palace of Apollidon; but I find that in fact these are paltry parts of my kitchen-door!

[B] When one hears grammatical terms such as 'metonymy', 'metaphor' and 'allegory', doesn't it seem that they refer to some rare, exotic form of language? Yet they are terms that apply to the babble of your chambermaid!

[A] It is an imposture similar to that one to give our offices of state the same lofty names that the Romans used, though they have no similarity of function and even less of authority and power. Similar too—and a practice that will in my opinion serve one day as a reproach to our century—is our unworthily assigning the most glorious surnames of antiquity to whomever we think fit, names the ancients bestowed on one or two personages every few centuries. By universal acclaim Plato has borne the name *divine*, which no-one has thought to dispute with him; and now the Italians, who with reason boast of having in general livelier minds and sounder judgments than other nations of their time, have just conferred it on Aretino, in whom, apart from a bloated style full of conceits, ingenious indeed but far-fetched and fantastical—in short, apart from his eloquence, such as it is—I see nothing beyond the common run of authors of his century; so far is he from approaching that ancient divinity.

And the title *great*; we now give it to monarchs who have nothing above commonplace 'grandeur'.

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[Essay 52, 'The parsimony of the ancients' is a page-long set of anecdotes.]

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[Essay 53, 'A saying of Caesar's', is a page long.]

54. Vain subtleties

[A] There are frivolous and vain subtleties through which a reputation is sought by some men, like the poets who compose entire works from lines all beginning with the same letter. We see eggs, balls, wings and axe-heads shaped by the ancient Greeks, who lengthened some lines and shortened others so as to represent such and such a shape. Such was the science [see Glossary] of the man who counted the number of ways the letters of the alphabet can be arranged and reached that incredible number we find in Plutarch.

I approve of the opinion of the man to whom was presented another man who had learned how to throw grains of millet with such skill that they always went through the eye of a needle; he was asked afterwards for some present as a reward for such a rare ability; whereupon he commanded—very amusingly and correctly in my opinion—that this man should be given two or three baskets of millet so that such a fine skill should not remain unpractised! It is a wonderful testimony of the weakness of our judgement that things are valued for their rarity or novelty, or even for their difficulty, when they are not good and useful.

·THINGS THAT MEET AT EXTREMES·

We have just been playing at my house a game to see who could find the most things that meet at extremes, as

- *Sire*, which is the title given to the highest person in our state, the king, and also to common folk such as tradesmen, but not to anyone in between;
- Women of quality are called *dames*; middle-ranking women *damoiselles*; and *dames* again for those of the lowest station.
- [B] The *daiz* that are spread over tables are permitted only in princely houses and in taverns.

[Montaigne evidently saw this game as frivolous and vain; but its content now becomes the theme of the rest of this mistitled essay.]

[A] Democritus used to say that gods and beasts had more acute senses than men, who are in between ·gods and beasts·.

The Romans wore the same clothes on days of mourning as on festival-days.

It is certain that extreme fear and extreme ardour of courage equally disturb the stomach and relax the bowels.

[C] The nickname 'the Trembler' given to King Sancho XII of Navarre remind us that boldness as well as fear makes the limbs shake. . . .

[A] The weakness that comes to us in the sports of Venus from coldness and distaste also comes from too intense a desire and from unruly passion.

Food can be cooked and roasted by extreme cold and extreme heat.

Aristotle says that lead ingots melt and run with the cold in a rigorous winter as with intense heat. . . .

[A] Stupidity and wisdom meet at the same point of feeling and of resolve to endure human accidents; the wise curb and control misfortune; the others are not aware of it; the stupid are on this side of misfortune, so to speak; the wise are beyond it. Having weighed and considered their qualities, having taken their measure and judged them for what they are, the wise man leaps above misfortunes by the force of a vigorous courage. He disdains them and tramples them underfoot, having a strong and solid soul against which incoming arrows of fortune, meeting an impervious obstacle, must bounce off, blunted. Men of ordinary middling capacities are lodged between these extremes, which is where men are aware of evils, feel them, and cannot bear them.

Infancy and extreme old age meet in weakness of the brain.

Avarice and extravagance meet in a like desire to grab and acquire.

[C] It may be said with some plausibility that there is an abecedarian ignorance that comes before learning and another, doctoral ignorance, that comes after it—an ignorance that learning makes and engenders, just as it undoes and destroys the first kind.

[B] Out of simple minds, less enquiring and less educated, are made good Christians, who through reverence and obedience believe simply and live under the laws. In the middle range of mental vigour and capacity, erroneous opinions arise; they follow the apparent truth of their first impressions; and they do have a case for thinking that those of us who stay with the old ways—not having been instructed in such matters by study—are stuck in them by simple-mindedness and stupidity. Great minds, more settled and clear-sighted, form another category of good believers; by long and religious investigation they come to have a deeper and more complex grasp of the Scriptures, and to sense the mysterious and divine secret of our ecclesiastical polity. However, we see some people reach this highest level by way of the second [i.e. not by the route of the 'great minds' but by means available to those in the 'middle range'], doing this with wonderful profit and comfort, as at the extreme limit of Christian understanding, and rejoicing in their victory with consolation, active gratitude, reformed behaviour and great modesty. I do not mean to place in this rank those others who, to clear themselves of the suspicion of their past error and make us sure of them, become extreme, injudicious, and unjust in their support of our cause, staining it with countless disgraceful acts of violence.

[C] The **(i)** simple peasants are honest men, and honest too are the **(ii)** philosophers, or at least what count as 'philosophers' these days—strong and clear natures enriched by a broad education in the useful branches of learning. The halfway people who have disdained **(i)** the first state, illiteracy, and who are incapable of reaching **(ii)** the other (their arses between two saddles, like me and many others), are dangerous, inept, and troublesome; they stir people up. That is why, for my part, I draw back as far as I can into that first and natural state, which I have tried and failed to leave.

Popular and purely natural poetry has its naif charms and graces that make it comparable with the principal beauty of poetry perfected according to art; as is seen in Gascon villanelles, and in songs brought to us from nations that have no knowledge of any branch of learning, or even of writing. But middling poetry, stuck between the two, is disdained, without honour, and without value.

[A] But I have found that—as ordinarily happens—once our mind has found an opening, something we had taken for a difficult task and a rare topic [referring to the game 'we have just been playing at my house'] is nothing of the sort, and that once our capacity for discovery has been warmed up, it finds countless similar examples; and I will add just one more: if these essays were worthy of being judged, I think they might not be much liked by common and vulgar minds, or by unique and outstanding ones: the former would not understand enough about them, the latter would understand too much. They might eke out a living in the middle region.

55. Smells

[A] It is said of some such as Alexander the Great that their sweat had a sweet odour because of some rare and extraordinary constitution of theirs, the cause of which was sought by Plutarch and others. But the usual make-up of ·human· bodies is the opposite: the best they can do is to have no

smell. The sweetness of even the purest breath has nothing more excellent than being free of any offensive smell, like the breath of thoroughly healthy children. That is why, Plautus says, 'A woman smells good when she has no smell', [B] just as we say that the best perfume for her actions is for her to be quiet and discreet. [A] Perfumes are rightly considered suspicious in those who use them, and thought to be used to cover up some natural defect in that quarter. That gives rise to those adages of the ancient poets, saying that to smell good is to stink: which claim that the man who smells nice in fact stinks: 'You laugh at us, Coracinus, because we emit no smell. I would rather smell of nothing than smell sweetly' [Martial]. And elsewhere: 'A man who always smells good, Posthumus, does not smell good' [Martial].

[B] However, I greatly like being among good smells, and I utterly hate bad ones, which I detect from further off than anyone else: 'I have a nose with more flair, Polypus, for sensing the goaty smell of hairy armpits than any hound on the track of a stinking boar' [Horace].

[C] The simpler, more natural smells seem to me more agreeable. And a concern for smells is chiefly a matter for the ladies. In deepest Barbary the Scythian women powder themselves after washing, and smother their whole face and body with a certain sweet-smelling unguent, native to their soil; when they take off this cosmetic to approach their menfolk, they find themselves sleek and perfumed.

[B] Whatever the odour, it is a marvel how it clings to me and how apt my skin is to imbibe it. Anyone who complains that nature has left man with no instrument to bring smells to his nose is wrong, for they bring themselves. But in my particular case my thick moustache performs that service; if I bring my gloves or my handkerchief near it, the smell will linger there all day, revealing where I have been. The close kisses of youth—savoury, greedy and sticky—used to adhere to it and remain there for many hours afterwards. Yet I find myself little subject to epidemics, which spring from infected air and are spread through social contact; and I have escaped those of my own time, of which there have been many sorts in our cities and in our armies. [C] We read that although Socrates never left Athens during many recurrences of the plague that so often racked that city, he alone was never the worse for it.

[B] Medical men could, I think, make more use of smells than they do; for I have often noticed that they change me and work on my spirits according to which smells they are. That makes me endorse the thesis that the use of incense and perfumes in churches—so ancient and widespread among all nations and religions—is aimed at making us rejoice, arousing and purifying our senses, so as to make us more fit for contemplation.

[C] I would like—so as to be able to judge concerning it—to work alongside those chefs who know how to add a seasoning of extra odours to the savour of foods, as was particularly noticed in the service of the king of Tunis who in our time landed at Naples to confer with the Emperor Charles. His foods were stuffed with aromatic ingredients, so sumptuously that a peacock and two pheasants cost a hundred ducats to prepare in their manner. And when they were carved they filled not only the hall but all the rooms of his palace and even the neighbouring houses with sweet fumes that lingered for some time.

[B] When choosing where to stay, my principal concern is to avoid air that is stinking and heavy. Those lovely cities Venice and Paris weaken my fondness for them by the pungent smell of the marshes of one and of the mud of the other.

56. Prayers

[A] I put forward formless and unresolved notions—as do those who propound questions for debate in the universities—not to declare the truth but to look for it. And I submit them to the judgement of those whose concern it is to regulate not only my actions and my writings but also my thoughts. Condemnation and approval will be equally welcome and useful, [C] since I think it would be impious and absurd if this jumble were found to contain—whether through ignorance or inadvertence—anything contrary to the holy laws and teachings of the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church, in which I die and in which I was born. [A] And so, while always submitting myself to the authority of their censure, which has absolute power over me, I rashly meddle with every sort of subject, as I do here.

I may be wrong—I don't know—but it has always seemed to me that since by a particular favour of divine goodness a set form of prayer has been prescribed and dictated to us word for word by the mouth of God, we should use it more ordinarily than we do. I would like it if Christians said the Lord's Prayer before and after our meals, when getting up and when going to bed, and with all particular actions that we normally bring prayers into, [C] saying it if not *exclusively* at least *always*. [A] The Church may extend or diversify prayers according to our educational needs, for I am well aware that it is always the same substance, the same thing. But *this* prayer should have the privilege of being continually on people's lips, since it certainly says everything necessary and is most appropriate on all occasions. [C] It is the only prayer that I use everywhere; instead of changing prayers I repeat that one. Which is why I remember it better than I do any other prayer.

[A] I have just been thinking about where that error of ours comes from, of having recourse to God in all our designs and undertakings, [B] •calling upon him in every kind of need and wherever our weakness wants support, without considering whether what we are up to is just or unjust, and •invoking his name and his power, whatever condition or action we are involved in, however sinful it may be.

[A] He is indeed our sole and unique protector, [C] and can do anything to help us; [A] but although he deigns to honour us with that sweet fatherly relationship, he is as just as he is good [C] and as he is powerful; but he exercises his justice more often than his power, [A] and favours us according to its criteria not to our petitions.

[C] Plato in his *Laws* lists three offensive sorts of belief about the gods:

(a) that there are none;
(b) that they do not concern themselves with our affairs;
(c) that they refuse nothing to our vows, offerings and sacrifices.

He believes that **(a)** never remains stable in anyone from childhood to old age; but **(b)** and **(c)** may allow of constancy.

[A] His justice and his power are inseparable. It is useless to implore him to use his power in a bad cause. At least for that instant when we make our prayer, we must have a soul that is clean and freed from vicious passions; otherwise we are handing him the rods with which to chastise us. Instead of redressing our fault we redouble it, presenting feelings full of irreverence and hatred to him from whom we are to ask for pardon. That is why I am not inclined to praise those whom I see praying to God often and habitually, if the actions surrounding the prayer do not show me evidence of some amendment and reform: [B] '. . . if for your nightly adultery you hide beneath an Aquitanian cowl' [Juvenal].

[C] And the state of a man who mixes devotion into a detestable life seems to be somehow more damnable than that of a man who is self-consistent and dissolute throughout. Which is why our Church every day refuses the favour of entry and fellowship to *moeurs* that stubbornly adhere to some conspicuous wickedness.

[A] We *pray* out of habit and custom; or, to put it better, we *read or utter our prayers*; basically it is only an act. [B] And it displeases me to see someone making three signs of the cross at the blessing ·before the meal· and three more at grace ·after it·, while seeing all the other hours of his day occupied with hatred, greed, and injustice. (And it displeases me the more because the sign of the cross is one that I revere and continually use, [C] including when I yawn.) [B] To vices their hour, to God his hour, as if by compensation and compromise! It is a miracle to see actions so incompatible follow each other so smoothly that no interruption or alteration is felt even at their edges, at the point of transition from one to the other. [C] What weird conscience can be at rest while harbouring under the same roof, in such harmonious and peaceful association, both the crime and the judge?

(i) A man whose head is incessantly ruled by lechery and who judges it to be very odious in the sight of God—what does he say to God when he speaks to him about it? He pulls himself back, but immediately relapses. If the fact and the presence of divine justice struck and chastised his soul, as he claims, then however short his repentance might be, *fear* would force his thoughts back to it so often that before long he would see himself master of those vices that are habitual and ingrained in him.

(ii) But what about those men who base an entire life on the fruits and profits of a sin they know to be mortal? How many accepted trades and vocations there are whose essence is vicious! And the man who confided to me that all his life he had professed and practised a religion he believed to be damnable and contradictory to the one he had in his heart, so as not to lose credit and the honour of his offices—how did he *endure* this reasoning in his heart? When such men address divine justice on such matters, what language do they use? Since their repentance would consist in visible and tangible reparation, they lose the means of affirming it either to God or to us. Are they so bold as to ask for forgiveness without making satisfaction and without repentance? I hold that **(i)** the first ones I mentioned are in the same state as these; but the obstinacy in the case of **(ii)** is not so easy to overcome.Those sudden violent changes and veerings of opinion that the **(i)** people put on for us are a source of wonder to me; they reveal a state of unresolved conflict.

How fantastic seemed to me the conceptions of those who in recent years have regularly accused *anyone* who showed a glimmer of intelligence yet professed the Catholic faith of only pretending to do so; and who even maintained, ·thinking· to do him honour, that whatever he might actually *say* for show, he **could** not fail to have his *belief* 'reformed' by their standards! An annoying malady, to rate your intellectual competence so high that you are convinced that no-one **can** believe the opposite! And more annoying still, to be convinced that such a person—·intelligent and professing to be catholic·—prefers I know not what present advantage to the hopes and fears of eternal life! They can take my word for it: if anything had tempted my youth, the *attraction* of the risks and difficulties of this recent enterprise—·the Reformation·—would have played a good part in it.

[A] It is not without good reason, it seems to me, that the Church forbids the indiscriminate, reckless and indiscreet use of the holy and divine songs that the Holy Spirit dictated to David. We should bring God into our activities only with reverence and with devout and respectful attention.

His word is too holy to serve merely to exercise our lungs and please our ears; it should be produced from the mind, not from the tongue. It is not right that a shop-boy should be allowed, amid his vain and frivolous thoughts, to entertain himself by playing about with it.

[B] Nor, assuredly, is it right to see the holy book of the sacred mysteries of our faith being bandied about a hall or kitchen. [C] They *used to be* mysteries; at present they are sports and pastimes. [B] A study so serious and venerable should not be handled on the run and in a flurry. It should always be a considered, calm activity, to which we should always add *Sursum corda* [= 'lift up your hearts'], which is the preface to our liturgy; and bring to it even our bodies disposed in a way that testifies to a focused attention and reverence.

[C] It is not a study for everyone; it is a study for those who are dedicated to it, whom God calls to it. It makes the wicked and the ignorant grow worse. It is not a story to tell but a story to revere, fear and worship. Those who think they have made it manageable for the populace by translating it into the language of the populace—comical folk! When people fail to understand everything they read, is it only because of the words? Shall I say more? By bringing it this little bit nearer ·to the common people· they push it further away. Pure ignorance and total reliance on others was much more salutary and more learned than this vain and verbal science [see Glossary], the nurse of presumption and rashness.

[B] I also believe that the freedom for anyone to spread such a sacred and important text into so many kinds of idioms is much more dangerous than it is useful. The Jews, the Mahometans and almost all others have espoused and revere the language in which their mysteries were originally conceived, and any change or alteration in them is forbidden—not without reason. Do we know for sure that in the Basque country or in Brittany there are enough competent judges to settle what is the right translation in their language? The universal Church has no judgment more arduous and solemn to make than this. In preaching or speaking the interpretation is vague, free, variable and piecemeal; so it is not the same thing.

[C] One of our Greek historians justly accuses his own time because the secrets of the Christian religion were scattered about the market-place in the hands of the meanest artisans, and anyone could argue and talk about them according to his own understanding. 'It should be a matter of deep shame', he says, 'that we—who by God's grace enjoy the pure mysteries of piety—allow them to be profaned in the mouths of ignorant and common people, seeing that the Gentiles forbade Socrates, Plato and the wisest men to speak about or inquire into things committed to the priests of Delphi.' He also says that in theological disputes the factions of princes are armed not with zeal but with anger; that zeal does partake of the divine reason and justice when its conduct is orderly and moderate, but changes into hatred and envy—producing not wheat and grapes but tares and nettles—when it acts in the service of a human passion. . . .

Nowadays children and women lecture the oldest and most experienced of men about ecclesiastical laws, whereas the first of Plato's laws forbids them even to inquire into the reason for civil laws, which are to be respected as divine ordinances. In permitting older men to discuss these matters among themselves and with the magistrate, he adds '. . . provided it is not in the presence of young or profane persons'.

A bishop has testified in writing that at the other end of the world there is an island that the ancients called Dioscorides, an island delightful for its fertility in all sorts of fruits and trees, and for its healthy climate. The people

there are Christian, having churches and altars adorned with crosses and no other images; they are great observers of fasts and festivals, pay their tithes exactly to the priests, and are so chaste that no man can lie with more than one woman for the whole of his life. For the rest, they are so happy with their lot that in the middle of the ocean they know nothing about ships, and so simple that they do not understand a single word of the religion they so scrupulously observe. This will be found incredible by those who do not know that the pagans, *devout* idolaters, know nothing about their gods except simply their names and their statues. The original beginning of Euripides' tragedy *Menalippus* went like this: 'O Jupiter! for I know nothing of thee but thy name. . . '.

[B] I have also seen in my time certain writings being complained of for being purely human and philosophical, with no admixture of theology. But a case can be made for the opposite attitude:

(i) divine doctrine keeps its rank better when set apart, as queen and mistress;

(ii) it should be first everywhere, never ancillary or subsidiary;

(iii) in grammar, rhetoric and logic, examples might perhaps be more suitably drawn from somewhere other than such sacred materials;

(iv) so might the story-lines for theatres, games and public spectacles;

(v) divine reasons are regarded with more veneration and reverence when considered by themselves and in their own style than when paired with human reasonings;

(vi) it is a more common fault for theologians to write too humanly than for humanists to write too untheologically;

(vii) human speech has its lower forms and should not avail itself of the dignity, majesty and authority of the language of God.

[As regards **(vii)**:] For my part, I allow it to say. . . .'fortune', 'destiny', 'accident', 'good luck', 'bad luck', 'the gods' and other expressions, in its own way. [To **(vi)** Montaigne adds:] Philosophy, says St Chrysostom, has long been banished from the school of divinity as a useless servant, considered unworthy of seeing, even from the doorway when simply passing by, the sanctuary of the holy treasures of sacred doctrine.

[C] I am offering notions that are human and my own, simply as human notions to be considered on their own, not as determined and decreed by heavenly ordinance and permitting neither doubt nor dispute. Matter of opinion, not matter of faith. What I reason out according to me, not what I believe according to God; in a lay not a clerical manner, but always deeply devout. As children offer their exercises [*essais*, see Glossary]—to be instructed, not to instruct.

[B] And might it not reasonably be said that a decree saying that *no-one may write about religion (except very reservedly) unless that is his profession* would have some appearance of usefulness and justice? It might perhaps be applied to me, to get me to hold my peace on the subject!

[A] I have been told that even those who are not of our Church forbid the use among themselves of the name of God in their ordinary talk. They do not want it to be used by way of interjection or exclamation, or to support testimony or for emphasis; in which I think they are right. In whatever way we call God into our interactions and society, it should be done seriously and devoutly.

There is, it seems to me, something like this in Xenophon, a passage in which he shows that we should pray to God less often, since it is not likely that we can so often bring our souls into that orderly, reformed and devout state required

for doing this; without that, our prayers are not only vain and useless but depraved. 'Forgive us', we say, 'as we forgive those who trespass against us.' What do we mean by that if not that we are offering him our soul free from vengeance and rancour? Yet we call on God and his help to conspire in our wrongdoings [C] and invite him into our injustice. . . .

[A] The miser prays to him for the vain and superfluous preservation of his hoard; the ambitious man for his victories and success in his career; the thief gets God to help him overcome the dangers and difficulties that obstruct his wicked enterprises, or thanks him for how easy he has found it to cut a passer-by's throat. [C] Standing beside the house they are going to climb into or blow up, they say their prayers, their purposes and hopes full of cruelty, lust and greed. . . .

[A] Queen Margaret of Navarre tells of a young monarch—and although she does not name him, his exalted rank makes him recognisable enough—that whenever he went to an amorous assignation to sleep with the wife of a Paris lawyer, his route leading through a church, he never failed to make his prayers and supplications in that holy place, both on the way there and on the way back. His soul filled with that fine thought, I leave you to judge what he was asking God's favour *for*! Yet she cites this as evidence of notable devotion. But that is not the only proof we have that women are hardly fit to treat theological matters.

A true prayer, a devout reconciliation of ourselves to God, cannot occur in a soul that is impure and at that very time subject to the domination of Satan. He who calls God to his aid while he is actually engaged in vice is like a cutpurse calling on justice to help him, or like those who produce the name of God to vouch for their lies: [B] 'We softly murmur evil prayers' [Lucan]. [A] Few men would dare to place in evidence the secret requests they make of God: 'A man won't be in a hurry to take the prayers he has whispered within the temple and say them aloud outside' [Persius]. That is why the Pythagoreans believed that prayer should be public and heard by all, so that God should not be begged for things unseemly or unjust—like the man in this poem: 'He first exclaims "Apollo!" loud and clear; / then he moves his lips, fearing to be overheard: "Lovely Laverna, / do not let me get found out; let me appear to be just and upright; / cloak my sins with night and my lies with a cloud"' [Horace; Laverna was the goddess of thieves].

[C] The gods heavily punished the unrighteous prayers of Oedipus by granting them. He had prayed that his children should settle the succession to his state by arms among themselves; and he had the misfortune to see himself taken at his word. We should not ask that all things should obey our will but that our will should obey wisdom.

[A] It really does seem that we use our prayers [C] as a jargon, [A] like those who use holy and divine words in sorcery and practical magic, and that for their effect we count on their texture, or sound, or sequence of the words, or our physical posture. For, with our souls still full of greed, not touched by repentance or by any fresh reconciliation with God, we offer him these words that memory lends to our tongue, hoping to get from them an expiation for our sins.

Nothing is so easy, so gentle, so favourable as the divine law; it calls us to itself, sinful and detestable as we are; it extends its arms to us and draws us to its bosom, no matter how vile, filthy and besmirched we are now and shall be in the future. But we in return should look on it in the right way; we should receive this pardon with thanksgiving and, at least for that instant when we address ourselves to it, have a soul remorseful for its sins and at enmity with the passions that have driven us to offend against the divine law.

[C] Neither the gods nor good men, Plato says, accept gifts from a wicked man. . . .

57. Age

[When Montaigne wrote this his age was somewhere between 39 and 47. He died at the age of 59.]

[A] I cannot accept our way of determining the span of our lives. I see that the sages make it a great deal shorter than common opinion does. 'What!' said the younger Cato to those who wanted to prevent him from killing himself: 'Am I now at an age where I can be reproached for leaving life too soon?' Yet he was only forty-eight. He reckoned that age to be quite mature and quite advanced, considering how few men reach it. As for those who keep themselves going with the thought that some span of life or other that they call 'natural' promises them a few years more: they could pull this off if something officially exempted them from the many accidents that each of us is naturally subject to and that can interrupt this course of life that they promise themselves.

What an idle fancy it is to expect to die of a failing of our powers brought on by extreme old age, and to make that the target for our life to reach, when it is the least usual kind of death! We call it and *only* it 'a natural death', as if it were contrary to nature to see a man break his neck in a fall, drowned in a shipwreck, snatched away by plague or a pleurisy, and as if our normal condition did not expose us to all those mishaps. Let us not soothe ourselves with these fine words; perhaps we ought rather to reserve 'natural' for what is general, common, and universal.

Dying of old age is a rare, singular and extraordinary death, and therefore less natural than the others. It is the last and ultimate kind of death; the further it is from us the less we can hope to reach it. It is indeed the boundary beyond which we shall not go, prescribed by nature's law as not to be crossed; but nature rarely grants the privilege of reaching it. It is an exemption that nature grants by special favour to a single person in the space of two or three centuries, relieving him of the misfortunes and difficulties that it has scattered along that long period.

So my idea is to consider the age we have reached as an age few people reach. Since in the ordinary course of events men do not come that far, it is a sign that we are getting on. And since we have passed the customary limits. . . .we should not hope to go much further. Having escaped so many occasions of dying that we see people stumble over, we ought to recognise that an extraordinary fortune like the one that is keeping us going is quite unusual and can hardly last much longer.

Even our *laws* have this false idea; they do not allow that a man is capable of managing his estate until he is 25, yet he will scarcely manage to make his life last that long! Augustus lopped five years off the old Roman ordinances and decreed that for a man to become a judge he needed only to be 30. Servius Tullius released knights who had passed the age of 47 from war-service; Augustus set this back to 45.

Sending men into retirement before 55 or 60 does not seem very reasonable to me. I would recommend *extending* our vocations and employments as far as possible, in the public interest; I find the fault in the other direction, namely not putting us to work early enough. The man—·Augustus·—who had been universal judge of the whole world at 19 ruled that a man had to be 30 to judge the placing of a gutter!

As for me, I reckon that at the age of 20 our souls are as developed as they are ever likely to be, showing promise of all they will be capable of. No soul having failed by that age to give a quite evident pledge of its power ever gave proof of it afterwards. The natural qualities and capacities reveal whatever beauty or vigour they possess by then—or never. . . .

[A] Of all the fine human actions that have come to my knowledge—of whatever kind, in ancient times and today—I

think it would take me longer to list the ones performed before the age of 30 than the ones performed after. [C] Yes, often in the lives of the same men. May I not say that with total certainty about the actions of Hannibal and his great adversary Scipio? They lived a good half of their lives on the glory achieved in their youth; after that they were great men compared with others, but not at all compared with their earlier selves.

[A] As for me, I am convinced that since that age my mind and my body have shrunk rather than grown, and retreated rather than advanced.

It may well be that for those who make good use of their time, learning and experience grow with the years, but vivacity, quickness, firmness and other qualities much more *ours*, more important and essential, droop and fade. [B] 'When the body is shattered by the mighty blows of age and our limbs shed their blunted powers, our wits too become lame and our tongues and our minds start to wander' [Lucretius]. Sometimes the body is the first to surrender to old age, sometimes the soul. I have seen plenty of men in whom the brain grew weak before the stomach or the legs; and this is all the more dangerous an infirmity in that the sufferer is hardly aware of it and its symptoms are obscure.

But now [A] I am complaining not that the laws leave us at work too late but that they put us to work too late. It seems to me that, considering the frailty of our life and how many ordinary natural reefs it is exposed to, we should not allot so large a part of it to getting started, to leisure-time, and to apprenticeship.