

# Essays, Book I

Michel de Montaigne

1580

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[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. —Contemporary 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.

### 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<sup>1</sup> in that nation ·of Antarctic France [= Brazil]·,

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>[C]</sup>And given that some uncultivated fruits of those countries have a savour and delicacy that our taste finds excellent in comparison with our own, <sup>[A]</sup> 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: <sup>[B]</sup> 'Ivy grows best when left untended; the strawberry tree flourishes more beautifully in lonely grottoes, and birds sing the sweeter for their artlessness' [Propertius]. <sup>[A]</sup> All our efforts cannot even manage to reproduce the nest of the tiniest little bird, its texture, its beauty, its fitness for its purpose; or the web of the puny spider. <sup>[C]</sup> 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.

<sup>[A]</sup> 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!—<sup>[C]</sup> ‘men fresh from the gods’ [Seneca]—  
<sup>[B]</sup> ‘These are the ways that nature first ordained’ [Virgil].

·THE WAY OF LIFE OF THE ‘BARBARIANS’·

<sup>[A]</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>[A]</sup> 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:

- <sup>[C]</sup> I want to sell some pearls,
- I want to buy some pearls,
- <sup>[A]</sup> 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, <sup>[C]</sup> or sent help to them where they were.

<sup>[A]</sup> 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.

<sup>[C]</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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 unmatched 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 *mœurs*. 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 <sup>[A]</sup> 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. <sup>[C]</sup> Idiots! He would rather have performed a beautiful, noble and just action that brought him shame than do it for the sake of glory. <sup>[A]</sup> 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, <sup>[C]</sup> 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) <sup>[A]</sup> *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.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>1</sup>

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!

<sup>1</sup> 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]

<sup>[C]</sup> 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.

<sup>[A]</sup> 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.

<sup>[C]</sup> 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.

<sup>[A]</sup> Some temperaments are more suited than others to these precepts <sup>[C]</sup> for retirement. <sup>[A]</sup> 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. <sup>[B]</sup> ‘Let’s grab our pleasures, life is all we have; you’ll soon be ashes, a ghost, a tale’ [Persius].

<sup>[A]</sup> 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 <sup>[A]</sup>-tagged diatribe with a paragraph about his own writing in the essays:]

<sup>[C]</sup> 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 <sup>[A]</sup>-tagged passage, and then returns to himself, this time as a letter-writer:]

<sup>[B]</sup> 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. <sup>[C]</sup> 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.

<sup>[B]</sup> 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 selflessness 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. Antigonus 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: <sup>[B]</sup> ‘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. <sup>[A]</sup> 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: <sup>[B]</sup> ‘Too strong and rich a love-affair soon turns loathsome, just as sweet food sickens the stomach’ [Ovid].

<sup>[A]</sup> 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].

<sup>[C]</sup> 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?

<sup>[A]</sup> 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.

<sup>[B]</sup> 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.’

<sup>[B]</sup> 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.’ . . .

<sup>[A]</sup> 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:]

<sup>[A]</sup> 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.]

\* \* \* \* \*

## 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, Benoit.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.]

<sup>1</sup> *gentils-hommes*; often meaning 'noblemen', but perhaps not here.

<sup>[A]</sup> [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.

<sup>[C]</sup> (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.)

<sup>[A]</sup> 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? <sup>[C]</sup> 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!

<sup>[A]</sup> 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] <sup>[C]</sup> 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

<sup>[A]</sup> 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: <sup>[C]</sup> 'When necessity is aroused her bites are most grievous' [Porcius Latro]. <sup>[B]</sup> 'Someone who provokes his enemy by showing his throat will not be beaten easily' [Lucan]. <sup>[C]</sup> 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. <sup>[A]</sup> 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; <sup>[C]</sup> the reason, says Xenophon, why the Asiatics in their wars took along wives, concubines, and their richest jewels and treasures.

<sup>[A]</sup> 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. <sup>[B]</sup> 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.' <sup>[A]</sup> 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 feasting 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.

· . . DISGUIISING 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. <sup>[C]</sup> 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 ·

<sup>[A]</sup> 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.’

\* \* \* \* \*

[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’.]

\* \* \* \* \*

## 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]. <sup>[C]</sup> 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?’ . . .

<sup>[A]</sup> 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—<sup>[C]</sup> I have seen some myself—<sup>[A]</sup> 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. <sup>[C]</sup>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

<sup>[A]</sup>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. <sup>[B]</sup>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.’<sup>1</sup> <sup>[A]</sup>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.

<sup>[C]</sup>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.

<sup>[A]</sup>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

<sup>1</sup> 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.]

\* \* \* \* \*

[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', <sup>[B]</sup>just as we say that the best perfume for her actions is for her to be quiet and discreet. <sup>[A]</sup>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].

<sup>[B]</sup>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].

<sup>[C]</sup>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.

<sup>[B]</sup>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. <sup>[C]</sup>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.

<sup>[B]</sup>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.

<sup>[C]</sup>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.

<sup>[B]</sup>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

<sup>[A]</sup> 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, <sup>[C]</sup> 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. <sup>[A]</sup> 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, <sup>[C]</sup> saying it if not *exclusively* at least *always*. <sup>[A]</sup> 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. <sup>[C]</sup> 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.

<sup>[A]</sup> I have just been thinking about where that error of ours comes from, of having recourse to God in all our designs and undertakings, <sup>[B]</sup> •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.

<sup>[A]</sup> He is indeed our sole and unique protector, <sup>[C]</sup> and can do anything to help us; <sup>[A]</sup> but although he deigns to honour us with that sweet fatherly relationship, he is as just as he is good <sup>[C]</sup> and as he is powerful; but he exercises his justice more often than his power, <sup>[A]</sup> and favours us according to its criteria not to our petitions.

<sup>[C]</sup> 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.

<sup>[A]</sup> 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: <sup>[B]</sup> '... if for your nightly adultery you hide beneath an Aquitanian cow!' [Juvenal].

<sup>[C]</sup> 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.

<sup>[A]</sup> We *pray* out of habit and custom; or, to put it better, we *read or utter our prayers*; basically it is only an act. <sup>[B]</sup> 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, <sup>[C]</sup> including when I yawn.) <sup>[B]</sup> 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. <sup>[C]</sup> 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.

<sup>[A]</sup> 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 <sup>[C]</sup> and invite him into our injustice. . . .

<sup>[A]</sup> 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. <sup>[C]</sup> 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. . . .

<sup>[A]</sup> 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: <sup>[B]</sup> ‘We softly murmur evil prayers’ [Lucan]. <sup>[A]</sup> 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].

<sup>[C]</sup> 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.

<sup>[A]</sup> It really does seem that we use our prayers <sup>[C]</sup> as a jargon, <sup>[A]</sup> 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.

<sup>[C]</sup> 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. <sup>[C]</sup> 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.

<sup>[A]</sup> 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. <sup>[B]</sup> 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 <sup>[A]</sup> 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.