

Essays, Book II

(without 'Defence of Raymond Sebond')

Michel de Montaigne

1572–80

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

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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*.]

24. The greatness of Rome

[A] I want to say only a word on this inexhaustible subject in order to show the simple-mindedness of those who compare Roman greatness with the present time's pitiful grandeurs.

In the seventh book of Cicero's *Letters to friends*¹ there is a letter from Cicero to Caesar, then in Gaul, in which he repeats these words, which were at the end of a letter that Caesar had written to him: 'As for Marcus Furius whom you have recommended to me, I will make him King of Gaul; and if you want me to advance some other friend of yours, send him to me.'

It was no novelty for a simple Roman citizen, as Caesar then was, to dispose of kingdoms, for he deprived King Deiotarus of his to give it to a nobleman named Mithridates of the city of Pergamum. And his biographers record several kingdoms that he *sold*; Suetonius says that at one stroke he extorted from King Ptolemy 3,600,000 crowns, which was close to selling his own kingdom to him! 'Price list: So much for Galatia, so much for Pontus, so much for Lydia' [Claudian].

Mark Antony said that the greatness of the Roman people showed itself not so much in what they took as in what they gave. [C] Yet about a century before Antony they had taken something with a wonderful show of authority that has no parallel in all their history. Antiochus possessed the whole of Egypt and was about to conquer Cyprus and other remnants of that empire. During the progress of his victories, Gaius Popilius came to him on behalf of the Senate and refused to take his hand until he had read the letters he was bringing. When the king had read them and said he would think about it, Popilius drew a circle around him with his stick and said: 'Before you step out of this circle give me

an answer that I can take back to the Senate.' Antiochus, astonished at the roughness of such a peremptory command, reflected for a while and then said: 'I shall do what the Senate commands me.' Thereupon Popilius greeted him as a friend of the Roman people. To have given up so great a monarchy and so fortunate and prosperous a career, under the impact of three lines of writing! He later informed the Senate through his ambassadors that he had received their command with the same respect as if it had come from the immortal gods; he was right to do that.

[B] All the kingdoms that Augustus acquired by right of war he either restored to those who had lost them or presented to third parties.

[A] In this connection Tacitus, talking of King Cogidunus of England, has a marvellous remark which makes us feel that infinite power. The Romans, he says, were from the earliest times accustomed to leave kings they had conquered in possession of their kingdoms, under their authority, 'so that they might have even kings as instruments of slavery'.

[C] It is likely that Suleiman, whom we have seen making a gift of the kingdom of Hungary and other states, was moved more by that consideration than by the one he was accustomed to cite, namely that he was glutted and overburdened by all the monarchies and power that his own efforts or those of his forebears had brought to him.

25. On not pretending to be ill

[A] There is an epigram of Martial's—one of the good ones, for there are all kinds in him—in which he jokingly tells the story of Cælius, who pretended to have gout so as to avoid paying court to some of the Roman grandees, being present

¹ Montaigne has a long aside on the proper title for that compendium, arguing that the one given here is preferable to the more usual *Familiar letters*.

at their levee, attending on them, and following them. To make his excuse more plausible he had his legs anointed and bandaged, and completely counterfeited the gait and bearing of a gouty man. In the end fortune favoured him by making him so in fact: 'How great is the power of counterfeiting pain! Cælius has stopped feigning the gout; he *has it*' [Martial].

I have read—somewhere in Appian, I think—a similar story of a man who, wanting to escape the proscription of the Roman triumvirate, kept himself hidden and disguised to avoid recognition by his pursuers, and added also the device of pretending to be blind in one eye. When he came to recover a little more liberty, and was willing to take off the plaster he had so long worn over his eye, he found that its sight had actually been lost under that mask. It is possible that the action of sight had been dulled through not being exercised for such a long time, and that the visual power had been wholly transferred to the other eye. For when we cover one eye we can plainly feel that it transfers to its fellow some part of its activity, so that the other swells and dilates. So also for Martial's gouty man, inactivity combined with the heat of the bandages and ointments may well have brought him some gouty humour.

Reading in Froissart of the vow of a troop of young English noblemen to keep their left eye covered until they had crossed into France and performed some exploit of arms against us, I have often been tickled by the thought that they might have been caught like those others and found themselves all one-eyed when they again saw the mistresses for whose sake they had undertaken this.

Mothers are right to scold their children when they imitate one-eyed, lame and cross-eyed people and other such

physical defects; for not only can their bodies, still so tender, take on a bad twist from this, but it seems that fortune (I do not know how) makes a game of taking us at our word; I have heard of many examples of people falling ill after pretending to be so.

[C] Whether riding or walking I have always held in my hand a rod or stick, even to the point of trying for elegance with it, leaning on it with a 'distinguished' look on my face. Many have warned me that one day fortune would turn this foppery into a necessity. If so. . . ., I would be the first of my family to have the gout!

[A] But let us lengthen this chapter and variegate it with another piece concerning blindness. Pliny tells of a healthy man who dreamed he was blind and woke the next morning to find that he was. The power of imagination can indeed contribute to 'things like' that, as I have said elsewhere, and Pliny seems to share this opinion; but it is more likely that the internal events in his body. . . .that took away his eyesight also caused the dream.

Let us add another story close to this subject, which Seneca tells in one of his letters. He wrote to Lucilius:

'Harpaste, my wife's *folle*,¹ has stayed at my house as a hereditary charge,

·not one I would have chosen to take on·, because I have no taste for these monsters, and if I want to laugh at a *fou* I do not have far to look for one: I laugh at myself.

She has suddenly become blind and (I am telling you something strange but true) she does not realise it! She keeps begging her keeper to take her outside; she thinks that my house is too dark.

¹ Feminine of *fou*, which can refer to someone who is employed as a clown or joker in a wealthy household. In some cases—Harpaste clearly being one of them—the clown is found to be funny because he/she is mentally incapacitated in some way.

‘What we laugh at in her I urge you to believe applies to each one of us. No-one realises that he is miserly, that he is covetous. At least the blind ask for a guide; we wander off alone. We say:

“I am not ambitious, but in Rome one cannot live otherwise.”

“I am no spendthrift, but the city requires great expense.”

“It is not my fault if I am short-tempered, if I have not yet settled down; it is the fault of my youth.”

Let us not go looking elsewhere for our disease; it is within us, rooted in our inward parts. The very fact that we do not realise we are ill makes the cure harder. If we do not *soon* begin to tend ourselves, when will we *ever* provide for so many sores and so many maladies? Yet philosophy provides a very sweet medicine; other cures are enjoyed only after they have worked; this one pleases and cures at the same time.’

That is what Seneca says. It has carried me away from my subject; but there is profit in change.

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Essay 26. ‘Thumbs’ is a page on that topic.

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27. Cowardice, the mother of cruelty

^[A] I have often heard it said that cowardice is the mother of cruelty. ^[B] And I have learned from experience that the bitterness and hardness of a malicious and inhuman heart are usually accompanied by womanish weakness. I have seen that some of the cruellest of men are given to weeping easily, and for frivolous reasons. Alexander, tyrant of Pheres,

could not allow himself to hear tragedies performed in the theatre for fear that his citizens might see him moaning over the misfortunes of Hecuba and Andromache—he who every day had pitilessly had so many people cruelly murdered! What makes such men so easy to bend to every extreme? Can it be weakness of soul?

^[A] Valour, which acts only to overcome resistance—‘And does not enjoy killing a bull unless unless it resists’ [Claudian]—stops when it sees the enemy at its mercy. But pusillanimity, in order to say that it is also in the game, having had little to do with the first role of fighting in battle, takes as its part the second role, that of massacre and bloodshed. Murders after victory are ordinarily done by the mob and the baggage-handlers. And what causes so many unheard-of cruelties in wars in which the people take part is that the common riff-raff become used to war and swagger about, up to their elbows in blood, hacking at a body lying at their feet, having no sense of any other kind of valour—^[B] ‘The wolves and base bears fall on the dying, and so do all the more ignoble beasts’ [Ovid]—^[A] like the cowardly curs which in the house tear and snap at the skins of wild beasts that they did not dare attack in the fields.

•THE CONCERN WITH KILLING•

What is it that makes all our quarrels mortal nowadays? Our fathers knew *degrees* of vengeance, but we begin at the ultimate and from the outset talk of nothing but killing—why? What is it, if it is not cowardice? Every man clearly feels that •there is more *braverie* [see Glossary] and disdain in beating his enemy than in finishing him off, in making him knuckle under than in making him die; and also that •the thirst for vengeance is better slaked and satisfied by these non-lethal means, for it aims only at making itself felt. That is why we do not attack a stone or an animal if it hurts us, since

they are incapable of feeling our revenge. To kill a man is to shelter him from our harm. . . .

‘He will repent of it’, we say. Do we really think our shooting him through the head will make him repent of what he did? On the contrary, if we look closely we will find that he pulls a face at us as he falls. He does not even hold it against us, so far he is from repenting. ^[C] And we do him the greatest favour of life, which is to make him die suddenly and painlessly. ^[A] We are busy hiding like rabbits, scuttling about and fleeing the officers of justice who are on our trail; he is at rest. Killing is good for preventing a future offence but not for avenging a past one. ^[C] It is an act more of fear than of *braverie*, more of precaution than of courage, more of defence than of attack. ^[A] It is obvious that by that act we give up both •the true end of vengeance and •our care for our reputation: •we show that• we are afraid that if the man lives he will renew the attack. ^[C] It is not *against him* that you get rid of him but *for yourself*—•your cowardly self•. . . .

^[A] If we thought that by valour we would always dominate our enemy and triumph over him at our pleasure, we would be very sorry if he were to escape—which is what he does when he dies. We want to conquer, but more safely than honourably, ^[C] and in our quarrel we seek an ending more than glory. [Then a paragraph about the cowardice of delaying a verbal attack until the target of it is dead.]

^[A] Our fathers contented themselves with avenging an insult by giving the lie, avenging being given the lie by a blow, and so on in order •up the scale•. They were valiant enough not to be afraid of their adversary, alive and outraged. We tremble with fear just from seeing him on his feet! And as proof of that, is it not one of our beautiful practices today to hound to death the man we have offended as well as the man who has offended us?

•THE MANAGEMENT OF DUELS•

^[B] It is also a type of cowardice that has introduced into our single combats this practice of our being accompanied by seconds, and thirds, and fourths. Formerly they were duels: nowadays they are encounters and battles. The first men who came up with this idea were afraid of being alone, ^[C] ‘since neither had the slightest confidence in himself’ [Virgil]. ^[B] For it is natural that company of any sort brings comfort and relief in danger. Formerly third parties were brought in to guard against rule-breaking and foul play ^[C] and to bear witness to the outcome of the combat. ^[B] But since it has become the fashion for them—the third parties—to take part themselves, whoever is invited to the duel cannot honorably remain a spectator, for fear of being thought to lack either affection or courage.

Besides the injustice and baseness of such an action, bringing some valour or power other than your own into the defence of your honour, I find it a disadvantage for a good man who fully trusts in himself to involve his fortune with that of a second. Each man runs enough risk for himself without running it also for another, and has enough to do to assure himself in his own valour for the defence of his life without committing so dear a thing to other hands. For unless it has been expressly agreed to the contrary, it is a joint combat of the four—the original duellists and their seconds. If your second is downed, you have two on your hands, and rightly so.

[An aside on fairness in combat.] This may be said to be unfair, and so indeed it is—like attacking when well armed a man who has only the stump of a sword, or attacking when in good physical shape a man who is already grievously wounded. But if these are advantages you have won in fighting, there is nothing wrong with exploiting them. Disparity and inequality

are weighed and considered only with regard to the state of the combatants when the fray begins [this topic is returned to at ■ below]; from there on, take your complaint to fortune! And when you find yourself one against three after your two companions have let themselves be killed, no-one is wronging you, any more than I would do wrong in war if, with a similar advantage, I struck a blow with my sword at the enemy whom I found attacking one of our men. . . .

I have a private interest to declare in this discussion; for my brother the sieur de Matecoulom was called on in Rome to act as second for a gentleman [see Glossary] he hardly knew, who was the defender, having been challenged to the duel by another. In this combat he found himself by chance matched against a man who was closer and better known to him than the man whose second he was. (I wish someone would explain to me the rationale for these 'laws of honour' that so often clash with those of reason!) Having disposed of his man and seeing the two principals in the quarrel still on their feet and intact, he went to the relief of his companion. What less could he do? Should he have kept still and watched the defeat—if that is how it worked out—of the man for whose defence he had come to the combat? He had not done him any good up to there; the quarrel was undecided.

The courtesy that you can and should show to your enemy when you have reduced him to a sorry state and have him at a great disadvantage—I do not see how you can show it when it concerns somebody else, where you are only the second, where the dispute is not yours. He—my brother—could not be just or courteous at the expense of the one to whom he had lent himself. Accordingly he went back into the fight, was arrested for duelling, and was delivered from the prisons of Italy through a very prompt and solemn recommendation

of our king.

·AN ASIDE ON COURAGE VERSUS SKILL AND ACCESSORIES·

Immodest nation! Not content with letting the world know of our vices and follies by reputation, we go to foreign nations to display them in person! Put three Frenchmen in the Libyan deserts; they will not be together for a month without provoking and scratching each other. You would say that this peregrination of ours is an affair especially arranged to give foreigners—especially those who rejoice in our misfortunes and laugh at them—the pleasure of seeing us making spectacles of ourselves.

We go to Italy to learn fencing, ^[C] and put it into practice at the expense of our lives before mastering it. ^[B] Yet by the rules of the discipline we should put theory before practice. We betray ourselves as mere apprentices: 'Wretched first fruits of youth; harsh training for the future wars' [Virgil]. I know that fencing is an art ^[C] that is useful for its purpose, . . . and, as I know from experience, an art ^[B] that has swelled the hearts of some beyond their natural measure. ■ But this is not really valour, since it draws its support from skill and has its basis in something other than itself. The honour of combat consists in rivalry of courage, not of craft. That is why I have seen a friend of mine, renowned as a grand master in that exercise, choosing for his duels weapons that deprived him of the means of this advantage and made everything depend on fortune and steadfastness, so that his victory would not be attributed to his fencing skill rather than to his valour. In my childhood the nobility avoided a reputation as good fencers as insulting; they learned to fence in secret, as a cunning trade detracting from true and natural valour:

They have no wish to dodge, parry or to make tactical retreats; skill has no part to play in their encounter;

they make no feints, or oblique blows, or shamming lunges; anger and fury strips them of their art. Just listen to the terrifying clash of striking swords, iron against iron; no foot gives way but stays planted firm: it is their arms that move; every thrust strikes home and no blow falls in vain' [Tasso; quoted in the original Italian].

Target-practice, tournaments, tilting—the image of warlike combat—were the exercise of our fathers. That other exercise, fencing, is all the more ignoble for having only a private end which teaches us to destroy each other, contrary to the laws and to justice, and in every way always produces harmful results. It is much more worthy and fitting to exercise oneself in things that strengthen our government rather than harming it, things that respect the public safety and the common glory.

[Montaigne develops this theme for another page, illustrating it with ancient anecdotes. He ends this with the confession: ^[B] But I am wandering away from my theme.]

•BACK TO COWARDICE AND CRUELTY•

^[A] The Emperor Maurice, having been warned by his dreams and several omens that he was to be killed by a certain Phocas, a soldier then unknown, asked his son-in-law Philip who was this Phocas, his nature, his traits, and his *moeurs*; when Philip told him among other things that he was cowardly and timorous, the emperor immediately concluded from this that he was therefore murderous and cruel.

What makes tyrants so bloodthirsty? It is concern for their own safety, and the fact that when they fear a *scratch* their cowardly heart provides them with no means of making themselves safe except exterminating all those who can harm them, women included: ^[B] 'He strikes at all because he fears all' [Claudian].

^[C] The first cruelties are done for their own sake; thence arises the fear of a just revenge, which then produces a string of new cruelties, each intended to smother its predecessors.

Philip, king of Macedon, the one who had so many bones to pick with the Roman people, agitated by the horror of the murders committed on his orders, and unable to make up his mind what to do against so many families harmed by him at various times, decided to seize all the children of those he had had killed, so as to kill them off, one by one, day after day, and thus ensure his peace of mind. [Montaigne devotes more than a page to a complex anecdote relating to this matter, admitting that this story, which he tells because he finds it 'beautiful', is off his present track.]

^[A] Tyrants, to do two things at once—killing and making their anger felt—have used all their ingenuity to find a way of prolonging death. They want their enemies to be gone, but not so fast that they have no time to savour their vengeance. They have a lot of trouble over this; for if the tortures are intense they are short, and if they are long they are not painful enough for the tyrant's liking; so there they go, dispensing their instruments of torture. We see a thousand examples of this in antiquity—and I wonder whether we do not, without realising it, still retain traces of such barbarity.

Everything that goes beyond simple death seems to me pure cruelty. Our justice cannot hope that the man who will not be kept from wrongdoing by fear of death by decapitation or hanging may yet be deterred by the thought of a slow fire or pincers or the wheel. And I do not know but that during this time we drive them to despair. For what can be the state of a man's soul as waits for death for twenty-four hours, broken on the wheel or (in the old fashion) nailed to a cross?

[The essay ends with a page of truly gruesome anecdotes about intense cruelty.]

28. There is a season for everything

[A] Those who liken Cato the Censor to the younger Cato who was his own murderer¹ [C] are likening two fine natures with similar forms. The former displayed his nature in more aspects, and did better in military exploits and in the usefulness of his public services. But the virtue of the younger—as well as being more vigorous (it is blasphemy to liken it in that respect to anyone else's)—was far more spotless. For who could acquit the Censor of envy and ambition, when he dared to attack the honour of Scipio, who in goodness and in all excellent qualities was far greater than him and than all other men of his time?

[A] What they tell of him among other things, that when in his extreme old age he set himself to learn the Greek language, with an ardent appetite as though to quench a long thirst, does not seem to me to be much in his honour. Strictly, it is what we call falling into second childhood.

There is a season for all everything, including the good things; I may say the Lord's Prayer at an inappropriate time; [C] as was the case of the general Titus Quintius Flaminius, who was denounced because he had been seen, *during* the conflict, on the sidelines praying to God in a battle that he won. [B] 'The sage sets limits even to virtuous things' [Juvenal].

[A] When Eudemondas saw the very old Xenocrates working hard at his school lessons, he remarked: 'If he is still *learning*, when will this man *know*?' [B] And Philopoemen said to those who were highly praising King Ptolemy for daily strengthening his body by the practice of arms: 'It is not praiseworthy for a king of his age to be practising them; from now on he should really use them!'

[A] 'The young man should make his preparations, the old man enjoy them', say the sages. And the greatest flaw they see in us is that our desires incessantly renew their youth. We are always *starting again* to live. Our study and our desire should sometimes savour of old age. We have one foot in the grave, yet our tastes and our pursuits are just being born: [B] 'On the edge of the grave itself you contract for cut marble, forget the tomb and build a house' [Horace].

[C] The longest of my projects is for less than a year; henceforth I think only of making an end, ridding myself of all new hopes and enterprises, saying my last farewell to all the places that I leave, and daily dispossessing myself of my belongings. 'I have long since ceased to lose or gain. I have more provisions ·for the road· than road' [Seneca]. 'I have lived, and run the course that fortune gave' [Virgil].

In short all the comfort I find in my old age is that it deadens within me many desires and cares that life is troubled by—care for how the world goes, care for riches, for grandeur, for knowledge, for health, for myself. [A] That man—Cato the Censor—is learning to speak when he ought to be learning to be silent forever. [C] We can always continue our studies, but not our school-work; what a stupid thing, an old man learning his alphabet! . . .

[A] If we must study, let us study something suitable to our condition, so that we can answer like the man who was asked why he conducted these studies in decrepit old age: 'So as to depart a better and more contented man.'

Such was the study of the younger Cato when, feeling that his end was near, he came across Plato's discussion of the eternity of the soul. Not, obviously, that he was not long since furnished with every sort of provision for such

¹ Before the edition of 1588 (the one whose additions are [C]-tagged) this sentence ended: 'do great honour, in my opinion, to the former; for I find them separated by an extreme distance.'

a departure. Of assurance, firm will and learning, he had more than Plato has in his writings; his knowledge and his courage were in this respect above philosophy. He occupied himself in this way not to ease his death (he would not even interrupt his sleep to think about such a matter), but as someone who simply got on with his studies, as with all the customary activities of his life, without choice or change.

[C] The night when he had just been rejected for the praetorship he spent in play; the one in which he was to die he spent in reading. Loss of life or loss of office, it was all one to him.

* * * * *

Essay 29. ‘Virtue’ is a seven-page miscellany, including (i) reflections on the revelation of character by ordinary daily conduct, with some anecdotes about the conduct of the sceptic Pyrrho; (ii) two stories about men who (for different reasons) emasculated themselves, and one about a woman who drowned herself to escape her husband’s abuse; (iii) reports on how death—and especially how women join their husbands in death—is managed in India and other ‘oriental nations’; and (iv) stories about how various men have acted on the basis of their belief in ‘fatal [see Glossary] necessity’ or predestination. The lead-in to (iv) is interesting: ‘Among our other disputes, that of *Fatum* has come in. To attach things to come (even our will) to a certain and inevitable necessity, people still use that age-old argument: “Since God foresees that all things are to happen thus, as he undoubtedly does, they *must* therefore happen thus.” To which our masters [the theology professors at the Sorbonne] reply that to see something happen—as we do, and God likewise (since all is present to him; he sees rather than foresees)—is not to force it to happen. Indeed, we see the things because they happen; they do not happen because we see them. The

event produces the knowledge, not the knowledge the event. What we see happen, happens; but it could have happened otherwise. And God, in the book of the causes of events which he has in his foreknowledge, also includes those we call fortuitous, and the voluntary ones that depend on the liberty he has given to our choice; he knows that we shall go astray because we shall have willed to do so.’

* * * * *

Essay 30. ‘A monster-child’ describes a small child whose physical form is radically abnormal. Montaigne offers a [C]-tagged remark: ‘What we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his creation the infinity of forms he has included in it. . . . Whatever happens contrary to custom we say is contrary to nature. **Nothing whatsoever is not in harmony with nature.** May nature’s universal reason drive out of us the error and astonishment that novelty brings us.’

* * * * *

31. Anger

[A] Plutarch is admirable throughout, but especially where he judges human actions. When he is comparing Lyncurgus with Numa we can see the fine things he says about our great foolishness in abandoning children to the government and care of their fathers.

[C] Most of our states, as Aristotle says, . . . leave to each individual man the guidance of his wife and children according to his foolish and thoughtless whims. Sparta and Crete are almost the only states that have entrusted the education of children to the laws. [A] Who does not see that everything in a state depends on their education and nurture? and yet this

is indiscriminately left to the mercy of the parents, however foolish or wicked they may be.

·BRUTALITY TOWARDS CHILDREN·

Among other things, how many times have I been tempted

the next phrase: *dresser une farce*

translated by Florio: to have a play or comedie made

by Cotton: to get up a farce

by Frame: to set up some trick

by Screech: to make a dramatic intervention

to avenge little boys whom I saw being flayed, knocked down and bruised by a parent in a fury and frenzy of anger! You can see the fire and rage flashing from his/her eyes—

^[B] ‘They are carried away by burning wrath, like boulders wrenched free from the cliff crashing down the precipitous slope’ [Juvenal]

(and according to Hippocrates the most dangerous maladies are those that contort the face)—^[A] with shrill wounding voices, often against children who are barely weaned. And then—look!—•children lamed and knocked stupid by blows, and •our judicial system taking no note of it, as though these maimings and dislocations were not being inflicted on members of our commonwealth: ^[B] ‘It is good to have given a citizen to the people and the state, if you make him fit for his country, good at farming, good in war and peace’ [Juvenal].

·ANGER AND THE JUDICIAL TEMPERAMENT·

^[A] No passion disturbs the soundness of our judgement as much as anger does. No-one would hesitate to punish with death a judge who had condemned someone as a criminal out of anger; why is it any more permissible for fathers and schoolmasters to whip and chastise children in anger? It is no longer correction, it is vengeance. Chastisement takes

the place of medicine for children; and would we tolerate a doctor who was worked up and angry with his patient?

We ourselves, to behave rightly, should never lay a hand on our servants as long as our anger lasts. While our pulse is beating and we can feel the emotion, let us put off the business; things will truly seem different to us once we have quieted and cooled down. Until then passion is in command, it is passion that speaks, not we ourselves. ^[B] Seen through anger, faults appear to us larger, like objects seen through a mist. Let a hungry man use meat; but someone who wants to use punishment should neither hunger nor thirst for it.

^[A] And then, the punishments that are inflicted with deliberation and discernment are received much better, and with more benefit, by the punished person. Otherwise he thinks he has been condemned unjustly by a man shaking with anger and fury; he cites in his own justification the extraordinary movements of his master, his inflamed face, his unaccustomed oaths, his excitement, and his precipitate haste. . . . Suetonius relates that Caius Rabirius, after being condemned by Caesar and having appealed to the people, won his appeal mainly because of the animosity and bitterness that Caesar had brought to that judgement.

·SAYING AND DOING·

Saying is one thing, doing another; the preaching and the preacher should be considered separately from one another. Those who in our time have tried to shake the truth of our Church through the vices of its ministers have given themselves an easy game; the Church gets its testimonies from elsewhere. That way of arguing is stupid; it would throw everything into confusion. A man of good *moeurs* can hold false opinions, and the truth can be preached by a wicked man—yes, even a man who does not believe it. It is doubtless a beautiful harmony when saying and doing go together, and

I don't mean to deny that saying has more authority and efficacy when followed by doing; as Eudamidas said on hearing a philosopher discoursing about war: 'Fine remarks, but the man who is making them is not to be believed, for he does not have ears accustomed to the sound of the trumpet.' And when Cleomenes heard a rhetorician declaiming about valour, he burst out laughing; the speaker took offence, but Cleomenes replied: 'I would do the same if it were a swallow speaking about that; but if it were an eagle, I would gladly hear him.'

I observe in the writings of the ancients, it seems to me, that he who says what he thinks drives it home much more forcefully than he who only pretends. Listen to Cicero speaking of the love of liberty, and listen to Brutus speaking of it—Brutus whose very writings ring out to you that he was a man to buy liberty at the price of his life. Let Cicero, the father of eloquence, treat the contempt for death; and let Seneca treat it too; the former drags it out lifelessly and you feel that he is trying to make you decide on something that he himself has not decided on. He does not put courage into you, for he himself he has none. Seneca animates and inflames you.

I never read an author, especially one of those who treat of virtue and conduct, without carefully inquiring into what sort of man he was. ^[B]The ephors of Sparta, seeing a dissolute man making a useful proposal to the people, ordered him to stop and asked a man in good standing to claim the proposal as his own and to speak for it.

·A DIGRESSION·

^[A]Plutarch's writings, if savoured properly, reveal him to us well enough, and I think I know him even into his soul; yet I wish we had some memoirs of his life. And I have embarked on this digression because of the gratitude I feel towards

Aulus Gellius for having left us in writing this account of Plutarch's *moeurs* [see Glossary], which brings us back to my subject of anger.

A slave of his, a bad and vicious man, but one whose ears were pretty well filled with the lessons of philosophy, having been stripped for some fault by order of Plutarch, at first while being whipped muttered that there was no reason for this and that he had not done anything wrong; but eventually he started to shout and insult his master in good earnest, accusing him of not being a philosopher as he boasted; since he had often heard him say that it was ugly to get angry—indeed, had written a book about it—and the fact that right then, immersed in anger, he was having him cruelly flogged completely gave the lie to his writings. To which Plutarch, quite cool and calm, replied:

'What makes you think, ruffian, that I am angry at this time? Does my face, my voice, my colouring or my speech give you any evidence that I am excited? I do not think that my eyes are wild, my face agitated, or my voice terrifying. Am I flushed? Am I foaming at the mouth? Do words escape me that I will later regret? Am I quivering? Am I shaking with rage? For I tell you, those are the true signs of anger.'

Then turning to the man who was doing the flogging he said 'Carry on with your job, while this fellow and I are arguing.' That is Gellius's account.

·ANGER AND PUNISHMENT·

On returning from a war in which he had been captain-general, Archytas of Tarentum found everything in a mess in his household, and his lands lying fallow through the bad management of his steward. He sent for him and said: 'Go. If I were not so angry I would give you a good thrashing.' So too Plato: inflamed against one of his slaves he handed

him over to Speusippus for punishment, excusing himself from putting his hand to it himself on the grounds that he was angry. Charillus, a Spartan, said to a helot who was behaving too insolently and boldly toward him: 'By the gods! If I were not angry I would have you put to death at once.'

It is a passion that takes pleasure in itself and flatters itself. How often, when we are all worked up for a wrong reason and are then offered some good defence or excuse, we are vexed even at truth and innocence! I recall an amazing example of this from antiquity. Piso, a person of notable virtue in everything else, was moved to anger against one of his soldiers. Returning alone from foraging, the soldier could give no account of where he had left his comrade; Piso was convinced that he had murdered him, and promptly condemned him to death. When he was at the gallows, along comes the lost comrade! At this the whole army was overjoyed and after many hugs and embraces between the two men the executioner brought them both into the presence of Piso, everyone present expecting that Piso himself would be delighted. Quite the contrary: for, through embarrassment and vexation, his continuing fury doubled and, by a quibble that his passion promptly provided him with, he found the three men guilty. . . . , •the first soldier because there was a sentence against him, •the second, the one who had gone missing, because he was the cause of his comrade's death, and •the executioner for not having obeyed the command that had been given to him. . . .

•CONTROLLING ONE'S ANGER•

Of the most choleric man in France (and it is always a defect, but more excusable in a military man, for in that profession there are situations that cannot do without it) I often say that he is the most long-suffering man I know in curbing his anger; it agitates him with such violence and frenzy—

'as when, beneath a brazen cauldron, the fire roars noisily into flame and licks its sides, the water boils with the heat and, madly foaming in its prison, breaks over the edge and can contain itself no longer, sending black fumes off into the air' [Virgil]

—that he has to constrain himself cruelly to moderate it. For my part, I know of no passion that I could ever make such an effort to conceal and resist. I would not rate wisdom at so high a price. I look not so much at what a man does as at what it costs him not to do worse.

Another was boasting to me of the self-control and mildness of his *moeurs*, which is indeed notable. I said to him that it was indeed something, especially in people of eminent rank like himself, whom everyone watches, to present themselves to the world always as even-tempered; but that the main thing was to provide inwardly for oneself, and that for my taste it was not good management of one's affairs to eat one's heart out. I was afraid he was doing just that, so as to maintain that mask, that outward appearance of control.

By hiding our anger we drive it into our bodies; as Diogenes said to Demosthenes, who for fear of being seen in a tavern kept drawing back further inside: 'The further back you go, the deeper in you go!' I advise that it is better to give one's valet a slap on the cheek a little out of season than to torture oneself so as to put on an appearance of calm wisdom. And I would rather *produce* my passions than brood over them to my cost. They grow weaker when they are vented, expressed. It is better for them to be jabbed outwards than for them to be turned against us. [C] 'All defects are lighter in the open, and most pernicious when concealed beneath a pretence of soundness' [Seneca].

[B] I warn those of my family who have the right to show their anger, firstly •to husband their anger and not scatter it

at random for that impedes its effect and its weight. Heedless and continual scolding becomes habitual, which makes everyone discount it. The scolding you give a servant for stealing is not felt, because it is the same as he has seen you use against him a hundred times already, for having badly rinsed a glass or badly placed a stool. Secondly, •not to get angry in the void, and to see to it that their reprimand reaches the person they are complaining about; for ordinarily they are yelling before he is in their presence and go on yelling for ages after he has gone, 'and petulant madness turns against itself' [Claudian]. They go at their own shadows, and carry this tempest into places where no-one is punished or affected by it, except such as cannot stand the racket of their voice. . . .

•MONTAIGNE'S HANDLING OF HIS OWN ANGER•

When I get angry it is as keenly, but also as briefly and privately, as I can manage. I lose my temper in haste and in violence, but not in such a state of agitation that I go hurling about all sorts of insults at random, heedless of whether I land my arrows pertinently where I think they will hurt the most (for I ordinarily use only my tongue). My servants get off more easily on big occasions than on small ones. The small ones take me by surprise, and bad luck will have it that once you are over the edge, no matter what gave you the shove, you always go right to the bottom. The fall provides its own rushing and excitement and confusion. On the big occasions I have this satisfaction, that they are so just that everyone expects to see a reasonable anger arise; I glory in disappointing their expectations. I prepare and brace myself against those occasions; they dig into my brain and threaten to carry me very far if I follow where they lead. It is easy to prevent myself from getting into this passion, and I am

strong enough, if I am expecting it, to repel its onslaught, however violent its cause; but once it takes over and grips me, it carries me away, no matter how trivial its cause.

This is the bargain I strike with those who may have a dispute with me: When you sense that I am the first to get excited, let me go my way, right or wrong; I will do the same for you in return. The tempest is bred only by the concurrence of angers, which are prone to produce one another and are not born at the same instant. Let us allow each to run its course; then we always have peace. A useful prescription but hard to carry out.

It sometimes happens that without any real emotion I put on an act of anger in order to govern my household. As age makes my disposition more sour, I make an effort to oppose it; and I shall succeed from now on, if I can, in being all the less peevish and hard to please as I shall have more excuse and inclination to be so, although hitherto I have been among those who are least so.

[A] One more word to close this chapter. Aristotle says that anger sometimes serves as a weapon for virtue and valour. That is likely; yet those who deny it have an amusing reply: it must be some new-fangled weapon; for we wield the other weapons, this one wields us; our hand does not guide it, it guides our hand; it holds us, we do not hold it.

32. In defence of Seneca and Plutarch

[A] My familiarity with these two great men and the help they give to my old age—[C] and to my book, which is built entirely out of their spoils—[A] oblige me to espouse their honour.

As for Seneca, among the thousands of little books that those of the so-called reformed religion¹ circulate in

¹ *la Religion pretendue reformée*, the French Catholic church's official name for Calvinism.

defence of their cause (which sometimes come from good hands—what a pity they aren't occupied on a better subject!), I once saw one which extended and filled out the likeness the author wanted to find between the rule of our poor late King Charles IX and that of Nero, by likening the late Cardinal of Lorraine to Seneca: their fortunes, having both been first in the governments of their monarchs, and along with that their *mœurs*, their endowments and their conduct. In my opinion that comparison honours the Cardinal; for—

although I am one of those who highly esteem his mind, his eloquence, his zeal for religion and for the King's service, and his good fortune in being born in an age when it was so new, so rare and at the same time so necessary for the public good to have an ecclesiastical personage of such nobility and dignity, competent and capable of his charge

—to tell the truth I don't consider his ability nearly as great, or his virtue as clear and entire and firm, as Seneca's.

Now, this book I am speaking of, to attain its purpose, offers a deeply insulting description of Seneca, having borrowed these slurs from Dion the historian, whose testimony I simply do not believe. For—

apart from the fact that Dion is inconsistent: he calls Seneca very wise and also a mortal enemy of Nero's vices, yet later makes him mean, given to usury, ambitious, cowardly, voluptuous, and playing the philosopher on false pretences

—Seneca's virtue is so evidently alive and vigorous in his writings, which themselves provide such a clear defence against some of these imputations, such as that of his wealth and excessive spending, that I will not accept any testimony to the contrary. Moreover, it is more reasonable in such matters to believe the Roman historians than to believe the Greeks and foreigners. Well, Tacitus and the others speak

very honourably both of his life and of his death, portraying him to us as in all things a very excellent and very virtuous person. And I will make no criticism of Dion's judgement except this one, which is unavoidable: his sense of Roman affairs is so *diseased* that he ventures to champion the causes of Julius Caesar against Pompey, and of Antony against Cicero.

Let us come to Plutarch. Jean Bodin is a good contemporary author, endowed with far better judgement than the mob of scribblers of Plutarch's century, and deserves to be judged and considered. I find him a bit rash in that passage in his *Method of History* where he accuses Plutarch not only of ignorance (on which I would let him have his say, for that is not my quarry) but also of frequently writing 'things that are incredible and entirely fabulous' (those are his words). If he had simply said 'things otherwise than they are', that would have been no great censure; for what we have not seen we take from the hands of others and on trust; and I see that he sometimes deliberately tells the same story in different ways. For example, Hannibal's judgement of the three best generals that ever lived appears in one way in Plutarch's 'Life of Flaminius' and another way in his 'Life of Pyrrhus'. But to charge him with having accepted incredible and impossible things as genuine coin is to accuse the most judicious author in the world of lack of judgement.

And here is Bodin's example. 'As', he says, 'when he relates that a Spartan boy allowed his whole stomach to be torn up by a fox-cub he had stolen, and kept it hidden under his robe until he died, rather than disclose his theft.' In the first place I find that a badly chosen example, since it is hard indeed to prescribe limits to the powers of the faculties of the soul, whereas with bodily powers we have more basis for setting bounds to them and knowing them. For that reason if I had to choose an example I would have taken one of

the second (·bodily·) sort, some of which are less credible. Among others, what Plutarch narrates about Pyrrhus: that, all wounded as he was, he gave such a great blow with his sword to an enemy clad in full armour that he split him from top to bottom so that his body fell into two parts.

In Bodin's own example I find no great miracle, nor do I accept the excuse that he makes for Plutarch, that he added the words 'so they say', to warn us to keep our belief in check. For he would not himself have accepted, or invited us to believe, intrinsically incredible things (apart from things accepted on authority and reverence for antiquity or religion). And that here he is not using 'so they say' for that purpose is easy to see from what he relates elsewhere concerning the powers of endurance of Spartan boys, things that happened in his own time and are even harder to accept. . . . [Montaigne gives examples, and continues through two pages of episodes—not all from ancient Sparta, and some from his own day—in which horrible tortures are endured; followed by an oddly placed ^[B]-tagged paragraph about 'the stubbornness of women' in maintaining their opinions, closing with the remark that 'stubbornness is the sister of constancy, at least in vigour and firmness'.]

As I have said elsewhere, we should not judge what is possible and what is not by what *we* find credible or incredible. And it is a great error into which most people fall (^[C]I am not saying this about Bodin) ^[A]to project onto others their beliefs about what they could not do ^[C]or would not do. It seems to each man that the ruling pattern of nature is in him, and that everyone else should follow it. Behaviours that do not square with his are counterfeit and artificial. When thinking about anyone else's actions or faculties, he starts by thinking about his own example: matters go with all the world as they go with him. What brutish stupidity!

^[A]As for me, I consider some men far above me, especially among the ancients; and although I clearly recognise my inability to follow them on foot, I nevertheless follow them with my eyes and judge the springs that raise them so high, ^[C]the seeds of which I somewhat perceive in myself (as I do also ·the seeds of· the ultimate baseness in minds, which does not surprise me and which I do not disbelieve either). I can clearly see the spiral by which those great souls wind themselves higher; ^[A]and I wonder at their greatness. Those flights that I find very beautiful I embrace; and if my powers do not reach them, at least my judgement applies itself to them very gladly.

The other example Bodin cites of 'things that are incredible and entirely fabulous' said by Plutarch is the statement that Agesilaus was fined by the ephors for having drawn his citizens' heart and will to himself personally. I do not know what mark of falsity he finds in that; but at any rate Plutarch is speaking there of things that must have been much better known to him than to us; and it was no novelty in Greece for men to be punished and exiled simply for being too well liked by their citizens. . . .

In the same place there is another accusation that annoys me on Plutarch's behalf. It is where Bodin says that Plutarch showed good faith in his matching Romans with Romans and Greeks among themselves, but not in ·matching· Romans with Greeks. Witness, he says,

- Cicero and Demosthenes,
- Cato and Aristides,
- Sulla and Lysander,
- Marcellus and Pelopidas,
- Pompey and Agesilaus,

reckoning that he favoured the Greeks by giving them such different companions [i.e. by treating them as comparable with men who were so clearly their superiors]. That is to attack precisely

what is most excellent and praiseworthy in Plutarch. For in those comparisons (which are the most admirable part of his works, and in my opinion the one he took special satisfaction in) the fidelity and sincerity of his judgements equals their depth and weight. He is a philosopher who teaches us virtue. Let us see whether we can protect him from this accusation of prevarication and falsehood.

What I can think of as having given rise to this judgement is the great and dazzling lustre that the Roman names take on in our minds. It does not seem to us that Demosthenes can ever equal the glory of someone, Cicero, who was a consul, proconsul and quaestor of that great republic. But considering the truth of the matter and the men in themselves, which was Plutarch's chief aim, and comparing them in respect of their *moeurs*, their natures, their abilities, rather than how well things went for them, I think, contrary to Bodin, that Cicero and the older Cato fall short of their parallels Demosthenes and Aristides. For his purpose I would rather have chosen the younger Cato compared to Phocion; for in that pair it would be more plausible to find an inequality to the advantage of the Roman.

As for Marcellus, Sulla and Pompey, I quite see that their exploits in war are more expansive, glorious and splendid than those of the Greeks Plutarch compares them with; but no more in war than anywhere else are the finest and most virtuous actions always the most famous. I often see the names of captains smothered under the splendour of other names of less merit; witness Labienus, Ventidius, Telesinus and many others. And if I had to look at things in such a way as to complain on behalf of the Greeks, might I not say that Camillus is far less to be compared to Themistocles, the Gracchi to Agis and Cleomenes, and Numa to Lycurgus? But it is folly to try to judge by one feature things with so many aspects.

When Plutarch compares them, he is not making them equal. Who could bring out their differences more clearly and conscientiously than he does? When he comes to match Pompey against Agesilaus in terms of victories, martial exploits, the might of their armies, and triumphs, this is what he says: 'I do not believe that even Xenophon, if he were alive and allowed to write all he wished in favour of Agesilaus, would dare to judge them to be comparable.' When he speaks of matching Lysander to Sulla, he says: 'There is no comparison, either in the number of victories or in the risks they ran in battle; for Lysander won only two naval battles. . . ' and so on.

That is not taking anything away from the Romans. By simply placing them beside the Greeks he cannot have wronged them, whatever disparity there may be between them. Plutarch does not weigh them against each other in the lump; there is no over-all preference; he compares and judges the parts and the circumstances one after another. So anyone who wanted to convict him of partiality would have to pick to pieces one particular judgement of his, or complain in a general way that he was wrong to match this Greek against that Roman since there were others that resembled each other more closely and were better fitted for comparison.

33. Ambition and lust

[Montaigne called this essay 'The story of Spurina', but that story has just one paragraph at ■ on pages 104–105.]

[A] Philosophy does not think it has used its resources badly when it has given reason the sovereign mastery of our soul and the authority to hold our appetites in check.

·TWO KINDS OF APPETITE·

Those who judge that there are no appetites more violent than the ones that love engenders have this in favour of their opinion: those appetites affect the body and the soul; the whole man is possessed by them, health itself depends on them, and medicine [here meaning 'the medical profession'] is sometimes constrained to pander to them.

But on the opposite side it could also be said that this bodily element somewhat lessens and weakens them; for such desires are subject to satiety, and are capable of material remedies. Some men, having wanted to deliver their souls from the continual alarms caused by this appetite, have resorted to the amputation of the parts that were depraved by arousal. Others have quite beaten down their strength and ardour by frequent applications of cold things such as snow and vinegar. Our ancestors' haircloths were used for this purpose; they are made of woven horsehair, which some made into shirts and others into girdles to torture their loins.

Not long ago a prince told me that in his youth, on a solemn feast-day at the court of King Francis I, where everyone was dressed up, he had the idea of wearing the hair-shirt (he still has it) of his father; but for all his devoutness he could not endure waiting until night-time to take it off, and it made him ill for a long time. He added that he did not think that there was any youthful heat so sharp as not to be mortified by the use of this remedy. But perhaps he had not experienced the most burning heats, for experience shows us that such an emotion often maintains itself under rough and wretched garments, and that hair-shirts [*haïres*] do not always make those who wear them wretched [*heres*].

Xenocrates set about it more rigorously; for when his disciples, to test his continence, smuggled into his bed the beautiful and famous courtesan Lais, quite naked apart from . . . the weapons of her beauty and her wanton charms,

Xenocrates felt that despite his reasonings and his rules his recalcitrant body was beginning to mutiny; so he burned the members of his that had lent an ear to this rebellion.

On the other hand, the passions that are entirely in the soul—ambition, avarice and so on—give much more work to *reason*, because where they are concerned it has nothing to back it up except its own resources. Also, those appetites are not capable of satiety—indeed they are sharpened and increased by enjoyment.

The example of Julius Caesar, all by itself, can show us the disparity of these appetites, for never was a man more addicted to sexual pleasure; . . . but the other passion of ambition, with which he was also infinitely smitten, coming into conflict this one, immediately made it give way. [The ellipsis replaces a page of details of Caesar's care over his physical appearance and a list of seven of his mistresses, two of them queens.]

[C] Remembering Mohammed II in this connection—the one who subjugated Constantinople and finally extinguished the Greek name—I know of no better case of these two passions being evenly balanced, equally indefatigable as lecher and as soldier. But when the two occur together in his life, the quarrelsome ardour always dominates the amorous one. And the latter did not regain sovereign authority until—though this was out of its natural season—he was very old and no longer able to carry the burden of war. . . .

·JULIUS CAESAR'S MANY VIRTUES AND ONE VICE·

I return to Caesar. [A] His pleasures never made him steal a single minute, or turn aside one step, from opportunities to aggrandise himself. This passion ·of ambition· ruled so sovereignly in him over all the others, and possessed his soul with such full authority, that it carried him wherever it wanted to go. That vexes me when I reflect on the greatness of this person in all other respects and on his marvellous

gifts; he was so competent in every sort of learning that there is hardly any realm of knowledge on which he has not written. He was such an orator that many preferred his eloquence to Cicero's; and he himself, in my opinion, did not think himself much inferior to him in that endowment; his two *Anti-Catos* were mainly written as a counterweight to Cicero's fine style in his *Cato*.

As for the rest, was there ever a man's soul so vigilant, so active and so enduring of labour as his? And without doubt it was also embellished with many seeds of virtue—living, natural ones I mean, not counterfeit. He was singularly sober, and so unpicky about food that Oppius tells that one day when he was served with medicated oil in mistake for salad oil he ate heartily of it so as not to embarrass his host. Another time he had his baker whipped for supplying him with bread other than the ordinary sort.

Cato himself used to say that Caesar was the first sober man to set out on the road to the ruin of his country. As for the fact that this same Cato called him a drunkard once, what happened was this. They were both in the Senate, where the conspiracy of Cataline—which Caesar was suspected of being involved in—was being discussed; a sealed letter was brought in to Caesar; and Cato, thinking it was some warning from the conspirators, demanded that he hand it over, which Caesar was forced to do to avoid further suspicion. It happened to be a love letter that Cato's sister Servilia had written to him. Cato read it and tossed it back to him saying 'Take it, drunkard!' This, I say, was a term of angry disdain rather than an express accusation of drunkenness. . . . I would add that the vice Cato reproached him with is a wonderfully close neighbour to the one in which he had surprised Caesar; for Venus and Bacchus are prone to go together, according to the proverb; ^[B] though in my case Venus is more lively when accompanied by sobriety.

^[A] There are countless examples of his mildness and clemency toward those who had harmed him—I mean besides those he provided when the Civil War was still in progress; he himself makes clear enough in his writings that in those he acted so as to cajole his enemies, making them less fearful of his future victory and domination. But it must be said that if those examples do not suffice to show us his natural mildness, they show us at least a marvellous confidence and greatness of courage in that man. It often happened that he sent whole captured armies back to his enemy after having vanquished them, without even deigning to make them swear binding oaths if not to support him at least to refrain from making war on him. He took certain of Pompey's captains three or four times, and as many times set them free. Pompey declared that all those who did not fight by his side were his enemies; Caesar had it proclaimed that all those who kept still and did not actually take up arms against him were his friends. To those of his captains who deserted him to take service elsewhere he sent their arms, horses and equipment. The cities he had taken by force he left free to follow which side they pleased, leaving no garrison with them except the memory of his mildness and clemency. On the day of his great battle at Pharsalia he forbade laying hands on Roman citizens except as an ultimate extremity.

These are very hazardous traits, in my judgement; it is not surprising that in the civil wars we are undergoing, those who are fighting against their country's former constitution, as he was, do not imitate his example. They are extraordinary methods, which only Caesar's fortune and admirable foresight could manage successfully. When I reflect on the incomparable greatness of that soul, I pardon victory for being unable to shake free of him, even in that very unjust and very iniquitous cause.

To return to his clemency: we have many genuine examples of it during the time of his ascendancy when, having everything under his thumb, he had no further need to dissemble. Caius Memmius had written some very forceful orations against him, to which he had replied sharply; yet soon afterwards he helped to make him consul. [After three more examples:] He feared his enemies even less than he hated them. When certain conspiracies against his life were revealed to him, he contented himself with a public edict stating they were known to him, without further prosecuting those responsible.

As for his concern for his friends: when Caius Oppius was taken ill while travelling with him, he let him have the only available lodging and spent the night on the hard ground in the open.

As for his justice: he had a servant of whom he was particularly fond put to death for having slept with the wife of a Roman knight, although no-one had complained.

Never did a man show more moderation in victory or more resolution in adversity.

But all these fine dispositions were spoiled and stifled by that furious passion of ambition, which he let himself be carried away by—so forcibly that one may easily maintain that its hand was on the tiller that steered all his actions. It changed him from a liberal man into public thief, to provide for his profusion and largesse; it brought him to make that base and wicked statement that if the worst and most abandoned men in the world had done him faithful service in his rise to grandeur he would cherish and advance them by his power as well as the most worthy men; it intoxicated him with a vanity so extreme that he ventured

- to boast in the presence of his fellow-citizens that he had made that great Roman Republic a name without form and without a body,

- to declare that his replies must henceforth serve as laws,
- to remain seated in receiving the Senate when it came to call on him in a body, and
- to allow himself to be worshipped as a god and have divine honours paid to him in his presence.

To sum up, this one vice, in my judgement, ruined in him the finest and richest nature there ever was, making his memory abominable to all good men because he willed to seek his own glory in the ruin of his country, the subversion of the most powerful and flourishing republic the world will ever see.

On the opposite side, many examples could be found of great public figures—Mark Antony and others—whose lust made them forget the conduct of their affairs; but whenever sexual love and ambition were evenly balanced and came to blows with similar forces, I have not the least doubt that the latter would win the victor's prize.

·THE WRONG WAY TO CONTROL LUST·

.... It is a considerable thing to rein in our appetites by reasoned argument, or to compel our members, by violence, to keep to their duty. But to flog ourselves in the interests of our neighbours—not merely

- to rid ourselves of that sweet passion that tickles us and of the pleasure we feel in seeing that we are attractive to others and loved and courted by everyone,

but

- to loathe and abhor our charms that provoke such things, condemning our own beauty because someone else is inflamed by it

—I have seen hardly any examples of that. Here is one.

■ In Tuscany there was a youth called Spurina...who was endowed with singular beauty, so extreme that the

chastest of eyes could not chastely endure its brilliance. Not content with merely *not encouraging* the feverish fire that he kindled everywhere, he entered into a furious rage against himself and against those rich gifts that nature had endowed him with, as if they should be blamed for the fault of others, and deliberately slashed and disfigured with the scars of his wounds the perfect proportion and symmetry that nature had so carefully observed in his face.

^[C]To speak my mind about this: I wonder at such actions more than I honour them; those extremes are enemies to my rules. Its purpose was fine, conscientious, but in my opinion a little lacking in wisdom. What if his ugliness came to provoke others to the sin of •scorn or hatred, or of •envy of the glory of so rare a merit, or of •calumny, interpreting this impulse of his as frantic ambition? Is there any form [here = 'kind of face'] from which vice cannot, if it wants to, draw an opportunity to exercise itself in some manner? It would have been more just and glorious to have made these gifts of God a basis for exemplary virtue and orderly living.

·THE DIFFICULTY OF MODERATION·

Those men who evade the common duties and the countless thorny and many-faceted rules that bind a punctiliously decent man in civil life spare themselves a great deal, in my opinion, however fierce the penalty they inflict on themselves. It is a kind of *dying* in order to escape the trouble of *living well*. They may win some other prize, but it has never seemed to me that they would get the prize for difficulty. There is nothing more arduous than standing upright amid the floods of this pressing world, loyally responding to and satisfying all the parts of one's charge.

It may be easier to do without the whole ·female· sex altogether than to behave rightly in every respect in relation to one's wife; and one can live a more carefree life in poverty

than in a properly managed abundance. Using something in a reasonable way is harder than abstaining from it. Moderation is a virtue that keeps one busier than suffering does. The younger Scipio's way of living rightly has a thousand aspects; Diogenes' has only one. Diogenes' life surpasses ordinary lives in innocence by as much as very accomplished lives surpass his in usefulness and power.

34. Julius Caesar's methods of waging war

^[A]We read that many leaders in war held particular books in special esteem, for example Alexander the Great—Homer; ^[C]Scipio Africanus—Xenophon; ^[A]Marcus Brutus—Polybius; Charles V—Philippe de Commines. And it is said that in our day Machiavelli is still in repute in other countries. But the late Marshal Strozzi, who took Caesar for his choice, undoubtedly chose better; for in truth he should be the breviary of every warrior, as being the true and sovereign model of the military art. And God knows with what grace and beauty he embellished that rich material in a style so pure, so delicate and so perfect that there are, to my taste, no writings in the world comparable with his in this respect.

I want to record here certain individual and unusual features, on the subject of his wars, that have remained in my memory.

·DIFFERENT USES OF DECEIT·

When his army was in some dismay because of the rumour then current about the great forces King Juba was leading against him, he assembled his troops to reassure them and put heart into them. Instead of playing down the opinion his soldiers had formed and minimising his enemy's resources, he took a course quite opposite to the one we are accustomed to: he told them not to take any more trouble trying to find

out what forces the enemy was leading, as he had very certain information about that, and then told them that the enemy's army numbered—and then he gave a number much greater than the true one and than the one that had figured in the rumours in his army. In this he was following the opinion of Cyrus (as reported by Xenophon) that being wrong on such a matter is better when it leads to the enemy's being found weaker than had been expected than when it leads to finding that in reality they are stronger.

He trained his soldiers above all to simply obey orders, without getting involved in criticising or discussing their captain's plans, which he told them about only at the last moment; and if they discovered anything about them he took pleasure in changing them on the spot in order to fool them; and often for this purpose after appointing a certain place to camp he would march right past it and lengthen the day's march, especially in bad and rainy weather.

At the beginning of his wars in Gaul, the Swiss sent envoys to him asking for leave to cross through Roman territory; having already decided to stop them by force, he put on a friendly face and delayed replying for a few days so as to have time to assemble his army. Those poor folk did not know what an excellent manager of *time* he was; he often said that the most sovereign parts of a commander's equipment are •knowledge of how to seize opportunities at the right moment and •speed in execution, which in his exploits was truly unheard-of and incredible.

·RELATIONS WITH HIS SOLDIERS·

If he was scarcely scrupulous in that affair ·with the Swiss·, getting the advantage over his enemy under colour of a treaty of agreement, he was as little so in not requiring in his soldiers any virtue but valour, and punishing hardly any vice

except mutiny and disobedience. Often after his victories he would give them free rein for licentiousness, releasing them for a while from the rules of military discipline, adding that he had soldiers so well trained that even when perfumed and musked they would still go furiously into combat. Indeed he liked them to be richly armed, getting them to wear armour engraved in gold and silver, so that their concern not to lose it would make them fiercer in self-defence.

When he spoke to them he called them 'comrades', a term we still use. His successor, Augustus, changed that, believing that Caesar had done it to meet practical needs, to flatter the heart of men who followed him only as volunteers,. . . but that this usage was beneath the dignity of an emperor and general of an army; and he restored the practice of calling them simply 'soldiers'.

With this courtesy, however, Caesar combined great severity in keeping men in check. When the ninth legion mutinied near Placentia, he broke it¹ and put it to shame, although Pompey was then still afoot; and he restored it to favour only after many entreaties. He appeased his men more by authority and by audacity than by gentleness.

When he talks of his crossing of the river Rhine into Germany he says that, considering it unworthy of the dignity of the Roman people to bring his army across in boats, he had a bridge built so that he could cross on foot. It was there that he built that astonishing bridge, the construction of which he described in detail; for in no place is he so prone to dwell on his achievements as in showing us the subtlety of his inventions in manual works of this kind.

·HIS ELOQUENCE·

I have also noticed that he sets great store by his exhortations to the soldiers before battle; for when he wants to show

¹ *il la cassa*, perhaps meaning that he kicked it out of the army; there is scholarly debate over how Caesar ended the Placentia mutiny.

that he was taken by surprise or hard pressed, he always mentions that he did not even have time to harangue his army. Before that great battle against the Turones, he says:

'Caesar, having seen to everything else, ran at once to wherever fortune took him to exhort his people; meeting the tenth legion he only had time to tell them to remember their accustomed valour, not to be thrown into confusion, and boldly to withstand the adversaries' charge. Then, as the enemy were already within bow-shot, he gave the signal to engage; he at once crossed the field to encourage others, but found that they had already joined battle.'

That is what he says about it—i.e. about addressing the troops—in that place.

In truth, his tongue did him notable services in many places; and even in his own time his military eloquence was so highly esteemed that many in his army wrote down his speeches; which led to the compiling of several volumes of them that long outlived him. His speech had particular graces, so that his intimates, including Augustus, when they heard readings from them recognised things—right down to phrases, to words—that were not his.

·HIS SPEED·

The first time that he left Rome with a public command, he reached the river Rhone in eight days, having in his coach •in front of him a secretary or two continually writing [to his dictation?] and •behind him the man who carried his sword. And certainly, even if one were merely travelling and doing nothing else, one could hardly equal the speed with which—always victorious—having left Gaul and pursuing Pompey to Brundisium, he subjugated Italy in eighteen days; returned from Brundisium to Rome; from Rome he went right into the heart of Spain, where he surmounted extreme

difficulties in the war against Afranius and Petreius, and then to the long siege of Massilia. From there he returned into Macedonia, and beat the Roman army at Pharsalia; pursued Pompey to Egypt, which he subjugated; went on from there to Syria and the region of Pontus, where he fought Pharnaces; and from there to Africa, where he defeated Scipio and Juba; and retraced his steps through Italy into Spain, where he defeated the sons of Pompey: ^[B] 'Swifter than lightning and a tigress defending her young' [Lucan]. 'It was like a landslide rushing down the mountain slopes when land is uprooted by the wind or loosened by the lashing rain or undermined by the force of passing years: as the huge mass crashes down into the void, it makes the earth tremble and bears away forests with their herds and herdsmen' [Virgil].

^[A] Talking of the siege of Avaricum, he says that it was his custom to stay night and day with the workers he was employing. In all his important undertakings he did his own reconnoitring, and never brought his army into a place that he had not first looked over. . . .

He was accustomed to say that he liked a victory won by thought better than a victory won by force. In the war against Petreius and Afranius, when fortune presented him with an obvious opportunity to gain the advantage he rejected it, hoping, he says, to finish off his enemies with a little more time but less risk. . . .

·HIS CONTEMPT FOR DANGER·

^[A] I find him a little more restrained and deliberate in his enterprises than Alexander, who seems to seek out dangers and run headlong at them like a rushing torrent that runs into and attacks everything it encounters, without discrimination or choice. . . . Also, when he was occupied in war he was in the flower and first ardour of his youth, whereas Caesar took to war when he was already mature and well

along in years. Besides, Alexander was of a more sanguine, choleric and ardent temperament, and he further stimulated this humour with wine, which Caesar took very sparingly. But whenever the present occasion necessitated it, when the action itself required it, there was never a man who held his life more cheaply than Caesar did.

For my part, it seems to me I read in many of his exploits a determined resolve to get killed so as to avoid the disgrace of being beaten. In that great battle against the Turones, seeing the van of his army wavering, he ran to meet the front ranks of the enemy, without armour, just as he was; and this happened several other times. Hearing that his men were surrounded, he passed in disguise through the enemy army to strengthen them by his presence. Having crossed over to Dyrrachium with very small forces, and seeing that the rest of his army (which he had left to Antony to lead) was slow in following him, he undertook to sail back alone during a very great storm; he made this journey to resume command of the rest of his forces surreptitiously, because the harbours on that side and the whole sea were held by Pompey.

As for exploits carried out with small armed forces, there are many in which the risks he ran exceed anything that military reasoning could justify; for with what feeble means did he undertake to subjugate the kingdom of Egypt and then go on to attack the forces of Scipio and Juba, ten times greater than his own! People like him have had some kind of superhuman confidence in their fortunes; ^[B] and he said that high enterprises should be carried out, not deliberated over.

^[A] After the battle of Pharsalia, having sent his army ahead into Asia, he was crossing the straits of Hellespont with a single ship when he met Lucius Cassius sailing with ten great warships; he had the courage not merely to wait for him but

to head straight for him and summon him to surrender; and he got the better of him.

When he had undertaken that furious siege of Alesia, where the defenders numbered 80,000, and all Gaul had risen up to attack him and raise the siege, gathering an army of 109,000 ¹ horses and 240,000 infantry, what boldness and maniacal confidence it was to continue with the siege and tackle two such problems at the same time! And he did withstand them; after winning that great battle against the forces outside, he soon reduced to submission those he held under siege. . . .

·UNUSUAL CONDUCT, GOOD AND BAD, BY GAULS·

I want to note here two rare and extraordinary events concerning that siege of Alesia. **(i)** One was that the Gauls who had assembled to march on Caesar first counted all their troops and then decided in council to reduce that huge crowd considerably, fearing that they might fall into confusion. This is a novel thing, fearing that one's numbers are too *large*; but looked at it the right way it is indeed likely that an army's size should be kept within limits, whether for the difficulty in feeding it or for the difficulty of leading it and keeping it in order. At least it would be very easy to prove by examples that those monstrously large armies have hardly ever achieved anything worthwhile.

^[C] According to the saying of Cyrus in Xenophon's *Anabasis*, the advantage lies not in the number of men but in the number of good men, the remainder serving to hinder rather than to help. And Bajazet based his decision to give battle to Tamberlane, against the advice of all his captains, mainly on the fact that the uncountable number of the enemy gave him assured hope of their falling into confusion. . . .

¹ Actually, 8,000; Montaigne is thought to have miscopied *IIX milibus* as *CIX milibus*.

[A] The **(ii)** other event was the decision of Vercingetorix, who was named general-in-chief of all the rebelling tribes of Gaul, to go and shut himself up in Alexia. This seems to be contrary both to usage and to military thinking; for a man in command of an entire country should never tie himself down, except in the extreme case where his last position is at stake and there is nothing more to hope for except in defending it. Otherwise he should keep himself free, so as to be able to provide in general for all the regions he controls.

·BACK TO CAESAR·

To get back to Caesar: in the course of time he became (as his friend Oppius testifies) a little more slow and deliberate, thinking that he should not lightly risk the honour of so many victories, which one misfortune could make him lose. When the Italians want to reprove that rash bravery found in young men they call them 'needy of honour', *bisognosi d'honore*; and ·say· that since they are still in such a great famine and dearth of reputation, they are right to seek it at any price—which those who have already acquired a store of it ought not to do. With any appetite there can be a just moderation, in this case between desire for glory and satiety. Plenty of people deal with it in this way.

He was far removed from the scrupulousness of the ancient Romans, who wanted to win in their wars only through simple and natural valour. But he brought to war more conscience than we would nowadays, and did not approve of every sort of means to victory. In the war against Ariovistus, when he was parleying with him, a disturbance broke out between the two armies, started through the fault of Ariovistus's cavalry. During the confusion Caesar found that he had a real advantage over his enemies; but he would not avail himself of it, for fear that he might be accused of having proceeded in bad faith [in offering to talk with Ariovistus].

He customarily wore rich accoutrements in battle, brilliantly coloured so as to make himself stand out.

When approaching the enemy he kept his soldiers on a shorter, tighter rein.

When the ancient Greeks wanted to accuse anyone of extreme incompetence, they would say in common parlance that he could 'neither read nor swim'. Caesar had this same opinion, that the ability to swim was very useful in war, and he derived many advantages from it. When he needed to hurry he ordinarily swam across any rivers he encountered for, like the great Alexander, he liked to travel on foot. In Egypt, when he was forced to escape in a small boat, so many jumped in with him that it was in danger of sinking; he chose to jump into the sea and *swim* out to his fleet, which was more than two hundred yards away, holding his tablets above the water in his left hand and dragging his armed tunic along with his teeth to prevent the enemy from getting the use of it. He was then well on in years.

Never did a general inspire so much trust in his soldiers. At the beginning of his civil wars, each of his centurions offered to pay out of his own purse for one armed man, and the foot-soldiers offered to serve him at their own expense, the better-off ones undertaking further to defray the expenses of the needier.

The late Admiral de Chastillon recently provided a similar case in our own civil wars, for the Frenchmen in his ·Protestant· army provided out of their own purses the pay of the foreigners who accompanied him. There would hardly be found examples of such ardent and such spontaneous devotion among those who follow the old ·Catholic· order, under the old established laws. . . .

[A] Having had the worst of it near Dyracchium, Caesar's soldiers came of their own accord and offered themselves to be chastised and punished, so that he needed to console

rather than rebuke them. One single cohort of his withstood four of Pompey's legions for over four hours, until it was almost completely wiped out with arrows; over 130,000 thousand shafts were found in their trench. One soldier named Scæva, who commanded one of the approaches, maintained himself there, invincible, with one eye transfixed, a pierced shoulder and thigh, and 230 cuts in his shield.

Many of his soldiers who were taken prisoner accepted death rather than promise to join the other side. When Granius Petronius had been captured by Scipio in Africa, Scipio had his companions put to death and then sent word to him that he was giving him his life because he was a man of rank and a quaestor. Petronius replied that Caesar's soldiers were accustomed to giving life to others, not to being given it, and at once killed himself with his own hand.

·A RARE INCIDENT·

There are countless examples of their loyalty. We must not forget the action of the men who were besieged at Salona (a town on Caesar's side against Pompey), for a rare incident that occurred there. Octavius held them besieged; and they were reduced to the extreme necessity in everything: •to make up for their lack of men (since most of them were killed or wounded), they freed all their slaves; •to be able to use their catapults they had to cut off the hair of all the women to make ropes; in addition to which •there was a staggering shortage of food. Yet they resolved never to surrender.

When they had dragged this siege out for so long that Octavius had grown more careless and less attentive to his campaign, they picked one day at about noon, stationed their women and children on the walls so that things should look normal, then sallied out against the besiegers with such fury that they broke through the first, second, and third rank of their guards, then the fourth, then the rest, forcing them to

abandon their entrenchments and driving them right back to their ships; and Octavius himself fled to Dyrrachium, where Pompey was.

Right now I cannot recall having seen any other case where the besieged rout the whole body of the besiegers and win mastery of the field, or where a sortie led to a clear and total victory in battle.

35. Three good wives

^[A] They do not come by the dozen, as everyone knows, and especially in the duties of marriage; for that is a bargain full of so many thorny details that it is hard for a woman's will to stay *whole* in it for long. ·Even· the men, although they are in it on slightly better terms, find it hard to do so.

^[B] The touchstone of a good marriage, and its real proof, is how long the association lasts, and whether it has been constantly pleasant, loyal and agreeable. In our century women more commonly reserve the displays of their good offices and the intensity of their affection for their *late* husbands; ^[C] and then at least they try to bear witness to their good will. Tardy and unseasonable witness! What they show by that is rather that they love their husbands only when they are dead.

^[B] Life is full of fireworks; death ·is full· of love and courtesy. Just as fathers hide their love for their children, so do wives hide theirs for their husbands, so as to maintain a decent respect. This ritual is not to my taste! It is no good their tearing their hair and clawing their faces; I go straight to the ear of a chambermaid or a secretary, 'How did they get on? What were they like when living together?' It always reminds me of that good remark: 'They wail most ostentatiously who grieve least' [Tacitus]. Their glum looks are

odious to the living and useless to the dead. We husbands will cheerfully let them laugh afterwards if they will only laugh with us while we are alive.

[C] If she who spat in my face while I existed comes to massage my feet now that I do not, isn't that enough to make one return from the dead out of vexation? [B] If there is some honour in weeping for husbands, it belongs only to those who have smiled upon theirs; let those who wept when their husbands were alive smile—outwardly as well as inwardly—when they are dead.

So take no notice of those moist eyes and that piteous voice; attend to that bearing, that colouring, the plumpness of those cheeks under those great veils; it is by those that she speaks plain French! There are few widows who do not improve in health, a quality that cannot lie. . . .

So as not to be totally out of step with our usage, I have chosen three wives who on the death of their husbands employed the force of their goodness and affection. But in these the affection is a little different from today's examples; it is so urgent that it leads to a bold sacrifice of life.

·1. A WOMAN (NO NAME GIVEN) 'OF LOW ESTATE'·

[A] The younger Pliny had a neighbour near a house of his in Italy who was appallingly tormented by ulcers that formed on his genitals. His wife seeing him languishing for so long begged him to allow her to examine—very closely, and not hurrying—the state of his malady, and then to tell him, more frankly than anyone else would, what he could expect from it. She obtained this permission, and carefully examined him; she found that it was impossible for him to be cured and that all he could expect was to drag out for a long time a painful and lingering life. So she advised him, as the most sure and sovereign remedy, to kill himself. Finding him a little soft for such a stern measure, she said:

'Do not think, my dear, that the pains I see you suffer do not affect me as much as you, and that I am unwilling to deliver myself from them by taking this medicine that I am prescribing for you. I want to accompany you in the cure as I have in the illness; put aside this fear and think that we shall have only pleasure in this passage that is to free us from such torments. We shall go away happily together.'

Having said this and warmed up her husband's courage, she resolved that they should throw themselves into the sea from a window in their house that opened onto it. And to maintain to her end that loyal and vehement love with which she had embraced him in life, she also wanted him to die in her arms; but fearing that those arms might fail her and that the clasp of her embrace might be loosened by the fall and by fear, she had herself tied to him, tightly bound by their waists. And thus she gave up her life for the repose of her husband's.

This woman was of low estate; among people of that condition it is not so novel to find some sign of rare goodness: 'When Justice finally left this earth, it took its last steps through them' [Virgil]. The other two are noble and rich; examples of virtue rarely lodge among people like that.

·2. ARRIA: *Paete non dolet*·

Arria was the wife of Caecina Paetus, a great man of consular rank. . . . When her husband had been taken prisoner by the Emperor Claudius's men after the defeat of Scribonianus, whose faction he had supported, begged the men who were taking him as a prisoner to Rome to allow her onto their ship, where she would be much less expense and trouble to them than the many people they would need to look after her husband, since she alone would take care of his room, his cooking and all other chores. They refused her this; so she hired a fisherman's boat on the spot, jumped into it, and

used it to follow her husband from Sclavonia.

One day in Rome in the presence of the Emperor she was familiarly approached by Junia, the widow of Scribonianus, because of their shared misfortunes; but she roughly thrust her away with these words: 'Should I even talk to you or listen to you when Scribonianus has died in your lap and you are still alive?' These words and several other signs made her relatives realise that, unable to endure her husband's misfortune, she aimed to do away with herself. Her son-in-law Thrasea begged her not to want to kill herself, saying: 'What? If I incurred a similar misfortune to Caecina's, would you want my wife, your daughter, to do likewise?' 'What! Would I?' she replied. 'Yes, yes, I would, if she had lived as long and in as good accord with you as I have with my husband.' Such answers increased their concern about her and led to their watching her behaviour more closely.

[After an account of a suicide attempt in which she failed:] The end of so admirable a virtue was this: Since her husband Paetus did not have, unaided, a firm enough heart to kill himself as the Emperor's cruelty required him to do, one day she used the appropriate arguments and exhortations to support her advice to him that he should do this, and then she seized the dagger her husband was wearing, and holding it drawn in her hand she concluded her exhortation thus: 'Do this, Paetus', and at that same instant, having struck herself a mortal blow in the stomach, she wrenched the dagger from her wound and offered it to him, ending her life as she did so with these noble, great-souled, immortal words *Paete, non dolet*. All she had time to utter were those three words with such a beautiful substance: 'You see, Paetus: it didn't hurt me.' . . .

Pætus at once struck himself through with that same blade, ashamed, in my opinion, at having needed so dear and precious a lesson.

·3. POMPEIA PAULINA·

Pompeia Paulina, a young and very noble Roman lady, had married Seneca in his extreme old age. Nero, that fine pupil of his, sent messengers to him to announce that he was sentenced to death.

(Such sentences were carried out in this way: when the Roman emperors of that time had condemned any man of rank, they dispatched their officials to tell him to select some death at his choice and to carry it out within such time as they prescribed, shorter or longer depending on the intensity of their anger; giving him time to put his affairs in order, or sometimes depriving him of the means to do that by the shortness of the time. If the condemned person resisted their command, they brought in suitable men to carry it out, either by slashing the veins in his arms and legs or forcing him to swallow poison. But men of honour did not wait for such compulsion, and used their own doctors and surgeons to do the deed.)

Seneca heard their charge with a peaceful and resolute countenance, then asked for paper to write his will; when that was refused by the captain, Seneca turned towards his friends and said: 'Since I can leave you nothing else out of gratitude for what I owe you, I shall at least leave you the finest thing I have, namely the picture of my *moeurs* [see Glossary] and of my life, which I beg you to preserve in your memory; so that by doing so you will acquire the glory of true and sincere friends.' At the same time with gentle words he quietened the bitter anguish he saw they were suffering, sometimes hardening his voice to rebuke them for it: 'Where are those fine precepts of philosophy? What has become of those provisions against the accidents of fortune that we have been laying up over so many years? Did we not know of Nero's cruelty? What could we expect from a man who killed

his mother and his brother, if not that he would also put to death his tutor who educated him and brought him up?’

Having spoken these words to them all, he turned to his wife and—embracing her tightly, as her heart and strength were yielding under the weight of her grief—begged her to bear this event a little more patiently for love of him, and said that the time had come for him to show the fruit of his studies not by arguments and discussions but by action, and that he really embraced death not only without sorrow but cheerfully. ‘So do not dishonour it with your tears, my dear,’ he said, ‘lest it should seem that you love yourself more than my reputation. Appease your sorrow and console yourself with the knowledge you have had of me and of my actions, spending the rest of your life in those honourable occupations you are devoted to.’

To this Paulina, having somewhat recovered her spirits and rekindled the magnanimity of her heart by a very noble affection, replied: ‘No, Seneca. I am not one to leave you companionless in such great need. I do not want you to think that the virtuous examples of your life have not yet taught me how die well; and when could I ever die better, or more honourably, or more as I would wish to, than with you? So be assured that I shall go along with you.’ Then Seneca, welcoming such a fine and glorious resolve by his wife, and also to rid himself of his fear of leaving her to the tender mercies of his cruel enemies after his death, replied: ‘I once advised you, Paulina, about what would let you live your life contentedly, but now you prefer the honour of death. Truly I will not begrudge you that. The constancy and resolution of our common end may be equal; but the beauty and the glory are greater on your side.’

That done, they both together had the veins in their arms cut. [Now half a page about how much time and trouble it took to procure Seneca’s death.]

Nero, informed of all this, fearing that he might be blamed for the death of Paulina—who was one of the best-connected Roman ladies, and for whom he had no particular enmity—sent with all speed to have her wounds bandaged, which her people did, without her knowledge because she was already half-dead and unconscious. And so against her own design she lived on, most honourably and as befitted her virtue, showing by the pallor of her face how much life had flowed out of her wounds.

There are my three very true stories, which I find as entertaining and as tragic as the ones we make up at will to give pleasure to the public. I am amazed that those who engage in that business do not instead choose some of the ten thousand fine historical accounts to be found in books, which would give them less trouble and would bring more pleasure and profit. Anyone who wanted to construct a single interconnected unity out of these ‘bricks’ would need to provide from his own resources only the mortar—like solder between bits of metal. In this way he could bring together many genuine events of all sorts, arranging and diversifying them as the beauty of the work required, somewhat as Ovid sewed and pieced together his *Metamorphoses* out of a great number of varied fables.

In regard to the last couple, it is also worth pondering on the fact that •Paulina willingly offers to give up living for love of her husband, and that •her husband had once given up dying for love of her. [The final page of the essay tells the story of Seneca’s taking more care of his health because Paulina urged him to so do, and quotes from a letter of his about this, including: ‘Sometimes we should •lend ourselves to our friends and when we would like to die for ourselves •break off our plans on their account’; also, more cheerfully, ‘What can be more delightful than to be so dear to your wife that you become dearer to yourself for her sake?’]

36. The most excellent of men

[A] If I were asked my pick of all the men who have come to my knowledge, I find three who seem to excel all others.

·1. HOMER·

One is Homer. It may be that Aristotle or Varro (for example) are as learned as he. And perhaps Virgil is comparable to him even as an artist; I leave that to be judged by those who know both. I who know only one—my Greek not being good enough for me to appreciate Homer's poetry properly—can only say that as far as I can tell the Muses themselves could not surpass the Roman poet: [B] 'On his learned lyre he sings verses such as Cynthian Apollo chants when he attunes his strings to his plucking fingers' [Propertius]. [A] However in making this judgement one should not forget that it is chiefly from Homer, his guide and his schoolmaster, that Virgil derives his ability, or that one single incident in the *Iliad*

what comes next: *a fourny de corps et de matiere*

literally meaning: provided body and matter

the distinction that this involves: ??

for that great and divine *Aeneid*. That is not the way I reckon; I bring in several other circumstances that make this personage admirable to me, almost as though he were above the human condition. And in truth I am often astonished that he who created many deities and got people to believe in them by his authority has not himself gained the rank of a god. Being blind and poor, living before the sciences were reduced to rules and certain observations, he knew them so well that those who have since taken it upon themselves to establish governments, to conduct wars, or to write on religion or philosophy. . . .or about the arts have used him

as their master, most perfect in the knowledge of all things, and his books as a seed-bed for every kind of competence:

'Better and more fully than Chrysippus and Crantor he says what is beautiful, what is ugly, what is profitable, what is not' [Horace].

'From whose perennial spring the poets come to wet their lips in the Pierian waters' [Ovid].

'To these add the companions of the Muses, of whom Homer alone was made into a star' [Lucretius].

'From whose abundant source all posterity have drawn their songs, dividing his one river into their many rivulets, each poet rich in the wealth of one single man' [Manilius].

In creating the most excellent work there can be, he went against the order of nature; for ordinarily things at birth are imperfect; they gain in size and strength as they grow. He made the infancy of poetry and of several other arts to be mature, perfect, and accomplished. That is why he can be, as he was, called 'the first and the last of poets'. Before him there was no-one he could imitate, and after him there was no-one who could imitate him. According to Aristotle, his words are the only ones that have movement and action; they are the only substantial words.

When Alexander the Great came across a rich coffer among the spoils of Darius, he commanded that it be set aside for him to keep his copy of Homer in, saying that he was the best and most faithful counsellor he had in his military affairs. For the same reason Cleomenes, son of Anaxandridas, said that Homer was the poet of the Spartans, because he was a very good master in the military art. This singular and particular tribute to him has also come down to us: Plutarch's judgement that he is the only author in the world who has never bored or disgusted men, always showing himself to his readers as something different, always

flourishing in new grace. . . . Xenophanes was complaining one day to Hiero, the tyrant of Syracuse, that he was so poor that he could not afford to feed two servants: 'What!', he replied: 'Homer who was far poorer than you feeds more than ten thousand of them, dead though he is.' ^[C] And when Panaetius called Plato 'the Homer of philosophers', what more was there to say?

^[A] In addition to that, what *glory* can be compared with his? There is nothing so alive in the mouths of men as his name and his works; nothing so well known and accepted as Troy, Helen, and his wars, which perhaps never existed. Our children are still given names that he invented over three thousand years ago. Who does not know Hector and Achilles? Not only certain individual families but most *nations* seek their origins in his inventions. The Turkish Emperor Mahomet II, writing to our Pope Pius II, says: 'I am amazed that the Italians should band against me, seeing that we both have a common origin in the Trojans and that I, like the Italians, have an interest in avenging the blood of Hector on the Greeks, whom they are supporting against me.' Isn't it a noble *farce* in which kings, commonwealths and emperors keep playing their parts through so many centuries, with this great universe serving as the theatre?

Seven towns of Greece—Smyrna, Rhodes, Colophon, Salamis, Chios, Argos and Athens—squabbled over his birthplace, so much honour did his very obscurity bring him.

·2. ALEXANDER THE GREAT·

Another is Alexander the Great. For **anyone who considers**

- the age at which he started his enterprises;
- the meagre resources with which he achieved such glorious design;
- the authority he gained as a boy over the greatest and most

experienced captains in the world, who followed him;

- the extraordinary favour with which fortune embraced him and favoured his hazardous—I almost said rash—exploits;. . .

- his greatness in having passed victorious through all this inhabitable earth by the age of 33, and ^[B] having attained in half a lifetime the utmost achievement of human nature, so that you cannot imagine him living the normal span and continuing throughout it to grow in valour and fortune without imagining something superhuman;

^[A] •his making so many royal branches sprout from among his soldiers, leaving the world divided at his death among his four successors—mere generals in his armies whose descendants remained for so long in control of those great possessions;

- so many excellent virtues in him, ^[B] justice, temperance, liberality, faithfulness to his word, love for his people, humaneness towards the vanquished ^[A] for his *moeurs* seem to have been flawless, ^[B] though some of his individual actions—rare and untypical ones—were not

(but it is impossible to conduct such great movements according to the rules of justice; such men have to be judged overall, by the dominant aim of their actions; it is rather hard to excuse such outbursts as his destruction of Thebes and the murders of Menander, of Hephaestion's doctor, of so many Persian prisoners at one stroke, of a troop of Indian soldiers (breaking his word), and of the Cosseians, right down to their little children; but in the case of Cleitus [whom he killed in a drunken quarrel] he made amends beyond the gravity of the offence; and that action as much as any other testifies to a generous character, a character excellently formed for goodness; ^[C] it was ingeniously said of him that he had his virtues from nature, his

vices from fortune; ^[B] as for the fact that he was a bit boastful, a bit too impatient of hearing ill said of himself, and that he scattered his mangers, weapons and bridles all over India, it seems to me that all these things might be pardoned in the light of his age and the remarkable prosperity of his fortune);

- so many military virtues that he had—diligence, foresight, endurance, self-discipline, subtlety, magnanimity, resolution, good fortune—in which he was the first among men (even if Hannibal had not taught us this);

- ^[A] the rare beauty and endowments of his person, downright miraculous;

- ^[B] his way of carrying himself, and that venerable bearing his beneath a face so young, ruddy, and radiant—'Shining like the morning star that Venus loves above all others when, bathed in Ocean's waves, it raises up its sacred face in the heavens and drives away the darkness' [Virgil];

- ^[A] the excellence of his learning and his capacities;

- how great and long-lasting his glory was—pure, clean, and free from spot or envy;

- ^[B] the fact that long after his death it was a matter of religious belief to hold that his medallions brought good luck to those who wore them;

- the fact that more kings and princes have written of his exploits than other historians have written of the exploits of any king or prince whatever;

- ^[C] the fact that even today the Mahometans, who despise all other biographies, honour his by a special dispensation;

—^[A] **anyone who considers** all that, taken together, will admit that I was right to prefer him even to Caesar, who alone was able to make me hesitate over my choice. ^[B] It cannot

be denied that Caesar's exploits owe more to Caesar, while Alexander's owe more to fortune. ^[A] In many things they were equal; Caesar may even have been greater in a few.

^[B] They were two fires, or two torrents, ravaging the world in various places: 'Like two forest-fires raging in different parts of a forest of laurel trees full of crackling twigs; or like two foaming torrents rushing down the mountain-sides with a roar, charging across the plains, sweeping everything before them' [Virgil]. But even if Caesar's ambition was more moderate in itself, it was so disastrous—coalescing with something abominable, the collapse of his country and the worsening of the entire world—that ^[A] when all is put together and weighed in the balance I cannot help coming down on the side of Alexander.

·3. EPAMINONDAS·

The third, and I think the most excellent, is Epaminondas.

Of glory he has nowhere near as much as others (nor is it part of the substance of the thing¹); of resolution and valour—not the kind that is sharpened by ambition but the kind that wisdom and reason can implant in a well-ordered soul—he had all that can be imagined. He has given as much evidence of this virtue, in my opinion, as Alexander himself and as Caesar; for though his exploits in war are not so frequent or so grand, they are nevertheless, if considered thoroughly and in all their circumstances, as important and as vigorous ·as those of the other two·, and provide as much evidence of boldness and military skill. The Greeks did him the honour of unanimously naming him the first man among them; and to be first among the Greeks is to be easily the best in the world.

As for his knowledge and ability, this ancient verdict has

¹ He means that someone's glory is not an intrinsic property of him but rather a relation between him and other people, comparable with indebtedness (say) rather than with height or intelligence.

come down to us, that never did a man know as much or speak as little as he did. [C] For he belonged to the Pythagorean sect. And what he did say, no-one ever said better; an excellent orator and very persuasive.

[A] But as for his *moeurs* and conscience, he far surpassed all those who have ever engaged in the affairs of state; for in that aspect—which must principally be considered, [C] and which alone truly reveals what we are and which for me outweighs all the other qualities put together—[A] he yields to no philosopher, not even to Socrates.

[B] In this man innocence is a key quality, sovereign, constant, steady, incorruptible. In comparison, it appears in Alexander as subordinate, uncertain, spasmodic, weak and subject to chance.

[C] Antiquity judged that if one studies minutely all the other captains, each will be found to have some special quality that makes him illustrious; whereas in Epaminondas—and in him alone—there is a virtue and competence, full and equal throughout, that leaves nothing to be desired in any of the functions of human life, whether in public or private occupations, in peace or in war, whether in living or in dying greatly and gloriously. I know of no man's form or fortune that I can regard with such honour and love.

It is quite true that I find his stubbornly persisting in poverty, as depicted by his best friends, somewhat over-scrupulous. And that conduct alone, though lofty and most admirable, is rather too sour, I feel, for me even to *want to want* to imitate his form of it.

[Now a brief interlude about two other men Montaigne admired, Scipio Aemilianus and Alcibiades.]

But as for Epaminondas, [A] I want to cite here a few of his opinions, to provide an example of his excellent goodness.

[B] The sweetest contentment he had in all his life, he testified, was the pleasure he gave his father and mother by his victory at Leuctra. It says a lot that he should put their pleasure ahead of his own full and rightful pleasure in such a glorious battle.

[A] He did not think it was permissible, even to restore freedom to his country, to kill a man without knowing the case against him, which is why he was so cool towards the project of his companion Pelopidas for the deliverance of Thebes by assassinating Theban politicians who favoured Sparta. He also held that in battle one should avoid encountering a friend who was on the opposing side, and should spare him.

[C] And when his humaneness, even towards his enemies, had made him suspect to the Boeotians—

because after miraculously forcing the Spartans to open to him the pass they had undertaken to guard at the entrance to the Morea, near Corinth, he was content to strike straight through their middle without hounding them to death

—he was deposed from his rank of commander-in-chief. To be dismissed for such a cause did him much honour, as did their their shame in *having to* reinstate him in his rank and to admit how much their glory and their safety depended on him, victory following him like a shadow wherever he led. His country's prosperity died as it had been born: with him.

37. Health and the medical profession¹

[A] This jumble of so many disparate pieces is made in the following way. I set my hand to it only when pressed to do so by too lax an idleness, and only when I am at home. So it is assembled irregularly, with interruptions, because occasions

¹ The relevance of Montaigne's title for this essay, 'The resemblance of children to fathers', starts at ■ on page 120 and fades away quite quickly.

sometimes keep me away for several months. Moreover, I do not correct my first thoughts by second ones—^[C] well, yes, perhaps the odd word, but to vary it, not to remove it. ^[A] I want to show my humours as they develop, revealing each element at its birth. I wish I had begun earlier, and studied more closely the course of the changes I have undergone. . . .

·MONTAIGNE'S CHRONIC PAINFUL ILLNESS·

I am seven or eight years older than when I began these essays—not without some new acquisition. Those years have generously introduced me to colic [see Glossary]; familiarity and long acquaintance with the years do not readily pass without some such benefit! I could wish that, of all the gifts they have for those who spend a long time in their company, the years had chosen one more acceptable to me; for they could not have given me one that I have held in greater horror ever since childhood. Of all the misfortunes of old age that was precisely the one I feared most. I often thought to myself that I was going too far [i.e. living too long], and that on such a long road I was sure to be caught up in some nasty encounter. I thought—and often enough *said*—that it was time to leave, and that life should be cut off at the point where it is alive and healthy, following the surgeons' rule when they have to amputate a limb. ^[C] And that anyone who does not repay his debt to nature on time usually find that it exacts a stiff rate of interest.

^[A] But I was so far from being ready to take the step then that after about eighteen months in this unpleasant state I have already learned to adapt myself to it. I have made a compact with this colicky life; I find in it material for consolation and hope. Men are so wedded to their wretched existence that there is no condition so harsh that they won't accept it to stay alive.

^[C] Listen to Maecenas: 'Make me lame in my hand, lame

in foot and thigh, shake out my loosened teeth; while life remains, all is well' [quoted by Seneca]. And Tamberlane threw a cloak of humaneness over his astonishing cruelty to lepers, having all that came to his knowledge put to death—in order, he said, to free them from the painful life they were living. This was stupid, because there was not one of them who would not rather have been thrice a leper than not exist.

And when Antisthenes the Stoic was very sick he cried out 'What will free me from these evils?' Diogenes, who had come to see him, offered him a knife and said 'This, if you wish, very quickly.' 'I do not say from life', he replied, 'I say from evils.'

^[A] The sufferings that affect us simply through the soul afflict me much less than they do most other men. Partly through judgement, for the majority think many things to be horrible, or to be avoided at the cost of life, that hardly matter to me at all. Partly because of my stolidly unfeeling attitude to accidents that do not come at me head on, a temperament that I regard as one of the best parts of my natural condition. But I feel very keenly the really essential *bodily* sufferings. Yet in other days when I used to foresee them through a vision that was weak, delicate, and softened by the enjoyment of that long and blessed health and repose that God has lent me for the better part of my life, I imagined them as so unbearable that in truth I had more *fear of* them than I have found *pain in* them; which strengthens my ever-growing belief that most of the faculties of our soul, ^[C] as we employ them, ^[A] disturb our life's repose more than they serve it.

I am grappling with the worst of all maladies, the most sudden ·in its onset·, the most painful, the most fatal and the most incurable. I have already experienced five or six very long and painful bouts of it. However, either I flatter myself or else even in this condition there is enough to bear a man

up if his soul is free of the burden of the fear of dying and the burden of all the threats, diagnoses and prognoses that medicine [here = 'the medical profession'] stuffs into our heads. The pain itself is not so shrill, harsh and stabbing as to drive a well-poised man to madness and despair. I get at least this profit from my colic: whatever I had not yet been able, unaided, to do to reconcile myself completely to death and familiarise myself with it, will be brought to completion by the colic; for the more it presses me and troubles me, the less will death be something to fear. I had already achieved this much: to hold to life only for what life has to offer; my illness will undo even this compact; and God grant that at the end, if the harsh pain finally overcomes my strength it does not drive me to the other extreme (no less wrong) of loving and desiring to die. 'Fear not the final day, nor wish for it' [Martial]. Those are two passions to be feared, but one has its remedy much nearer at hand than the other.

·BEARING UP UNDER PAIN·

And another thing: I have always regarded as *ceremonieux* [here = 'a mere contribution to etiquette'] that precept which so rigorously and precisely requires that pain be endured with a good countenance and a disdainful and composed bearing. Why does philosophy, which has regard only for a person's core and his actions, waste time on these external appearances? [C] Let it leave this concern to the clowns and teachers of rhetoric, who set so much store by our gestures! Let philosophy boldly grant to pain this cowardice in the voice, provided it is neither in heart or in the stomach, and classify these voluntary complaints with the sighs, sobs, tremblings and pallors that nature has placed beyond our control. Provided the heart is without fear, the words without despair, let it be content! What does it matter if we twist our arms, provided we do not twist our thoughts? It trains us for

ourselves, not for others; for being, not for seeming. [A] Let philosophy confine itself to governing our understanding, which it has undertaken to instruct. In the attacks of colic, let it preserve the soul's ability to know itself, to follow its accustomed path; fighting the pain and bearing it, not shamelessly grovelling at its feet; stirred and aroused for battle, not subdued and overthrown; [C] capable to some extent of conversation and of other occupations.

[A] In such extreme misfortunes it is cruelty to require of us so composed a bearing. If we play a good game, it matters little if we make a bad face. If the body finds relief in complaining let it do so; if it likes agitation, let it tumble and toss at its pleasure; if it thinks that forcing out violent cries can somewhat evaporate the pain (as some doctors say it helps pregnant women in their deliveries), or if that distracts it from the torment, just let it shout out. . . . We have enough work dealing with the pain, without working to obey these superfluous rules.

I say this to excuse those whom we commonly see thrown into turmoil by the shocks and assaults of this illness; ·not to excuse myself·, for I have so far been through it with a slightly better countenance, and have been content to groan without roaring. Not that I take any trouble to maintain this external decorum, for I do not think much of such an achievement. In this respect, I concede whatever my illness demands; but either my pains are not so excessive or I bring to them more firmness than most. I complain, I fret, when the stabbing pains afflict me, but I do not come to despair. . . .

[C] When the illness is at its worst, I test myself, and have always found myself capable of talking, thinking and replying as correctly as at any other time, but not as steadily because I am troubled and distracted by the pain. Often when I am thought to be most stricken and those around me are sparing me, I test my powers by applying them to topics

that are utterly remote from my condition. I can bring off anything with a sudden effort; but do not ask it to last long!

If only I were like that dreamer in Cicero who dreamed he had a wench in his arms and found that he had discharged his stone in the sheets! Mine utterly unwench me. [For 'stone', see 'colic' in the glossary.]

[A] In the intervals of this excessive pain, [C] when my ureters are sick but are not eating into me, [A] I return at once to my accustomed form, since my soul takes no alarm except what comes from the senses and the body. I certainly owe *that* to the care I have taken to prepare myself by reason for such accidents: [B] 'No toils present themselves new or unforeseen: I have seen them coming and been through them already in my mind' [Virgil].

[A] I am tested, however, pretty roughly for a beginner, by a very sudden and very rough change, having fallen all at once from a most gentle and happy condition of life into the most painful and grievous one imaginable. This is an illness to be dreaded on its own account, but my attacks of it are much sharper and harder than most people's. They recur so often that I hardly feel perfect health any more. Yet up to now I have kept my mind in such a state that, provided I can hold to it, I find myself in a considerably better condition of life than a thousand others who have no fever or illness but what they inflict on themselves by faulty reasoning.

·HEREDITY·

■ There is a certain kind of subtle humility that is born of presumption. This for instance: we acknowledge our ignorance of many things, and are polite enough to confess that the works of nature have some qualities and conditions that are imperceptible and whose means and causes we are not equipped to discover. We hope that this honest and conscientious declaration will lead to our being believed

concerning things that we do claim to understand. ·Yet· we have no need select miracles and remote difficulties; it seems to me that among the things we see quite regularly there are wonders so incomprehensible that they surpass all that is problematic in miracles.

What a prodigious thing it is that the drop of semen that brings us forth bears in itself the impressions not only of our fathers' bodily form but of their thoughts and preferences! Where does that drop of fluid house this infinite number of forms? [B] And how do they convey these resemblances so randomly that the great-grandson will correspond to the great-grandfather, the nephew to the uncle? . . .

[A] I probably owe to my father this stony propensity, for he died dreadfully afflicted by a large stone in the bladder. He did not perceive his malady until he was 67; he had experienced no threat or symptom of it beforehand, in his loins or his sides or anywhere else. Until then he had lived in good health, very little subject to diseases; and he lasted another seven years with that affliction, painfully dragging out the last years of his life.

I was born more than twenty-five years before he fell ill, during his most vigorous period, the third of his children. Where was the propensity for this affliction hiding through all that time? And when his illness was so far off, how did that little piece of his own substance with which he made *me* carry such a strong impression of it? And how was it so hidden that I started to feel it forty-five years later—so far the only one to do so out of so many brothers and sisters, all from the same mother? If anyone will enlighten me about this process, I will believe him about as many other miracles as he likes; provided that he does not palm off on me (as they do) some explanation that is more difficult and fantastic than the thing itself.

·HOSTILITY TO THE MEDICAL PROFESSION·

Doctors will have to pardon my liberty a bit ·when I mention· my loathing and contempt for their teachings, which I received through that same fatal [see Glossary] ejaculation and penetration. This antipathy I have for their art is hereditary in me. My father lived to 74, my grandfather to 69, my great-grandfather to nearly 80, without having tasted any sort of medicine. Among them, anything that was not in ordinary use counted as a drug.

·The art of· medicine is built from examples and experience; so is my opinion. Have I not just cited a very definite experience that strongly supports me? I doubt if the annals of medicine can provide an example of three generations born, bred and dying at the same hearth, under the same roof, who lived for that long under doctors' orders. They should grant me that if reason does not support me at least fortune does; and, well, for doctors fortune is more valuable than reason!

Let them not take advantage of me now, or threaten me after I have been struck down: that would be unfair. The fact is that I have won a solid victory over them with the examples from my family, even if it stops with them. Human affairs do not have so much constancy; it is only eighteen years short of two centuries that this test of ours has lasted, for the first of them was born in the year 1402. It is truly quite normal that this experiment should begin to run out on us. Let them not hold against me the infirmities that have a stranglehold on me now; is it not enough that I stayed healthy for forty-seven years? Even if this is the end of my career, it is one of the longer ones.

Some unexplained natural inclination gave my forebears an aversion to medicine; for the mere sight of drugs filled my father with horror. The seigneur de Gaviac was an uncle of mine on my father's side; he was in holy orders, sickly from

birth, but made that frail life last till he was 67. He once fell victim to a great and violent continual fever [see Glossary]; the doctors ordered that he be informed that if he did not call in aid (what they call 'help' ' is more often harm), he would certainly be dead. Terrified though he was by this horrible sentence, the good man replied 'Then I am dead'; but soon afterwards God made this prognosis vain.

^[B] I had four brothers; the youngest, born long after the others, was the sieur de Bussaguet. He was the only one to submit to the art of medicine, doing so I think because of his dealings with the other arts (he was counsellor in the court of Parlement). It turned out so badly for him that, despite apparently having a stronger constitution, he died long before the others with the sole exception of the sieur de Saint-Michel.

·THE HOSTILITY IS NOT WHOLLY INHERITED·

^[A] It is possible that I inherited from my ancestors this natural aversion to medicine, but if that had been the whole story I would have tried to overcome it. For all those predispositions that arise in us without reasons are bad; they are a kind of disease that ought to be fought against. I may have inherited this disposition, but I have supported and strengthened it by reasoned arguments, which are the basis for my opinion about this matter. For I also hate the idea of refusing medicine because of the bitterness of its taste. That would hardly be like me—I consider health to be worth purchasing by all the most painful cauteries and incisions that can be made. ^[C] And following Epicurus it seems to me that sensual pleasures are to be avoided if they result in greater pains, and pains are to be welcomed if they result in greater pleasures.

^[A] Health is a precious thing; and the only one, in truth, that merits our devoting to its pursuit not only time, sweat, toil and wealth but even life itself; for without it life becomes

oppressive to us—pleasure, wisdom, scholarship and virtue lose their lustre and fade away. To the strongest and most rigorous arguments that philosophy tries to impress on us to the contrary we have only to oppose the picture of Plato being struck down by epilepsy or apoplexy, and on this supposition challenge him to get help from the rich faculties of his soul.

For me, no road leading to health can be called arduous or expensive. But I have certain other notions that make me extremely suspicious of all this merchandise. I do not deny that there may be some art in it, that among so many works of nature there are things suited to the preservation of our health—there certainly are. ^[B] I quite understand that there is some simple that moistens, some other that dries; I know from experience that horseradish produces flatulence and that senna leaves loosen the bowels; and I know many other things from experience, such as that mutton nourishes me and wine warms me. (Solon used to say that eating was like other remedies: it was a cure for a disease called hunger.) I do not reject practices drawn from the ·natural· world; I am confident of the power and fertility of nature and of its applicability to our needs. I see quite well that nature does well by pikes and swallows. What I am suspicious of are the inventions of our minds, of our science and art, in favour of which we have abandoned nature and its rules, and on which we are unable to impose moderation or limits.

·MEDICINE—IDEAL V. ACTUAL, AND NATURAL V. ARTIFICIAL·

^[C] Just as we call ‘justice’ the hodgepodge of laws that first fall into our hands, dispensed and applied often very ineptly and iniquitously; and just as those who mock and revile it are not maligning that noble virtue [justice] but only condemning the abuse and profanation of that sacred title [‘justice’]; so also with ‘medicine’, I honour that glorious name, its purpose, its promise, so useful to the human race; but what it designates

among us I neither honour nor esteem.

^[A] In the first place, experience makes me fear it; for as far as my knowledge goes, I see no group of people whose illnesses are as early, and whose cures are as late, as those who are under the jurisdiction of medicine. The constraints of their regimens [see Glossary] actually impair and corrupt their health. Not content with having control over sickness, the doctors turn health into sickness, so as to prevent the patient from ever escaping their jurisdiction. From constant perfectly good health don’t they derive an argument for a great illness to come?

I have been ill often enough, and without their help I have found my illnesses (and I have experienced virtually every sort) as easy to bear and as brief as anyone else’s. . . . My health is free and complete, with no rule or discipline except my habits and my pleasure. Any place is good for me to stop at ·when travelling·, because I need no more conveniences when I am ill than when I am well. I am not upset at being without a doctor, without an apothecary, and without help—which I see afflict most people more than the illness itself. Why, do doctors have such long and happy lives that they are clear evidence for the effectiveness of their discipline?

There is no nation that has not been without medicine for many centuries—and those were the first centuries, i.e. the best and the happiest ones—and even today a tenth of the world makes no use of it. Countless nations have no knowledge of it, and live more healthily than we do here, and longer. And among us the common folk manage happily without it. The Romans existed for six hundred years before accepting it; then after a trial they drove it out of their city through the intervention of Cato the Censor, who showed how easily he could do without it, having lived to be 85 himself and keeping his wife to an extreme old

age—not without medicine [*sans medecine*] but without medical practitioners [*sans medecin*], for everything that is found to be healthful for our life can be called ‘medicine’. [Then some details regarding natural remedies variously employed by Cato, the ancient Arcadians and Libyans, and Montaigne’s contemporaries in the villages in his vicinity.]

And truly of all that diversity and confusion of prescriptions what other purpose and result is there after all than to empty the bowels, which many homely simples can do?

^[B] And I do not know whether this is as beneficial as they say, and whether our nature does not need, to a certain extent, the presence of its excrements, just as wine needs its lees for its preservation. You often see healthy men having attacks of vomiting or diarrhoea from some external cause, evacuating a great deal of stuff without any prior need or subsequent benefit—indeed with impairment and damage. ^[C] It is from the great Plato that I recently learned that of the three sorts of movements we can undergo the last and the worst is that of purgations, which only a fool would undertake except in extreme necessity. The disease is disturbed and activated by being attacked head on. It should be gently weakened and brought to its end by the ‘patient’s’ way of life. The violent struggles between the drug and the disease are always at our expense, since the quarrel is fought out inside us, and the drug is an unreliable support, by its nature an enemy to our health and having access to our constitution only through disturbance.

·LETTING THE ORDER OF NATURE TAKE THE LEAD·

Let us let go a little; the **order** that provides for fleas and moles also provides for men who, like the fleas and moles, allow themselves to be governed by it. Shouting *Giddyup!* is pointless: it will make our throats sore but won’t move anything along. It is a proud and un pitying order. Our fear

and despair disgust it and slow it down in coming to our aid. It is obliged to let disease, as well as health, run its course. It will not be bribed to favour one at the expense of the rights of the other, for then it would fall into **disorder**. Let us follow, for God’s sake, let us follow! It *leads* those who follow; as for those who do not follow it, it *drags* them along, and their rage and their medicine too. ·To them I say· order a purge for your brain; it will be better employed there than in your stomach. . . .

·A TIRADE AGAINST THE MEDICAL PROFESSION·

^[A] ·Returning to the topic of medical practitioners·: They they have this luck, ^[B] according to Nicocles, ^[A] that the sun shines on their successes and the earth hides their failures. In addition to which they have a very convenient way of turning all sorts of outcomes to their own advantage; for medicine has the privilege of taking the credit for every improvement or cure (and the number of those is infinite) brought about by fortune, nature or some other extraneous cause in a patient who is under doctors’ orders. The factors that have cured me, and cure a thousand others who do not call in medical help, the doctors *usurp* in the case of their patients. And when things go wrong, either **(i)** they disclaim responsibility by blaming the mishap on the patient, for reasons so feeble that they need never fear running out of them: ‘he bared his arm’, ‘he heard the noise of a coach’, ‘someone opened his window’, ‘he has been lying on his left side’, ‘he let some painful thought run through his head’—in short a word, a dream, a glance, strike them as sufficient to clear them from blame; or **(ii)** they choose to take advantage of that set-back, advancing their business by another ploy that can never let them down: when the illness has been heated up by their treatment, they palm us off with the assurance that without their remedies it would have been even worse. They take

a man with a bad cold, turn it into a quotidian fever [see Glossary], then claim that without them it would have been a continual fever. They need not worry about doing their work badly, because the damage they do turns to their profit. They are certainly right to require their patients to favour them with their trust. It truly has to be trust—and a pliant trust too—to cling to notions so hard to believe.

[After a couple of pages of ancient quotations and anecdotes relating to this topic, ending with a scornful account of how doctors suggest ‘mystery and sorcery’ by their choice of ingredients for their medicines, ‘and similar apish trickery that looks more like magic spells than solid knowledge’, Montaigne continues sarcastically:] Where they went wrong after such a good start was in not making their assemblies and deliberations more religious and more secret: no outsider ought to have had access to them, any more than to the secret ceremonies of Aesculapius. The result of this error is that when their uncertainties and the weakness of their arguments, prognoses and premises, as well as the bitterness of their disagreements (full of hatred, jealousy and self-interest) have all been revealed to everybody, one would have to be *blind* not to feel at risk in their hands.

Who ever saw a doctor using a colleague’s prescription without cutting out or adding something? That gives their art away, and shows us that they are more concerned with their own reputation, and consequently their profit, than with the well-being of their patients. Wiser than them was the doctor [Mohammad Ibn Zakariya al-Razi, 865-925] who long ago decreed that each patient should be treated by only one doctor; for if he does no good, the failure of one man will be no great reproach to the art of medicine, whereas if he is lucky, the glory of this will be great. When many are involved, however, they discredit their trade at every turn, especially since they manage to do more harm than good. They should

have been content with the constant disagreement to be found among the opinions of the great masters and ancient authorities of this science, which only bookish men know about, without revealing to the public the controversies and inconsistencies of judgement that they foster and continue among themselves.

Do we want an example of medical disagreement among the ancients? [He cites idiosyncratic opinions of seven ancient doctors, four of them named again in the next paragraph. Then:] A friend of theirs whom they know better than I do [Pliny] exclaims in this connection that the most important science that we use, being the one in charge of our preservation and health, is unfortunately the most uncertain, the most unstable and the one shaken by the most changes. There is no great harm done if we miscalculate the height of the sun or the fractions in some astronomical computation; but here, where our whole being is at stake, it is not wise to abandon ourselves to the mercy of so many contrary gales.

·HISTORY OF THE UPS AND DOWNS OF MEDICINE·

Before the Peloponnesian War there was not much news of this science. Hippocrates brought it into repute; everything he had established was overturned by Chrysippus; then everything Chrysippus had written about it was overturned by Erasistratus, Aristotle’s grandson. After them came the Empirics, who adopted a completely different method from his predecessors in the handling of this art. When their reputation began to grow shaky, Hierophilus got a new kind of medicine accepted, which Asclepiades came to attack and annihilate in his turn. Then successively the opinions of Themison gained authority, then Musa’s, then later still those of Vexius Valens (the doctor famous for his closeness to Messalina). At the time of Nero, the empire of medicine fell to Thessalus, who abolished and condemned everything that

had been accepted before his time. His doctrine was struck down by Crinas of Massilia, who re-introduced the regulation of medical procedures by positions of heavenly bodies and movements of the stars, ·making men· eat, sleep and drink at the times when it would please the moon and Mercury for them to do so. His authority was soon supplanted by that of Charinus, also a doctor in Massilia; he fought not only against the old medicine but also against the centuries-old public institution of hot baths. He had men take cold baths even in winter, plunging the sick into streams of fresh water.

Up to Pliny's time no Roman had yet condescended to practise medicine; it was done by foreigners and Greeks, as among us French it is done by Latinisers. For, as a very great doctor has said, we do not easily accept *the medicine that we understand*, any more than ·we trust· *the drug that we gather*. If the countries from which we get guaiacum, sarsaparilla and chinaroot have doctors, just think how this same recommendation of foreignness, rarity and costliness must make them esteem our cabbages and our parsley! for who would dare to despise plants sought in such distant lands at the risk of such long and perilous journeys?

Since those medical upheavals among the ancients there have been countless others up to our own times, mostly complete and universal upheavals like those recently produced by Paracelsus, Fioravanti and Argenterius; for they change not merely one prescription but (I am told) the whole contexture and government of the medical corpus, accusing those who professed it before them of being ignorant charlatans. I leave you to think where that leaves the poor patient.

If we could only be sure that their mistakes did us no harm even if they did no good, it would be a reasonable bet to chance gaining something without putting oneself in danger of loss. ·But that is not how things stand·. ^[B] Aesop

tells how a man bought a Moorish slave and thought that his colour was incidental, brought on by ill-treatment from his former master; so he had him very carefully treated with many baths and beverages, with the result that the Moor was not cured of swarthinness but wholly lost his former health.

·MEDICINE IS IMPOSSIBLY DIFFICULT·

^[A] How often do we see doctors blaming each other for the deaths of their patients! I remember a very dangerous and mortal epidemic in the towns in my neighbourhood a few years ago. When this storm was over, having swept away countless people, one of the best-known doctors in the whole region published a booklet on the subject, in which he regrets their having used bloodletting and confesses that that was one of the principal sources of the harm that was done. Moreover, medical authors hold that there is no medicine that doesn't have something harmful in it. If even the ones that help us also harm us somewhat, what must be the effect of the ones that are applied to us entirely inappropriately? . . .

[This paragraph is a sarcastic account of how difficult medical practice must be, given the doctors' own accounts of what is involved in it.] Now, if the doctor's mistake is dangerous, we are in a very bad way, for he will probably often fall into it again. To shape up his treatment correctly, he needs too many details, considerations, and circumstances. He must know the **patient's** constitution, his temperament, his humours, his inclinations, his actions, even his thoughts and his fancies. He must be responsive to **external circumstances**, the nature of the locality, the condition of the air and the weather, the position of the planets and their influences. In the **disease** he must know the causes, the symptoms, the effects, the critical days. Regarding the **drug** he needs to know the dosage, the strength, the country of origin, the appearance, the age, the way of dispensing it. And he must know how to combine

those elements in the right proportions so as to produce a perfect balance. If he gets any one of them ever so slightly wrong, if among so many springs there is a single one that that pulls askew, that is enough to destroy us. God knows how hard it is to know most of these details; for example, how will he find the proper symptom of the disease, when each disease can have an infinite number of them? How many disputes and doubts do they have over the analysis of urines? How, otherwise, could we explain their ceaseless wrangling over their diagnosis of the disease? . . . In the illnesses I have had, however little difficulty there was, I never found three doctors to agree.

I more readily note the examples that concern me. Recently there was a gentleman [see Glossary] in Paris who was cut for the removal of a stone on doctor's orders; no stone was found in his bladder any more than in his hand! Similarly, a close friend of mine, a bishop, was insistently urged by the doctors he consulted to have himself cut; trusting in others, I joined in the persuasion; once he was dead they opened him up and found that his only trouble had nothing to do with stones, and was something to do with his kidneys. They have less excuse with this malady, because it is in a way palpable. That is why surgery seems to me much more certain, because it it sees and feels what it is doing, with less conjecture and guesswork. Whereas the medical men have no *speculum matricis* [see Glossary] to reveal to them the passages of our brains, our lungs or our livers.

The very promises of medicine are incredible. For having to provide against different and contrary maladies that often afflict us at the same time and have an almost necessary relation—such as a heated liver and a chilled stomach—they try to persuade us that of their ingredients this one will warm the stomach while that one will cool the liver. One is said to go straight to the liver—indeed, even to the bladder—without

doing anything along the way, conserving its powers and its efficacy throughout that long turbulent journey right to the place that its occult property destines it for! Another will dry the brain, still another will moisten the lungs.

After a potion has been concocted out of all this stuff, is it not somewhat *fanciful* to hope that the virtues contained in that chaotic mixture will separate and sort themselves out, running on such different errands? I would be infinitely afraid that they might lose or switch their tags and get muddled about their quarters. And who could suppose that the various properties in that liquid jumble would not corrupt, counteract and spoil one another? And what about the fact that the prescription has to be made up by another practitioner, to whose good faith and mercy we again entrust our lives?

[C] Just as we have doublet-makers and breeches-makers to **clothe** us, and are served better by them because each performs only his own specialty and needs only a more restricted and limited skill than does a tailor who undertakes everything; and just as, when it comes to **food**, great households find it convenient to have specialists in soups or in roasts, which cannot be prepared so exquisitely by a cook with a responsibility for everything; so also with **cures**—the Egyptians were right to reject the general practice of medicine and to split the profession up, with separate workers for each illness and each part of the body, each being treated much more appropriately and less haphazardly by someone who made it his specialty. Our doctors do not realise that he who provides for everything provides for nothing, and that the entire government of this microcosm is more than they can manage. In fearing to stop a dysentery lest it bring on a fever, they killed a friend of mine—Etienne de La Boétie—who was worth more than the whole lot of them. They put their prognoses into the scales against the present illnesses; so

as not to cure the brain at the expense of the stomach, they harm the stomach and make the brain worse by these disorderly and quarrelsome drugs.

·CONTRADICTIONARY ADVICE ABOUT MANAGING COLIC·

[A] Conflicting and unsound reasoning is more apparent in this art than in any other. Aperient substances are useful for a man with colic, because by dilating and distending the passages they move along the sticky matter that can build up into gravel or stone, so evacuating whatever is beginning to gather and to harden in the kidneys. Aperient substances are dangerous for a man with colic, because by dilating and distending the passages they move towards the kidneys the matter whose property is to build up the gravel, for which the kidneys have a propensity so that they will hardly fail to retain much of what reaches them. . . .

They are equally firm in the advice they give us about healthy living. It is good to pass water often, for experience shows us that by allowing it to stagnate inside the body we give it time to dump impurities and lees, which will serve as matter to form the stone in the bladder. It is good not to pass water often, for the heavy impurities borne along in it will be discharged only if evacuated violently (we know from experience that a rushing torrent scours the bed it passes through more thoroughly than a sluggish, debilitated stream).

Similarly, it is good to lie frequently with women, because that opens the passages and moves the sand and gravel. It is also bad, for it heats the kidneys, tires and weakens them.

It is good to take hot baths at the spas, because they relax and soften the places where the sand or stone is lurking; it is also bad, because the application of external heat helps the kidneys to bake, harden and petrify the matter that is deposited there.

For those who are at the spas, it is healthier to eat little in the evening, so that the waters they are to take the next morning can have more effect, finding the stomach empty and unobstructed. On the other hand, it is better to eat little at the midday meal, so as not to disturb the workings of the water which are not yet completed and not burden the stomach so soon after that other work, and so as to leave the function of digesting to the night, which can do it better than the day, when the body and the mind are in perpetual movement and action.

That is how they go juggling and trifling at our expense in all their reasonings. [B] They could not give me one proposition against which I could not oppose one of equal force.

[A] Stop railing then at those who, amid such confusion, ignore the medical profession and allow themselves to be gently led by their feelings and by the counsels of nature, committing themselves to the common lot.

·BATHS·

My travels have provided occasions for seeing almost all the famous baths of Christendom; and I have been using them for some years now. For in general I reckon that bathing is healthy, and I believe that our health has suffered several quite serious inconveniences since we lost the habit (that was formerly observed in almost all nations and still is in many) of washing one's body every day; I can only think that we are much the worse for having our limbs encrusted and our pores blocked up with filth.

As for drinking the waters at the spas, firstly fortune has not made this in any way hostile to my taste, and secondly it is natural and simple and at least not dangerous, even if it does no good. I take as warrant for that the countless people of all sorts and constitutions who assemble there. And although I have never seen any extraordinary and miraculous

effect there—

but rather, on investigating a little more thoroughly than is usual, I have found to be ill-founded and false all the rumours of such effects that are scattered about in those places and are believed (since people easily fool themselves about things that they desire)

—I have seen almost no-one made worse by these waters; and it cannot be honestly denied that they stimulate the appetite, help the digestion and liven us up a bit (unless you are already too weak when you go there, something I advise you not to do). They cannot rebuild massy ruins, but they can prop up a leaning wall or provide against the threat of some deterioration.

Anyone who does not bring to them enough cheerfulness to be able to enjoy the pleasure of the company gathered there, and of the walks and relaxations we are invited to by the beauty of the places where most of these spas are situated, will certainly lose the best and surest part of their effect. For this reason I have so far chosen to stay at and make use of those that offer most in the way of location, lodgings, food and company. [He names some of them, in four countries, following this with half a page on how different countries use spas differently though ‘in my experience the effects are virtually identical’, summing up:] So you see how this branch of medicine—the only one I have availed myself of—though it is the least artificial also has a good share of the confusion and uncertainty that is seen everywhere else in that art. [He adds two Latin epigrams, which he says make his point ‘with more eloquence and grace’; he could have said also that they make it rather obscurely. Then he tells ‘two stories’ occupying more than two pages. The first concerns a region of France where things were well-nigh perfect for centuries, but which came to grief when first a lawyer and then a doctor settled there.

The second expresses scepticism about commonly accepted medicines.]

·‘MY QUARREL IS NOT WITH THEM’·

For the rest, I honour doctors. . . .for themselves, having known many honourable and lovable men among them. My quarrel is not with them but with their art, and I do not blame them much for profiting from our stupidity, for most people do. Many vocations, both less and more worthy than theirs, have no other foundation or support than the abuse of the public. When I am ill I call them in if they happen to be around at the right time; I ask them for treatment and pay up like anyone else. I grant them authority to order me to wrap up warmly if I prefer that to being cold; they can choose between leeks and lettuce to make my broth, and prescribe for me white wine or claret—and so on, for anything that my appetite and habits don’t care about either way. . . .

How many of the doctors we see are of my disposition, disdaining medicine for their own use and adopting an unfettered way of life quite contrary to the one they prescribe for others! If that is not shamelessly exploiting our simple-mindedness, what is? For their life and health are as dear to them as ours are to us, and they would practise what they preach if they did not know that it is false.

What blinds us so is our fear of death and pain, impatience [see Glossary] with illness, and a frenzied and indiscriminate thirst for a cure; it is pure cowardice that makes our belief so soft and pliable. [C] Even then, most people do not so much believe ·in medical treatments· as endure and acquiesce ·in them·; for I hear them complaining and talking about medicine as I do. But they end up deciding ‘What else can I do?’ As if impatience were an intrinsically better remedy than patience! [A] Among those who acquiesce in this miserable subjection is there anyone who does not surrender

equally to every sort of imposture, putting himself at the mercy of anyone shameless enough to promise him a cure?

·BASING MEDICINE ON ANECDOTES·

[C] The Babylonians carried their sick into the public square; the doctor was the populace; each passer-by was required out of humanity and civility to inquire into their condition and to give them some salutary advice according to his own experience. We do much the same. [A] There is not the simplest little woman whose spells and amulets we do not use; and, for my taste, if I had to accept any medicine I would prefer to accept theirs, since at least there are no ill-effects to fear. [C] What Homer and Plato said of Egyptians, that they were all doctors, applies to all peoples; there is nobody who does not boast of prescription and try it out on his neighbour if he is willing to trust it.

[A] The other day I was in company when a fellow-sufferer—it doesn't matter who—brought news of a new kind of pill compounded from a hundred-odd carefully counted ingredients. There was great rejoicing and singular consolation; for what rock could withstand the impact from such a numerous battery ·of guns·? However, I understand from those who tried the pill that not even the tiniest grain of gravel deigned to be dislodged by it.

I cannot cut myself loose from this essay without saying this one word about the fact that they guarantee the reliability of their drugs by citing the experiments they have conducted. The greater part (over two-thirds, I think) of the virtues of medicines consists in the quintessence or hidden properties of *simples*; only practical usage can instruct us about that, for quintessence is nothing but a quality whose cause cannot be explained by our reason.

Those of their proofs that doctors say they owe to revelations from some daemon or other I am content to accept (for I never touch miracles); the same goes for proofs based on things we use every day for other purposes; for example, if the wool we use to clothe us is found by accident to have some hidden power of desiccation that cures the blisters on our heels; or if the horseradish we eat for food is found to have some laxative action. Galen reports that a leper was cured by drinking wine from a jar into which a viper had chanced to slip. We find in this example the means and a likely method for this sort of experiment, as also in the ones that the doctors say they were led to by the example of certain animals.

But in most of the other experiences¹ they say they were led to by fortune with luck as their only guide, I cannot believe that they actually *advanced* their knowledge that way. [Montaigne imagines someone looking at the natural world for cures for epilepsy, grappling with the infinitely complex problems of fully understanding any substance proposed for a cure and the infinitely complex problem of getting clearly about exactly epilepsy *is*,] being guided in all this not by argument or by conjecture or by example or by divine inspiration but only by the movement of fortune; well, it would have to be a fortune that was perfectly workmanlike, regular, and methodical! And then, even if a cure is achieved, how can he—the doctor—be sure that this was not because the malady had run its course, or a result of chance, or the effect of something else the patient had eaten, drunk or touched that day, or the merit of his grandmother's prayers? Furthermore, even if that proof had been perfect, how often was it repeated? How often was that long string of chances

¹ This translates *experiences*, translated previously by 'experiments'. In this passage, Montaigne *glides* from experiments they have conducted to experiences they have undergone.

and coincidences strung again so that a rule could be derived from it?

^[B] When the rule is derived, who derives it? Out of so many millions, only three men—Hippocrates, Galen and Avicenna—have taken the trouble to record their experiences. Will chance have alighted precisely on one of those? What if another man—a hundred other men—have contrary experiences? Perhaps we would see some light if all men's judgements and reasonings were known to us. But that three witnesses—three doctors—should make rules for the whole human race is not reasonable. . . .

·ADDRESSED TO MARGUERITE DE DURAS·

^[A] To Madame de Duras. Madame, you found me at this point when you called to see me recently. Because these clumsy essays may fall into your hands one day, I would also like them to testify that their author feels most honoured by the favour you will be doing them. In them you will recognise the same bearing and the same tone that you have seen in his conversation. Even if I had been able to adopt some style other than my usual one, and some better and more honourable form, I would not have done so; for all I want from these writings is for them to recall me to your memory plain and unadorned. I want to take those characteristics and faculties that you have been familiar with and have favoured, Madame, with more honour and courtesy than they deserve, and lodge them without alteration in a solid body that can outlive me by a few years, or a few days, in which you will find them again when you want to refresh your memory of them, without otherwise taking the trouble to remember them, as indeed they are not worth it. What I want is for you to go on favouring me with your friendship for the same qualities that first aroused it.

I have not the least desire to be better loved and esteemed

dead than alive. ^[B] That disposition of Tiberius which made him more concerned to be widely honoured in the future than to make himself esteemed or liked in his own day is ridiculous, though common enough. ^[C] If I were one of those to whom the world owes praise, I would settle for half of what was owed if I was paid in advance. Let praise rush to pile up all around me, thickly not thinly spread, plentiful rather than long-lasting. And let it abruptly switch off, together with my consciousness of it, when its sweet sound will no longer reach my ears.

·CONTEMPT FOR LITERARY FAME·

^[A] At this moment when I am ready to give up dealings with men, it would be a stupid fancy to present myself to them as worthy of esteem in some new way—such as my authorship of these essays—. I will not acknowledge receipt of any goods not delivered for use during my lifetime.

Whatever I may be, I want to be it somewhere other than on paper! My art and industry have been employed in making *me* worth something; my studies, in teaching me to *do*, not to *write*. I have put all my efforts into forming my life. That is my trade, my work. I am less a maker of books than of anything else. I have wanted enough for my present and essential needs, not to lay up a stock and reserve for my heirs.

^[C] If a man has any good in him, let him show it in his *moeurs*, in his ordinary talk, in the way he loves or quarrels, at play, in bed, at table, in the way he conducts his business and runs his house. Those whom I see writing good books in torn breeches would have first mended their breeches if they had taken my advice. Ask a Spartan if he would prefer being a good orator to being a good soldier! Personally, I would not prefer it to being a good cook, if I did not already have the services of one.

^{1A1} *Mon Dieu*, Madame, how I would hate the reputation of being clever at writing but stupid and useless at everything else! I would rather be stupid at writing *and* at everything else than have chosen so badly where to employ my ability. Far from expecting to acquire some new honour by this silly nonsense—these essays—I shall have done well if it does not make me lose the little I have. For this dead and mute portrait not only gives a washed-out picture of my natural being but also comes from me not in my best state but only when I have fallen far from my original vigour and cheefulness, beginning to grow withered and rancid. I am at the bottom of the barrel, where it begins to taste of the sediment and the lees.

·BACK TO MEDICINE·

Moreover, Madame, I would not have ventured to disturb the mysteries of medicine so boldly, considering the trust that you and so many others have in it, if I had not been led to this by their very own authors. I think there are only two of these among the ancient Latins: Pliny and Celsus. If you read them some day, you will find that they speak to their trade far more roughly than I do. I give it a pinch; they slaughter it. Among other things Pliny mocks doctors who, when they have come to the end of their tether, have thought up the fine escape sending off the patients they have uselessly agitated and tormented with their drugs and diets, some •to get help from vows and miracles, the others •to hot-spring spas. (Do not be offended, Madame: he wasn't speaking of the ones on our side of the border, which are under the protection of your family. . . .) And they have a third way of getting rid of us and escaping the reproaches we could launch at them for the lack of improvement in our illnesses that they have been treating for so long that they have run out of ideas, namely sending us away •to some

other region to discover how good the air is there! Enough of this, Madame. You will allow me to pick up the thread of my argument, from which I had digressed from in order to talk with you.

I think it was Pericles who, when was asked how he was getting on, replied 'You can judge from this', pointing to amulets that he had attached to his neck and his arm. He meant to imply that he was very ill, having reached the point of resorting to such silly things and letting himself be decked out in that fashion. I do not say that I may not one day be swept away by the ridiculous idea of entrusting my life my health to the mercy and government of the doctors; I might well fall into that madness; I cannot vouch for my future firmness. But if in that case someone asks how I am getting on, I shall be able to answer as Pericles did, 'You can judge from this', showing him my hand full of six drams of opiate. That will be a very clear sign of a violent illness; my judgement will be extraordinarily unhinged. If fear and intolerance of pain ever get that much hold on me, that will support the diagnosis that I have a very fierce fever in my soul.

I have taken the trouble to plead this cause, which I do not understand well, to support a little and strengthen the natural aversion to drugs and to the practice of our medicine which I have derived from my ancestors, so that it should have a little more *form* than a mere stupid and thoughtless inclination; and also so that those who see me firmly set against the persuasions and menaces addressed to me when my maladies oppress me do not think that this is pure stubbornness or be so nasty as to conclude that I am pricked on by vainglory. What a well-aimed ambition *that* would be, wanting to be honoured for something I have in common with my gardener and my mule-driver! Surely my heart is not so swollen or so windy that I would go about

exchanging a solid, meaty, marrowy pleasure like good health for a pleasure that is imaginary, immaterial, and airy. . . .

Those who like our medicine may also have their own good, great, strong reasons; I do not hate ideas that are contrary to mine. I am so far from being scared off when I see others' judgements clashing with mine, and from disliking the society of men who are of a different sentiment and party from mine, that on the contrary I always *expect* to find

myself in the presence of disagreement. Just as the most general style followed by nature is *variety*—^[C] even more in minds than in bodies, since minds are of a more supple and variable substance—^[A] I find it much rarer to see our humours and purposes coincide. And there never were in the world two opinions exactly alike, any more than two hairs or two grains. The most universal quality of things is diversity.¹

¹ *Leur plus universelle qualité, c'est la diversité.* He is saying that what things most have in common is being unlike another!