

Essays, Book II

(without 'Defence of Raymond Sebond')

Michel de Montaigne

1572–80

Copyright © Jonathan Bennett 2017. All rights reserved

[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.—Essay 12, 'Defence of Raymond Sebond', is about 200 pages long and is not included here. —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 they are crucial. —The footnotes are all editorial. —Montaigne's spellings of French words are used in the glossary and in references in the text to the glossary. —In the original, all the quotations from Latin writers are given in Latin.

First launched: February 2018

Contents

1. The inconsistency of our actions	1
2. Drunkenness	4
3. Suicide	9
5. Conscience	16
6. Practice	18
7. Honorific awards	24
8. Fathers' affection for their children	26
10. Books	35
11. Cruelty	43
13. Judging someone else's death	50
15. Difficulty increases desire	52
16. Glory	55
17. Presumption	62
18. Giving the lie	78
19. The Emperor Julian	80
21. Against indolence	83
23. Bad means to a good end	85

Glossary

braverie: Courage, usually thought of as swaggering courage.

colic: This is used to translate *colique* on page 44 and in essay 37; the OED defines it as ‘Acute episodic abdominal pain, especially one arising from the twisting, spasm, or obstruction of a hollow organ’; but as essay 37 proceeds it becomes increasingly clear that Montaigne’s affliction was from kidney stones.

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

esprit: Mind, intelligence, wit—take your pick.

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.

fatal: Translating *fatal(e)*. As used on pages 94 and 121, the word means ‘destiny-setting’, applicable to something that *settles* how some later course of events will unroll.

fever: The varieties ‘continual fever’ and ‘quotidian fever’ mentioned on pages 121 and 124 belong to a classification that was old in Montaigne’s time and still has some currency today.

gentleman: This is sometimes used to translate *gentil-homme*; but in Montaigne’s time it tended to mean something stronger than that—a man of *very* good family, perhaps a nobleman.

(im)patience: Mostly translated as ‘(not) putting up with’ or the like; but in some places, especially the paragraph on

page 124, that translation wouldn’t work very well, although the meaning is the same.

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*.

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’). It is translated by ‘prince’ throughout.

regimen: ‘A prescribed course of exercise, way of life, or diet, esp. for the promotion or restoration of one’s health’ (OED). Translates *régime*, which means the same thing.

science: Translated as ‘branch of learning’ or simply ‘learning’, except in a few cases where those seem stylistically impossible. Then it is left untranslated, or translated as ‘science’, though it never means anything much like ‘science’ in our sense.

speculum: ‘An instrument used to dilate an orifice or canal in the body to allow inspection’ (OED); *speculum matricis* on page 126 refers to the inspection of the vagina.

vice: Translates *vice*, meaning bad behaviour, not necessarily of any of the kinds that would be called ‘vices’ today. Similarly ‘vicious’ [*vicieux*.]

1. The inconsistency of our actions

^[A] Those who strive to account for a man's deeds are never so perplexed as when they set them out and show them in the same light; for they commonly contradict each other in such a strange way that it seems impossible that they should come from the same shop. At one moment young Marius is a son of Mars, another moment a son of Venus. They say that Pope Boniface VIII entered office like a fox, behaved in it like a lion, and died like a dog. And—who would believe it?—when Nero, the very image of cruelty, was presented with the death-sentence of a convicted criminal to be duly signed, he said 'Would to God that I had never learned to write!', so much it oppressed his heart to condemn a man to death.

Everything is so full of such examples—indeed each man can provide himself with so many—that I find it strange to see men of understanding sometimes working hard to make something harmonious of these fragments, seeing that vacillation strikes me as the most common and obvious defect of our nature: witness that famous line of Publius: 'It's a bad resolution that can never be changed!'

^[B] It seems reasonable to judge a man on the basis of the most ordinary features of his life; but given the natural instability of our *moeurs* [see Glossary] and our opinions, it has often seemed to me that even good authors are wrong to insist on seeing each of us as one invariable and solid structure. They select one general characteristic, and set about classifying and interpreting all someone's actions to fit their picture; and if they cannot twist them enough they accuse the man of dissimulating. Augustus has escaped them; for there is in that man such an obvious, abrupt, and continual variety of actions that even the boldest judges had to let him go, intact and unsolved. Nothing is harder for me

than to believe in men's consistency; nothing easier than their inconsistency. Anyone who judged a man in his detail, ^[C] piece by piece, separately, ^[B] would hit on the truth more often.

^[A] In all antiquity it is hard to pick out a dozen men who set their lives on an assured and definite course, which is the principal goal of wisdom. For, to comprise all wisdom in a word, says an ancient [Seneca], and to embrace all the rules of our life in one, it is 'always to want the same thing, always to oppose the same thing. I would not deign to add "provided that the will is just", for if it is not just it cannot possibly remain the same through time.'

In truth, I once learned that vice [see Glossary] is only irregularity and lack of moderation, and that consequently it is impossible for it to go with consistency through time. There is a maxim attributed to Demosthenes: the beginning of all virtue is consultation and deliberation; its end and perfection, consistency. If by reasoning we adopted one definite course of action, it would be the most beautiful one; but nobody has thought of doing that: 'He scorns the thing he sought; seeks again for what he spurned. He fluctuates, and his whole life is disordered' [Horace].

Our ordinary practice is to follow the inclinations of our appetite—to the left, to the right, uphill and downhill—as the wind of circumstance carries us. What we want is in our thought only for the instant that we want it; we change like the animal that takes the colour of the place you set it on. What we decided just now we will change very soon; and soon afterwards we retrace our steps; it is all nothing but shaking and inconstancy: 'We are led like a wooden puppet by wires pulled by others' [Horace]. We do not *go*; we are *carried*; like things afloat, now gently, now violently, as the water is angry or calm: 'Do we not see them, not knowing what they want, always looking for something and changing place, as though

they could get rid of their burden?' [Lucretius].

[A] Every day a new fancy, and our moods change with changes in the weather. . . . [C] We float about among different states of mind; we wish nothing freely, nothing absolutely, nothing constantly. [A] If **a man** were to prescribe and establish definite laws and a definite organisation in his head, we would see shining throughout his whole life an evenness of *moeurs*, an order, and an infallible relation between his principles and his practice.

[C] (The defect Empedocles noted in the Agrigentines was their abandoning themselves to pleasure as though they were to die the next day, while they built as though they would never die.)

[A] **This man** would be easy to understand. That is shown by the younger Cato: touch one of his keys and you have touched them all; there is in him a harmony of sounds in perfect concord that cannot conflict. We on the contrary need a separate judgement for each action: in my opinion the surest way to understand one of us would be to relate each of his actions to its immediate circumstances, without researching further into it and without inferring from it any conclusions about what else he will do.

During the disorders of our poor country I was told that a girl living near where I then was had thrown herself from a high window to escape the violence of a knavish soldier billeted on her. She was not killed by her fall, and repeated her attempt by trying to cut her own throat with a knife—she was stopped from doing so, but only after she had given herself a nasty wound. She herself admitted that the soldier had not yet gone beyond pressing her with requests, solicitations and gifts, but that she was afraid that he would eventually use force. And above all this, there were the words, the look on her face, and that blood testifying to her virtue, truly like some second Lucretia. Well, I learned as a

fact that both before and after this event she was a wench not so hard to come to terms with. As it says in the story: Handsome and gentlemanly as you may be, when you have no luck do not promptly conclude that your lady is inviolably chaste; for all you know, the mule-driver may get his will with her.

Antigonus, having taken a liking to one of his soldiers for his virtue and valour, ordered his doctors to treat him for a persistent internal malady that had long tormented him. He noticed that after the soldier was cured he set about his work with much less ardour, and asked him who had changed him into such a coward. 'You yourself, Sire,' he replied, 'by delivering me from the ills that made life valueless to me.'

A soldier of Lucullus who had been robbed of everything by the enemy made a fine attack on them to get revenge. When he had made up for his loss, Lucullus, having formed a high opinion of him, urged him to some dangerous exploit with all the fine expostulations he could think of: 'With words that might have stirred a coward's heart' [Horace]. 'Urge that', he said, 'on some wretched soldier who has lost everything'—'Yokel though he was, he replied "The man who will go anywhere you like is the one who lost his money-belt"' [Horace]—and resolutely refused to go.

[C] We read that after Sultan Mohammed outrageously berated Hasan, the leader of his Janissaries, for allowing his line of battle to be broken by the Hungarians and for fighting faint-heartedly, Hassan's only reply was to charge furiously against the first group of enemy soldiers to come along, alone and just as he was, weapon in hand; they promptly overwhelmed him. That was perhaps not so much self-justification as ecstasy, not so much natural bravery as a new anger.

[A] That man you saw so adventurous yesterday, do not think it strange if you find him just as cowardly tomorrow.

What put heart into his belly ·yesterday· was anger, or need, or company, or wine, or the sound of a trumpet. His courage was not fashioned by reasoning; it was those factors that stiffened it; it is no wonder if ·today—look at him!—he is made different by other, contrary circumstances.

[C] These supple variations and contradictions that are seen in us have made some people imagine that we have **two** souls, others that **two** powers accompany us and drive us each in his own way, one toward good, the other toward evil; for such sudden changes cannot, ·they think·, be reconciled with **one** simple subject.

[B] Not only does the wind of events move me at will, but I also shake and disturb myself by the instability of my posture; and anyone who observes carefully will hardly find himself in the same state twice. I give my soul now this face, now that, according to which direction I point it in. If I speak of myself in different ways, that is because I look at myself in different ways. Every sort of contradiction can be found in me, depending upon some twist or attribute: timid, insolent; [C] chaste, lecherous; [B] talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; clever, stupid; angry, meek; lying, truthful; [C] learned, ignorant; generous and miserly and extravagant; [B] I can see something of all that in myself, depending on which way I turn; and anyone who studies himself attentively finds in himself—yes, even in his judgement—this turbulence and discord. There is nothing I can say about myself as a whole, simply, solidly, with no confusion or mixing. . . .

[A] I am always inclined to speak well of what is good, and to interpret favourably anything that can be taken that way; yet the strangeness of our ·human· condition leads to its often being the case that by acting badly we in fact do good; or this would be so if *doing good* were not judged solely by our intentions.

So one courageous action should not be taken as proof

that a man is brave; one who is truly brave will be so always and in all circumstances. If it were a habit of virtue and not a sudden outburst, it would make him equally resolute in all eventualities—as much alone as in company, as much in the barracks as on the battlefield. . . . He would bear being ill in bed as bravely as suffering a wound in battle, and would no more fear dying at home than in an attack. We would not see a man charging into the breach with brave assurance and then—the same man—tormenting himself, like a woman, over the loss of a lawsuit or a son. [C] If he cannot bear slander but is resolute in poverty; if he is weak against the surgeons' knives but steadfast against the swords of his adversaries, then praise should go not to the man but to the action.

Many Greeks, Cicero says, cannot look at their enemies, yet bear up well in illnesses; the Cimbrians and the Celtiberians, just the opposite. 'For nothing can be called constant that does not arise out of a fixed principle' [Cicero].

[B] There is no valour greater in its kind than Alexander's; but it is only of one kind, and is not full or universal enough in all cases. [C] Incomparable though it is, it has blemishes. [B] Which is why we see him •frantically worried over his slightest suspicion that his men are plotting against his life, and •investigating this with passionate and indiscriminate injustice, and with a fear that subverts his natural reason. The superstition with which he was so strongly tainted bears some stamp of faint-heartedness. [C] And the excessiveness of the penance he did for murdering Cleitus is also testimony to the unevenness of his courage.

[A] Our actions are nothing but a patchwork—[C] 'they despise pleasure but are cowardly in pain; they are indifferent to glory but are broken by disgrace' [Cicero]— [A] and we want to win honour under false colours. Virtue wants to be followed only for its own sake; if we borrow its mask for some other purpose, it promptly snatches it from our face. It is, once

the soul is steeped in it, a vivid and strong dye that does not leave the soul except by taking the fabric with it.

That is why to judge a man we must follow his tracks long and carefully. If

- his constancy does not rest firmly on its own foundations—^[C] ‘his way of life having been thought about and prepared for beforehand’ [Cicero], if
- ^[A] changing circumstances make him change his pace (I mean his *path*, for his pace may be sped up or slowed down by them),

then let him go; that man ‘goes before the wind’, as the crest of our Talbot puts it.

It is no wonder, says an ancient [Seneca] that chance has so much power over us, since we live by chance. Anyone who has not groomed his life in general towards a definite goal cannot possibly arrange his individual actions properly. He cannot put the pieces together if he does not have in his head a picture of the whole. What good is a paint supply for someone who does not know what he is to paint? No-one makes a definite plan for his life; we think about it only piecemeal. The Bowman must first know what he is aiming at, and then adjust his hand, bow, bowstring, arrow and movements to that goal. Our projects go astray because they have no direction and no aim. No wind is right for someone who has no port of destination.

In the action brought against Sophocles by his son, I do not agree with the verdict—on the strength of seeing a performance of one of his tragedies—that he was competent to manage his domestic affairs. ^[C] Nor do I think that the Parians sent to reform the Milesians were sound in their thinking. Visiting the island, they identified the best-tended lands and the best-run country estates and noted down their owners’ names, assembled all the citizens in the town, and appointed those owners as the new governors and

magistrates—judging that those who were careful of their private affairs would be careful of those of the public.

^[A] We are all patchwork, so shapeless and diverse in composition that each piece, each moment, plays its own game. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and other people. ^[C] ‘Consider it a great thing to play the part of one single man’ [Seneca]. ^[A] **Ambition** can teach men valour, temperance, generosity, even justice. **Greed** can plant in the mind of a shop-boy, brought up in obscurity and idleness, enough confidence to put himself at the mercy of the waves and angry Neptune, in a frail boat far from his hearth and home; and can also teach him discretion and prudence. And even **Venus** provides resolution and boldness to youths still subject to discipline and the cane, and puts a soldier’s heart into virgins still in their mothers’ laps: ‘With that guidance, the maiden all alone and in the dark steals furtively past the sleeping guardians to come to the young man’ [Tibullus].

In view of all this, a sound intellect will not judge men simply by their outward actions; we must probe right down inside and find out what springs set men in motion. But since this is a dangerous and difficult undertaking, I wish fewer people would meddle with it.

2. Drunkenness

^[A] The human world is all variety and dissimilarity. Vices are all the same in being vices—and perhaps that is how the Stoics understand it—but although they are equally vices they are not equal vices. It is not credible •that a man who has transgressed by a hundred paces those limits ‘beyond which, and short of which, there is no right way’ [Horace] is not in a worse condition than one who has transgressed them

only by ten paces; or •that sacrilege is no worse than stealing a cabbage from our garden: 'Reason cannot convince me that there is equal sinfulness in trampling down someone's spring cabbages and in robbing the temple-treasures in the night' [Horace]. There is as much diversity there as anywhere else.

[B] Confusion about the ranking and measuring of sins is dangerous. Murderers, traitors and tyrants gain too much by it; it is not right that their conscience is relieved because somebody else is lazy, lascivious or less assiduous in his devotions. Each man lays weight on his neighbours' sins and lightens his own. Even our theological teachers often rank sins badly, in my opinion.

[C] Socrates said that wisdom's chief duty is to distinguish good from bad, and we whose best is always partly vicious should say the same about the science [see Glossary] of distinguishing among the vices; if that is not done precisely, virtuous people will be jumbled together with vicious ones.

[A] Now drunkenness, among the others, seems to me gross and brutish. The **mind** has more of a part in the others; and there are some vices that have about them something indefinably magnanimous, if that is the right word. There are some that have an ingredient of learning, diligence, valour, prudence, skill and dexterity; drunkenness is all **body** and earthiness. So the grossest nation of our day is the only one that holds it in esteem. Other vices harm the understanding; this one overthrows it; [B] and it stuns the body: 'When the strength of the wine has sunk in, limbs become heavy, legs get tangled, speech is slowed, the mind becomes sodden, the eyes swim; then come the din, the hiccups and the brawling' [Lucretius]. [C] The worst state for a man is when he loses knowledge and control of himself.

·USES OF DRUNKENNESS·

[A] And among other things they say that, just as the juice fermenting in the jar pushes what is at the bottom up to the top, so wine uncorks the most intimate secrets of those who have drunk too much: 'Jolly Bacchus, you uncover the cares and secret counsels of the wise' [Horace].

[A] Josephus tells how he wormed secrets out of a certain ambassador sent to him by his enemies by getting him to drink a lot. Yet Augustus confided his most private secrets to Lucius Piso, the conqueror of Thrace, and was never let down by him; nor was Tiberius by Cossus, on whom he unburdened all of his plans; though we know them to have been so given to drinking that they had often to be carried out of the Senate, both drunk, 'Their veins swollen with yesterday's wine, as usual' [Virgil]. [C] And the plan to kill Caesar was confided to Cimber (who was often drunk) as trustingly as it was confided to Cassius (who drank water); and Cimber amusingly responded 'I should bear the weight of a tyrant—I who cannot bear the weight of wine!' [A] We see our Germans when drowned in wine remember their quarters, password, and rank: [B] 'It is not easy to beat them, even when they are sodden-drunk, incoherent and staggering about' [Juvenal].

[C] I would not have believed anyone could be so deeply drunk—dead and buried in drunkenness—if I had not read the following in the history books. With the purpose of inflicting on him some notable indignity, Attalus invited to supper that Pausanias who for the same reason later killed Philip king of Macedon¹. . . . and got him to drink so much that he could insensibly abandon his handsome body, like the body of a hedgerow whore, to mule-drivers and to many

¹ Why 'for the same reason'? Because it was thought that the murder of Philip was driven by anger at Philip's not having punished Attalus for procuring Pausanias's rape.

abject scullions in his household.

And a lady whom I honour and greatly esteem told me that in a village not far from her home a widow of chaste reputation, feeling the first hints of pregnancy, told her neighbours that if she had a husband she would think she was with child. But as the reason for her suspicions grew bigger every day and finally became evident, she brought herself to having it declared from the pulpit of her church that if any man would admit the deed she promised to pardon him and, if he saw fit, to marry him. One of her young farm-hands, emboldened by this proclamation, declared that he had found her, one holiday when she had taken her wine very freely, so deeply asleep by her fireside and so indecently displayed that he had been able to enjoy her without waking her up. They married each other and are still alive.

^[A] Antiquity, certainly, did not strongly condemn this vice. Even the writings of several philosophers speak of it very mildly; and some Stoics advise us to allow ourselves to drink our fill occasionally, and to get drunk to relax the soul: ^[B] 'They say that in this trial of strength Socrates took the prize' [Maximianus]. ^[C] That censor and corrector of others, ^[A] Cato was reproached for his heavy drinking: ^[B] 'It is told how the old Cato's strength was often warmed with wine' [Horace].

^[A] Cyrus, such a renowned king, cited among the praise-worthy qualities that made him preferable to his brother Artaxerxes the fact that he could drink better. Among the best regulated and governed nations, this test of drinking one's fill was much in use. I have heard Silvius, an excellent Parisian doctor, say that to arouse the powers of our stomachs it is a good thing once a month to awaken them by this excess, stimulating them so as to stop them from getting sluggish. ^[B] And we read that the Persians discussed their most important affairs after drinking wine.

·MONTAIGNE'S ATTITUDE TO ALL THIS·

^[A] My taste and constitution are more hostile to this vice than my reason is. For, apart from the fact that I readily submit my beliefs to the authority of ancient opinions, I find this vice—though base and stupid—less malicious and harmful than the others, which nearly all do more direct damage to our society. And if we cannot enjoy ourselves without its costing us something, as they say, I find that this vice costs our conscience less than the others. Besides which, wine is easy to prepare and easy to find—a non-negligible consideration.

^[C] A man advanced in years and rank told me that he counted drink among the three main pleasures left to him in this life. But he went about it wrongly. A fine palate and care in the selecting of wines are to be avoided. If you base your pleasure on drinking good wine, you are bound to suffer from drinking bad. A less exacting and freer taste is required. A good drinker should not have such a delicate palate. The Germans drink almost all wines with equal pleasure. Their aim is to swallow rather than to taste. They get a better bargain. Their pleasure is more abundant and closer at hand.

Secondly, to drink French style, at two meals but moderately, is to restrain the god's favours too much. More time and constancy are required. The ancients spent entire nights in this occupation and often went on into the next day. So we make our daily drinking habits more expansive and vigorous. I have seen in my time a great lord, a person of high enterprises and famous successes, who effortlessly and in the course of his ordinary meals drank almost two gallons of wine and who on leaving showed himself only too wise and circumspect—at the expense of our affairs!

The pleasure that we want to count on over the whole of our life should take up more space in it. Like shop-

apprentices and workmen we ought to refuse no opportunity for a drink, and have this desire always in our head. It seems that we daily cut back on the use of wine, and that in our houses, as I saw as a boy, lunches, suppers and snacks used to be much more frequent and usual than they are now. Could it be that in something we are moving towards an improvement? Surely not. But it could be that we are much more given to lechery than our fathers were. Those two occupations impede each other's strength. On the one hand lechery has weakened our stomachs; on the other, sobriety makes us more lively and lusty for love-making.

·AN INTERLUDE IN PRAISE OF MONTAIGNE PÈRE·

It is wonderful the accounts I have heard my father give of the chastity of his times. He was the one to talk of this, being well suited both by nature and by art to the service of the ladies. He spoke little and well; he sprinkled his speech with elegant expressions from books in the modern-vernaculars, especially Spanish. . . . His bearing was one of gentle, humble and very modest gravity. Particular care for neatness and propriety of person and dress, whether afoot or on horseback. Enormous fidelity in keeping his word, and conscientiousness and over-all piety tending towards superstition rather than towards the other extreme. For a small man, full of vigour, and straight and well-proportioned in stature; and with an attractive face, inclining to brown; adroit and nimble in all gentlemanly exercises. I have seen canes filled with lead with which he is said to have exercised his arms for throwing the bar and the stone, or for fencing, and shoes with leaden soles to make him lighter in running and jumping. Folk recall little miracles of his in vaulting. I have seen him, past sixty, put our agility to shame, vaulting into the saddle in his furred gown, doing a turn over the table on his thumb, nearly always going up to his room taking

three or four steps at a time. On my subject, he used to say that in a whole province there was hardly one woman of quality who had a bad reputation, and he would tell of men—especially himself—who were on remarkably intimate terms with decent women without a breath of suspicion. In his own case he would solemnly swear that he had come to his marriage as a virgin; and this was after he had taken a long part in the Italian wars, leaving a detailed hand-written diary of events there, both public and personal. He married on his way back from Italy in 1528 at the mature age of 32.

Let us get back to our bottles.

·RETURNING TO THE TOPIC·

[A] The discomforts of old age, which need some support and refreshment, could reasonably make me want to be a better drinker, since that is almost the last pleasure that the passing years steal from us. According to our drinking fraternity, natural heat starts in the feet; that concerns childhood. From there it rises to the middle region, where it settles in for a long time and produces there, in my opinion, the only bodily pleasures of true life. . . . Towards the end, like a mist rising and evaporating, it lands in the gullet and makes there its last stop.

[B] But I cannot understand how anyone can prolong the pleasure of drinking beyond his thirst, creating in his imagination an appetite that is artificial, unnatural. My stomach would not go that far; it has enough trouble coping with what it takes in for its needs. [C] My disposition is not to care much about drink except after a meal, which is why my last drink is always the biggest. Anacharsis was amazed that the Greeks should at the end of their meals drink out of bigger glasses than they used at the start. I suppose it was for the same reason that the Germans do it, beginning their drinking contests at that point.

Plato forbids young people to drink before the age of eighteen and to get drunk before forty. But men over forty he permits to enjoy themselves in this way and to bring copiously into their banquets the influence of Dionysius, that good god who restores gaiety to all men, and youth to the old ones, who calms and softens the passions of the soul as iron is softened by fire. And in his *Laws* he finds such drinking parties to be useful (provided that the group has a leader to ensure that order is maintained), on the ground •that drunkenness is a good and certain test of each man's character and, at the same time, is suited to giving older men the courage to enjoy themselves in music and dancing, useful pastimes that they would not venture to engage in when sober; and •that wine can temper the soul and give health to the body. However, he likes these restrictions, partly borrowed from the Carthaginians: that it should be engaged in sparingly on military expeditions, and that it should be avoided

- by all statesmen and judges when they are about to perform their duties and to consult on matters of public concern;
- in daylight hours that are owed to other activities; and
- on any night when we intend to beget children. . . .

·EVEN WISE MEN ARE FRAIL·

^[A] But it is is an old and entertaining question whether the soul of a wise man would yield to the power of wine: 'if wine can storm the fort of wisdom' [Horace]. What inanity we are driven to by our good opinion of ourselves! The best governed and most perfect soul in the world has only too much to do to stay on its feet and keep itself from falling to the ground through its own weakness. Not one soul in a thousand stands up calm and straight for one instant in its life; and it could be questioned whether, given the soul's

natural condition, it can ever be so. But if you add constancy as well, that is the soul's highest perfection—I mean when nothing shakes it, which a thousand stray events can do.

It was all very well for that great poet Lucretius to philosophise and brace himself—look at him, driven insane by a love-potion! Do they think that an apoplexy will not make Socrates lose his wits as much as it will a porter? Some have been led by the force of an illness to forget their very name, and a slight wound has overturned the judgement of others. For all his wisdom, the sage is still a man; and what is there more null and void, more wretched, more *nothing*? Wisdom cannot overcome our natural limitations: ^[B] 'Then we see sweat and pallor take over his whole body, his tongue grows incoherent, his voice fails, his eyes are troubled, his ears begin to ring, his legs give way and he falls to the ground, as panic seizes his mind' [Lucretius]. ^[A] When he—the sage—is threatened with a blow nothing can stop him from blinking; if you set him on the edge of a precipice he must shudder like a child; because nature has reserved to itself these signs of its authority—slight ones, but invulnerable to reason or Stoic virtue—in order to teach man his mortality and our triviality. ^[A] He becomes pale with fear, he blushes with shame, he bewails an attack of colic in a voice which, if not desperate and clamorous, is at least broken and hoarse. 'Let him not take anything human to be alien to him' [Terence]. Poets, ^[C] who invent things as they please, ^[A] do not dare to exempt their heroes from tears: 'Thus he speaks, weeping, and then sets sail with his fleet' [Virgil]. Enough for him to rein in and moderate his affections, for it is not in his power to do away with them.

Even that Plutarch of ours—so perfect and excellent a judge of human actions—on seeing Brutus and Torquatus killing their children came to doubt whether virtue could go that far, and whether those great men had not rather been

shaken by some other passion. All actions outside the usual limits are open to sinister interpretations, since our taste is no more drawn to things above it than to things below.

·THE SOUL CUTTING LOOSE·

[C] Let us leave aside that other sect—the Stoics—which makes an express profession of pride. But even in the sect that is considered the softest, we hear these boasts of Metrodorus: ‘I have forestalled you, Fortune, and caught you; I have blocked off all your approaches; you cannot get near me’ [Cicero]. [Montaigne now offers, in gruesome detail, three episodes in which people undergoing torture shout defiance and even claim to be contented. He comments:]

[A] When we hear such defiance, we have to admit that in these souls there is some change for the worse, some frenzy, no matter how holy.

When we come across such Stoic sallies as

- Antisthenes saying ‘I would rather be mad than voluptuous’,
- Sextius telling us that he would rather be pierced by pain than by pleasure, and
- Epicurus undertaking to be *caressed* by gout, refusing rest and good health, cheerfully defying ills and—scorning less severe pains and not condescending to struggle with them—calling for and *wanting* pains that are strong, biting, and worthy of him. . . .

who does not conclude that these are outbursts of a runaway courage? Our soul could not reach so high while staying in its own place. It has to leave it and rise and, taking the bit between its teeth, abduct its man and carry him so far that afterwards even he is amazed by his deeds. As in war, the heat of the combat often makes valiant go through such dangers that that they are the first to be struck with astonishment once they have come back to themselves; so

too poets are often seized by wonder at their own works and no longer recognise the track through which they ran such a fine race. In their case too it is called frenzy and mania. And just as Plato says that a sedate man knocks in vain at poetry’s door, so too Aristotle says that no outstanding soul is free from a mixture of folly. He is right to call folly any leap—however praiseworthy it might be—that goes beyond our judgement and reason. Especially since wisdom is an orderly management of our soul, carried out with measure and proportion, on the soul’s responsibility. . . .

3. Suicide

[Montaigne entitled this essay ‘A custom of the island of Cea’, for a reason that does not appear until page 15. The present title is anachronistic: French did not have *suicide*—or (it seems) any other one word with that meaning—until about two centuries later.]

[A] If to philosophise is to doubt, as they say, then *a fortiori* to fool about and weave fantasies as I do must also be to doubt; for it is the learners’ role to inquire and argue, the master’s to provide the solutions. My master is the authority of God’s will, which rules us without contradiction, and has its place above these vain human controversies.

·IN DEFENCE OF SUICIDE·

When Philip had entered the Peloponnesus with his army, somebody told Damidas that the Spartans would have sufferings in plenty if they did not get back into Philip’s favour. ‘Coward,’ he replied, ‘what can men suffer who do not fear death?’ And Agis was asked how a man could live free; ‘By regarding death as negligible’, he replied.

These assertions and a thousand others that we find to the same effect evidently mean something beyond merely accepting death when it comes to us; for many things we can

suffer in life are worse than death. Witness that Spartan boy who was captured by Antigonus and then sold as a slave; when pressed by his master to perform some abject task he said: 'You will see whom you have bought; it would be shameful for me to be a slave when freedom is so ready at hand.' And so saying, he threw himself from the top of the house. When Antipater harshly threatened the Spartans to force them to go along with one of his demands, they answered 'If you threaten us with something worse than death, we will be all the more willing to die.' ^[C] And when Philip threatened to block all their undertakings, 'What,' they said, 'will you also block us from dying?'

^[A] That is what they say: that a wise man lives not as long as he can but as long as he should; and that nature's most beneficent gift to us—the one that deprives us of all grounds for complaining over our condition—consists in leaving to us the means to get out. It has ordained only one entrance to life, and a hundred thousand exits. ^[B] 'We may lack land to live on,' as Boiocalus replied to the Romans, 'but we cannot lack land to die on.' ^[A] Why do you complain of this world? It has no hold on you; if you live in pain the cause is your cowardice; to die, all that is needed is the will: 'Death is everywhere. It is a great favour from God that while anyone can take your life from you, no-one can take away your death; a thousand open roads lead to it.' [Seneca]

And it is not the remedy for a single illness; death is the remedy for all ills. It is a very safe haven that is never to be feared and is often to be sought. It all comes to the same thing whether a man gives himself his death or passively accepts it, whether he runs to meet his last day or waits for it. Wherever it comes from, it is still his; no matter where the thread breaks, that is the whole of it—it's the end of the skein.

The most voluntary death is the most beautiful. Life

depends on the will of others; death on our own. In nothing should we suit our own humour as much as in this. Reputation has nothing to do with such an undertaking; it is folly to consider it. Living is slavery if the freedom to die is lacking. . . .

^[C] Just as I do not break the laws against theft when I take my own property or cut my own purse, or the laws against arson if I burn my own woods, so too I am not bound by the laws against murder if I take my own life.

Hegesias used to say that like the condition of life, the condition of death should depend on our choice. And when Diogenes met Speusippus the philosopher, long afflicted with dropsy and carried in a litter, who called to him 'Good health, Diogenes!', he replied 'No health to you, who allow yourself to live in that condition.' Indeed, some time later Speusippus had himself killed, weary of such a painful condition of life.

·THE CASE AGAINST SUICIDE·

^[A] But this does not pass without opposition. For many hold that •we cannot abandon this garrison of the world without the express command of him who has posted us here; that •it is for God (who has sent us here not for ourselves alone but for his glory and for the service of others) to *give* us leave when he pleases, not for us to *take* it; and that ^[C] •we were born not for ourselves but also for our country: the laws require us. . . .to account for ourselves, and can bring an action for homicide against us. ^[A] Otherwise, as deserters from our post we are punished in the next world: 'Then, nearby, was the region where, overwhelmed with sadness, stand the just who had killed themselves by their own hand and, loathing daylight, had thrown away their souls' [Virgil].

There is much more fortitude in wearing out the chain that binds us than in breaking it, and more proof of firmness in Regulus than in Cato. It is rashness and impatience [see

Glossary] that hasten our pace. No mishap can make living virtue turn its back; it goes looking for evils and pains, and feeds on them. The threats of tyrants, the rack and the scaffold put spirit and life into it: ‘. . . as some oak, rich in its dark leaves, trimmed back by the double-bladed axe, draws strength and life, despite loss and destruction, from the very steel itself [Horace]. And as another says: ‘Virtue is not as you think, father, fearing life; it is confronting huge evils without turning one’s back or retreating’ [Seneca]. ‘In adversity it is easy to despise death; stronger is the man who can live in misery’ [Martial]. It is the part of cowardice, not virtue, to go and hide in a hole beneath a massive tombstone so as to avoid the blows of fortune. Whatever storm it faces, virtue does not stop on the road or slacken its pace: ‘If the world were to shatter and fall on him, its ruins would strike him but fear would not’ [Horace].

Most commonly what drives us to this misfortune is flight from others. Indeed, flying from death sometimes makes us run towards it—^[C] ‘I ask you, is it not madness to perish in order to avoid death?’ [Martial]—^[A] like those who for fear of the precipice throw themselves over it: ‘The fear of future ills has driven many into great dangers; strongest of all is the man who can brave dangers when they come but knows how to avoid them when possible’ [Lucan]. ‘Fear of dying can even bring men to hate life and the very sight of the light, so that with heavy heart they arrange their own deaths, forgetting that the source of all their distress was their fear of dying’ [Lucretius]. ^[C] In his *Laws*, Plato ordains an ignominious burial for anyone who has deprived his closest and best friend, namely himself, of life and of his destined course, under the influence not of

- the sentence of the public court, or of
- some sad and unavoidable accident of fortune, or of
- some unbearable shame, but only of

- the cowardice and weakness of a timorous soul.

^[A] And the opinion that disdains our life is ridiculous; for after all it is our being, it is our all. Things that have a nobler and richer being can look down on ours, but it is unnatural for us to despise ourselves or care little for ourselves; hating and disdaining oneself is a malady peculiar to man, not found in any other creature.

It is by a similar vanity that we want to be something other than what we are. The success of such a desire has no effect on us because the desire contradicts, and works against, itself. Anyone who wants to be changed from man to angel does nothing for himself; he would gain nothing by it. For when he no longer exists, who will rejoice and feel for him over that change? ^[B] ‘For anyone to be wretched in the future, he must exist at the time when the blow falls’ [Lucretius].

^[A] What we purchase by our death—security, rest, calm, freedom from the evils of this life—bring us no benefit. A man achieves nothing by avoiding war if he cannot enjoy peace; he achieves nothing by fleeing trouble if he does not have what it takes to savour rest.

·VARIANTS WITHIN THE SUPPORT FOR SUICIDE·

Among those who endorse suicide there has been much uncertainty over what occasions could justify anyone’s deciding to kill himself, i.e. to make what they call a ‘reasonable exit’. For although they say that in many cases it is right to end one’s life for minor reasons, because the reasons that keep us living are not very strong either, still there should be some moderation.

Some fantastic and irrational humours have driven not only individual men but whole peoples to do away with themselves. I cited examples of this ·in Book 1, essay 14·; and we also read of the virgins of Miletus who in a mad

conspiracy hanged themselves one after another, until the authorities put a stop to this by ordering that any found hanging in this way should be dragged by the same rope stark naked through the city.

When Cleomenes has fled from death in the battle he has just lost, Threicion urges him to kill himself because of the sorry state of his affairs, accepting this other death that is second in honour to the one he has escaped, giving the victors no chance to make him suffer a shameful death or a shameful life. Cleomenes, with a stoic Spartan courage, rejects this counsel as weak and effeminate: 'That is a remedy', he says, 'that I will never be without but that should not be used while there is an inch of hope remaining.' He adds that to go on living sometimes requires constancy and courage, and that he wants even his death to serve his country, and wants to make it an honourable and virtuous deed. Threicion followed his own advice and killed himself. Cleomenes did the same later on, but only after experiencing the worst that fortune can do.

Not all troubles are worth our wanting to die to avoid them. And then there are so many sudden changes in human affairs that it is hard to judge at what point it is right to abandon hope: ^[B] 'Even when lying vanquished on the cruel sand, while the menacing crowd in the arena turn their thumbs down, the gladiator still hopes on' [Pentadius].

^[A] There is an ancient saying that anything can be hoped for while a man is still alive. 'Yes,' replies Seneca, 'but why should I bear in mind that fortune can do anything *for* one who remains alive rather than that fortune can do nothing *to* one who knows how to die?'

We see Josephus involved in a danger so clear and so imminent, with a whole nation in revolt against him, that he could not reasonably hope for relief; yet having been (as he tells us) advised by a friend to do away with himself at this

point, he did well to cling stubbornly to hope, for fortune, beyond all human reason, so reversed the situation that he found himself delivered from it unharmed. Cassius and Brutus, on the other hand, by the rash and unthinking haste with which they killed themselves before the proper time and occasion, demolished the remnants of Roman freedom, which it was their duty to protect.

^[C] I have seen hundreds of hares escape from the very jaws of the greyhounds: 'A man has been known to outlive his executioner' [Seneca]. ^[B] 'Time in its wavering course has often produced great changes for the better; and fortune, altering its course, has sported with men and restored them again to solid prosperity' [Virgil]. . . .

·MISCELLANEOUS ANECDOTES INVOLVING SUICIDES·

[Montaigne offers six wearying pages of these. The ones omitted here only illustrate things also shown by some of the others.]

^[A] There are some who, to avoid a worse death, decide to seek death at their discretion. ^[C] Damocritus, the leader of the Aetolians, was led prisoner to Rome; one night he found a way to escape. But being pursued by his guards he ran himself through with his sword before they could recapture him.

When the city of Epirus was reduced to the last extremity by the Romans, Antinous and Theodotus advised all its people to kill themselves; but when policy of surrendering was decided on by the populace, these two went and sought death, rushing on the enemy, intent only on striking and not on protecting themselves.

A few years ago when the island of Gozo was taken by the Turks, a Sicilian with two beautiful daughters who were ready for marriage killed them with his own hand, and then killed their mother who came running up at their death. With that done, he went into the street with a crossbow

and an arquebus; with two shots he killed the first two Turks who approached his door; then with sword in hand he threw himself furiously into the mêlée where he was quickly surrounded and cut to pieces, saving himself from slavery after having first delivered his family from it.

[A] Fleeing the cruelty of Antiochus, Jewish women, after having their infants circumcised, jumped to their deaths with them. . . .

Scribonia advised her nephew Libo to kill himself rather than await the hand of justice, telling him he was doing other people's work if he preserved his life merely to surrender it three or four days later into the hands of those who would come looking for it. . . .

·SUICIDE TO AVOID BEING RAPED·

Of acts of violence against the conscience, the one most to be avoided in my opinion is that against the chastity of women; because an element of bodily pleasure is naturally mixed in with it, so that their resistance cannot be absolutely complete, and it seems that ·in a rape· force is met with a some willingness.

[C] Ecclesiastical history reveres several examples of devout persons who called on death to protect them from the outrages prepared by tyrants against their religion and their conscience. Two of them have been canonised:

- Pelagia, who cast herself and her mother and sisters into the river to avoid rape by a group of soldiers, and
- Sophronia, who killed herself to avoid being raped by the Emperor Maxentius.

[A] Future centuries may honour us for having a learned author in our days (a Parisian be it noted) who takes trouble to persuade the ladies of our time to do anything rather than follow the horrible counsel of such despair. I am sorry he

did not know, for inclusion among his stories, the good one I heard in Toulouse concerning a woman who had passed through the hands of a group of soldiers: 'God be praised', she said, 'that at least once in my life I have been satisfied without sin.'

But these cruelties are not worthy of the gentle ways of France.¹ Thank God our air has been thoroughly purged of them since that sound piece of advice. All women need is to follow the rule of our good Marot: say 'No!' while doing it.

·BACK TO THE OTHER ANECDOTES·

History is full of those who have in a thousand ways exchanged a pain-filled life for death.

[B] Lucius Aruntius killed himself, 'in order', he said, 'to escape both the future and the past'.

[C] After Granius Silvanus and Staius Proximus had been pardoned by Nero, they killed themselves: either •so as not to live by the grace of such a wicked man, or else—in view of his readiness to suspect and accuse good men—•so as not to have to go through the ordeal of a second pardon later on. . . .

Bogez, governor of Eion for King Xerxes, when besieged by the Athenian army under the leadership of Cimon, refused the offer of a safe-conduct to Persia for him and his ·personal· goods, because he could not bear to survive the loss of what his master had given into his keeping. Having defended his city to the very end when there was nothing left to eat, he first threw into the river Strymon all the gold and everything else he thought the enemy might best take as plunder; then, having ordered a huge pyre to be lit and the throats of his wife, children, concubines and servants to be cut, he threw them into the fire and then himself. . . .

[B] Sextilia the wife of Scaurus, and Paxea the wife of Labeo,

¹ [He means the cruelty of committing suicide to escape from rape or from the supposed shame of having been raped.]

to encourage their husbands to escape the dangers that beset them—in which they were not concerned except as loving wives—voluntarily took their own lives so as to provide their hard-pressed husbands with examples and with company.

What they did for their husbands Coceius Nerva did for his country, less usefully but with equal love. That great jurist, flourishing in health, riches, reputation and respect, and close to the Emperor, killed himself out of compassion for the wretched condition of the Roman Republic.

Nothing can be added to the delicacy of the death of the wife of Fulvius, a close friend of Augustus. One morning Augustus, having learned that Fulvius had revealed a vital secret he had entrusted to him, received him frowningly when he came to see him. Fulvius returned home in despair and told his wife piteously that having fallen into this misfortune he was resolved to kill himself. She said very frankly: 'You will only be doing what's right, seeing that for all your experience of the indiscipline of my tongue you did not guard against it. But wait, let me kill myself first', and without more ado she ran a sword through her body. . . .

Alexander was besieging a city in India; its inhabitants, finding themselves hard-pressed, vigorously resolved to deprive him of the pleasure of this victory, and—despite his humanity—they burned themselves to death along with their city. A new kind of war: the enemy fought to save them; they to destroy themselves; and to ensure their death they did all the things that people do to ensure their life.

[C] When the walls and defence-works of Astapa (a town in Spain) turned out to be too weak to withstand the Romans, the inhabitants made a pile of their riches and household objects in the market-place and placed their wives and children on top of the heap, surrounding it with wood and other material that would catch fire easily; then, leaving behind fifty young men to carry out their plan, they made

a sortie during which they all sought death, as they had sworn to do, not being able to win. The fifty young men, having first massacred every living soul scattered about their town, set fire to the pile and then threw themselves upon it, ending their high-minded freedom in insensibility rather than in pain and shame; and showing their enemies that if it had pleased fortune they would have been as brave in depriving them of victory as they had been in making their victory frustrating and horrifying—indeed *fatal* to those who, lured by the glitter of gold melting in those flames, crowded around it and were suffocated and burned to death, unable to draw back because of the crowd behind them.

The people of Abydos, pressed by Philip, made the same resolution. But they had too little time. King Philip, horrified by the rash haste of their preparations (they had already assembled the treasures and household goods they were going to destroy by fire or water), withdrew his soldiers and granted them three days to kill themselves with more order and less pressure, days that they filled with blood and slaughter exceeding any enemy's cruelty; not a single person of them escaped who had power over himself.

There are countless examples of similar mass resolves; they seem all the more horrible as their effect is more universal; but they are in fact less horrible than when done individually. What persuasion would not do for each man separately it does for them all together, group frenzy snatching away each individual judgement.

·SUICIDE WITH AN EYE ON THE AFTER-LIFE·

[A] Sometimes death is desired in the hope of a greater good: 'I have a desire', said St Paul, 'to depart and to be with Christ.' And 'Who shall deliver me from these bonds?' Cleombrotus Ambraciota, having read Plato's *Phaedo*, acquired such a great appetite for the life to come that for no other reason he

went and threw himself into the sea. ^[C] That clearly shows how wrong we are to label as 'despair' this wish to depart, to which we are often brought by the ardour of hope, and often by a calm and thoughtful inclination of our judgement.

^[A] During Saint Louis's journey to Outremer, Jacques du Chastel the Bishop of Soissons saw that the king and the whole army were preparing to return to France leaving their religious business unfinished; he resolved rather to go to Paradise, and having said adieu to his friends he charged alone into the enemy, in full view of everyone, and was cut to pieces. . . .

·VARIOUS LAWS RELATING TO SUICIDE·

^[B] In the time of Tiberius, condemned men awaiting execution forfeited their property and were denied funeral rites; those who got in first by killing themselves were buried and could make a will.

^[A] There are governments that have taken it upon themselves to rule when voluntary death is legal and appropriate. In our Marseilles there used to be kept, at public expense, some poison based on hemlock for those who wanted to hasten their days. They first had to get their reasons approved by 'the six hundred', their senate. It was not permissible to lay hands on oneself except by leave of the magistrate [see Glossary] and for legitimate reasons. This same law was also found elsewhere.

When sailing to Asia, Sextus Pompeius went via the island of Cea in the Aegean. As one of his company tells us, it happened by chance that while he was there a woman of great authority, who had just explained to the citizens why she had decided to end her life, asked him to honour her death with his presence; which he did. Having tried in vain for a long time—by force of eloquence (at which he was wonderfully proficient) and of persuasion—to deflect her from

her purpose, he finally allowed her to have her way. She had lived for ninety years in a happy state of mind and body; now she was lying on her bed (made more ornate than usual) and was propped up on her elbow. She said:

'Sextus Pompeius, may the gods be gracious to you (the gods I leave behind rather than those I am about to meet) for not disdainng to be a counsellor in my life and a witness to my death. For my part, having always experienced fortune's favourable face, and fearing that the desire to live too long might confront me with an adverse face, I am with this happy death giving leave of absence to what remains of my soul, leaving behind me two daughters and a legion of grandchildren.'

She then urged her family to agree in peace and unity, divided her possessions among them, and commended her household gods to her elder daughter, then with a steady hand she took the cup containing the poison and—having addressed her vows to Mercury, praying to be taken to some happy abode in the next world—she quickly swallowed that mortal potion. She then kept the company informed of the progress of its operation; how the the parts of her body grew cold, one after another; until she finally said it had reached her heart and her entrails, whereupon she called on her daughters to do one last thing for her, to close her eyes.

Pliny gives an account of a certain Hyperborean people whose climate is so temperate that their lives are ordinarily ended only by their own will. When they become weary, having had their fill of life and reached an advanced age, it is their custom after making merry with their friends to leap into the sea from a high rock reserved for this purpose.

^[C] Unbearable ^[B] pain and the fear of a worse death seem to me the most excusable motives for suicide.

* * * * *

Essay 4. 'Let business wait till tomorrow' is a couple of pages of musings on procrastination.

* * * * *

5. Conscience

·CONSCIENCE AS A BETRAYER·

[A] During our civil wars I was travelling one day with my brother the sieur de la Brousse when we met a gentleman [see Glossary] of good appearance; he was of the opposing party, but I did not know that because he pretended not to be. The worst of these wars is that the cards are so shuffled—your enemy not being marked off from you by any clear indication of language or of bearing, having been brought up under the same laws, *moeurs* and atmosphere as you—that it is hard to avoid confusion and disorder. That made me fear that I myself would encounter our own troops in a place where I was not known and might have no chance to state my name, or maybe something worse. [B] Such a misunderstanding had happened to me once before; I lost men and horses. Among others, they miserably killed one of my pages, an Italian of good family whom I was carefully training; in him was extinguished a fine young life full of great promise.

[A] But this man ·whom we met on the road· was so madly afraid, and I saw him so paralysed every time we met any horsemen or passed through towns loyal to the King, that I finally guessed that his alarms arose from his conscience. It seemed to this poor man that right through his visor and the crosses on his greatcoat people would read the secret thoughts of his mind. So marvelous is the power of conscience! It makes us betray, accuse and fight ourselves; in the absence of an outside witness it brings us forward

against ourselves: 'Lashing us with invisible whips, our soul torments us [Juvenal].

This story is on the lips of children: a Paeonian called Bessus was rebuked for having wantonly knocked down a nest of sparrows and killed them. He said he had reason to do so, because these little birds kept falsely accusing him of having murdered his father. Until then this act of parricide had been hidden and unknown; but the avenging furies of conscience made the very man who was to pay the penalty be the one who made it public.

· . . . AS A SOURCE OF ANXIETY·

Hesiod corrects Plato's dictum that the punishment follows close after the sin; for he says it is born at the same instant as the sin itself. Whoever expects punishment is already suffering it, and whoever has done something to deserve it expects it. Wickedness forges torments against itself—'Bad designs are worst for the person who makes them' [Proverb]—just as the wasp harms others when it stings but especially itself, for it thereby loses its sting and its strength for ever. . . .

Blister-beetles have something in them that works as an antidote to their poison, by a contrariety of nature. So also, even while we are taking pleasure in vice there is born in our conscience an opposite displeasure that torments us, waking and sleeping, with many painful thoughts: 'Many indeed, often talking in their sleep or delirious in illness, have revealed long-hidden sins' [Lucretius].

[A] Apollodorus dreamed that he saw himself being flayed by the Scythians, then boiled in a cauldron, while his heart kept muttering 'It is I who has caused you all these woes.' No hiding-place awaits the wicked, said Epicurus, for they can never be sure of being hidden, since their conscience reveals them to themselves. 'This is the principal vengeance: no guilty man is absolved, he being his own judge' [Juvenal].

· . . . AS A SOURCE OF CONFIDENCE ·

As conscience fills us with fear, so also it fills us with assurance and confidence. ^[B] And I can say that in a number of dangerous situations I have walked with a much firmer step because of my secret knowledge of my own will and of the innocence of my intentions. ^[A] 'A man's knowledge of his own actions creates either hope or fear in him, according to what the actions were' [Ovid]. There are a thousand examples; it will suffice to cite three, all about the same man.

When Scipio was arraigned one day before the Roman people on a grave indictment, instead of making excuses or flattering his judges he said: 'You will be cutting a fine figure, undertaking to judge on a capital charge the man who has enabled you to have the authority to judge the whole world!'

And at another time, his only reply to the accusations made against him by a tribune of the people was not to plead his cause but to say: 'Come, fellow citizens, let us go and give thanks to the gods for the victory they gave me over the Carthaginians on a day like this one!'.¹ Then as he started to walk towards the temple, look! the whole assembled crowd following him—even his accuser.

When Petilius was incited by Cato to ask Scipio to account for the money he had handled in the province of Antioch, Scipio came to the Senate for this purpose, took his account-book from under his toga and declared that it contained the truth about his receipts and expenditure; but when he was told to enter it into the records he refused to do so, saying that he was not willing to submit himself to such shame; and he tore it up with his own hands while the Senate watched. I do not believe that a damaged soul could *counterfeit* such assurance. ^[C] He had, says Livy, a mind too great by nature and accustomed to too lofty a fortune to be

able to be a criminal and stoop to the baseness of defending his innocence.

· . . . IN RELATION TO TORTURE ·

^[A] Torture is a dangerous invention, which seems to be a test of endurance rather than of truth. ^[C] The man who can endure it hides the truth, and so does the one who cannot endure it. ^[A] For why should pain make me confess what is true rather than force me to say what is not true? And, on the other hand, if an innocent man has the fortitude to bear such torment, why won't a guilty man have it also when so beautiful a reward as life itself is set before him?

I think that this invention is based on a view about the power of conscience. It seems that •the guilty man's conscience weakens him and helps the torture to make him confess his fault, and that •the innocent man's conscience strengthens him against the torture.

To tell the truth, it is a method full of danger and uncertainty. What would one not say, what would one not do, to escape such grievous pain? ^[C] 'Pain compels even the innocent to lie' [Publilius Syrus]. This results in a man whom the judge has tortured so as not to put him to death *innocent* being put to death *innocent and tortured*. ^[B] Thousands upon thousands have falsely confessed to capital charges. I count Philotas among them, after considering the facts of the suit Alexander brought against him and the way he was tortured.

^[A] All the same it is, so they say, the least bad method that human frailty has been able to discover; ^[C] very inhumanely, however, and very uselessly in my opinion. Many nations, less barbarous in this respect than the Greeks and the Romans who call them 'barbarians', consider it horrifying and cruel to torture and smash a man of whose guilt you are still in doubt. What can *he* do about *your* ignorance? Aren't

¹ [It was the 17th anniversary of his victory in the battle of Zama.]

you unjust, you who in order not to kill him without cause subject him to something worse than killing him? To see that this is so, consider how often a man would rather die for no reason than go through this questioning that is more painful than the execution, and that by its harshness often gets in ahead of the execution and carries it out. . . .

6. Practice

[A] Even when our trust is readily placed in them, reasoning and education can hardly be powerful enough to lead us to action unless by experience we also train and form our soul to the way we want it to go; otherwise when the time comes for action it will undoubtedly find itself at a loss. That is why the philosophers who have wanted to attain to some greater excellence have not been content to await the rigours of fortune in shelter and repose—not wanting it to take them unawares, inexperienced and untried in battle—and have gone out to confront it, deliberately putting themselves to the test of hardships. Some renounced wealth, to accustom themselves to voluntary poverty; others sought toil and the austerity of a laborious life, to toughen themselves against trouble and toil; yet others deprived themselves of the most precious parts of their bodies—such as their eyes and their organs of generation—fearing that the use of them, being too pleasant and easy, might relax and soften the firmness of their souls.

·PRACTISING FOR DEATH·

But practice is no help in the greatest task we have to perform: dying. We can by habit and experience strengthen ourselves against pain, shame, poverty and other such eventualities; but as for death, we can try it only once; we are all apprentices when we come to it.

In ancient times there were men so excellent at using their time that they even tried to taste and savour their own death; they strained their minds to discover what that crossing-over was; but they have not come back give us the news about it. 'No-one who has felt the icy end of life awakes again' [Lucretius].

Canius Julius, a noble Roman of particular virtue and steadfastness, having been condemned to death by that scoundrel Caligula, gave many wonderful proofs of his resoluteness, including this one. At the moment when he was on the point of being executed, a philosopher friend of his asked him, 'Well, Canius, what is the state of your soul right now? What is it doing? What thoughts are you having?' He replied: 'I was thinking about holding myself ready and with all my powers intent to see whether in that moment of death, so short and so near at hand, I will be able to perceive any dislodgment of the soul, and whether it will have any sense of its departure; so that if I learn anything about it I may come back, if I can, to inform my friends.' This man philosophises not merely right up to his death but into death itself. What assurance it was, and what proud courage, to want his death to teach him something! . . . 'Such sway he had over his dying soul' [Lucan].

[A] It seems to me, however, there is a certain way for us to familiarise ourselves with death and to some extent to try it out. We can have experience of it, not whole and complete but at least not useless, making us more strong and assured over the thought of our death. If we cannot come right up to it we can come close, we can reconnoitre it; and if we do not get the whole way to its stronghold we can at least see and become acquainted with the approaches to it. It is not without reason that we are told to look to our own sleep for its resemblance to death.

[C] How easily we pass from waking to sleeping, and with how little concern we lose consciousness of the light and of ourselves! Our capacity for sleep, which deprives us of all action and sensation, might seem useless and unnatural were it not that through its nature teaches us that it has made us for dying and for living alike, and from the start of life presents to us the eternal state it reserves for us after this one, to get us accustomed to it and to take away our fear of it.

[A] But those who by some violent accident have fallen into a faint and lost all sensation have, in my opinion, been very close to seeing death's true and natural face. As for the instant—the point in time—at which we pass away, there is no risk of its bringing with it any hardship or pain, because we can have feelings only while time passes. Our sufferings need time, which in death is so short and precipitate that death must be imperceptible. What we have to fear are death's approaches, and they *can* fall within our experience.

Many things appear to us greater in imagination than they are in reality. I have spent a good part of my life in health that was perfect and intact; indeed not only intact but downright vivacious and bubbling. This state, so full of sap and festivity, made me find the thought of illnesses so horrible that when I came to experience them I found their pains mild and weak compared with my fears. . . .

The mere thought of being always shut up in a room seemed to me quite unbearable; then suddenly I had to adapt to being there for a week, a month, full of emotion, decline, and weakness. And I have found that in time of health I used to pity the sick much more than I am to be pitied when I am sick myself, and that the power of my anxiety made its object almost half as bad again as it was in its truth and essence. I hope it will be like that with my death, and that all the trouble I take to prepare for it and

all the aids I invoke and assemble to sustain the shock of it are wasted labour. But I don't give them up, because, come what may, we cannot give ourselves too many advantages!

·MONTAIGNE'S PERSONAL SKIRMISH WITH DEATH·

During our third troubles (or the second; my memory is not clear about this), I was out riding one day about a league from my home, which is situated at the hub of all the tumult of our French civil wars. Thinking myself perfectly safe and so near my home that I had no need of better equipage, I had taken an easy but not very reliable horse. On my way home, when there suddenly arose an occasion to use that horse for a task it was not much used to, one of my men—big, strong, on a powerful work-horse with a desperately hard mouth but fresh and vigorous—wanting to show his daring and get ahead of his companions in coming to my assistance, rode it full speed along the path behind me and came down like a colossus on the little man and little horse, striking us like a thunderbolt with all his and his horse's rigidity and weight, knocking us both upside down. So there was my horse thrown down and lying stunned, and myself, ten or twelve paces further on, stretched out on my back with my face all bruised and cut about, the sword I had been holding lying more than ten yards further on still, my belt in pieces, having no more movement or feeling than a log. To this day, that is the only swoon that I have experienced.

Those who were with me, having tried every means in their power to bring me round, thought I was dead; they took me in their arms and struggled back with me to my house, about half a French league away.

On the way, and after I had been taken for dead for more than two full hours, I began to move and breathe, because so much blood had found its way into my stomach that nature had to revive its forces to discharge it. They set me up on

my feet, where I threw up a bucketful of clots of pure blood; and I had to do the same several times along the the way. With that I began to recover a little life; but it was bit by bit, and over such a long stretch of time that at first my feelings were closer to death than to life. . . . This recollection, which I retain strongly printed on my soul, shows me the face of death in such a natural portrait that it somewhat reconciles me to it.

When I began to see anything, my vision was so blurred, weak and dead that I could make out nothing but light, ‘as one who now opens his eyes, now shuts them, half sleeping, half awake’ [Tasso]. As for the functions of the soul, they came back to life in step with those of the body. I saw myself all bloody, for my my doublet was stained all over with the blood I had thrown up. The first thought that came to me was that I had been shot in the head by an arquebus volley; and indeed several were being fired around us at the time of the incident. It seemed to me that my life was hanging on to me only by the outer edges of my lips; I closed my eyes in order (it seemed to me) to help push it out, and I found it pleasant to relax and let myself go. It was a fancy that was merely floating on the surface of my soul, as delicate and feeble as all the rest; but truly it was not only free from distress but mingled with that sweet feeling people have when they let themselves slide into sleep.

·IT IS WRONG TO PITY THE TERMINALLY ILL·

I believe that this is the same state that people are in when they are failing from weakness in the throes of death, and I maintain that we pity them without cause, thinking that they are agitated by grievous pains or have the soul oppressed by painful thoughts. This has always been my belief (against the opinion of many, and even of Etienne de La Boétie) concerning those we see prostrate in a coma as their end

approaches, or crushed by the length of their illness or by an apoplectic fit or by epilepsy—

^[B] ‘Often, before our very eyes, a man is struck down by illness as if by lightning; he foams at the mouth; he groans and he twitches; he is delirious; he stretches out his legs, he twists and turns; he pants for breath and tires his limbs throwing himself about’ [Lucretius]
—^[A] or by a wound in the head. We hear them groaning and sometimes uttering penetrating sighs, and see them making certain bodily movements, which makes it seem that they retain some remnant of consciousness; but I have always thought, I repeat, that their soul and their body are buried, and asleep. ^[B] ‘He lives, and is unconscious of his life’ [Ovid].
^[A] And I could never believe that after such a great shock to the bodily parts and such a great failing of the senses the soul could sustain any inward power to be conscious of itself; and consequently ·I believed· that those men had no reflections to torment them and make them judge and feel the misery of their condition; and that in consequence they were not much to be pitied.

[Then a gruesome ^[B]-tagged paragraph about much less peaceful deaths.]

^[A] The short and incoherent words and replies that are extorted from the dying by shouting in their ears and storming at them, or movements that seem to have some connection with what is asked of them—that is still not evidence that they are alive, at least fully alive. The same thing happens to us when we are in the early stages of sleep, before it has taken us over completely: we sense as in a dream what is happening around us, and we follow voices with a blurred and uncertain sense of hearing which seems to reach only the edges of the soul; and after the last words spoken to us we make replies that are more random than meaningful.

·BACK TO MONTAIGNE'S NEAR-TO-DEATH EXPERIENCE·

Well, now that I have actually experienced it, I have no doubt that I have judged this matter correctly all along. For from the first, while wholly unconscious, I laboured to rip open my doublet with my bare nails—I was not wearing armour—and I *know* that I was not imagining any wounds; for many of our movements do not arise from any command of ours: ^[B] ‘Half-dead fingers twitch and grasp the sword again’ [Virgil]. ^[A] Those who are falling throw out their arms in front of them, by a natural impulse that makes our limbs lend each other their services and have stirrings independent of our reason. . . . My stomach was swollen with clotted blood; my hands rushed to it of their own accord, as they often rush to an itch against the intention of our will.

There are many animals, and even men, whose muscles are seen to contract and move after they are dead. Each man knows from his own experience that he has parts that often stir, stand up, and lie down again without his leave. Well, these passive movements that touch only our *rind* cannot be called ours. To make them ours, the whole man must be involved; the pains that our foot or our hand feels while we are asleep are not ours.

As I approached my home, where the news of my fall had already arrived and the members of my household had greeted me with the outcries customary in such cases, not only did I briefly answer their questions but they say that I thought to order that a horse be provided for my wife, whom I saw struggling and stumbling along the road, which is steep and difficult. It might seem that this concern must have come from a wide-awake soul, but the fact is that I had *no* part in it. They were empty, cloudy thoughts provoked by sensations in my eyes and ears; they did not come from *me*. I had no idea where I was coming from or where I was going to; nor could I weigh and consider what I was asked.

My reactions were slight effects that my senses produced of themselves, as if from habit. What the soul contributed was in a dream, very lightly touched—licked and sprinkled, as it were—by the gentle impression of the senses.

Meanwhile my condition was truly very pleasant and peaceful; I felt no affliction for others or for myself; it was a languor and extreme weakness, without any pain. I saw my house without recognising it. When they got me into bed, I felt infinite sweetness in this repose, for I had been dreadfully pulled about by those poor fellows who had taken the trouble to carry me in their arms over a long and very bad road and who, working in relays, had tired themselves out two or three times.

I was offered many remedies, of which I accepted none, being convinced that I was fatally wounded in the head. It would, honestly, have been a very happy death; for the weakness of my reason kept me from having any judgement of it, and the weakness of my body kept me from having any feeling of it. I was letting myself slip away so gently, in such a mild and easy fashion, that I hardly ever did anything with less sense of effort.

When I came back to life and regained my powers. . . ., which was two or three hours later, I at once felt myself caught up again in pains, my limbs having all been battered and bruised by my fall; and they had me feeling so bad two or three nights later that I thought I was going to die all over again, but of a less peaceful death! And I still feel the shock of that battering.

I do not want to forget this, that the *last* thing I could recover was my memory of the accident itself. I could not take it in until after I had people tell me several times where I was going, where I was coming from, at what time this had happened to me. As for the manner of my fall, they hid that from me and made up other explanations, for the sake of

the man who had caused it. But a long time later, and the following day, when my memory opened up and depicted to me the state I had been in at the instant when I saw that horse bearing down on me—

(for I had seen it at my heels and thought I was done for, but that thought had been so sudden that I had no time to be frightened by it)

—it seemed to me that a bolt of lightning had struck my soul and that I was returning from the other world.

This account of such a minor event would be rather pointless if it were not for the instruction I have derived from it for myself; for in truth I find that to get used to the idea of death, all you need is to come close to it. Well, as Pliny says, each man is a good education for himself provided he has what it takes to spy on himself from close up.

·IN DEFENCE OF TALKING ABOUT ONESELF·

What I am writing here is not my teaching; it is my study. It is not others' lesson; it is mine. ^[c] Still, it should not be held against me if I publish it. What helps me may happen to help someone else. Anyway, I am not spoiling anything; I am using only what is mine. And if I play the fool, it is at my own expense and without harm to anyone, for it is a folly that dies with me and has no consequences. We have reports of only two or three ancients who trod this road, and we cannot say whether it was in any way like what I am doing, because we know only their names. No-one since then has followed in their tracks. It is a thorny undertaking—more so than it seems—to follow so roaming a course as our mind's, to penetrate the opaque depths of its innermost folds, to pick out and immobilise the innumerable flutterings that agitate it. It is a new and unusual pastime, which withdraws us from the ordinary occupations of people—yes, even from the ones that are most recommended.

For many years now the target of my thoughts has been myself alone; I observe and study only myself; and if I do study anything else, it is so as to apply it promptly to myself or more correctly ·to install it· *within* myself. And it does not seem to me to be wrong if, as is done in other incomparably less useful branches of learning, I share what I have learned in this one, though I am hardly satisfied with the progress I have made. No description is equal in difficulty, or certainly in usefulness, than the description of oneself. One must spruce up, present oneself in an orderly arrangement, if one wants to go out in public. Well, I am constantly making myself ready, for I am constantly describing myself.

Custom has made it a vice to talk about oneself, and obstinately forbids it out of hatred for the boasting that always seems to be attached to self-description. Instead of wiping the child's nose this amounts to pulling it off. 'Flying from a fault, we fall into a vice' [Horace].

I find more harm than good in that remedy. But even if it were true that talking to the public about oneself is necessarily presumptuous, my general plan will not let me refrain from an activity that openly displays this morbid quality, since it is in me; and I must not conceal this fault, which I not only practise but profess. Anyway, to say what I think about it, custom is wrong to condemn wine because many get drunk on it. Only things that are good can be misused. And I think that this rule ·against speaking in public about oneself· applies only to the vulgar form of this failing. It is a bridle for calves, which neither the saints (whom we hear talking so boldly about themselves) nor the philosophers nor the theologians curb themselves. Nor do I, though I am none of those. If they do not write about themselves openly, at least when the occasion calls for it they do not hesitate to put themselves on display. What does Socrates treat of more fully than himself? And what does

he most often lead his disciples to do, if not to talk about themselves—not about the lesson of their book but about the essence and the movement of their soul? We religiously speak of ourselves to God and to our confessors, just as our neighbours [the Protestants] do before the whole congregation. ‘But’, someone will reply, ‘we then speak only to accuse ourselves.’ In that case we say everything, for everything about us, even our virtue, is faulty and fit for repentance.

My trade, my art, is *living*. If anyone forbids me to talk about it according to my own sense, experience and practice, let him command an architect to talk about buildings not according to himself but according to his neighbour, according to someone else’s knowledge and not his own. . . .

Perhaps they mean that I should testify to myself by works and deeds, not by bare words. What I chiefly portray are my ways of thinking, a shapeless subject that does not express itself in actions. It is all I can do to couch it in this airy medium of words. Some of the wisest of men, and of the most devout, have lived avoiding any sign of activity. My activities would tell you more about fortune than about me. They testify to their own role, not to mine except by uncertain conjecture—*samples* that display only details. I am *all* on display; I present a cadaver in which can be seen at a glance the veins, the muscles, the tendons, each working part in its place. . . . It is not my deeds that I write down; it is myself, it is my essence.

·SELF-PRAISE·

I hold that a man should be careful in making an estimate of himself, and—whether he rates himself high or low—he should be equally conscientious in testifying about himself. If I seemed to myself to be absolutely good and wise, I would shout it out at the top of my voice. Saying less of oneself than is true is stupidity, not modesty. According to Aristotle,

to pay yourself less than you are worth is cowardice and pusillanimity. No virtue is helped by falsehood, and truth never generates error. Saying more of oneself than is true is not always presumption; it is also often stupidity. In my judgement, the substance of that misconduct is to be—stupidly—immoderately pleased with oneself and so to fall into an injudicious self-love.

The sovereign remedy for this is the exact opposite of what is prescribed by people who, in forbidding talking about oneself, even more strongly forbid thinking about oneself. The pride lies in the thought; the tongue can only have a very slight share in it. It seems to them that to be occupied with oneself means being pleased with oneself, that to frequent and associate with oneself means cherishing oneself too much. But this excess arises only in those who merely finger the surface of themselves; who observe themselves only after taking care of business; who call it daydreaming and idleness to be concerned with oneself; who regard enriching and constructing one’s character as building castles in the air; who treat themselves as outsiders.

If anyone gets intoxicated with his self-knowledge when he looks down on others, let him turn his eyes upward toward past ages; he will lower his horns, finding there many thousands of minds that trample him underfoot. If he gets into some flattering presumption about his valour, let him recall the lives of Scipio and Epaminondas, so many armies, so many nations, that leave him so far behind. No one individual quality will bring pride to any man who at the same time takes account of all those other weak and imperfect qualities that are in him and, finally, of the nullity of the human condition.

Because Socrates alone had seriously digested his god’s precept to *know himself*, and by that study had come to despise himself, he alone was judged worthy of being called

wise. If any man knows himself thus, let him boldly reveal himself by his own mouth.

7. Honorific awards

[A] The biographers of Augustus Caesar note this in his military discipline: he was wonderfully free with his gifts to those who deserved it; but where purely honorific awards were concerned he was equally sparing. Yet before he had ever gone to war himself, all the military awards had been bestowed on him by his uncle.

It was a fine invention—taken up by most of the governments in the world—to establish certain vain and valueless decorations to honour and reward virtue, such as crowns of laurel, oak or myrtle, certain forms of dress, the privilege of riding through the city in a coach or with torch-bearers by night, a special seat at public meetings, the prerogative of certain surnames and titles, certain symbols on coats of arms, and such-like things. This system was operated differently according to each nation's opinions, and is still in use.

We for our part, like many of our neighbours, have the orders of knighthood, which are established only for this purpose. It is in truth a very good and beneficial practice to find a way to recognise the worth of rare and excellent men, pleasing and satisfying them with rewards that are no charge on the people and cost the prince nothing. It was always recognised by the experience of the ancients—and could formerly be seen to be so among us French—that men of quality were more anxious for such rewards than for ones bringing gain and profit. There is reason and great justification for that: if a prize that should be for honour alone has other advantages and riches mixed in with it,

instead of increasing the prestige it lessens it, prunes it back.

The Order of Saint Michael, which was so long held in high esteem among us, had no greater advantage than its having no connection with any other advantage. As a result there used to be no office or status whatever that the nobility aspired to with as much desire and longing as they did to this order, and no distinction that brought more respect and grandeur, because virtue more readily embraces and aspires to a reward that is truly its own, glorious rather than useful. For in truth other gifts do not have the same dignity, because they are used for all sorts of purposes. Money repays the services of a valet, the diligence of a courier, dancing, vaulting, talking and the meanest services done for us; yes, and even vice is paid for with money, flattery, pimping and treachery. It is no wonder if virtue is less eager to receive that sort of common coin than that which is proper and peculiar to itself, and wholly noble and generous. Augustus was right to be much more thrifty and sparing with this than with the other, especially since honour is a privilege that gets its principal essence from rarity.

(And so does virtue itself. 'For him who thinks no man is bad, can any man be good?' [Martial]. We do not praise a man for taking trouble over the upbringing of his children, because that, however right it may be, is not unusual; [C] any more than we pick out a tree for its height where the whole forest is like that. [A] I do not think that any citizen of Sparta boasted of his valour—for that was a universal virtue in their nation—any more than of his fidelity and indifference to wealth. No reward falls due to any virtue, however great, that has become customary; I'm not sure we would ever call it 'great' when it was common.)

Since these honorific titles have no value or prestige except for the fact that few people enjoy them, all that is

needed to wipe them out is to be generous with them. Even if there were more men nowadays than before who merited our order, that would not justify degrading its prestige by awarding it to more people. And it can easily happen that there *are* more who deserve it, for there is no other virtue that spreads as easily as military valour.

[In the original, this paragraph does not contain *vallance* or any other word meaning 'valour'.] There is another kind of valour that is true, perfect, philosophical (it is not what I have been writing about; I use the word according to our usage); it is much greater than ours and more ample; it is a power and assurance of the soul, equally disregarding every sort of adverse event; equable, uniform and constant; our kind of valour is only a very feeble glimmer of it. Custom, education, example and habit are all-powerful in establishing what—i.e. the kind of valour which—I am talking about, and easily make it common, as can easily be seen from the experience of it that our civil wars give us. ^[B] And if anyone could unite us now and arouse our whole people for some common enterprise we would make our former military reputation flower again.

^[A] It is certain that in former times the award of this order of Saint Michael did not depend solely on valour in our ordinary sense of that word; it looked beyond that. It was never the payment of a valiant soldier, but that of a famous captain; the science [see Glossary] of *obeying* orders did not merit such an honourable reward. Back then they required for it a more universal expertness in war, taking in the broadest and greatest qualities of the fighting man—^[C] For the skills of a soldier and those of a commander are not the

same' [Livy]—^[A] who should also be of a rank suitable to such a dignity. But I say that even if more men were worthy of it than were found to be in former times, it should not on that account have been handed out more liberally; it would have been better to fail to bestow it on everyone who deserves it than to lose for ever, as we have just done, such a valuable institution. No man of spirit deigns to pride himself on what he has in common with many men. And today those who merit it least make the greatest show of despising it, so as to put themselves in the rank of those who were wronged when a decoration that was peculiarly their due was unworthily extended and debased.

Now, to obliterate and abolish this order, in the expectation of immediately restoring prestige and renewal to some similar decoration, is not an appropriate undertaking in such a licentious and sick time as our present one; the new order will from its inception run into the same troubles that have just ruined the other. For this new order to have any authority, the rules governing the award of it would need to be extremely tight and restrictive, and our troubled times are not capable of a short and firm rein. Besides, this one cannot have any prestige until all memory has been lost of the former order and of the contempt into which it has fallen.¹

This could be the place for a discussion of valour, and of what makes it different from other virtues. But since Plutarch often returned to this theme, I would be meddling to no purpose in reporting here what he says about it. But it is worth considering that our nation gives the first place among the virtues to valour, as is shown by its name [*vallance*], which

¹ Montaigne was a knight of the Order of Saint Michael. In his *Apology for Raymond Sebond*—which was in Book II but is not included here—he reports that for years he wanted this honour but did not receive it until early in the 1570s, when it had been devalued by being spread widely. It was followed by the Order of the Holy Ghost in 1578.

comes from 'value' [*valeur*], and that •by our usage in the language of our court and our nobility, when we speak of 'a very valuable man' [*un homme qui vaut beaucoup*]. . . ., all we mean is 'a valiant man'; as with the Romans, who derived their general term for virtue [*virtus*] from the word for strength [*vis*]. The proper, the only, the essential form of nobility in France is the military profession.

It is probable that the first virtue to appear among men, giving some of them the advantage over others, was this one by which the strongest and bravest made themselves masters of the weaker, acquiring individual rank and reputation, this being the source of our terms of honour and dignity; or else those nations, being very warlike, gave the prize and the title highest in dignity to the virtue they were most familiar with.

So too our passion, and our feverish concern for the chastity of women, bring it about that 'a good woman', 'a worthy woman', and 'a woman of honour and virtue' means in effect to us nothing but *a chaste woman*; as though, in order to bind them to that duty, we neglected all the rest and gave women free rein for any other fault provided they abandon this one.

8. Fathers' affection for their children

TO MADAME D'ESTISSAC

•WHY MONTAIGNE IS WRITING THIS•

[A] Madame, if strangeness and novelty, which usually give value to anything, do not save me, I shall never extricate myself with honour from this stupid enterprise; but it is so fantastic and appears so remote from normal practice that it may just get by.

What first put into my head this fancy of trying my hand at writing was a melancholy mood—and therefore one most

hostile to my natural disposition—brought on by the gloom of the solitude I was plunged into a few years ago. Then finding myself quite destitute and empty of anything else to write about, I offered *myself* to myself as theme and as subject-matter. It is [C] the only book of its kind in the world, [A] wild and eccentric in its conception. The only thing worthy of notice in this work of mine is its bizarreness; for the best craftsman in the world could not have turned material so vacuous and base into something worth taking account of.

Now, Madame, having here to portray myself to the life, I would have overlooked an important feature if I had not portrayed the honour I have always paid to your merits. I particularly wanted to do so at the start of this chapter, since of all your fine qualities one of the first in rank is the love you have shown your children. Anyone who knows •at what age you were left a widow by your husband Monsieur d'Estissac, •the great and honourable matches that have been offered you, as many as to any lady in France of your rank, •the constancy and firmness with which you have, for so many years and through so many thorny difficulties, carried the weight of responsibility for your children's affairs, which have driven you through all corners of France and still besiege you, and •the happy prosperity which your wisdom or good fortune have brought to those affairs, will readily agree with me that we have today no clearer example of maternal affection than yours.

I praise God, Madame, that it has been so well employed. For the promise shown by your son Monsieur d'Estissac are assurance enough that when he comes of age you will receive from him the obedience and gratitude of an excellent son. But because as a child he has not been able to appreciate the countless supreme benefits he has received from you, I want him—if these writings happen to fall into his hands some day when I shall have neither mouth nor speech to

say it to him—to receive from me this absolutely truthful testimony. . . .that there is not a gentleman [see Glossary] in France who owes more to his mother than he does, and that he cannot give any more certain proof of his goodness and virtue than by recognising you for what you are.

·A COOL ATTITUDE TO NATURAL PARENTAL AFFECTION·

If there is any truly natural law—that is to say, any instinct that can be seen to be universally and permanently stamped on the beasts and on ourselves (which is not beyond dispute)—I may say that in my opinion the affection every animal has for his offspring is second only to his concern for self-preservation and the avoidance of what is harmful. And since nature seems to have required this affection from us with a view to extending and *advancing* the successive working parts of this great machine, ·the world·, it is not surprising if *backwards* the affection of children for fathers is not so great.

[C] Add to that this other Aristotelian consideration, that whoever does good to someone loves him better than he is loved by him; that he to whom something is owed loves better than he who owes; and that every worker loves his product better than he would be loved by it if it had feeling. For *being* is something we hold dear, and being consists in movement and action; so that each person is, in a way, *in* his work-product. The benefactor performs a fair and honourable action; the beneficiary performs only a useful one. And the useful is much less lovable than the honourable. The honourable is stable and lasting, providing constant satisfaction to the one who has done it. the useful easily escapes and is lost, and the memory of it is not so refreshing or so sweet. The things that have cost us most are dearest to us, and giving costs more than taking.

[A] [Picking up from '... not so great.'] Since it has pleased God to endow us with some capacity for reasoning, so that we would not be slavishly subject to the common laws as the beasts are but would conform to them through judgement and freedom of the will, we should indeed give some weight to the simple authority of nature but should not allow ourselves to be tyrannically carried away by it; our inclinations should be directed by reason alone.

For my part, I have a strangely blunted taste for these propensities that are produced in us without the command and mediation of our judgement. For example on this subject I am discussing: I cannot feel the emotion that leads people to hug new-born infants that do not yet have movements of soul or recognisable features of body to make themselves lovable. [C] And I have not willingly allowed them to be nursed in my presence.

[A] A true and well-regulated affection should be born and then increase with the knowledge children give us of themselves; *then*, if they are worthy of it, we should cherish them with a truly paternal love, the natural propensity going along with reason; if they turn out differently we should still judge them, always submitting to reason despite the force of nature.

What happens is often the reverse of this; we feel ourselves more moved by the skippings and games and babyish tricks of our children than we are later on by their grown-up activities, as though we had loved them as giving us amusement, [C] like monkeys, not like men. [A] Some ·fathers· supply plenty of toys for their infancy but tighten up at the slightest expenditure they need when they are of age. Indeed it seems that our jealousy at seeing them appear in the world and enjoy it when we are about to leave it makes us stingy and tight with them; it annoys us that they come treading on our heels, [C] as if to urge us to leave. [A] And if

that frightened us, then since things are so ordered that—in sober truth—children can be and live only at the expense of our being and our life, we ought not to have involved ourselves in fatherhood in the first place.

·CHILDREN AND PARENTAL PROPERTY·

For my part, I find it cruel and unjust not to •receive them into a share and association in our goods, and as companions in the understanding of our domestic affairs when they are capable of it, and •cut back and economise on our own comforts so as to provide for theirs, since we gave them birth for just such a purpose. It is unjust that an old, broken, half-dead father should enjoy alone, in a corner of his hearth, possessions that would be enough to advance and maintain many offspring, allowing them for lack of means to waste their best years without advancing in public service and recognition. They are driven by despair to find some way, however unjust, of providing for their needs. I have seen in my time several young men of good family so addicted to theft that no punishment could turn them from it. I know one well connected young man with whom I spoke about about this matter at the request of a brother of his, a very honourable and brave gentleman. He answered me, and admitted openly that he had been started on this filthy path by his father's unbending miserliness, but that now he was so accustomed to it that he could not stop himself. He had just been caught stealing rings from a lady whose morning reception he was attending with many others. . . .

[B] I am a Gascon, but there is no vice I understand less. I temperamentally hate it rather more than I rationally condemn it; I never even *want* to take anything from anyone.

[A] It is true that this region of France has a somewhat worse reputation for theft than the others; yet we have seen in our time, on various occasions, men of good family from

other provinces convicted of many horrible robberies. This depravity, I fear, owes something to the meanness of fathers.

A nobleman with good understanding told me once that he hoarded his wealth not •to get any practical advantage from it but •to be honoured and courted by his offspring. When age had deprived him of all his other powers, he said, this was the only means he had left for maintaining his authority over his family and not being treated with disdain and neglect by everyone. . . . Well, there is something in that; but it is medicine for a disease that ought not to have been allowed to start.

A father is wretched indeed if he can only hold the affection of his children—if you can call it affection—by their need for his help. He should make himself worthy of respect by his virtue and by his ability, and worthy of love by his goodness and the gentleness of his *moeurs* [see Glossary]. With rich material even the ashes have their value, and we customarily hold in respect and reverence the bones and relics of persons of honour. For a person who has lived his life honourably, old age cannot be so decrepit and rancid as not to be venerable; especially to his children, whose souls he should have trained in their duty by reason, not by necessity and need or by harshness and force: 'In my opinion, it is wrong to think that authority is firmer or more stable when it relies on force than when it is associated with affection' [Terence].

·DISCIPLINING CHILDREN·

[B] I condemn all violence in the upbringing of a tender soul that is being trained for honour and liberty. There is something servile about rigour and constraint, and I hold that what cannot be done by reason, and by wisdom and tact, is never done by force. That is how I was brought up: they say that in all my childhood felt the rod only twice, and

that was very lightly. I owed the same treatment to my own children, who all die on me before they are weaned. But Leonor, one single daughter who escaped that misfortune, has reached the age of six or more without being guided in her conduct or punished for her childish faults by anything but words, and gentle ones. (Her indulgent mother easily went along with that.) And even if my wishes for her are frustrated, there are enough other causes to blame for that without finding fault with my method of discipline, which I know to be just and natural.

I would have been even more punctilious about this with boys, who are less born to serve and whose condition is more free: I would have loved to fill their hearts with innocence and openness. The only effect of the rod that I have seen is to make souls more cowardly or more maliciously obstinate.

[A] Do we want to be loved by our children? Do we want to remove any occasion for their wishing us dead?—

though no occasion for such a horrible wish could be right or pardonable: [C] 'no crime has rational justification' [Livy]

—[A] then let us do whatever is in our power to enrich their lives reasonably.

·THE BEST AGE FOR A MAN TO MARRY AT·

To achieve that we ought not to get married so young that our age comes to be almost confounded with theirs, for this drawback plunges us into many great difficulties. I apply this especially to the nobility, which is a leisured class that lives, as they say, only on its annuities. In other cases, where a living must be earned, the plurality and company of children is an advantage to the household; they are so many new tools and instruments for enriching it.

[B] I married at 33, and I approve the suggestion of 35, which is said to be Aristotle's. [C] Plato does not want one

to marry before 30; but he is right to laugh at those who perform the works of marriage after 55; and he dismisses their offspring as unworthy of nourishment and life. Thales set the limits best: his mother pressed him to get married when he was young, and he replied that it wasn't yet time; and when he was getting old, that it was no longer time. We should accept no time as appropriate for doing something inappropriate!

[A] The ancient Gauls thought it extremely reprehensible for a man under twenty to lie with a woman, and particularly recommended to men who wanted to train for war to keep their virginity until well along in years, because courage is softened and deflected by coupling with women. 'But now, married to a young wife, happy to have children, he was weakened by his love as father and husband' [Tasso]. [More to this effect from ancient Greece and from modern Tunis and the West Indies.]

When a gentleman is 35, it is not the time for him to make way for his son who is 20; he is himself engaged in appearing on military expeditions and at the court of his prince; he needs his resources, and should certainly share them with his son, but not so lavishly that he forgets himself. Such a man can rightly give the answer that fathers often have on their lips: 'I have no wish to be stripped before I go to lie down.'

·MORE ON PARENTAL PROPERTY·

But a father who is brought low by age and illness, whose weakness and ill-health deprive him of ordinary human fellowship, wrongs himself and his family by uselessly brooding over a great pile of riches. In his situation, if he is wise, he *will* want to get stripped as a preliminary to going to lie down—not stripped to his shirt but down to a nice warm dressing-gown. He has no more use for all the remaining

pomp: he should willingly present it to those who by nature's ordinance ought to have it. It is right for him to leave the use of these things to them, since nature won't let him use them; if he does otherwise, malice and envy are certainly involved.

The finest action of Emperor Charles V was this, [C] in imitation of certain ancients of his calibre: [A] he was able to recognise that reason clearly enough commands us to strip ourselves when our robes become a burden and a hindrance to us, and to go to bed when our legs fail us. He resigned his possessions, his rank and his power to his son when he felt himself losing the firmness and strength needed to continue to conduct his affairs with the glory he had acquired in them: 'Be wise enough to unharness that tired old nag, lest it ends up short-winded, stumbling while men jeer at it' [Horace].

·HOW TO DEAL WITH ONE'S OLD AGE·

This fault of not being able to recognise oneself early, of not feeling the impotence and extreme decline that age naturally brings to the body and to the soul (equally, in my opinion, unless the soul has the larger share), has ruined the reputation of most of the world's great men. I have seen in my time, and intimately known, persons of great authority who it was easy to see had declined amazingly from their former ability, which I knew of from the reputation it had brought them in their better years. For their honour's sake I would have wished them to withdraw to their home at their ease and unburdened with the public and military occupations that were no longer suited to their shoulders.

I used to be an intimate in the house of a gentleman, a widower and very old, but of a quite green old age. He had several daughters to marry off and a son already old enough to enter society. This burdened his household with many expenses and visits of strangers; he took little pleasure in

this, not only because of the expense but even more because his age had led him to adopt a way of life far different from ours. I told him one day—a little boldly, as is my custom—that it would be more becoming if he made room for us younger folk, leaving his principal residence to his son (for it was the only one he had that was properly equipped and furnished), and retired to a neighbouring estate of his where nobody would disturb his rest; because—given his children's circumstances—there was no other way he could avoid our unsuitable company. He later took my advice and liked its result.

This is not to say that we should give them our property in such a binding way that we cannot take it back. I, who am ready to play that role, would leave them the enjoyment of my house and possessions but be free to change my mind if they gave me cause. I would let them have use of all this because it no longer did anything for me; but I would retain as much general authority over affairs as I wanted to. I have always thought that it must be a great happiness for an old father to train his own children in the management of his affairs, and to be able during his lifetime to oversee their conduct, providing them with instruction and advice according to the experience he has of them, personally arranging for the former honour and order of his house to come into the hands of his successors, thereby providing firm ground for the hopes he may have for their future conduct.

So I would not avoid their company; I would like to be near so as to watch them and to enjoy their fun and festivities as much as my age permitted. I could not live *among* them without inflicting on them the testiness of my age and the demands of my illnesses, and without having to constrain and alter the rules and habits I would then have; but I would like at least to live *near* them in some corner of my house—not the most showy but the most comfortable.

[He contrasts this with a melancholy cleric who spent two decades in one room, seeing almost no-one but the servant who brought his daily meal; and eventually died there.]

·RELATIONS OF FATHERS TO THEIR ADULT CHILDREN·

I would try to have gentle relations with my children, encouraging in them an active love and unfeigned affection for me, which is easily gained in well-born natures; ·but not otherwise·, for if they are wild beasts ^[C] such as our century produces in profusion, ^[A] one ought to hate and shun them as such.

I hate the custom ^[C] of forbidding children to say 'Father' and requiring them to use some less familiar title, as more respectful; as if nature had not sufficiently provided for our authority. We call almighty God 'Father' and disdain to have our own children call us that! I have reformed this fault in my family. It is also stupid and wrong to ^[A] deprive adult offspring of easy relations with their fathers, and to prefer to maintain an austere and disdainful frown, hoping by that to keep them in fear and obedience. That is a quite useless farce, which makes fathers unpleasant—and, worse, ridiculous—to their children. *They* have youth and vigour in their hands, and consequently the wind and the world's favour going their way; they receive with mockery these fierce and tyrannical looks from men who have no blood left in either heart or veins—real scarecrows in a hemp field! Even if I could make myself feared, I would rather make myself loved.

^[B] There are so many sorts of defects in old age, so much impotence, it is so liable to contempt, that the best acquisition it can make is the love and affection of one's family; command and fear are no longer its weapons. I know one old man who had been very imperious when young and who, now that old age is coming upon him, although he is

as healthy as can be, slaps and bites and swears—^[C] the stormiest master in France. ^[B] He is eaten up by care and vigilance, but this is all a farce in which the household itself conspires. Others have the use of the best part of his granary, his cellar, and even his purse, while he keeps the keys to them in his pouch, more protectively than he keeps his eyes. While he is happy to keep so spare and thrifty a table, everyone is living it up in various corners of his house, gambling, spending, and exchanging stories about his pointless anger and precautions. Everyone is on guard against him. If some wretched servant happens to become devoted to him, he is promptly regarded by him with suspicion—a trait that old age so readily gets its teeth into. How many times has he boasted to me of the tight rein he kept on his family, and the strict obedience and reverence he received from them, and how clearly he saw into his own affairs! . . . I know no man who can bring to bear more qualities, both natural and acquired, appropriate for maintaining his mastery; yet he fell from mastery, like a child. That is why I have picked him out from several other cases that I know, as the best example.

^[C] It would be a matter for a scholastic debate whether he is better off like this than ·he would be· otherwise. In his presence, all things yield to him. His authority is allowed to run its empty course, in that nobody ever resists him. They believe him, they fear him, they give him a bellyful of respect. •Does he dismiss a servant? He packs his bag and *voilà!* he is gone—but only out of his presence. The steps of old age are so slow, the senses so confused, that the servant will live for a year in the house, carrying out his duties, without being noticed ·by the master·. At the appropriate time arrangements are made for a letter to arrive from distant parts, piteous, suppliant, full of promises to do better, whereby he is restored to favour. •Does Monsieur make a deal or send a letter that displeases ·his household·? They

suppress it, inventing soon afterwards reasons to explain the lack of action or reply. Since no letters from outside are ever brought to him first, he only sees those that it seems convenient for him to know. If he happens to get hold of any ·others·, the person he usually relies on to read them for him promptly finds in them whatever he chooses; letters that abuse him are regularly 'read' as begging his pardon. In short he sees his affairs only through some counterfeit image designed to be as satisfactory as possible, so as not to arouse his bad humour and anger. I have seen, in various forms, plenty of households run long and steadily ·in this way·, all with the same result.

·BEING CHEATED·

[B] Wives are always disposed to disagree with their husbands. [C] They seize with both hands every pretext for going against them; the first excuse ·they can think of· serves as full justification. I have known one who robbed her husband wholesale—in order, she told her confessor, to fatten up her almsgiving. Just trust that pious almsgiving! No responsibility seems to them to have enough dignity if the husband *allows* it. For it to have grace and authority ·in their eyes· it must be something they usurped by cunning or by insolence, and in any case unjustly. When, as in the case I was describing, they are acting against a poor old man and for offspring, they seize this pretext and glory in making it serve their passion; and, as though they ·and the offspring· were slaves banded together, they readily plot against the father's sovereignty and government. [B] If the offspring are male and adult, in the bloom of youth, then ·in cooperation with the mothers· they by force or by favour suborn the steward, the bursar and everyone else ·in the household·.

Those ·old men· who have neither wife nor son fall into this misfortune less easily but more cruelly and shame-

fully. . . . It is a good thing that decrepitude provides us with the sweet benefits of imperceptiveness, ignorance and a facility for letting ourselves be deceived. If we got stirred up over this, what would become of us, especially nowadays when the judges who settle our quarrels usually side with the young and have something to gain by doing so? . . .

[C] If others deceive me, at least I do not deceive myself into thinking I am capable of guarding against this, or into racking my brains to make myself so. I escape from such betrayals in my own bosom, not by restless and tumultuous curiosity but rather by diversion and resolution.

When I hear of the state someone is in, I do not dwell on him; I immediately turn my eyes to myself to see how I am doing. Everything that touches him concerns me too. What has happened to him informs me and alerts me. . . . Every day, every hour, we say things about others that we would more properly say about ourselves if we knew how to turn our attention inward as well as extend it outward. . . .

·BACK TO RELATIONS OF FATHERS TO CHILDREN·

[A] The late Marshal de Monluc, talking to me of the loss of his son (a truly brave gentleman of great promise who died on the island of Madeira), among other regrets emphasised the grief and heartbreak he felt at never having opened up to him. By his manner of paternal gravity and stiffness, ·he lamented·, he had lost the pleasure of knowing and enjoying his son, and of telling him of his great love for him and the high opinion he had of his virtue. He said:

'All that poor boy saw of me was a frowning face full of scorn; he is gone, believing I was unable to love him or to esteem him according to his merit. The revelation of the special affection I had for him in my soul—whom was I saving that for? Should not *he* have had all the pleasure of it and all the gratitude?

I forced myself, I tortured myself, to keep up that silly mask, thereby losing the joy of his company—and his goodwill along with it, which must have been cold towards me since he had never received from me anything but harshness or experienced anything but a tyrannical façade.'

I think this lament was reasonable and well taken; for, as I know all too well from experience, when we lose our friends there is no consolation sweeter than the knowledge of not having forgotten to tell them anything and of having had perfect and complete communication with them.

^[B] As much as I can I open myself to my family, and very readily signify to them the state of my will and my judgement towards them, as towards everyone. I hasten to bring myself out and present myself, for I do not want to be misunderstood, whether for better or worse.

^[A] According to Caesar, among the customs peculiar to our ancient Gauls there was this: sons were not presented to their fathers, or appeared in public with them, until they had begun to bear arms; as if they wanted to say that *now* it was appropriate for the fathers to admit them to their intimate acquaintance.

•MAKING A REASONABLE WILL•

I have seen another kind error of judgement by some fathers in my time: not content with having deprived their children of their natural share of the property during their long lifetime, they have left to their widows this same authority over all of it and the right to dispose of it at their pleasure. And I knew one lord, one of the highest officers of our crown, who •could rightfully have expected to come into property worth fifty thousand crowns a year but •died in need and overwhelmed with debts at over fifty years of age, while his mother in her extreme decrepitude still enjoyed rights over

the entire property under the will of his father, who himself had lived to be nearly eighty. To me that seems in no way reasonable.

^[B] For all that, I do not see that a man whose affairs are prospering is helped much by seeking a wife who burdens him with a large dowry; no outside debt brings more ruin to a household. My predecessors have usually followed this counsel to good advantage, and so have I. ^[C] But those who warn us against rich wives for fear that they may be less tractable and grateful are mistaken, making us lose some real profit because of such a frivolous conjecture. For an unreasonable woman it costs no more to override one reason than to override another, ·so that not being rich won't make her tractable and grateful·. Such women are most pleased with themselves when they are most in the wrong; unfairness allures them. Whereas good women are allured by the honour of acting virtuously; and the richer they are the more gracious they are, just as their being beautiful makes them that much more willingly and proudly chaste.

^[A] It is reasonable to let mothers run affairs until the sons are legally old enough to take over; but the father has brought them up very badly if he cannot expect them as adults to be wiser and more competent than his wife, given the ordinary weakness of the sex. But in truth it would be even more unnatural to make mothers depend on their offsprings' discretion. They should be given plentiful means to maintain their state according to the condition of their family and their age, especially since want and indigence are far more unbecoming and hard to bear for them than for males. ·If there is to be poverty in the family·, that burden should be borne by the sons rather than the mother.

[Then a ^[C]-tagged couple of pages in which Montaigne •says (with an illustrative quotation from Plato) that it is right for the law of the land to control how a man leaves his

property, •deplores those who chop and change their wills as a means of reward and punishment, •expresses scepticism about 'male entails', i.e. legal devices ensuring that property is left to male members of the same family, and •warns against predicting the character a man will have from what he was like as a boy. Then:]

·CAUTION ABOUT LEAVING THINGS TO WOMEN·

[C] To return to my subject, [A] it seems to me that there are almost no women who should have any kind of mastery over men except for the maternal and natural,

unless it is for the punishment of a man who has wilfully submitted to the woman out of some feverish humour; but that would not happen with old women, the subject of my present discussion.

(It is the obviousness of this consideration that has made us create and so readily give force to that law—which nobody has ever seen—that debars women from succeeding to our throne; and though fortune has given it more credit in some places than others, there is hardly a sovereignty in the world where that law is not cited, as here, on the strength of its reasonableness.)

It is dangerous to leave the distribution of our property ·after our death· to the judgement of women, based on the choice they will make among the children, a choice that is always unfair and capricious. For that disordered appetite and sick taste that they have during pregnancy they have in their soul at all times. We commonly see them devote themselves to the weakest and the most boorish, or to those (if they have any) who are still hanging about their necks. Not having enough reasoning power to choose and embrace what deserves it, they are all the more willing to let themselves be led solely by natural impulses—like animals that recognise their young only while they cling to their nipples.

Moreover, experience clearly shows us that this natural love that we give such authority to has very weak roots. Every day we take their own children out of women's arms and get them to take charge of our own, for a very small sum. We get them to abandon theirs to some wretched wet-nurse to whom we are not willing to entrust our own, or to some goat; forbidding them to suckle them (whatever harm may come of that) and even to take care of them, so that they can devote themselves entirely to the service of *our* children. And most of them soon come to have •a bastard affection created by habit, more passionate than natural affection is, and •a greater concern for the preservation of the borrowed children than for their own.

I mentioned goats because the village women where I live, when they cannot breast-feed their children themselves, call in the help of goats. I have now two menservants who never tasted mothers' milk for more than a week. These goats are promptly trained to suckle human children; they recognise their voices when they start crying, and come running up. If they are presented with any child other than the one they are feeding, they reject it—animals debase and bastardise natural affection as easily as we do—and the child does the same with another goat. The other day I saw an infant whose goat had been taken away because the father had only borrowed it from a neighbour; the child rejected the different one that was provided for him, and no doubt died of hunger. . . .

·OFFSPRING OF OUR NOBLER PART·

Now, once we consider this simple reason we have for loving our children—that we begot them, and so call them our second selves—it seems that we also produce from ourselves something else that is no less commendable. For what we engender by our soul, the offspring of our mind, our heart

and our ability, are produced by a part ·of us· more noble than the body and are more *ours*. In this act of generation we are both mother and father; these ‘children’ cost us much more and, if they have any good in them, bring us more honour. The value of our other children is much more theirs than ours; we have only a very slight share in them; but in the case of these ·offspring of our souls· all their beauty, all their grace and value, is *ours*. [Montaigne develops this idea through the remaining four pages of the essay. Historical anecdotes about •writers who went into decline when their books were condemned and destroyed; •the Latin poet Lucan who died reciting lines from his most famous poem; •Epicurus, who in dying was consoled by the thought of the beauty of his doctrine (Montaigne writes: ‘If he had had to choose between leaving behind either a deformed and ill-born child or a stupid and inept book, would not he—and any man of similar ability—have chosen to incur the former misfortune rather than the other?’). Also, several reflections on how various great men must have attached less value to their biological children than to such ‘offspring’ as a great poem, wonderful military victories, a fine statue. Mixed in with all this, Montaigne shows how he views the offspring of his own mind, his essays:]

[B] I think I might prefer producing one perfectly formed child by intercourse with the muses to producing one by intercourse with my wife. [C] As for this present one, what I give to it I give unconditionally and irrevocably, as one gives to the children of one’s body. Such little good as I have done for it is no longer at my disposal. It may know things that I no longer know, and hold for me things that I have forgotten; if I needed to get some of them back, it would be like borrowing from a stranger. If I’m wiser than it is, it is richer than I am.

* * * * *

Essay 9. ‘The arms of the Parthians’ is four pages on the use—of which Montaigne is sceptical and even scornful—of heavy personal armour in battle.

* * * * *

10. Books

[A] I have no doubt that I often happen to speak of things that are treated better and more truthfully by the masters of the craft. This here is purely the *essai* [see Glossary] of my natural abilities, not at all of the acquired ones. Anyone who catches me out in ignorance wins no victory over me; I would hardly be answerable to others for my ideas when I am not answerable to myself for them and am not satisfied with them. Anyone who looks to them for *knowledge* should fish for it where it dwells; there is nothing I lay claim to less. These are my fancies, by which I try to give knowledge not of things but of myself. The things may be known to me some day, or used to be so when fortune brought me to places where light was thrown on them; but I no longer remember them. [C] If I am a man of fairly wide reading, I am a man of no retentiveness.

[A] So I guarantee nothing for certain, except for making known what point I have at that moment reached in my knowledge of what I am treating. Do not linger over the things I talk about, but over how I shape them when talking about them.

[C] Where my borrowings are concerned, see whether I have known how to choose what will enhance or support my theme, a choice that is always *mine*. I get others to say—after I have said my piece, not before—things that I cannot put so well myself, sometimes because of the weakness of my

language and sometimes because of the weakness of my intellect. I do not count my borrowings; I weigh them. If I had wanted them valued for their number, I would have loaded myself with twice as many. They are very nearly all taken from names so famous and ancient that they seem to identify themselves well enough without help from me. [This version supplies authors' names for Montaigne's quotations; the original does not, and he now explains why.] In the reasonings, comparisons and inventions that I transplant into my own soil and mix up with my own, I deliberately omit the author's name so as to rein in the temerity of those hasty criticisms that are tossed at all sorts of writings, especially recent writings by men still alive—and in the vulgar tongue, which invites everyone to talk about them and seems to convict their conception and design of also being vulgar. I want them to give Plutarch a *nazarde* [= a contemptuous finger-flick against the nose] on *my* nose, and make fools of themselves by insulting Seneca *in me*. I have to hide my weakness under these great reputations.

I will love anyone who can pluck out my feathers—i.e. can identify any of these borrowed passages as not by me—I mean through sharpness of judgement and by spotting the force and beauty of the passages. That is what I do when re-reading my work. My memory is not good enough for me to pick them out by my knowledge of their origin; but I am quite able, by measuring my capacity, to realise that my own soil is utterly incapable of producing certain too-rich flowers that I find rooted there. . . .

[A] [Picking up from '...when talking about them.'] What I *am* obliged to answer for is getting myself tangled up, or having in my reasoning some emptiness or defect that I do not see, or that I cannot see when it is pointed out to me. For faults often escape our eyes; sickness of judgement consists in not being able to perceive them when someone else reveals

them to us. Knowledge and truth can lodge in us without judgement; judgement can do so without them; indeed, the recognition of one's ignorance is one of the finest and surest signs of judgement that I find.

I have no sergeant-major to line up my pieces—except chance! As my fancies present themselves, I pile them up; sometimes they come in a crowd, sometimes in single file. What I want to show is my natural, ordinary step, however much it wanders off the path. I let myself go as I am. Besides, these are not matters of which of ignorance, and talking casually and rashly, are forbidden.

I would like to have a more perfect understanding of things, but that would cost more than I am prepared to pay. My design is to spend what remains of my life gently and unlaboriously. There is nothing for which I am prepared to rack my brain, not even for knowledge, however great its value.

All I look to books for is to give me the pleasure of an honest pastime; or if I do study, I seek in them only the branch of learning that deals with knowledge of myself and teaches me how to die well and live well: 'This is the winning-post towards which my sweating horse must run' [Propertius].

[A] If I encounter difficulties in my reading, I do not gnaw my nails over them; after making one or two attacks on them, I leave them there. [B] If I settled down to them I would waste myself and my time, for I have an impulsive mind. What I do not see at the first attack I see less by persisting. I do nothing without gaiety; too much firmness in continuing the struggle to understand dazes, depresses and wearies my judgement. My vision becomes confused and unfocussed. I have to withdraw it and then apply it again by starts. . . .

[A] If one book wearies me I take up another, applying myself to it only at times when the boredom of doing nothing

starts to grip me. I do not take much to recent books, because the ancients seem to me fuller and stronger; or to books in Greek, because my judgement cannot do its work with a childish beginner's level of understanding.

•READING PURELY FOR PLEASURE•

[A] Among books that are simply entertaining I find, of the moderns, the *Decameron* of Boccaccio, Rabelais and *The Kisses* of Johannes Secundus. . . .to be worth spending time on. As for the *Amadis* and writings of that sort, they did not have anything to hold me even in childhood. I will also add, boldly or rashly, that this heavy old soul of mine no longer lets itself be tickled by Ariosto, or even by the good Ovid; his facility and inventiveness, which once enchanted me, hardly entertain me now.

I speak my mind freely on all things, even those that may exceed my competence and that I don't regard as at all within my jurisdiction. So the opinions I give of are meant to reveal the measure of my sight, not the measure of the things. When I find myself disliking Plato's *Axiochus* as a weak book, considering its author, my judgement does not trust itself: it is not so arrogant as to oppose the authority of so many other judgements, famous and ancient, which it considers its tutors and masters; it would rather be wrong along with them •if they were wrong•. It blames and condemns itself either •for stopping at the outer rind and being unable to penetrate to the heart or •for looking at the thing in some false light. It is content with simply securing itself from confusion and disorder; as for its weakness, it recognises that, and willingly admits it. It thinks it interprets correctly the appearances its conception presents to it; but these are weak and imperfect.

Most of Aesop's fables have many senses and interpretations. Those who take them allegorically select some aspect

that squares well with the fable; but in most cases that is only their most superficial aspect; there are others, more living, more essential and inward, to which they have not known how to penetrate; that is how I read them.

But to continue on my path: it has always seemed to me that in poetry Virgil, Lucretius, Catullus and Horace rank highest by far—especially Virgil in his *Georgics*, which I regard as the most perfect achievement in poetry; by a comparison with it one can easily see that there are passages in the *Aeneid* which the author would have touched up a little if he had had time for that. . . . I also love Lucan and enjoy his company, not so much for his style as for his own worth and for the truth of his opinions and judgements. As for good Terence—the very grace and delight of the Latin tongue—I find him wonderful at depicting to the life the movements of the soul and the state of our *moeurs* [see Glossary]; [C] our own actions constantly bring me back to him. [A] However often I read him, I always find some new beauty and grace in him.

Those who lived near Virgil's time complained that some compared Lucretius to him. In my view, that is indeed a comparison between unequals; but I find it hard to confirm myself in that belief when I find myself entranced by one of the beautiful passages in Lucretius. If they were irritated by that comparison what would they say of the nonsensical and barbarous stupidity of those who now compare Ariosto with him? And what would Ariosto himself say? 'O what a silly, tasteless age!' [Catullus].

I think that the ancients had even more reason to complain of those who put Plautus on a par with Terence (the latter savours much more of the gentleman [see Glossary]) than of those who compared Lucretius with Virgil. [C] It does much for Terence's reputation and superiority that the father of Roman eloquence [Cicero] has him—alone in his class—often

on his lips, and so too the verdict that the best judge among Roman poets [Horace] gave of his fellow.

[A] It has often occurred to me how in our time those who undertake to write comedies (such as the Italians, who are quite good at it) use three or four plots from Terence or Plautus to make one of their own. In a single comedy they pile up five or six stories from Boccaccio. What makes them so load themselves with material is their lack of confidence that they can sustain themselves by their own graces. They need a **body** to lean on; not having enough of their own to detain us, they want the story to amuse us. In the case of my author [Terence], it is quite the reverse: the perfections and beauties of his style of expression make us lose our appetite for his subject. His distinction and elegance hold us throughout; he is everywhere so delightful—‘Clear flowing and most like a crystal stream’ [Horace]—and so fills our souls with *his* charms that we forget those of his plot.

This consideration draws me on further. I note that the good ancient poets avoided affectation, and did not try for fantastic Spanish and Petrarchian flights or even for the milder and more restrained conceits that are the adornment of all the poetic works of the ensuing centuries. Yet no sound judge regrets their absence from ·the works of· those ancients, or fails to regard the smooth polish and sustained sweetness and flowering beauty of Catullus’s epigrams as incomparably superior to all the stings with which Martial sharpens the tails of his. This is for the reason I was stating just now, as Martial said of himself: *He had less need for the labour of wit because its place had been taken by his subject matter*. Those earlier poets make themselves sufficiently felt without getting excited and goading themselves; they find something to laugh at everywhere; they do not have to tickle themselves! The later poets need outside help; the less *esprit* [see Glossary] they have, the more **body** they need. [B] They go

on horse-back because they are not strong enough on their own legs.

[A] Just as at our balls the men of low estate who run dancing schools, not being able to match the bearing and propriety of our nobility, try to gain favour by perilous leaps and other mountebank’s antics. [B] And the ladies can show off their wares more easily in dances where there are various contortions and twistings of the body than in certain other formal dances where they have only to walk with a natural step and display a natural bearing and their ordinary grace. As I have also seen some excellent clowns, dressed in their everyday clothes and with an ordinary face, give us all the delight that can be drawn from their art; whereas apprentices who are less deeply learned in that art can make us laugh only if they put flour on their faces, dress up, and hide behind wild movements and grimaces.

[A] The best place to see this conception of mine at work is in the comparison between ·Virgil’s· *Aeneid* and ·Ariosto’s· *Orlando furioso*. We see the *Aeneid* on outspread wings in lofty and sustained flight, always pursuing its goal; the *Orlando furioso* we see fluttering and hopping from tale to tale, branch to branch, trusting its wings only for a very short hop, landing on every hedge for fear that its breath or strength should fail. —So there are the authors I like best on that kind of subject.

·READING PARTLY FOR PROFIT·

As for my other reading, which mingles a little more profit with the pleasure, and from which I learn how to arrange my opinions and qualities, the books that serve me in this way are ·those of· Plutarch (since he has become a Frenchman [i.e. been translated into French]) and Seneca. They both have this notable advantage, from my point of view, that the knowledge I seek in their works is treated there in detached pieces that

do not require commitment to a lengthy labour, of which I am incapable. Such are the *Moralia* of Plutarch and the *Epistles* of Seneca, which are the finest and most profitable part of their writings. I need no great enterprise to get at them, and I drop them whenever I like; for they have no continuity, no dependence of one part on another.

Those authors agree in most of their useful and true opinions, and their fortunes were also similar: •they were born at about the same period, •both were tutors of Roman Emperors, •both came from foreign lands, and •both were rich and powerful. Their teaching is some of the cream of philosophy, and is presented in a simple and relevant manner. Plutarch is more uniform and constant; Seneca is more undulating and varied. The latter labours, strains and tenses himself to arm virtue against weakness, fear and vicious appetites; the former apparently regards these as less powerful, and disdains to hasten his step to put himself on guard against them. Plutarch has opinions that are Platonic, mild, and suitable for civil society; the other's are Stoic and Epicurean, more remote from common use but in my opinion more suitable for private life and more sturdy. It appears that Seneca bows somewhat to the tyranny of the emperors of his day, for I am sure it is by a forced judgement that he condemns the cause of those high-minded murderers of Caesar; Plutarch is free throughout. Seneca is full of pithy phrases and sallies; Plutarch of things. The former enflames you more, and stirs you; the latter contents you more and pays you better. ^[B] Plutarch guides us; Seneca drives us.

^[A] As for Cicero, the works of his that can serve my purpose are those that treat of philosophy, especially moral philosophy. But to tell the truth boldly (for once the boundaries of impudence have been crossed there is no more curb),

his style of writing seems to me boring, as do all similar styles. For his prefaces, definitions, classifications, etymologies, eat up most of his work. What life and marrow there is in him is smothered by these long-winded preparations. If I spend an hour reading him (which is a lot for me) and then recall what juice and substance I have drawn from him, most of the time I find nothing but wind, because in the course of that hour he has not yet reached the arguments that serve his purpose or the reasons that get to the core of what I am interested in.

For me, who ask only to become wiser, not more learned ^[C] or eloquent, ^[A] these logical and Aristotelian arrangements are not to the point. I want an author to begin with the main proposition. I know well enough what •death and •pleasure are—well enough not to waste time dissecting •them. I want from the outset good solid reasons that teach me how to sustain •their attack; and I am not helped in that by grammatical subtleties or by ingenuity in weaving words and arguments. I want arguments that drive their first attack into the stronghold of the doubt; Cicero's hover around the camp-fire. They are all right for the classroom, the court of law, or the pulpit, where we are free to doze off and a quarter of an hour later are not too late to pick up the thread of the argument again. There is a need to talk like that to judges whom one wants to win over rightly or wrongly, to children, and to the common herd ^[C] to whom one has to say everything and then see what will carry.

^[A] I do not want anyone to work at gaining my attention by crying *Or oyez!* fifty times, like our heralds. The Romans in their religion used to cry *Hoc age!*, ^[C] just as in our own we cry *Sursum corda!*;¹ ^[A] for me these are so many wasted words. I leave home fully prepared; I need no appetisers or

¹ 'Now listen!', 'Do this!', 'Lift up your hearts!'

sauce; I can eat my meat quite raw; and instead of whetting my appetite with those preparations and preliminaries, they deaden it for me and dull it.

[C] Will the licence of our times excuse my sacrilegious audacity in thinking that even Plato's dialogues drag, stifling his matter? And in lamenting the time spent on those long, empty, preliminary discussions by a man who had so many better things to say? My ignorance will excuse me better in that

what comes next: *je ne voy rien en la beauté de son langage.*

strictly meaning: I see nothing in the beauty of his language.

what he may have meant: I cannot see the beauty of his language (because I do not know Greek).

In general I ask for books that *use* the sciences [see Glossary], not ones that *decorate* them.

[A] My first two, as well as Pliny and their like, have no *Hoc age!*; they are addressed to people who are already on the alert. . . .

I also like reading ·Cicero's· *Letters to Atticus*, not only because they contain a very ample education in the history and affairs of his time but much more because of what they tell me about his personal humours. For I am, as I have said elsewhere, singularly curious about my authors' souls and their unstudied judgements. What their writings display when paraded in the theatre of the world should be our basis for judging their talents, but not for judging their *moeurs* or themselves. I have regretted a thousand times that we have lost the book Brutus wrote about virtue; it is a fine thing to learn the theory from those who thoroughly know the practice. But seeing that the preacher and the preaching are different things, I am just as happy to see Brutus in Plutarch as in a book of his own. I would prefer having a true account of his chat with a close friend in his tent on

the eve of a battle to having the oration he delivered next morning to his army, and prefer knowing what he did in his work-room and bedroom to knowing what he did in the Forum or Senate.

As for Cicero, I share the common opinion that apart from his learning there was little excellence in his soul. He was a good citizen, affable by nature as fat jolly men like him are apt to be; but he had in truth a great deal of softness and ambitious vanity. I cannot excuse him for rating his poetry as worth publishing. There is nothing much wrong with writing bad verses, but there was something wrong in his not realising how unworthy they were of the glory of his name. As for his eloquence, it is beyond compare; I believe no man will ever equal it. . . .

·HISTORIES·

The historians come right to my forehand. They are pleasant and easy; and at the same time [C] *man in general*, whom I seek to know, appears in them more alive and more entire than anywhere else—the true variety of his inward qualities, both in the mass and in detail, the variety of the ways he is put together and the events that threaten him.

[A] The ones that suit me best are those who write biographies, since they spend more time on plans than on events, more on what comes from within than on what happens without. That is why in every way Plutarch is my man. I am very sorry that we do not have a dozen Laertiuses, or that his work is not more widely known or better understood. For I consider the lives and fortunes of the world's great teachers no less carefully than their doctrines and fancies.

[A] In this kind of study of history one has to leaf one's way even-handedly through all kinds of authors, both old and new, both gibberish and French, so as to learn from them the things that they variously treat. But Caesar seems to me

to deserve special study, not only for historical knowledge but also for himself, so much perfection and excellence he has above all the others, although Sallust is one of them. I certainly read this author with a little more reverence and respect than one brings to reading ·merely· human works, considering now the man himself through his actions and the miracle of his greatness, now the purity and the inimitable polish of his language, which surpassed not only all the historians, as Cicero said, but perhaps Cicero himself. There is so much sincerity in his judgement concerning his enemies that the only thing he can be reproached for—apart from the deceptive colours under which he seeks to hide his bad cause and the filth of his pestilential ambition—is that he has been too sparing in talking about himself; for so many great things cannot have been done by him without his contributing more to them than he sets down.

I like historians who are either very simple or outstanding. The simple ones—who have nothing of their own to contribute, bringing to their work only care and diligence in collecting everything that comes to their attention and recording everything in good faith without choice or selection—leave our judgement intact to discern the truth. One example of this among others is the good Froissart, •who has gone through his enterprise with such frank sincerity that when he has made an error he is not in the least afraid to admit it and to correct it in the place where he has been made aware of it; and •who presents to us even the various rumours that were current and the differing reports that were made to him. This is the material of history, naked and unformed; each reader can profit from it as his understanding allows.

The truly outstanding historians have the capacity to choose what is worth knowing, selecting from two reports the one that is more likely; from the situation and humours of princes they infer their intentions and attribute appropriate

words to them. They are right to assume the authority to regulate our belief by their own; but that ·privilege· certainly belongs to extremely few.

Those who are between those two kinds (as most historians are) spoil everything for us. They want to chew our morsels for us; they give themselves the right to judge, and consequently slant history to their fancy, for once judgement leans to one side one cannot help turning and twisting the narration to that bias. They undertake to choose what is worth knowing, often hiding from us this remark or that private action which would have taught us more; they omit as incredible things that they do not understand, and perhaps also omit things because they do not know how to say them in good Latin or French. Let them boldly display their eloquence and their reasonings, let them judge as they like, but let them also leave us the means of making our own judgements after them, not interfering with the substance of the matter by their abridgements and suppressions. Let them pass it *all* on to us, pure and whole.

As often as not, and especially these days, people are selected for this work from among the common herd, simply because they can speak well, as though we were trying here to learn grammar! Having been hired only for that, and having nothing to sell but babble, they rightly care mainly about that aspect. Thus with many fine words they cook up a concoction out of the rumours they pick up on the streets.

The only good histories are ones written by men who were actually in charge of the affairs ·they are writing about·, or played some part in the conduct of them, ^[C] or at least happen to have conducted others of the same sort. ^[A] Such are virtually all the Greek and Roman histories. For, when several eye-witnesses have written on the same subject (as happened in those days, when greatness and learning commonly intersected), if a mistake is made it must be *very*

slight and on a very doubtful incident.

What can be expected from a doctor who writes about war, or a schoolboy writing about the designs of princes?

To take in how scrupulous the Romans were over this, we need only this example: Asinius Pollio found even in Caesar's histories some mistakes he had fallen into through •not being able to keep his eyes on every part of his army, •believing individuals who often reported to him things insufficiently verified, or •not being carefully enough informed by his lieutenants about what they had done in his absence. That example shows what a delicate thing the quest for truth is, when we cannot even rely on the commander's knowledge of a battle he has fought, or on the soldiers' knowledge of what went on around them—unless, as in a judicial inquiry, we confront witnesses and hear objections about the evidence in the slightest details of each incident. Truly, the knowledge we have of our own affairs is much looser. . . .

My treacherous and weak memory is so bad that on several occasions I have picked up a book, thinking it new and unknown to me, when in fact I had carefully read it some years earlier and scribbled over it with my notes. To compensate a little for this, I have for some time now adopted the practice of adding at the end of each book (I mean of each book that I intend to consult only once) the date when I finished reading it and the general judgement I drew from it, in order to show me again at least the general idea and

impression I had conceived of its author when reading it. I shall transcribe here some of these annotations.

Here is what I put about ten years ago on my Guicciardini (for whatever language my books speak, I speak to them in my own): 'He is a diligent historian from whom in my opinion we can learn the truth about the affairs of his time as accurately as from any other; moreover he played a part in most of them, holding an honourable rank. There is no sign that he ever disguised anything through hatred, favour or vanity. . . . Some of his digressions and reflections are excellent and enriched by beautiful sketches; but he likes them too much. . . . I have also been struck by the following: that among all his judgements on minds and actions, among so many motives and intentions, he attributes not one of them to virtue, religious scruple or conscience, as if those qualities were entirely extinct in the world; and for all actions, no matter how fine they might seem in themselves, he traces their cause to some evil opportunity or gain. It is impossible to conceive that among the countless actions he makes a judgement about there was not a single one produced by the way of reason. No corruption can have infected everyone so universally that no-one escaped the contagion. That leads me to fear that his own taste was somewhat corrupted; and he may have judged others by himself.' [Montaigne then quotes annotations he had written on his copies of histories by Philippe de Commines and the brothers Du Bellay.]