

# Essays, Book III

Michel de Montaigne

1588

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

[A]: material in the first edition (1580) or added soon thereafter; there is none of this in Book III,

[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. —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

**colic:** Translates *cholique*. Severe abdominal pain, perhaps accompanied by diarrhoea. In Montaigne's case it was essentially connected with his **stone**, q.v.

**Conquistador:** A leader in the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru in the 16th century (Spanish for 'conqueror').

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

**Cupid:** Several occurrences of this, especially in Essay 5, are translations of *amour*.

**dare:** This translates *oser*, which can also be translated less strenuously as 'venture'.

**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.

**friendship:** Translates *amitié*. Sometimes, for example on page 108, it means something much stronger, such as 'loving relationship'. Similarly with *ami* and 'friend'.

**gravel:** Translates *grave*, *gravele*, and *sable*, which could be 'sand'. It means about the same as **stone**, q.v.

**honest man:** Used as a stop-gap substitute for *honneste homme*, which Montaigne is using in an old sense: 'man of the world, agreeable and marked by his manners and also by his intelligence and knowledge' [Petit Robert dictionary]. Perhaps 'honest women' (*honnestes femmes*) on page 22 should be understood in the same way.

**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*.

**munificence:** Splendid liberality in giving [OED].

**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'). The word is translated by 'prince' throughout.

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

**spiritual:** Translates *spirituel*, an adjective whose cognate noun is *esprit*, which can mean 'spirit' but also mean 'mind' or 'intellect'. So occurrences of the adjective should be viewed with caution.

**stone:** This refers to kidney-stones, an affliction from which Montaigne suffered grievously; a major topic of the final essay.

**vanity, vain(ly):** Regularly used to translate *vanité* and its cognates, though in Montaigne's usage *vanité* means 'emptiness', 'triviality' or the like more often than it means what 'vanity' does to us. See especially Essay 9.

## 1. The useful and the honourable

[B] No one is free from uttering stupidities. The misfortune is to say them very carefully.

'Of course that man will take great pains to say enormous trifles!' [Terence].

That does not apply to me. My trifles escape me as casually as they deserve. All the better for them. I would part with them at once, however low their price. I do not buy and sell them except for what they weigh. I speak on paper exactly as I do in casual conversation. What follows is proof of that!

Is there anyone for whom treachery should not be detestable, when Tiberius rejected it at great cost to himself. His people in Germany sent word him that, if he approved, they would rid him of Arminius by poison. (Arminius was the most powerful enemy the Romans had; he had humiliated them under Varus, and alone was preventing Tiberius from extending his dominion over that territory.) He replied that the Roman people were accustomed to avenging themselves on their enemies openly, weapons in hand, not covertly by trickery. He renounced what was useful for what was honourable.

You will tell me that he was a hypocrite. I believe he was—hardly a miracle in someone in his profession! But a profession of virtue does not lose force by coming from a man who hates it; indeed truth forces the profession out of him, and even if he doesn't welcome virtue inwardly he decorates himself with it.

Our structure, both in public and in private, is full of imperfection. But there is nothing useless in nature—not even uselessness. Nothing works its way into this universe without having an appropriate place in it. Each of us is *held together* by bad qualities. Ambition, jealousy, envy,

vengeance, superstition and despair lodge in us with such a natural right of possession that we recognise the likeness of them even in the animals too—indeed, even the unnatural vice of cruelty; for in the midst of compassion we feel within us some sort of bitter-sweet pricking of malicious pleasure at seeing others suffer. Even children feel it: 'Sweet it is during a tempest when the gales lash the waves to watch from the shore another man's great striving' [Lucretius].

Anyone who removed the seeds of such qualities in man would be destroying the basic conditions of our life. So too in any political management there are things that *have to be done* and that are not merely abject but vicious as well. Vices have their place here; they are used to develop the ties that bind us together, just as poisons are used to preserve our health. If they become excusable because we have need of them, and their necessity effaces their true qualities, we must leave that role—the performing of vicious acts that are needed for social well-being—to be played by citizens who are more vigorous and less timorous and are prepared to sacrifice their honour and their consciences, as men in ancient times sacrificed their lives for the well-being of their country. The rest of us, being weaker, accept roles that are easier and less dangerous. The public interest requires men to betray, to tell lies [C] and to massacre; [B] let us resign that commission to people who are more obedient and more pliant.

I have certainly been moved to anger at seeing judges engage in shameless trickery, using fraud and false hopes of favour or of pardon to tempt criminals to reveal what they have done. It would be helpful to justice (and to Plato, too, who is in favour of that practice) to provide me with other methods, more in keeping with myself. Such 'justice' is malicious, and I think that malice harms justice as much anything does. Not long ago, when asked about my attitude

to such matters, I replied that I would hardly be one to betray my Prince for a private citizen when I would be deeply grieved to betray any private citizen for my Prince; and just as I hate to deceive, I also hate others to be deceived about me. I am unwilling even to provide matter or occasion for it. In the little I have had to do with negotiations between our princes during these disputes and sub-disputes that tear us apart these days, I have carefully avoided letting anyone be mistaken about me or getting entangled in my mask. Those in the business—professional negotiators—keep themselves well covered, doing their best to counterfeit a moderate and conciliatory attitude. As for me, I present myself through my liveliest opinions and in the manner that is most truly mine—a green and tender negotiator who would rather fail in my mission than let myself down. I have been very lucky so far—and luck certainly plays the major part in this; few men have gone from one group to another with less suspicion or more favour and courtesy.

I have an open manner that easily insinuates itself and is trusted from the first encounter. At any time in history, naturalness and simple truth always find their time and their place. And then frank speech is less suspect or offensive in men who are not working for some private gain and who can truthfully say as Hyperides did when Athenians complained of his harsh way of speaking: ‘Gentlemen, do not consider only my frankness but that I am frank without having anything to gain, without restoring my own fortunes.’ My own frankness has quickly freed me too from suspicion of deceitfulness, by its vigour. . . .and also by presenting itself as simple and casual. All I want to gain from doing anything is doing it; I do not attach long consequences and purposes; each thing I do plays its game separately; let it win if it can.

I feel, by the way, no driving passion of love or hatred toward the great; my will has not been throttled by private

injury or obligation. <sup>[C]</sup> I view our kings with the simple loyal affection of a subject, neither encouraged nor discouraged by personal interest. I am pleased with myself over that. <sup>[B]</sup> I am devoted to public affairs when they are just, but only moderately and calmly. . . . Anger and hatred go beyond the duty of justice; they are passions that serve only those who are not held to their duty by reason alone. All legitimate and equitable purposes are inherently fair and temperate; otherwise they slide into sedition and disloyalty. That is what makes me stride forward, head erect, open-faced and open-hearted.

Indeed I am not afraid to admit that if there were a need for it I would readily. . . .offer a candle to St Michael and another to his dragon. I shall follow the good side as far as the fire, but no further if I can avoid it. Let Montaigne, my home, be engulfed in the collapse of the commonwealth if need be; but if it does not need to be, I shall be grateful to fortune for its preservation. Was it not Herodes Atticus who held to the just side, the losing side, yet saved himself by his moderation in that universal shipwreck of the world among so many schisms and upheavals?

It is easier for private men such as he was; and I find that in that kind of turmoil one is entitled not to be ambitious to get involved and push oneself forward. But I find that to remain vacillating and half-and-half, keeping one’s affections in check, unmoved by civil strife and public disputes in one’s own country, is neither handsome nor honourable. <sup>[C]</sup> ‘That is not the way of moderation: it is no way at all. It is simply awaiting the outcome so as to support those who happen to win.’ <sup>[Liv]</sup> That may be permissible towards the affairs of neighbouring countries: Gelon, the tyrant of Syracuse, refrained from supporting either side in the war of the Barbarians against the Greeks, keeping an envoy in readiness at Delphi bearing gifts, on the lookout for which

side fortune would favour, so as to form a prompt alliance with the victor. But it would be a kind of treason to act thus in civil strife at home, in which <sup>[B]</sup> one *must* decide to join one side or other. But for a man who is not under pressure from any official responsibility or explicit command I find it to more excusable for him to keep out of the strife (though it's not an excuse I make for myself), except in the case of foreign wars. . . . Nevertheless, even those who become totally committed can still do so with such order and moderation that the storm should pass over their heads without harm. Did we not have reason to hope for this in the case of the late bishop of Orleans, the sieur de Morvilliers? And among those who are struggling valiantly right now, I know some whose *mœurs* [see Glossary] are so equable or so gentle that they are likely to remain upright, whatever destructive upheavals and collapses heaven may have in store for us.

I hold that it is for kings alone to feel animosity towards kings; and I laugh at folk who light-heartedly enter into such disproportionate quarrels. For a man who fulfills his honour and his duty by marching openly and courageously against a monarch is not pursuing a *private quarrel* with him; if he does not love that great person, he does something better—he *esteems* him. And there is always this in favour of the cause of the laws and of the defence of the existing state that even those who are disturbing it for their personal ends do not condemn those who defend it, though they do not honour them. But inward bitter harshness born of self-interested passion should not be called *duty*, as it commonly is, and malicious and treacherous dealings should not be called *courage*. What they call *zeal* is their propensity to wickedness and violence; what sets them ablaze is not the cause but self-interest; they kindle war not because it is just but because it is war.

Nothing stops us from behaving properly and in good faith

even when among men who are enemies to one another. In that situation, conduct yourself not with an *equal good-will* (for good-will can allow of varying degrees) but at least with a *temperate one* that won't get you so involved with one of the hostile parties that it can demand everything of you. And be satisfied with a moderate degree of their favour, gliding through troubled waters without trying to fish in them!

The other way, namely offering all one's service to this side *and* to that, savours even less of prudence than it does of morality. The man to whom you betray another with whom you are on equally good terms—doesn't he know that you will do the same to him in turn? He regards you as a wicked man; but he listens to you, pumps you, turns your treachery to his advantage. Double-dealers are useful for what they *bring*, but there's a need for care that they *take away* as little as possible.

I never say anything to one side that I cannot say to the other when the time comes, merely changing the emphasis a little. I report only things that are irrelevant to the current conflict, or already known, or useful to both sides. There is no advantage for which I would permit myself to lie to them. I scrupulously conceal whatever has been entrusted to my silence, but I carry as little into concealment as I can. The secrets of princes are a troublesome burden when one has no use for them. I freely offer this bargain: they entrust little to me, but they absolutely trust what I bring to them. I have always known more about these matters than I wanted to.

<sup>[C]</sup> An open way of speaking opens up another man's speech and draws it out, as do wine and love.

<sup>[B]</sup> Phillipides replied wisely to King Lysimachus who asked him 'Which of my possessions shall I share with you?'—'Whatever you like, provided it is none of your secrets.'

I notice that everyone rebels if the deeper implications of the negotiations he is employed on are concealed from

him and if some ulterior motive is hidden from him. As for me, I am glad not to be told more than I am expected to *use*; I do not want my knowledge to exceed and constrain my speech. If I must serve as a means of deception, at least let my conscience be clear. I do not want to be regarded as such a loyal or loving servant that I would be thought fit to betray anyone. Someone who is unfaithful to himself is excusable for being unfaithful to his master.

But these are princes who will not accept men halfway, and scorn services limited by conditions. There is no remedy for this. I frankly tell them my limits; the only thing I should be a slave to is reason, and I can scarcely manage even that. [C] They are wrong to require a free man to be as abjectly bound to their service as a man they have made and bought or one whose fortune is expressly and individually tied to theirs.

[B] The laws have saved me a great deal of trouble; they have chosen my party for me and given me a master; any other superiority and obligation must be relative to that one and restrained by it. That does not mean that if my affection carried me in another direction, I would immediately go there with my support. Our will and our desires are laws unto themselves, but our actions must accept public law.

This way of proceeding of mine does not quite fit our customs; it is not made to achieve great effects or to endure very long. Innocence itself could not negotiate among us without dissimulation or bargain without without lying. So public employments are not my quarry; whenever my profession requires them of me, I carry them out in the most private way I can. As a boy I was plunged in them up to my ears, with success; but I got out of that in good time. Since then I have often avoided getting involved in public employments, rarely accepted them, never asked for them; . . . and yet my not having embarked on such a career owes less to my

resolve than to my good fortune. For there are paths that are less inimical to my taste and more in conformity with my capacities that fortune *could have* summoned me to follow towards political service and growing worldly prestige; and if it had done so, I know I would have over-ridden my reasoned arguments and answered its call.

There are those who say, against what I profess, that my frankness, simplicity and naturalness in my *mœurs* are mere skill and cunning, prudence rather than goodness, artifice rather than nature, good sense rather than good luck;

they give me more honour than they take from me. They certainly make my cunning *too* cunning. If anyone follows and watches me closely, I will hand him the victory if he does not admit that his sect has no rule that could counterfeit my natural way of proceeding and keep up an appearance of liberty and licence maintained so uniformly along such tortuous paths. . . . The way of truth is **one** and artless; the way of private gain and success in one's personal business is **double**, uneven and random.

I have often seen that counterfeit artificial frankness in practice, but most often without success. It brings to mind Aesop's ass which tried to copy the dog by gaily throwing both its forefeet onto its master's shoulders; but the caresses the dog received for such a show of affection were outnumbered by the blows given to the wretched ass. [C] 'What best becomes a man is whatever is most peculiarly his own.' [Cicero] [B] I don't want to deprive deceit of its proper place; to do that would be to misunderstand the world. I know that it has often served profitably and that it feeds and maintains most of men's occupations. There are lawful vices, just there are many actions that are good or pardonable though unlawful.

Inherent justice that is **a** natural and **b** universal is ordered differently and more nobly than the other sort of

justice that is **b** particular to one nation and **a** constrained by our political necessities. <sup>[c]</sup> 'We have no solid and exact image of true law and absolute justice; we use mere sketches and shadows.' [Cicero]

(<sup>[B]</sup> So that when the sage Dandamis heard tell of the lives of Socrates, Pythagoras and Diogenes, he judged them to be great men in every way except for their excessive veneration for the laws, to authorize and support which true virtue must give up much of its original vigour.)

Many vicious deeds are done not merely with the laws' permission but at their instigation. <sup>[c]</sup> 'There are crimes authorised by decrees of the Senate and by popular votes' [Seneca]. <sup>[B]</sup> I follow the ordinary usage that differentiates between useful things and honourable things; so that some natural actions that are not only useful but necessary are called dishonourable and foul.

But let us continue our examples of treachery. Two claimants to the kingdom of Thrace had fallen into a quarrel over their rights. The Emperor stopped them from coming to blows; but one of them, under the pretext of a meeting to establish an amicable relation between them, invited his rival to an entertainment in his house—where he had him imprisoned and killed. Justice required that the Romans should get satisfaction for this crime, but difficulty blocked the ordinary way of doing so. What they could not do lawfully without war and hazard they therefore undertook to do by treachery. What they could not do 'honourably' they did 'usefully'. A certain Pomponius Flaccus was found fit to do the work. After drawing the other into his net by deceitful words and assurances, instead of the honour and favour he had promised him he dispatched him to Rome bound hand and foot. Here we have one traitor betraying another, which goes against the usual pattern, for traitors

are full of mistrust and it is hard to catch them out by cunning like their own—witness the painful experience we have just had. [It is not clear what this refers to. It cannot be the 1572 Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre: the victims there were *innocent* protestants who *were* tricked into coming to Paris; doubly unlike what Montaigne has just been talking about.]

Let him who will be a Pomponius Flaccus—and there are plenty who will. In my case, my word and my honour are working parts of our commonwealth, along with all the rest; their best work is in public service; I take that as granted. But if I were ordered to take charge of the Palace of Justice and its lawsuits, I would reply: 'I know nothing at all about such things'; if ordered to take charge of a corps of pioneers [= 'military engineers and ditch-diggers'], I would say: 'I am called to a more worthy role.' Similarly if anyone wanted to employ me to lie, to betray and to perjure myself in some important cause (even if not to assassinate or poison), I would say 'If I have robbed anyone or stolen anything, send me rather to the galleys.' It is lawful for a man of honour to speak as the Spartans did when, defeated by Antipater, they were agreeing terms with him: 'You may command us to accept conditions which are as grievous and as damaging as you please; but if you command us to do shameful and dishonourable things, you will be wasting your time.'

(Each of us ought to have sworn to himself the oath the kings of Egypt made their judges solemnly swear: that as judges they would never deviate from their conscience for any command that even they, their kings, might give.)

In such a commission there is an evident sign of ignominy and condemnation; the one who gives it to you is condemning you; properly understood, he is giving it to you as an accusation and a punishment. The better public affairs are through your activities, the worse things are for you: the better you do, the worse you do. If the very man who set



you the task punished you for performing it—well, there are precedents for that, and even some appearance of justice.

<sup>[C]</sup> In a particular case perfidy may be excusable, but only when used to betray and punish perfidy. <sup>[B]</sup> There are plenty of treacherous deeds that have been not only disowned but punished by the very ones on whose behalf they were perpetrated. Who does not know the judgement Fabricius pronounced against Pyrrhus's physician? <sup>[The doctor wrote to Fabricius offering to poison Pyrrhus, to whom Fabricius forwarded the letter, telling him to choose his friends better.]</sup> But further still, there are cases when the very one who ordered the deed has exacted rigorous revenge on the man he employed to do it, disclaiming such unbridled authority and power and disowning such an abandoned and cowardly servility and obedience.

A Russian duke called Jaropelc bribed an Hungarian nobleman to betray •King Boleslaus of Poland, either by killing him or by providing the Russians with the means of doing him some significant harm. The Hungarian acted the carefully courteous man and devoted himself more than before to the service of •the king; he succeeded in becoming one of his council and one of his most trusted men. Taking advantage of this, and choosing an opportune moment when his master was absent, he betrayed Wielickzka to the Russians; that great and flourishing city was entirely sacked and burnt by them; with the slaughter not only of the city's entire population of all ages and both sexes but also of a large number of neighbouring nobles whom he had assembled there for that purpose. Jaropelc, his vengeance and his anger assuaged—and they were not unjustified, since Boleslaus had greatly injured him in a similar manner—was satiated by the fruits of that treacherous deed. He came to reflect on its naked, simple ugliness, seeing it with a sane vision and no longer obscured by passion; he was seized with

such remorse and revulsion that he had his agent's eyes put out, and his tongue and private parts cut off.

<sup>[Montaigne now cites four more cases in which treacherous behaviour is brutally punished by the person whose persuasion, bribery or authority caused it to happen in the first place. Then:]</sup> <sup>[B]</sup> Even to worthless men, after profiting from a vicious deed, it is very sweet to be able from then on to fasten on it some mark of goodness and of justice, as though their conscience wanted to make up for it and put things right. <sup>[C]</sup> To which may be added the fact that the agents of such horrific wickedness are a reproach to them [i.e. to the **a** instigators, not the actual **b** agents]; so **a** they seek through **b** their deaths to smother any knowledge witnessing to such proceedings.

<sup>[B]</sup> Now, even if you do get rewarded for a base act—an extreme and desperate remedy required by public necessity—the one who rewards you will nevertheless regard you as a man accursed and abominable, unless he is so himself. And he will think you a worse traitor than does the man you betrayed; for it is with your own hands. . . .that you prove to him the malevolence of your heart. He employs you just as we do those degraded men who carry out capital punishment—a task as useful as it is shameful. Apart from the baseness of such commissions, there is the prostitution of one's conscience. Because Sejanus's daughter was a virgin and therefore not punishable by death according to Roman law, the executioner made space for the law to apply by raping her before he strangled her. Not only his hand but his soul is a slave to public convenience.

<sup>[C]</sup> When Amurath I, to increase the severity of his punishment of those subjects who had supported the parricidal rebellion of his son against him, ordered that their closest kin should take part in their execution, I find it very honourable in some of them who, ·by refusing to do this·, preferred to

be unjustly held guilty of another's ·attempted· parricide rather than to serve justice by a parricide of their own. And in my own time when I have seen some rabble, after we have stormed their wretched hovels, saving their own lives in return for the hanging of their friends and relatives, I have always regarded them as worse than those who were hanged.

It is said that in former days Prince Vitold of Lithuania proclaimed as law that condemned criminals must execute their sentences by their own hand, finding it monstrous that a third party, who was innocent of their crime, should be burdened with the task of homicide.

<sup>[B]</sup> When some urgent necessity or some violent unforeseeable event affecting the needs of the state makes a prince deviate from his word and his faith, or otherwise forces him from his ordinary duty, he should consider this necessity as a scourging by the rod of God; it is not a vice, for he has abandoned his own reason for a more powerful and universal one; but it is indeed a misfortune. So when I was asked, 'What remedy is there?' I replied, 'None: if the prince was really torn between those two extremes, then he had to do it. But if he had no regrets about doing it, if it did not weigh upon him, then that is a sign that his conscience is in a bad way.' <sup>[C]</sup> [Between those two sentences, Montaigne inserts <sup>[C]</sup> 'But let him beware that he is not seeking a pretext for perjury' (Cicero).]. . . .

Those are dangerous examples, rare and sickly exceptions to our natural rules. They should be yielded to, but with great moderation and circumspection. No •private good is worth our doing such violence to our consciences. The •public good?—yes, when it is very obvious and important.

<sup>[C]</sup> Timoleon sheltered himself from the monstrous quality of his deed, remembering that he had killed the tyrant with the hand of a brother; and it rightly pricked his conscience that he had had to purchase the common good at the price of his *mœurs*. Even the ·Corinthian· Senate, which he had

freed from slavery ·by killing his brother·, dared not plainly make up its mind about such a prominent action that was split between two weighty and contrary aspects. But when the citizens of Syracuse at that very moment sent to beg protection from the Corinthians, asking for a leader worthy of restoring their city to its former splendour and of cleansing Sicily of the many petty tyrants who were oppressing it, the Senators chose Timoleon for this task, declaring—a new evasion!—that their decision would be •in favour of the liberator of his country or •against the murderer of his brother depending on whether he did well or badly in this new task.

This fanciful decision has some excuse in the dangerous nature of the case and the complexity of the action in question. And they did well to free their judgement of the burden it imposed, or to base it on some other independent considerations. Now, Timoleon's conduct during that expedition soon threw light on his case, so worthily and so virtuously did he act in every way; and the good fortune that accompanied him during the hardships he had to overcome in that noble task seemed to them to have been sent by the gods, united in favour of vindicating him.

If ever an aim was worthy of pardon, that aim was Timoleon's. But ·not every 'public necessity' has such weight·. The usefulness of increasing the public revenue. . . .is not strong enough to warrant such an injustice. [He illustrates this with a 'filthy' thing the Roman Senate did in the second century BCE.]

Civil wars often produce base examples of our punishing private citizens for believing in us when we were different; the magistrate inflicts the penalty for his own change of mind on someone who had nothing to do with it; the master whips his pupil for being teachable; the guide whips his blind man. Horrible image of justice!

Some rules in philosophy are false and weak. An example is presented to us to show private usefulness ·morally· prevailing over a formal promise because of special features of the case:

Thieves have captured you; they have set you free after exacting from you an oath to pay a certain sum.

But the special features don't succeed in this. It is wrong to say (·as some do·) that a good man, once out of their hands, will be free of his promise. He is nothing of the sort! What fear has once made me will, I am bound to go on willing when the fear is over. And if fear merely forced my tongue without my will, I am still bound to pay the promised sum down to the last farthing. As for me, when I have carelessly let my tongue get ahead of my thoughts, it has been a matter of conscience for me not to disavow it. Otherwise, we will gradually reach the point where it will overthrow *any* right that someone else acquires by our promises and our oaths. . . . Private interest excuses our breaking a promise if, but only if, what we promised is wicked and iniquitous in itself; for the right of virtue should prevail over the right of our obligation.

I have already placed Epaminondas among the foremost ranks of outstanding men,<sup>1</sup> and I do not retract that. How far would he go, out of consideration for his private duty? He was someone who

- never killed a man he had vanquished;
- scrupled to kill a tyrant or his accomplices without due form of law, even for the inestimable good of restoring freedom to his country; and who
- judged a man to be wicked—however good a citizen he might be—if he did not spare his friend and host among his enemies even in battle.

A richly complex soul! To the harshest and most violent of hu-

man activities he married goodness and humanity—indeed the most delicate to be found in the school of philosophy. That heart so great, full and obstinate against pain, death and poverty: was it nature or art that made it tender to the point of such extreme gentleness and kindness of disposition? Terrible with blood and sword, he goes smashing and shattering a nation that no-one could beat but him, and *turns aside* in the thick of the melee when he encounters his friend and host. Truly that man was in command of war when he subjected it to the curb of *kindness* at the highest point of its most blazing ardour, all enflamed as it was and foaming with frenzy and slaughter. It is a miracle to mingle such actions with a semblance of justice; but it was for the strength of Epaminondas alone to mingle them with the gentle ease of the mildest *mœurs* and pure innocence.

Where one man [Pompey] said to the Mammertines that statute-law did not apply to men under arms, another [Caesar] told the Tribune of the People that the times of war and of justice were two different things, and a third [Marius] declared that the noise of weapons prevented him from hearing the voice of the laws, Epaminondas was never prevented from hearing the laws of civility and pure courtesy. Had he not borrowed from his enemies the practice of sacrificing to the Muses as he went to war, so as to temper by their gentleness and gaiety the harshness and frenzy of military activities?

After such a great preceptor, let us not fear to think •<sub>[C]</sub> that some things are unlawful even when done to enemies, that •<sub>[B]</sub> that the common interest cannot require all men to sacrifice all private interest always—

<sub>[C]</sub> 'the memory of individual rights subsisting even in the strife of public discord' [Livy]; <sub>[B]</sub> 'No power can authorise treachery against a friend' [Ovid]

<sup>1</sup> 'The Most Excellent of Men', essay 36 in Book 2.

—and •that not all things are permissible for an honourable man in the service of his king or of the cause of the commonwealth and its laws. [C] ‘The claims of our country are not paramount over all other duties: it is good for it to have citizens who are dutiful to their kindred’ [Cicero].

[B] It is a lesson proper to the times. We have no need to harden our hearts with these plates of iron; it is enough to harden our shoulders; it is enough to dip our pens in ink without dipping them in blood. If it is greatness of heart and the effect of rare and singular virtue to despise friendship, private obligations, our word and kinship, for the common good and obedience to the magistrate [see Glossary], then for us to decline such ‘greatness’ it suffices that it cannot find lodging within the greatness of mind of Epaminondas.

I loathe the frenetic exhortations of that other disordered soul: ‘While your weapons flash, let no thought of duty to your parents move you, nor the sight of your fathers on the other side; slash with your swords at the faces you should venerate.’ [Lucan; the speaker is supposed to be Julius Caesar.] Let us deprive wicked, bloody and treacherous natures of this pretext of reason. Let us cast aside such monstrous and deranged justice and cling to models that are more humane. How much time and example can do! In an encounter in the civil war against Cinna, one of Pompey’s soldiers unwittingly killed his brother who was on the opposite side; from shame and sorrow, he killed himself on the spot. And a few years later, in another civil war of the same people, a soldier asked his commanders for a reward for killing his brother.

It is wrong to argue for an action’s honour and beauty from its usefulness, and to conclude that that is obligatory and honourable for everyone to perform an action if it is useful: [C] ‘Not everything is fit for every man alike’ [Propertius].

[B] Let us select the most necessary, the most useful activity of human society: that will be marriage. Yet the

council of saints finds the contrary way more honourable, and excludes from marriage the most venerable vocation, just as we assign to stud the horses we value least.

## 2. Repentance

[B] Others *form* man; I give an account of him, and portray a man who is very badly formed and whom I would truly make quite different from what he is if I had to fashion him afresh. But it is done now. The brush-strokes of my portrait do not go astray, though they do change and vary. The world is but a perennial seesaw. Everything in it—the land, the mountains of the Caucasus, the pyramids of Egypt—all waver with their own particular motion and with the common motion. Stability is merely a more languid motion.

I cannot *fix* my subject: it goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness. I grasp it as it is now, at this moment when I am occupied with it. I do not portray *being*. I portray *passing*: not the passing from one age to another (or, in popular parlance, from seven years to seven years), but from day to day, from minute to minute. The account of myself must be adapted to the passing hour. I may change soon, not only by chance but also by intention. This is a register of varied and changing occurrences and of ideas that are irresolute and sometimes even contradictory—either because I myself have become different or because I grasp hold of different attributes or aspects of my subjects. So I may happen to contradict myself but. . . I never contradict truth. If my soul could find a footing, I would not be trying myself out but resolving myself.

But it is always in apprenticeship and on trial. The life I am expounding is humble and lacklustre; that doesn’t matter.

The whole of moral philosophy can be tied to a commonplace private life as well as it can to a life of richer stuff. Each man bears the whole *form* of the human condition. <sup>[C]</sup> Authors communicate with the public by •some special extrinsic mark; I do so •by my entire being, not as a grammarian, poet or jurist but as Michel de Montaigne. I am the first to do this. If the world complains that I talk too much about myself, I complain that it does not even *think* about itself.

<sup>[B]</sup> But is it reasonable that I who am so private in actual life should offer to make public this knowledge of myself? Also, is it reasonable that I should present to the world—where grooming and artifice have so much credit and authority—the crude and simple products of nature, and of a very feeble nature at that? Writing a book without knowledge or skill—isn't that like building a wall without stone? Musical fancies are guided by art; mine, by chance.

At least I have *this* that conforms to the rules •of sound teaching•: no man ever treated a subject that he knew or understood better than I know and understand the one I have undertaken; in that subject I am the most learned man alive! Secondly, no man ever <sup>[C]</sup> penetrated more deeply into his material, or plucked its limbs and consequences cleaner, or <sup>[B]</sup> reached more precisely or more fully the goal he had set for his project. To accomplish it, I only need to bring fidelity to it; and it is there, as sincere and pure as can be found. I tell the truth, not as much as I could but as much as I dare—and as I grow older I dare a little more, for it seems that custom allows old age a greater licence to prattle, and more indiscretion in talking about oneself. What I often find happening cannot happen here, namely that the craftsman and his work contradict each other: 'Has a man whose conversation is so decent written such a stupid book?' or 'Can such learned writings come from a man whose conversation is so weak?'

<sup>[C]</sup> When a man is commonplace in discussion yet excellent in writing, that means that his talents lie in his borrowed sources not in himself. A learned man is not learned in all fields: but a capable man is capable in all fields, even in ignorance. <sup>[B]</sup> Here, my book and I go harmoniously forward at the same pace. Elsewhere you can commend or condemn a work independently of its author; not here: touch one and you touch the other. Anyone who judges concerning it without knowing it will harm himself more than me; anyone who does know it has satisfied me completely. I shall be blessed beyond my merit if public approval will allow me this much: that I have made intelligent people feel that I was capable of profiting from knowledge if I had had any, and that I deserved better help from my memory.

Let us excuse me for •repeating myself•, saying what I often say: that I rarely repent <sup>[C]</sup> and that my conscience is happy with itself—not like the conscience of an angel or of a horse but like the conscience of a man—<sup>[B]</sup> always adding this refrain (not a ritual one but one of simple and fundamental submission): that I speak as an ignorant inquirer; for solutions I purely and simply abide by the common authorised beliefs. I am not teaching, I am telling.

Every vice that is truly a vice is odious and is condemned by a sound judgement; for there is so much evident ugliness and impropriety in it that perhaps the people are right who maintain that vice is principally the product of stupidity and ignorance, so hard it is to imagine that anyone could know it without loathing it.

<sup>[C]</sup> Malice swallows most of its own venom and poisons itself with it. <sup>[B]</sup> Vice leaves repentance in the soul like an ulcer in the flesh, forever scratching itself and bleeding. For reason *effaces* other griefs and sorrows, but it *engenders* that of repentance, which is all the more grievous for being born within us, just as •the chill and the burn of our fevers

are more stinging than •those that come to us from outside. I regard as vices (though each according to its measure) not only those that are condemned by reason and nature but even those that have been are condemned by the opinions of men, even when these are false or erroneous, provided that law and custom lend them their authority.

Likewise, every good deed brings joy to a well-born nature. There is an indescribable delight in acting well, which makes us inwardly rejoice; a warm-hearted feeling of pride accompanies a good conscience. A boldly vicious soul can perhaps achieve composure, but it can never achieve such satisfaction and happiness with itself. It is no light pleasure to know oneself to be preserved from the contagion of such a corrupt age •as ours•, and to say of oneself:

‘Anyone who could see right into my soul would still not find me guilty of

- any man’s ruin or affliction, or of
- envy or vengeance, or of
- any public attack on our laws, or of
- innovation or disturbance, or of
- breaking my word.

And despite what this licentious age allows and even teaches each of us, I have not put my hand onto the property or into the purse of any Frenchman; I have lived by my own means, in war as in peace; nor have I exploited any man’s labour without due reward.’

These testimonies of **one’s own** conscience are pleasant; and this natural rejoicing is a great blessing and the only reward that never fails us. Looking to the approval of **others** as a reward for virtuous actions is relying on something too uncertain and shaky. [C] The good opinion of the populace is a *dishonour*, especially in a corrupt and ignorant period like our own; whom would you trust to recognise what is really praiseworthy? God preserve me from being a decent man

according to the self-descriptions that I daily see each man give to honour himself! ‘What used to be vices have become moral acts’ [Seneca].

Certain of my friends have sometimes undertaken to put me on trial and lecture me unreservedly, doing this either on their own initiative or at my invitation; of all the services of friendship, this—for a well-formed soul—is not only the most useful but also the sweetest. I have always welcomed it with the wide-open arms of courtesy and gratitude. But to speak of it now in all conscience, I have often found in their reproaches and praises such false measure that I would hardly have done worse in acting wrongly than in acting rightly by their standards.

[B] Those of us who live private lives that are on display only to ourselves have a special need for an inner pattern to test our actions, on the basis of which we sometimes pat ourselves on the back and sometimes punish ourselves. I have my own laws and law-court to pass judgement on me, and I address myself to them more than to anything else. I indeed •restrain my actions according to the standards of others, but I •extend them according to my own. No-one but you knows whether you are base and cruel or loyal and dedicated. Others do not *see* you; they *guess at* you from uncertain conjectures; what they see is not your nature so much as your art. So do not go by their sentence; go by your own. [C] ‘You should use your own judgement of yourself.’ ‘Your own conscience gives weighty judgement on your virtues and vices; remove that and everything collapses.’ [both Cicero]

[B] But the saying that repentance follows hard upon the sin does not seem to apply to fully-fledged sin that lodges in us as in its own home. We can disown and retract the bad actions that take us by surprise and towards which we are swept by our passions; but ones that are rooted and

anchored in a strong and vigorous will cannot be denied. Repentance is nothing but a disavowal of our will and a contradiction of our whims; because that's all there is to it, it can lead us in any direction. It makes the repentant man disown his past virtue and his continence! As Horace wrote:

Why did I not want to do as a young man what I  
want to do now?

Or why, thinking as I do now, cannot my radiant  
cheeks return?

It is a rare life that remains well-ordered even in private. Anyone can take part in a side-show and *represent* an honest personage on the stage; but to be disciplined within, **in one's bosom** where everything is permitted and everything is hidden—that's what matters. Just one step down from that is to be so in **one's home**, in one's everyday actions for which we are not answerable to anyone; there is no striving there, no artifice. That is why Bias, portraying an excellent state of family life, says that it is one where the head of the family act indoors of his own volition in the same way that he acts outdoors for fear of the law and the comments of men. And it was a worthy response that Julius Drusus made to the workmen who offered for 3,000 crowns to re-plan his house so that his neighbours could no longer see into it: 'I will give you 6,000 to arrange for them to see in everywhere!' We note with honour Agesilaus's practice of taking up lodgings in the temples when on a journey, so that the people and even the gods could see into his private actions.

A man whose wife and manservant see nothing remarkable about him may appear to the world as a marvel. Few men have been admired by their households. <sup>[C]</sup> No man has been a prophet in his own home or even in his own country, says the experience of history. Likewise in things of no importance. The image of greater things can be seen in this humble example:

In my region of Gascony they think it a joke to see me in print; the further from my lair knowledge of me has spread, the more I am valued. In Guienne I pay my printers; elsewhere, they pay me.

That consideration is the motive of those who hide away when alive and present, so as to gain favour when they are dead and gone. I prefer to have less of it [i.e. of posthumous fame]; I throw myself on the world only for the share of favour I can draw from my account with it. Once I am gone, the account is closed.

<sup>[B]</sup> The people escort that man ecstatically back to his door from a public function; he gives up that role when he takes off his robes; the higher he has climbed, the lower he falls. Inside, in his home, everything is tumultuous and vile. If there were moral order there, it would take a keen and highly selective judgement to perceive it in these low-level private actions. Besides, orderliness is a dull and sombre virtue. Storming a breach, serving as an ambassador, ruling a nation—these are •glittering deeds. Scolding, laughing, buying, selling, loving, hating, living on gentle and just terms with one's household and with oneself, not getting slack, not being false to oneself—that is •less conspicuous, but it is rarer and more difficult. So retired lives, whatever people may say, involve duties that are at least as hard and as strenuous as those of other lives. <sup>[C]</sup> And Aristotle says that private citizens serve virtue as highly and with as much difficulty as those who hold office. <sup>[B]</sup> We prepare ourselves for great occasions more for glory than for conscience. <sup>[C]</sup> The quickest road to glory would be to do for conscience what we do for glory. <sup>[B]</sup> And Alexander's virtue seems to me to show less vigour on his stage than does that of Socrates in his humble and obscure exercise of it. I can easily conceive of Socrates in Alexander's place; Alexander in that of Socrates, I cannot. Ask Alexander what he can do and

he will reply: 'Subdue the whole world.' Ask Socrates, and he will answer, 'Live the life of man in conformity with his natural condition'; knowledge which is much more general, weighty and legitimate.

The soul's value consists not in going high but in proceeding in an orderly way. <sup>[C]</sup> Its greatness is exercised not in greatness but in *mediocrité* [= keeping to the middle, neither high nor low]. Thus, those who judge us by the touchstone of our motives do not make much of the sparkle of our public actions, and see that these are only thin jets of fine water spurting up from muddy and thick depths; while those who judge us by this brave outward show conclude that our inward disposition corresponds to it; they cannot associate ordinary faculties like their own with those other 'amazing' faculties that are so far beyond their ken. That is why we give savage shapes to demons. And who does not give Tamberlane raised eyebrows, gaping nostrils, a ghastly face and immense size matching the size of the imaginary picture we have conceived of him from the renown of his name? If I had ever met Erasmus, it would have been hard for me not to take as adages and epigrams everything he said to his manservant or to his innkeeper's wife. We much more appropriately imagine an artisan on his toilet seat, or on his wife, than 'imagine' a great lord chancellor, venerated for his dignity and wisdom, 'in such a position'. It seems to us that they do not come down from their lofty thrones even to live.

<sup>[B]</sup> As vicious souls are often incited to do good by some external impulse, so are virtuous souls to do evil. So souls should be judged by their settled state, when they are *at home* (if if they ever are), or at least when they are nearest to repose and to their natural position.

Natural inclinations are helped and reinforced by education, but they are scarcely to be changed or overmastered. 'To use a military metaphor', in my lifetime hundreds of natures

have escaped towards virtue or vice through the lines of a contrary training:

As when wild beasts, shut up in a cage, forget  
their forests and are tamed,  
losing their menacing looks and learning to be  
ruled by men,  
yet if a tiny drop of blood falls on their avid lips,  
back come their snarls and ragings;  
they have tasted blood; their jaws yawn wide; they  
are in turmoil  
and can hardly be stopped from venting their  
wrath on their trembling tamer. [Lucan]

We do not root out these qualities we are born with; we cover them, we conceal them. Latin is like a native tongue for me; I understand it better than French; but for forty years I have made no use of it for speaking or writing. Yet on the two or three occasions in my life when I have suffered some extreme and sudden emotion—one was when my perfectly healthy father fell back into my arms in a faint—the first words I have dredged up from my depths have always been Latin ones: <sup>[C]</sup> Nature breaking forcibly out and finding expression despite a long prior of disuse. <sup>[B]</sup> And this example applies to many others.

Those who have tried through new opinions to improve the *mœurs* of the world, of our age, reform the superficial vices; they leave the essential vices as they are, if they do not increase them. And increase is to be feared: people are ready to take a rest from all other well-doing on the strength of those uncertain surface reforms that cost less and bring more acclaim; and they thereby satisfy at little cost the other vices that are inborn, grounded in our substance, and visceral.

Just consider the evidence of this in our own experience. There is no-one who listens to himself and does not discover



in himself a pattern all his own, a ruling pattern that struggles against his education and against the storm of emotions that oppose it. For my part, I do not feel much agitation; I am virtually always *in my place*, as heavy and inert bodies are. If I am not 'at home', I am always nearby. My indulgences do not carry me very far away; there is nothing extreme or strange about them. And besides, I have bouts of healthy and vigorous reaction.

The real condemnation that applies to the common type of men nowadays is that even their retreat is full of corruption and filth, their idea of reform is blurred, and their repentance is almost as sickly and guilt-ridden as their sins. Some of them, being stuck to their vices by some natural bonding by long habit, no longer see their ugliness. There are others—and I am one of that regiment—for whom vice does have weight but who counterbalance it by the pleasure it gives or by some other factor; they put up with it and give themselves over to it at a definite price, though this still vicious and base. Yet we might imagine a counterbalancing that was so extreme that the pleasure could actually justify the sin (as we say enormous utility does), not only if the pleasure was incidental and not part of the sin, as in theft, but even where the pleasure was in the very performance of the sin, as in sexual intercourse with women, where the drive is violent and, so it is said, sometimes irresistible.

The other day when I was in Armagnac on the estate of a kinsman of mine I met a peasant whom everyone nicknames "The Thief". He gave me this account of his life: born to beggary, and finding that earning his bread by the labour of his hands would never give him enough to keep poverty at bay, he decided to become a thief, and spent his entire youth safely in that trade. He relied for this on his bodily strength: he gathered his harvest and vintage on other men's lands, but in remote locations and in such great loads that

it was inconceivable that one man could have carried so much on his shoulders in one night. He also took care to spread the damage equally, making the loss less burdensome for each of his victims. Now in his old age he is rich for a man of his station, thanks to this traffic, which he openly admits. To make his peace with God for his gains, he says •that he spends his days making benefactions to compensate the heirs of those he has robbed, and •that if he does not finish this task (for he cannot do it all at once), he will instruct his heirs to carry on with it; and all this is based •not on fear of public criticism, but• on the knowledge that he alone has of the harm he has done to each individual. Whether this account is true or false, it shows that this man regards theft as a dishonest deed which he hates, but not as much as he hates poverty. He indeed repents of it in itself, but does not repent of it considered as being counterbalanced and outweighed. We do not find in this case the habit that incorporates us with vice and brings even our understanding into conformity with it; nor is it the violent gale that batters and blinds our soul and for the moment sweeps us—judgement and all—into the power of vice.

I customarily do wholeheartedly whatever I do, and go my way all in one piece. I scarcely make a motion that is hidden from my reason and is not guided by the consent of almost all my parts, without schism or inner strife. The entire blame or praise for whatever I do belongs to my judgement; and any blame it once has it has for ever, because virtually since birth it has always been *one*: the same inclinations, the same route, the same strength. As for general opinions, in childhood I established myself in the position where I was to remain.

There are some impetuous, prompt, and sudden sins; let us leave them aside. But as for those other sins, so often repeated, deliberated and meditated upon—sins that

are rooted in our characters, <sup>[C]</sup> indeed in our professions or vocations—<sup>[B]</sup> I cannot conceive that they should be rooted for so long in one and the same heart without the reason and conscience of the person in question constantly *wanting* them to be there; and the repentance that he claims to come to him at a certain prescribed moment is a little hard for me to imagine or conceive.

<sup>[C]</sup> I do not subscribe to the Pythagorean doctrine that when men approach the statues of the gods to receive their oracles, they take on a new soul. Unless Pythagoras meant that their soul must actually be a new one, foreign to them and lent for the occasion, since their own soul showed so little sign of being cleansed by purification and suitable for that duty.

<sup>[B]</sup> What they do is flat contrary to the Stoics' precepts, which do indeed command us to correct the imperfections and vices that we acknowledge to be in us, but forbid us to be gloomy or upset about them. But these men would have us believe that they do feel deep remorse and regret within; yet no amendment or improvement, or interruption, ever becomes apparent. But it is no cure if the disease is not thrown off. If repentance weighed down the scales of the balance, it would outweigh the sin. I know of no quality that is, when one's *mœurs* and life do not conform to it, so easy to counterfeit as *devotion*: its essence is abstruse and hidden, its external appearances are easy and ostentatious.

As for me, I can desire to be entirely different, I can condemn and deplore my nature as a whole, and beg God to reform me entirely and to pardon my natural frailty. But it seems to me that I should not call that 'repenting', any more than my regret at not being an angel, or not being Cato, can be called 'repenting'. My actions are ruled by what I am, and are in harmony with my social status. I cannot do better. And repentance—unlike ·mere· regret—does not

bear on things that are not within our power. I imagine countless natures loftier and better regulated than mine; but ·by imagining them· I do not amend my own capacities, any more than my arm or my intelligence become stronger because I conceive others that are. If imagining and desiring actions nobler than ours made us repent of our own, we would have to repent of our most innocent doings, since we are sure that in a more excellent nature they would have been performed with greater perfection and dignity.

When I compare my behaviour as a young man with my behaviour in old age, I find that I have usually behaved in an orderly fashion according to my lights; that is all that my *resistance* [here = 'moral fibre'] can accomplish. I do not flatter myself; in similar circumstances I would still be thus. What soils me is not a splotch but a stain that runs all through me. I have no experience of superficial, half-way, perfunctory repentance. Before I call anything 'repentance' it must affect me in every part, and must grip my bowels and afflict them as deeply and as completely as God sees into me.

In my business dealings, several good opportunities have escaped me because I did not manage them well. Yet my decisions were well chosen according to the circumstances they were faced with; their procedure is always to take the easiest and the surest course. I find that I proceeded wisely in my previous deliberations, according to my rule, given the state of the subject as set before me: and in the same circumstances I would do the same a thousand years from now. I pay no attention to what it is now, but to what it was when I was deliberating it.

<sup>[C]</sup> The soundness of any plan depends on the time: circumstances and things continually roll about and change. I have made some grievous mistakes in my life—important ones—not through bad thinking but through bad luck. The things we deal with have secret parts, beyond the reach

of any probe. Especially in the nature of men there are mute factors that ·ordinarily· do not show, factors that are sometimes unknown even to the person concerned, but are aroused and displayed by events. If my prudence wasn't able to penetrate through to them and predict them, I bear it no grudge; there are limits to its responsibilities. It is the outcome that defeats me, and <sup>[B]</sup> if it favours the course I rejected, that cannot be helped. I don't turn on myself; I blame my luck, not the way I am built. That is not to be called repentance.

Phocion had given the Athenians a certain piece of advice that was not followed. When however the affair turned out prosperously, against his opinion, someone said to him 'Well, Phocion, are you pleased that the thing is going so well?' 'Of course,' he said, 'I am happy that it has turned out this way, but I do not repent of having given the advice that I did.'

When my friends come to me for advice, I give it freely and clearly, without hesitating—as nearly everyone does—because the matter is chancy and may turn out differently from how I think it will, giving them (·they will think·) cause to reproach me for my advice. That never bothers me, for they will be wrong; and I ought not to have refused them this service.

<sup>[C]</sup> I hardly ever have occasion to blame my failures or misfortunes on anyone but myself. For the fact is that I rarely *ask* for anyone's for advice except politely, as a compliment. I seriously ask for advice only when I need learned instruction or knowledge of the facts. But in matters where only my judgement is involved, the reasons of others may support me but will do little to change my direction. I •listen graciously and courteously to *all* of them, but as far as I can recall I have never, up to this moment, •trusted any but my own. In my view they are nothing but flies and atoms that distract my will. I set little store by my own

opinions but just as little by other people's. And fortune has treated me worthily. If I receive little advice, I give even less. [This seems to clash with the preceding paragraph. Note that this one is <sup>[C]</sup>-headed.] I am very rarely asked for it; I am even less believed, and I know of no public or private undertaking that was put on its feet and brought along through my advice. Even those whom fortune has made somewhat dependent on my opinions let themselves be swayed by some quite other mind. I prefer it that way, because I am as protective of my right to peace and quiet as of my right to authority. By leaving me alone they treat me in accordance with my own professed principle, which is to be wholly established and contained within myself; it is a pleasure for me to be detached from others' affairs and free of responsibility for them.

<sup>[B]</sup> I have few regrets for any affairs, no matter how they turned out, once they are past. I am always soothed by the thought that they had to happen that way; there they are in the great march of the universe and in the chain of Stoical causes. Your fancy, by wish and imagination, cannot change a single point without overturning the whole order of nature, both past and future.

For the rest, I loathe the superficial repentance that age brings. The ancient who said he was obliged to the years for freeing him from sensual pleasures had a different opinion from mine; I could never be grateful to infirmity for any good it might do me. <sup>[C]</sup> 'Providence will never be found so hostile to its own work as to rank debility among the best of things' [Quintilian]. <sup>[B]</sup> Our appetites [here meaning 'Our attacks of appetite'] are few when we are old; and afterwards a profound satiety siezes us. I see nothing of conscience in that; sourness and weakness imprint on us a lax and rheumatic 'virtue'. We should not allow ourselves to be so borne away by natural decline that our judgement about it is spoiled. In former

days youth and pleasure did not make me fail to recognise the face of vice within the sensuality; nor does the distaste the years have brought me make me fail to recognise now the face of sensuality within the vice.

I don't have any involvement with sensuality now, but I judge concerning it as though I did. <sup>[C]</sup>When I give my reason a lively and attentive shake, I find that <sup>[B]</sup>it is just the same as in my more licentious years, except perhaps that it has become weaker and worse as it has aged. <sup>[C]</sup>And I find that although my reason refuses to put me in the furnace of such pleasure, out of consideration for the interests of my bodily health, it would not do that—now any more than earlier—for the sake of my spiritual [see Glossary] health. <sup>[B]</sup>Seeing my reason lie quiet, I do not think it any braver for that. My temptations are so crippled and enfeebled that they are not worth opposing. I can dispell them merely by waving my hands. If my reason were confronted *now* by my former lust, I'm afraid it would have less power to resist it than it used to have. ·But· I don't see that of itself it *judges* anything differently from how it judged back then, or that it is freshly enlightened. So if there is any convalescence, it is a harmful convalescence.

<sup>[C]</sup>A wretched sort of cure, to owe one's health to illness! It is not for our ill-fortune to do us that service; it is for the good fortune of our judgement. Offences and afflictions don't get me to do anything except curse them. They are meant for folk who are put on the alert only by whipping. My reason runs more freely in prosperity. It is far more distracted and occupied when digesting misfortunes than ·when it is digesting· pleasures. I see much more clearly in fair weather. Health counsels me more cheerfully, and also more usefully, than illness does. I progressed as far as I could towards reform and right-rule when I had health to enjoy. I would be ashamed and resentful if the wretched lot

of my decrepitude were to be preferred above the years when I was healthy, alert, and vigorous, and if men were to esteem me not for *being* what I was but for *ceasing to be* that.

In my opinion, human felicity consists not in dying happily (as Antisthenes said) but in living happily. I have never tried to make a monster by sticking a philosopher's tail onto the head and trunk of a dissipated man, or to make this wretched end of my life disavow and belie the longer part of it that was finer and more wholesome. I want to present myself, and to be seen, as uniform throughout. If I were to have a life over again, I would live as I have done; I do not regret the past or fear the future. And unless I deceive myself, it has gone pretty much the same way within me as without. One of my greatest obligations to my fortune is that my bodily state has run its course with each thing in due season. I have seen the buds, the blossom, and the fruit; and now I see them dried up—happily so, because naturally so. I more easily bear the ills that I have, since they come at the proper time, and also because they make me recall more pleasantly the long happiness of my former life.

My wisdom may well have the same stature now as in earlier years; but it was much more powerful and graceful back when it was green, gay and natural than it is now, bent double, querulous and slow.

So I renounce those superficial 'reformations' based on the pains of old age. <sup>[B]</sup>God must touch our hearts. Our conscience must amend itself unaided, through the strengthening of our reason and not through the weakening of our appetites. . . . We should love temperance for its own sake and out of respect for God, who has commanded it to us; and chastity too. What our breathing difficulties lend to us, and what I am indebted to my colic [see Glossary] for, is neither chastity nor temperance.

No-one can pride himself on despising and fighting sen-

sual pleasure if he does not see it, does not know either •its grace and power or •its most alluring beauty. I know them both; and I am the one to say so. But it seems to me that in old age our souls are subject to ills and imperfections that are more troublesome than those of youth. I said this when I was young, and was taunted over my beardless chin. And I still say so now that my grey hair lends me credit. We call 'wisdom' the moroseness of our moods, our distaste for things as they are now. But in truth we do not so much give up our vices as change them—for the worse, in my opinion. In addition to silly decrepit pride, tedious babble, prickly and unsociable moods, superstition and a ridiculous concern for wealth when we have lost the use of it, I find in old age more envy, unfairness and malice. Old age puts more wrinkles on our minds than on our faces. And there are no souls—or very few—which as they grow old do not come to smell sour and musty. It is the man as a whole that marches ·up· towards his flower and ·down· towards his fading.

[C] Seeing the wisdom of Socrates and several of the circumstances of his condemnation, I would venture to think that he deliberately lent himself to it to some extent, by prevarication; because at 70 years of age he would soon have to suffer the benumbing of the rich activity of his mind, and the dimming of its accustomed brightness.

[B] What transformations do I daily see produced by old age in many of my acquaintances! It is a powerful malady—one that flows on naturally and imperceptibly. A great store of study and great foresight are needed to avoid the imperfections it loads on us—or at least to slow their progress. I sense that despite all my defensive works it is gaining on me foot by foot. I put up such resistance as I can. But I do not know where it will take me in the end. Anyway, I am glad to have people know what I shall have declined from.

### 3. Three kinds of association

[B] We should not nail ourselves down so firmly to our humours and dispositions. Our principal talent is the ability to apply ourselves to a variety of activities. To keep ourselves bound by the bonds of necessity to a single course of action—that is *existing*, not *living*. The fairest souls are those that have the most variety and flexibility. [C] Here is a testimony that honours the elder Cato : 'His mind was so versatile, so ready for anything, that whatever he did you would say he was born for that alone' [Livy].

[B] If it were up to me to train myself in my own fashion, there is no way so good that I would want to be fixed in it and unable to break loose. Life is an uneven, irregular movement with a multitude of forms. Incessantly following yourself, so caught in your inclinations that you cannot depart from them or re-shape them—that is not being a friend of yourself, let alone a master ·of yourself·; it is to be a slave. I am saying this now because I cannot easily escape the bullying of my soul, which usually can't spend time on anything without getting bogged down in it, or apply itself to anything except fully and intensely. However trivial the subject it is given, my soul enlarges and stretches it to the point where it needs its whole strength to work on it. For this reason, its idleness is painful for me and damages my health. Most minds need extraneous matter to arouse and exercise them; mine needs rather to rest and settle down. . . . Its principal and most difficult study is the study of itself.

[C] For it, books are the sort of occupation that seduces it from its study. [B] At the first thoughts that occur to it, it stirs about and shows signs of vigour in all directions, practises its touch, now for order, now for order and grace, [C] organises, moderates and fortifies itself. [B] It has what it needs to awaken its faculties by itself. Nature has given to it,

as to all minds, enough material of its own for its use, and enough subjects of its own in which to make discoveries and arrive at judgements.

[C] For anyone who knows how to probe himself and to do so vigorously, reflection is a powerful and full study: I would rather shape my soul than furnish it. No occupation is stronger than entertaining one's own thoughts—or weaker, depending on what kind of soul it is. The greatest of souls make it their vocation, 'to whom living is thinking' [Cicero]. Nature has granted to thinking the prerogative that there is nothing else we can keep up for as long, no activity we engage in more commonly or more easily. It is the occupation of the gods, says Aristotle, from which springs their happiness and ours.

Reading particularly serves to arouse my reason by presenting a variety of topics that provide work not for my memory but for my judgement.

[B] Thus, few conversations hold my interest unless they are vigorous and powerful. It is true that grace and beauty satisfy and occupy as much as weight and depth, or even more. And since I grow sleepy during any other sort of conversation, lending it only the outer skin of my attention, it often happens that in such feeble and abject sort of talk, small talk, I say stupid things unworthy of a child, or make silly, ridiculous answers, or remain stubbornly silent, which is even more awkward and rude. I have a dreamy way of withdrawing into myself, as well as a dull and childish ignorance of many everyday matters. Those two qualities have brought me the distinction that five or six true anecdotes can be told about me as absurd as about any man whatsoever.

### 1. ·ASSOCIATION WITH MEN·

Now, to continue with my subject: this hard-to-please dispo-

sition makes me fastidious in dealings with men—I need to handpick my companions—and also makes me ill-fitted for ordinary activities. We live and deal with the common people; if association with them is a burden to us, if we disdain to adjust ourselves to humble and vulgar souls

—and the humble, vulgar ones are often as well-governed as the most refined [C] (all wisdom that does not adapt to the common flatness is itself flat)—

[B] then we should no longer deal with our own affairs or with anyone else's; both public and personal business involves us with these people.

The most beautiful ways of our soul are the least strained and most natural ones; the best occupations are the least forced. Lord, what a favour wisdom does for those whose desires it adjusts to their powers! No knowledge is more useful. 'According as you can' was the refrain and favourite saying of Socrates, a saying of great substance. We should direct our desires to, and settle them on, the easiest and nearest things. Is it not a stupid humour of mine to be out of tune with the hundreds of men to whom I am joined by fortune, whom I cannot manage without, in order to cling to one or two who are out of my reach, or rather to a mad desire for something I cannot get?

My mild *mœurs*, opposed to all sharpness and contentiousness, may very well have freed me from the burden of envy and hostility; no man ever gave more occasion (I do not say to be loved, but) not to be hated. But the coolness of my dealings has rightly robbed me of the good-will of many, who can be excused for interpreting it in a different and worse sense.

I am very capable of forming and maintaining exceptional and exquisite friendships. I grasp so hungrily at any acquaintanceship that suits my taste; I put myself forward and throw myself into them so eagerly that I hardly fail to attach

myself and to make an impression wherever I land. I have often made happy proof of this. In ordinary friendships I am rather barren and cool, for my pace is not natural if it is not under full sail. Besides, my fortune, having trained me from my youth for a single perfect friendship and given me a taste for it, has in truth given me a distaste for other friendships and imprinted too deeply on my fancy that—as Plutarch said—friendship is an animal made for company, not for the herd. I also, by nature, find it hard to impart myself by halves, with limitations and with that servile and suspicious prudence prescribed to us in these numerous imperfect friendships—prescribed especially in our times when one cannot *safely* talk about the world, unless one speaks falsely.

Yet I see clearly that anyone who aims as I do at the comforts of life (I mean the essential comforts) should shun like the plague these fastidious and squeamish attitudes. I would praise a soul with different levels, one that could be tense *and* could relax; a soul at ease wherever fortune led it; which could chat with a neighbour about his building, his hunting and his lawsuit, and enjoy conversing with a carpenter or a gardener. I envy those who can be familiar with the humblest of their retinue and carry on a conversation with their own servants.

[C] I do not like Plato's advice always to talk like a master to our domestics, male or female, without jests or intimacy. For, in addition to the reason I have just given, it is unkind and unjust to make so much of this trivial privilege of fortune; the administrations that admit the least inequality between servants and masters seem to me the most equitable.

[B] Others study themselves in order to hoist their minds and make them glitter; I do so in order to humble mine and lay it to rest. There's nothing wrong with this except when it is overdone. Horace wrote:

You sing of Aeacus' line

and the wars beneath the sacred walls of Ilium.

But concerning how much a jar of Chian wine

will cost me, who will heat my water,

where I shall find shelter, and when

I shall escape the Pelignian cold, you say nothing.

Thus, just as Spartan valour needed moderating by the gentle gracious playing of flutes to calm it down in war lest it fling itself into recklessness and fury (whereas all other nations ordinarily use shrill and powerful sounds and voices to stir and inflame the hearts of their soldiers), so also it seems to me, contrary to the usual opinion, that in exercising our minds we mostly have more need of lead than of wings, of coolness and rest rather than of ardour and agitation. Above all, it is in my opinion acting like a fool to come across as knowledgeable, talking always punctiliously and formally, in the company of people who are not knowledgeable. You should come down to the level of those you are with, sometimes even affecting ignorance. Set aside force and subtlety; with ordinary folk it is enough if you maintain due order. Apart from that, if they want you to creep along at ground-level, do it.

Learned men are very apt to stumble over this stone. They are always parading their mastery of their subject, scattering their book-learning on all sides. These days they have *sung* it so loudly into the boudoirs and the ears of the ladies that even if the ladies retain none of the substance, they behave as though they have; on every sort of topic and theme, they speak and write in a newfangled and erudite manner:

'This is the style in which they express their fears, their anger, their joy and their cares. This is the style

in which they pour forth all their secrets; what else?

They copulate learnedly.' [Juvenal]

They cite Plato and St Thomas Aquinas for things that the first passer-by would support just as well. The learning that could not reach their souls has stayed on their tongues.

If well-born ladies will take my advice, they will be content to display the natural riches that are really theirs. They hide and drape their own beauties under borrowed ones. It is very simple-minded to dull one's own brightness so as to shine with borrowed light; they are buried, entombed, under artifice. . . . It's because they do not know themselves enough; the world has nothing more beautiful; it is for them to lend honour to the arts and

**the end of the sentence:** *de farder le fard.*

**literally meaning:** to put make-up on make-up.

**best understood as:** [you decide]

What should they be doing except living beloved and honoured? They possess and know only too much for that. They need only to arouse a little and warm up the abilities that they have. When I see them intent on rhetoric, law, logic and such-like vain trinkets that have no relation to their needs, I begin to fear that the men who advise them to do this are merely having a pretext for manipulating them. For what other excuse could I find for them? It suffices that without our help they can •adjust the grace of their eyes to gaiety, to severity, and to gentleness; •season a refusal with harshness, or uncertainty, or encouragement; and •not try to *interpret* the speeches we make in courting them. With this knowledge they have the whip-hand and master the schoolmasters and the school.

If however it vexes them to lag behind us in anything whatever, and if out of curiosity they want a share in books, then **poetry** is a pastime suited to their needs, an art that is

- wanton,
- subtle,
- in fancy dress,
- wordy,
- all pleasure,
- all show,

like them! They will also get various benefits from **history**. From the part of **philosophy** that is useful for life they will take arguments that train them to •judge concerning our moods and characters, to •defend themselves against our treacheries, to •control the rashness of their own desires, to •cultivate their freedom, to •prolong the pleasures of life, and to •bear with human dignity the unreliability of a servant, the rudeness of a husband, and the attack of years and of wrinkles; and things like that. That is the most that I would assign to them in the matter of learning.

There are private, retiring and inward natures. My essential pattern is suited to imparting things and putting them forth; I am all in the open, in full view; I was born for company and friendship. The solitude that I like and advocate is primarily nothing but bringing my feelings and thoughts back to myself, restraining and shortening (not my steps but) my desires and my cares, abandoning solicitude for external things and fleeing like death from all servitude and obligation, <sup>[C]</sup>and running away not so much from the press of people as from the press of affairs.

<sup>[B]</sup>To tell the truth, solitude of place makes me reach out and extend myself more: I throw myself into matters of state and into the whole universe more willingly when I am alone. At the Louvre and in a crowd I withdraw into my skin; crowds drive me back into myself, and my thoughts are never more full of folly, more licentious and private than in crowded places dedicated to circumspection and formal prudence. Our follies don't make me laugh; our wisdom does.



I don't have a built-in hostility to the bustle of courts; I have spent part of my life there, and am so made that I can get along cheerfully in large groups, provided that it is at intervals and at times of my own choosing. But the laxness of judgement that I am speaking of forces me to bind myself to solitude; even in my own home, indeed, in the midst of a crowded household which is among the most visited. I meet plenty of people there, but rarely those I like to talk with; and I reserve an unusual degree of freedom there for myself and for others. There we have called a truce with all etiquette, welcomings and escortings and other such troublesome practices decreed by formal courtesy. (Oh what servile and bothersome customs!) Everybody goes his own way; anyone who wants to can think his own thoughts; I remain dumb, abstracted and inward-looking, without offending my guests.

The men whose companionship and intimacy I seek are talented ones of the sort that are called honest men [see Glossary]. Having the picture of them in mind spoils my taste for any others. It is, if you take it rightly, the rarest human type, and a type that is mainly owed to nature. The aim of such association is simply intimacy, fellowship and conversation—exercising the soul with no other gain. In our talks, any topic will do; I do not worry if it lacks depth or weight; charm and appropriateness are always there; everything in the conversation is imbued with mature and constant good sense, and mingled with kindness, frankness, gaiety and friendship. Our minds show their beauty and strength not merely on the subject of property-law or the affairs of kings, but also in conversations about private matters. I recognize my men even by their silences or their smiles; and I may learn more about them at table than in the council chamber. Hippomachus used to say that he could tell good wrestlers by seeing them walk down the street.

If Learning wants to enter our conversation, she will not be rejected; she will not be (as she usually is) professorial, imperious and bullying, but subordinate and herself willing to learn. We merely want to pass the time; when it's time to be instructed and preached at, we will go to find her on her throne. Let her come down to us on this occasion, if she pleases. For, useful and desirable as she is, I presume that if we had to we could quite well dispense with her and do our business without her. A soul that is well-born and practised in dealing with men makes itself thoroughly agreeable by itself [i.e. without help from learning]. Art is nothing but the list and record of the productions of such souls.

## 2. ·ASSOCIATION WITH WOMEN·

There is for me another delightful kind of converse: that with beautiful and honest women. . . . If the soul has less to enjoy here than in the first ·kind of association·, our bodily senses, which play a greater part in this one, bring it to a proportion close to the other—though in my opinion not equal to it. But it is an association in which we should be a little on our guard, especially men like me over whom the body has a lot of power. I was scalded by this in my youth, and suffered all the ragings the poets say come to men who go after women without restraint and without judgement. It is true that that whiplash has subsequently been a lesson to me: 'Anyone in the Grecian fleet who escaped from that shipwreck on the promontory of Caphareus ever thereafter turns his sails away from the waters of Euboea' [Ovid]. It is madness to fix all our thoughts on it and to engage in it with a furious and reckless passion. But on the other hand,

to get involved in it without love and without committing one's will, like an actor playing the standard role of our age and customs, contributing nothing of one's own but *words*,

is indeed providing for one's safety; but in a cowardly fashion, like someone whose fear of danger led him to jettison his honour, his goods, or his pleasure. For it is certain that those who form such a relationship cannot expect to get from it anything that will please or satisfy a noble soul. We must truly have desired what we truly want to enjoy possessing; I say this even though fortune may unjustly favour role-playing—as often happens, since there is not one woman, no matter how ugly she may be, who does not think herself lovable

<sup>[C]</sup> and who does not think herself attractive for her youth, her laugh, her way of moving; for no woman is comprehensively ugly, any more than any is comprehensively beautiful. Brahman girls who have nothing else to recommend them go to the market-place where people have been assembled, to display their organs of matrimony to see whether in this respect at least they are worth marrying.

<sup>[B]</sup> It follows that there is not one who doesn't let herself be easily persuaded by the first oath of devotion sworn to her. Now, the inevitable outcome of this common and ordinary treachery of men nowadays is what experience already shows us: to escape us, women—to put this in terms of battlefield metaphors—to rally and fall back on themselves or on other women or else they fall in line with the example we give them, playing their part in the farce and joining in the business without passion, concern, or love. <sup>[C]</sup> 'Unsusceptible to passions, their own or anyone else's' [Tacitus]. Following the conviction of Lysias in Plato, they reckon that the *less* we love them the *more* usefully and agreeably they can devote themselves to us. <sup>[B]</sup> It will go as in the theatre: the audience will enjoy it as least as much as the actors do.

For my part, I no more recognise Venus without Cupid than maternity without children; they are things whose

essences are necessary to each other. So this cheating splashes back on the man who does it. It costs him hardly anything, but he gets nothing worthwhile out of it either. Those who made Venus a goddess regarded her principal beauty as incorporeal and spiritual [see Glossary]; yet the 'beauty' pursued by the men I'm talking about is not even human—not even *animal*. The beasts do not desire it in such a gross and earth-bound form. We see that imagination and desire often set beasts on heat and arouse them before their body does; we see that beasts of both sexes choose and *select* the object of their desires from among the herd, and that they maintain long-term affectionate relationships. Even ones that are denied bodily vigour by old age still tremble, whinny and quiver with love. We see them, before the act, full of hope and fire, and when the body has played its part still tickling themselves with the sweet memory of it. We see some who swell with pride as they leave the scene, and produce songs of joy and triumph—tired and sated. Anyone who merely wants to relieve his body of a natural necessity has no reason to trouble others with such elaborate preparations; those are not food for a gross and coarse hunger.

I do not ask to be thought better than I am; but I will say this about the errors of my youth. I hardly ever engaged in venal commerce with prostitutes, not only because of the danger <sup>[C]</sup> to my health (though even then I did not manage to escape a couple of light anticipatory doses) <sup>[B]</sup> but also because I despised it. I wanted to sharpen the pleasure by the difficulty, by the desire, and by a kind of glory; I liked •the style of the Emperor Tiberius, who in his love-affairs was drawn more by modesty and rank than by any other quality, and •the attitude of the courtesan Flora, who delighted in the dignity of her lovers who were never less than a dictator, a consul or a censor. Pearls and brocade certainly add to the pleasure; so do titles and retinue. Moreover, I used to

set a high value on **a** the mind, provided however that **b** the body was not deficient; for if one of the two beauties had to be lacking, I must admit in all conscience that I would have chosen to do without **a** the spiritual [see Glossary] one; it has its use in better things. But where love is concerned—a matter mainly connected with sight and touch—one can achieve something without **a** the mental graces but nothing without **b** the bodily ones.

Beauty is the true advantage of the ladies.

[C] It is so much more exclusively *theirs* than ours is *ours*. Though ours requires slightly different traits, it is at its best in boyish and beardless youths, when it is indistinguishable from theirs. It is said that at the court of the Grand Seigneur the countless males chosen to serve him because of their beauty are sent away at the age of 22 at the latest.

[B] Reasoning powers, wisdom and the offices of friendship are oftener to be found in men, which is why they govern the affairs of the world.

### 3. ·ASSOCIATION WITH BOOKS·

Those two forms of converse are chancy and dependent on other people. **(1)** is distressingly rare; **(2)** withers with age; so they would not have provided adequately for the needs of my life. Converse with books (which is my third form) is more reliable and more properly our own. It concedes other advantages to the first two, but has its own advantage of being constantly and easily available with its services. It is at my side throughout my life's course, accompanying me everywhere. It consoles me in old age and in solitude. It spares me the burden of tedious idleness and at any time releases me from disagreeable company. It dulls the pangs of sorrow, if the sorrow is not extreme and overpowering. To distract me from a troubling thought, I need only to resort

to books; they easily rid me of the thought by diverting me to *them*. And yet they do not rebel when they see that I seek them out only for lack of other benefits that are more real, lively and natural; they always welcome me with the same expression.

He may well go on foot, they say, who leads his horse by the bridle! And our James, king of Naples and Sicily, young, handsome and healthy, had himself carried about the land on a stretcher, lying on a wretched feather-pillow, dressed in a robe of grey cloth with a cap to match, followed meanwhile by great regal pomp with all sorts of litters and hand-led horses, and by officers and noblemen; in this performance he displayed an austerity that was still weak and wavering: 'No need to pity an invalid who has a remedy up his coat-sleeve!' Everything I get from books consists in experiencing and applying that proverb (which is a very true one). Actually, I hardly use them more than those who have no contact with them. I enjoy them as misers do riches, through knowing that I shall enjoy them whenever I please; my soul takes its fill of contentment from this right of possession.

I do not travel without books, in peace or in war. Yet many days will pass, and even some months, without my using them. I'll do it soon, I say, or tomorrow, or when I feel like it. The time speeds by and is gone, but this does me no harm; for it is impossible to describe what comfort and peace I derive from the thought that my books are at my side to give me pleasure whenever I want it, and from recognising how much support they bring to my life. It is the best provision I have found for this human journey, and I am extremely sorry for men of understanding who do not have it. I will accept any other sort of pastime, no matter how trifling, because this one cannot fail me.

At home I slip off a little more often to my library, where at one sweep I command a view of my household. I am above

the entrance, and see below me my garden, my chicken-run, my courtyard, and see into most parts of my house. There I can leaf through now one book, now another, without order or design, in disconnected fragments. Sometimes my mind wanders off, at others I walk to and fro, dictating fancies of mine such as this one ·that you are now reading·.

[C] My library is on the third floor of a tower. The first is my chapel; the second, a bedroom and dressing-room, where I often sleep so as to be alone. Above ·the library· there is a large *garderobe*. [A *garderobe* could be a wardrobe or a room containing a privy. It is not clear which Montaigne means. What follows makes best sense if it all refers to the library, though what Montaigne says about the amount of time he spends there does not square well with his earlier saying that he goes there ‘a little more often’.] It was formerly the most useless place in my house; I now spend most days of my life there, and most hours of each day. I am never there at night. Adjoining it is a rather elegant little room in which a fire can be lit in winter, very pleasantly lighted by a window. I could easily add onto each side a gallery a hundred paces long and twelve wide, having found that the walls have for other purposes been raised to the required height. (What deters me from doing this is not so much the expense as the trouble—which is what drives me from all business!) Every place of retreat needs a place to walk. My thoughts doze off if I let them sit down. My mind will not budge if my legs don’t move it. Those who study without books are all in that situation.

My library is round in shape, squared off only for the needs of my table and chair; as it curves around it offers me at a glance every one of my books ranged on five shelves all the way round. It has three splendid and unhampered views, and a free space sixteen paces in diameter.

I am less continuously there in winter since my house is perched on a little hill, as its name indicates, and contains

no room more exposed to the wind than this one, which I like for being a little hard to reach and out of the way—for the sake of the exercise and because it keeps the crowd away. There I have my seat. I try to make my dominion over it absolutely pure, and to withdraw this one corner from society, whether filial, conjugal or civil. Everywhere else I have only a verbal authority, one essentially mixed. Wretched the man, to my mind, who has nowhere in his house where he can be by himself, pay court to himself in private and hide away! Ambition pays its servants well by keeping them always on display like the statue in a market place: ‘Great fortune is great slavery’ [Seneca]. They cannot even find privacy on their privy!

Of the austerities of life that our monks delight in I have never considered any to be harsher than the rule I have noted in some of their orders: to be perpetually *with* somebody, and to be surrounded by people no matter what they are doing. I find it somewhat more tolerable to be always alone than never to be able to be so.

[B] If anyone tells me that it is degrading the muses to use them as a mere plaything and pastime, he does not know as I do the value of pleasure, play, and pastime. I would almost say that any other aim is ridiculous. I live from day to day, and—forgive me!—I live only for myself; my plans stop there.

In youth I studied in order to show off; later, a little, to make myself wiser; now for recreation; never for gain. As for the silly spendthrift fancy I once had for furnishing myself with books, [C] not just to meet my needs but three steps beyond that, namely [B] to decorate my walls with them, I gave that up long ago.

Books have many charming qualities for those who know how to select them; but there is no good without ill. The pleasure we take in them is no more pure and untarnished than any other. Reading has its disadvantages—and they are

weighty ones: it exercises the soul, but the body (my care for which I have not forgotten) meanwhile remains inactive and droops and saddens. I know of no excess more harmful to me, or more to be avoided in my declining years.

There you have my three favourite particular occupations. I make no mention of the ones I owe to the world through my obligations to the state.

#### 4. Diversion

<sup>[B]</sup> Once I was charged with consoling a lady who was feeling distress—

*genuine* distress; most of their mourning is artificial and ritualistic: ‘She has a reserve of abundant tears ever ready to flow, ever awaiting her decision to make them do so’ [Juvenal].

To oppose this passion is the wrong way to proceed, for opposition goads the women on and drives them further into sadness; one makes the trouble worse by the abrasiveness of argument. (We see in commonplace discussions that if anyone challenges some casual statement of mine, I stiffly defend it—more so if it is a matter of concern to me.)

And then, by acting that way you set about your cure in a rough manner, whereas the first greetings a doctor makes to his patient should be cheerful, pleasing, and full of grace: nothing was ever achieved by an ugly churlish doctor. So from the outset you should *encourage* women’s grief, showing some signs of approving it and excusing it. This will earn you the trust needed to proceed further; then you can glide down an easy and imperceptible slope to arguments that are more solid and appropriate for curing them.

Since my main desire was to deceive the bystanders who all kept their eyes on me, I decided to plaster over the cracks.

Anyway, I find by experience that I am a heavy-handed and unsuccessful persuader. I present my arguments either too pointedly and drily, or too brusquely, or too carelessly. After I had sympathised with this lady’s anguish for a while, I made no attempt to cure it by powerful vigorous arguments, either because I had none or because I thought I could achieve my effect better by another way.

<sup>[C]</sup> Nor did I set about choosing ·among· the various methods that philosophy prescribes for consoling grief, saying that what we are lamenting is not an evil (e.g. Cleanthes); that it is a light one (the Aristotelians); that lamenting is an action that is neither just nor laudable (Chrysippus); that we should shift our mind away from painful thoughts to pleasant ones (Epicurus, closer to my style). Nor did I, like Cicero, arm myself with this whole pile of cures, dispensing them as required.

<sup>[B]</sup> Rather, by gently deflecting our talk and gradually leading it on to nearby subjects and then on to slightly more remote ones as she gave me more of her attention, I imperceptibly stole this painful thought from her; and as long as I remained with her, I kept her composed and totally calm. I made use of a diversion. Those who came to help her after me found no improvement in her, since I had not laid the axe to the roots.

<sup>[C]</sup> I have doubtless touched elsewhere on the kind of diversion used in politics [Essay 23 in Book 2]. And the practice of military diversions—such as those used by Pericles in the Peloponnesian Wars and by hundreds of others elsewhere to draw out enemy forces from their lands—is all too common in the histories.

<sup>[B]</sup> It was an ingenious shift by which the sieur de Humbercourt saved himself and others in the town of Liège, which the Duke of Burgundy, who was besieging it, had obliged

him to enter so as to draw up agreed terms of surrender. The townspeople assembled by night for this purpose broke into mutiny against what had been agreed; and several decided to fall on the negotiators whom they had in their power. Hearing the rumble of the first wave of these people who were coming to break into his apartments, he at once dispatched two of the inhabitants—there were several with him—bearing new and milder conditions to put before their council; he had made them up on the spot, for his need. These two stopped the first tempest, bringing the excited mob to the town hall to hear the terms they were charged with, and to deliberate on them. The deliberation was brief; and behold a second storm is unleashed, as animated as the first; and he dispatches to meet them four new mediators similar to the first two, protesting that this time they are carrying much more tempting conditions that will entirely please and satisfy them, thus driving these people back to their conclave. In short, by wasting their time that way, diverting their frenzy and dissipating it in empty discussions, he eventually put it to sleep until daybreak—which had been his main concern.

This other story is in the same category. Atalanta, a girl of outstanding beauty and wonderful agility, sought to rid herself of a throng of a thousand suitors seeking to wed her. She decreed that she would accept the one who matched her in running, with the proviso that those who failed should lose their lives. There were found plenty who reckoned the prize worth such a risk and who incurred the penalty of that cruel bargain.

Hippomenes' turn to make his attempt came after the others; he asked for help from the goddess who protects all amorous passion. She answered his prayer by providing him with three golden apples and a plan for how to use them. As the race was being run, when Hippomenes felt his lady pressing hard on his heels he dropped one of the apples as

though inadvertently. The girl, arrested by its beauty, did not fail to turn aside to pick it up. 'The startled girl, eager to have the shining apple, turns from the race and picks up the rolling gold' [Ovid]. At the right moments he did the same with the second and the third apples, finally winning the race because of those distractions and diversions.

When the doctors cannot purge a catarrh, they divert it and lead it off to another less dangerous part. I have noticed that this is also the most usual prescription for ailments of the soul.

[C] 'The mind should sometimes be deflected to other interests, preoccupations, cares, business; and finally it is often cured—like the physically sick when slow to recover—by a change of place.' [Cicero]

[B] The soul can rarely be made to meet its troubles head on. Rather than withstanding their attack or beating it off, it is caused to avoid and sidestep them.

The next example is too high and too difficult. It is only for first-class men to dwell purely on the thing itself, reflect on it, judge it. It is only for Socrates to meet death with a normal countenance, to become familiar with it and play with it. He seeks no consolation outside the thing itself; dying seems to him a natural and indifferent [here = 'neither good nor bad'] event. He fixes his gaze precisely on it and resolves to accept it, without looking away.

The disciples of Hegesias, who starve themselves to death, inflamed by the fine arguments in his lectures—[C] doing this in such numbers that King Ptolemy forbade Hegesias to go on maintaining these murderous doctrines in his school—[B] are not focussed on dying itself; they are not judging it. It is not *there* that they fix their thoughts; the goal to which they run is a new existence.

Those poor wretches to be seen on the scaffold, filled with burning devotion. . . ., their ears intent on the instructions

they are being given, their eyes and hands lifted up to heaven, their voices raised in loud prayer full of fierce and sustained emotion—are certainly behaving in a way that is praiseworthy and suitable to such an extremity. They should be praised for piety but not, strictly speaking, for constancy. They flee the struggle; they turn their thoughts away from death, just as we occupy our children's attention when they are being lanced. . . . Those who have to cross over some terrifyingly deep abyss are ordered to close their eyes or turn them away.

[C] On Nero's orders Subrius Flavius was condemned to be put to death at the hands of Niger. Both were military commanders. When he was led to the place of execution, he saw that the grave Niger had ordered to be dug for him was uneven and shoddily made. Turning to the soldiers who were present, he said 'You could not do even this according to your military training!' And when Niger urged him to hold his head firm, he retorted 'If only you could strike as firmly!' And he guessed right: Niger, his arm trembling, needed several blows to cut his head off. That man certainly seems to have had his thoughts directly fixed on the object.

[B] The man who dies in the melee, weapons in hand, is not at that time thinking about death; he neither feels it nor considers it; he is carried away by the heat of battle. A gentleman whom I know was struck to the ground in battle; while he was down, he felt his enemy stab him nine or ten times with a dagger, while everyone present was calling him to think of his conscience [here = 'to reconcile himself to approaching death']. He told me later that although these voices reached his ears, they did not touch him in the least, and that his only thought was of struggling loose and avenging himself. He killed his man in that same combat.

[C] The man who brought Lucius Silanus his death sentence did him a great service; having heard Silanus reply

that he was prepared to die but not at such wicked hands, the man rushed at him with his soldiers to take him by force, while he, unarmed, stoutly defended himself with fists and feet. He was killed in the struggle. By his quick and stormy anger he destroyed the painful thought of the lingering and elaborate death to which he was destined.

[B] Our thoughts are always *elsewhere*. The hope of a better life stays and supports us; or the hope of our children's worth, or the future glory of our name, or an escape from the evils of this life, or the vengeance menacing those who are causing our death. 'I hope that if the holy gods can prevail, you will drink the cup of my vengeance, driven on the rocks in the midst of the sea, constantly crying out the name of Dido. I shall hear it, and its fame will reach me in the deepest underworld.' [Virgil]

[C] Crowned with a garland, Xenophon was performing his sacrificial rites when he was told of the death of Gryllus his son in the battle of Mantinea. His first reaction to this news was to throw down his garland; but then, when he heard how valiantly his son had died, he picked it up from the ground and placed it back on his head.

[B] Even Epicurus, when he was dying, found consolation in the eternity and moral usefulness of his writings: [C] 'All labours are bearable that bring fame and glory' [Cicero]. And the same wound, the same hardship, do not—says Xenophon—weigh as heavily on a general as on a common soldier. Epaminondas accepted death much more cheerfully after being told that his side was victorious. [B] Other similar circumstances can occupy, divert and distract us from considering the thing in itself.

[C] Indeed, the arguments of philosophy are constantly skirting the matter and dodging it, scarcely grazing its outer surface. The great Zeno, the leading figure in the leading school of philosophy that dominates all the others, says this

against death: 'No evil is honourable; death is honourable; therefore death is no evil'; and he says against drunkenness, 'No-one confides his secrets to a drunkard; each man trusts the wise man: therefore the wise man will not be a drunkard.' Is that hitting the bull's-eye? I delight in seeing those first-rate minds unable to shake off our common lot. Perfect men though they may be, they are still grossly *men*.

[B] The desire for vengeance is a sweet passion deeply ingrained in us by our nature; I can see this clearly, though I have never experienced it. To draw a young prince away from it recently, I did not tell him that when anyone strikes you on one cheek you should, as a work of charity, turn the other; nor did I represent to him the tragic outcomes that poetry attributes to that passion. I left vengeance aside and spent my time making him savour the beauty of a contrary picture: the honour, acclaim and good will he would acquire by clemency and kindness. I diverted him towards ambition. That is how things get done.

If when in love your passion is too powerful, disperse it, they say; and they say truly, for I have often tried this with good results. Break it down into a variety of desires, one of which may rule as master if you like, but for fear that it may dominate you and tyrannise over you, weaken it, check it, by subdividing it and diverting it.

'When the capricious vein throbs in the restless member' [Persius];

'Ejaculate the gathered fluid into anything at all' [Lucretius];

And get onto it early, lest you find yourself in trouble once it has seized hold of you. . . .

Once I was touched by a grief that my nature made powerful, and it was even more justified than it was powerful.

I might well have died from it if I had simply relied on my own powers. Needing some urgent diversion to distract me from it, I used skill and effort to make myself fall in love, helped in that by my youth. Love comforted me and took me away from affliction brought on by friendship [see Glossary].<sup>1</sup> The same applies everywhere: some painful idea gets hold of me; I find it quicker to change it than to subdue it; I replace it by one that is contrary, or at least different. Variation always solaces, dissolves and dissipates. If I cannot fight it, I escape it; and in fleeing I dodge, I use tricks; by changing place, occupation and company, I escape into the throng of other pastimes and thoughts, where it loses track of me.

That is nature's way in granting us the benefit of inconstancy; for time, which nature has given us as the sovereign physician of our passions, achieves its effects primarily by providing our imagination with other concerns, so dissolving and breaking up that first sensation, however strong it may be. A wise man sees his dying friend scarcely less clearly after 25 years than after the first year, [C] and according to Epicurus not a bit less, for he attributed no lessening of our sufferings either to our anticipating them or to their growing old. [B] But so many other thoughts cut across the first one that in the end it grows tired and weary.

To change the direction of current gossip, Alcibiades cut off the ears and tail of his handsome dog and drove it into the public square, so that the people, given this subject to chatter about, would leave his other activities in peace. I have also known women too who have hidden their true affections under pretended ones, in order to divert people's opinions and conjectures and to mislead the gossips. But I knew one who got well and truly caught: she abandoned her original passion for the pretended one. From her case I

<sup>1</sup> [Montaigne's close friend Étienne de la Boétie died about 25 years before this essay was written. See next paragraph.]



learned that those who are well lodged ·in a woman's favour· are fools to consent to such mummery. Since overt greetings and conversations are reserved for that decoy of a suitor, be assured that he is not very clever if he does not eventually take your place and give you his. <sup>[c]</sup> That really is cutting out and stitching a shoe for someone else to wear.

<sup>[b]</sup> Minor things divert and distract us, for minor things hold us. We scarcely look at things on the whole and on their own; it is the small and superficial circumstances and images that strike us, the empty husks that peel off from things. . . . Even Plutarch mourns his daughter for the monkey tricks of her childhood. We are afflicted by the memory of a farewell, of an action, of some particular grace, of a last blessing. Caesar's robe troubled all of Rome, which his death had not done. The sound of the *names* that ring in our ears—

'My poor Master!',  
 'My dear friend!',  
 'Alas! my dear father!',  
 'My sweet daughter!'

—when these keep hammering in my mind, and I look at them closely, I find that I am being moved by the words and the intonation! Just as preachers' exclamations often move their congregation more than their reasons. . . . While that is happening, I do not weigh or penetrate the true and solid essence of my subject. 'With stimuli such as these, grief provokes itself' [Lucan]. These are the foundations of our mourning.

<sup>[c]</sup> The obstinacy of my ·kidney· stones, especially when in the penis, has sometimes forced me into prolonged suppressions of urine during three or four days, and so far forward me into death that it would have been madness to hope or even to wish to avoid it, given the cruelty of the strain this condition entails. . . . Having reached that point, I considered •how *light* were the stimuli and objects that nursed in me

the wish to stay alive, •out of what atoms the weight and difficulty of this departure ·from life· built itself up in my soul, •what frivolous thoughts we make room for in so great an affair—a hound, a horse, a book, a wine-glass and whatnot had their role in my loss. With others it is their ambitious hopes, their purse, or their learning—no less foolishly, in my opinion. I look casually at death when I look on it globally as the end of my life. Taken in that way, I can master it; in detail, it harasses me. The tears of a manservant, the distribution of my clothes, the touch of a familiar hand, a routine word of comfort—any of these makes me disconsolate and sorry for myself.

<sup>[b]</sup> Thus the laments in fiction trouble our souls, and the regrets of Dido and Ariadne in Virgil and Catullus impassion even those who do not believe in them. <sup>[c]</sup> It is a sign of a hard and obstinate nature to feel no emotion about them. . . . To experience no emotion from them is to be like Polemon, an example of a hard and inflexible heart, of whom that is told as a miracle that he did not even blench when a mad dog chewed off his calf! <sup>[b]</sup> And no matter how great a man's wisdom, he can never, by his judgment alone, get so close to grasping the cause of an intense grief that he cannot get even closer through *presence*, when the eyes and ears have a share in it. . . .

Is it reasonable that even the arts should exploit and profit from our natural weakness and inborn animal stupidity? The orator, rhetoric says, in the *performance* of his plea, will be moved by the sound of his own voice and by his own feigned indignation; he will let himself be tricked into the passion he is portraying. By means of this mummery that he enacts, he will stamp on himself the essence of true grief and then transmit it to the judges, who are even less involved in the case than he is. It is like those mourners who are hired at funerals to help in the ceremony of mourning,

and sell their tears by weight and measure, and also their sadness; for although they go through borrowed motions, it is nevertheless certain that by habitually adopting the right countenance, they are often entirely carried away and inwardly effected by a genuine melancholy.

With several other of his friends I once had to escort the body of Monsieur de Gramont from La Fère, where he was killed in the siege, to Soissons. I noticed that wherever we passed, we filled the people with tears and lamentations, doing this purely by the solemn pomp of our procession, since they didn't even know the dead man's name.

[C] Quintilian says that he has seen actors so deeply engaged in playing a mournful role that they were still weeping from it after returning home; and of himself he says that, having undertaken ·as an orator· to arouse some passion in others, he espoused it himself to the point of being overcome by tears and with the pallor of face and the bearing of a man really overwhelmed with grief.

[B] In a region near our mountains, the women play. . . . a double role: they magnify their grief for their lost husband by recalling his good and agreeable qualities, while also listing his imperfections, as if to bring themselves into balance and to divert themselves from pity to disdain. [C] In this they are acting with far better grace than we do when we lose a mere acquaintance and pride ourselves on giving him new and undeserved praises, turning him (now that he is lost to sight) into something quite different from what he seemed to us to be when we were seeing him—as if regret were an instructive thing or tears could clarify our understanding by washing it! Here and now, I renounce any flattering eulogies anyone may want to give me not because I shall deserve them but because I shall be dead!

[B] If you ask that man 'How does this siege concern you?' he will reply: 'I am concerned to give an example of routine

obedience to the prince; I do not expect any benefit from it. As for glory, I know how little of that can come to a private individual like me. I have no passion or quarrel in this,' Yet look at him the next day; entirely changed, all boiling and red with anger at his post in the line of attack. This new vigour and hatred have been injected into his veins by the glint of so much steel, the flashes of our cannon and the din of our kettle-drums.

'A trivial cause!' you will tell me. What do you mean, *cause*? None is needed to agitate our soul; it is dominated and agitated by a daydream without body or subject. When I throw myself into building castles in the air, my imagination creates for me there comforts and pleasures by which my soul is really stimulated and rejoiced. How often we encumber our mind with anger or sadness by such shadows, and put ourselves into fantastical passions that impair both soul and body! . . .

[B] Ask yourself where is the object of this change? Are *we* the only things in nature that are sustained and pushed around by inanity? Cambyses dreamed in his sleep that his brother was to become king of Persia; so he had him killed—a beloved brother whom he had always trusted. Aristodemus, king of the Messenians, killed himself because he fancied there was a bad omen in some noise his dogs were making. King Midas did the same, disturbed and worried by an unpleasant dream he had had. Abandoning your life for a dream is to value it for exactly what it is worth.

Yet listen to our soul triumphing over the wretched body, its frailty, its being a target for all kinds of injuries and impairments. Truly it has a fine right to talk about this!

'O wretched clay which Prometheus first moulded! How unwisely he worked! By his art he arranged the body, but did not see the mind; his first concern should have been the soul.' [Propertius]

## 5. Old age, love, and sex

[Montaigne entitled this Essay 'On some lines of Virgil'. Presumably the lines he had in mind are the ones on page 37, in a 2008 translation by Sarah Ruden. Montaigne reverts to them over the ensuing dozen pages; but the title chosen here for this astonishing Essay is accurate. ]

·VIRTUE IN YOUTH AND IN OLD AGE·

[B] The more full and solid our practical thoughts are, the more they absorb and oppress us. Vice, death, poverty, illness are grave subjects that put a strain on us. The soul should be •instructed in the means of bearing evils and of fighting them off, •instructed in the rules for right living and right belief, and •often aroused and exercised in this fine study. But for a soul of the common sort this must be done with moderation and with breaks; a soul goes mad if it is too continuously tense.

In my youth I needed to warn and urge myself to arouse myself to keep to my duty; cheerfulness and good health do not go so well, it is said, with these wise and serious lines of thought. Nowadays I am in a different state. The conditions of old age warn me, sober me, and preach to me only too much. From excessive gaiety I have fallen into excessive seriousness, which is more disagreeable. So at this stage •in my life• I deliberately engage in a bit of debauchery, sometimes employing my soul on youthful wanton thoughts over which it can linger. From now on I am all too sedate, too heavy, and too mature. The years give me daily lectures on composure and on temperance. This body of mine flees from disorder and fears it. It is my body's turn now to guide my mind towards reform. It is *its* turn now to dominate, which it does more harshly and imperiously. It does not leave me an hour, sleeping or waking, free from lectures about death, patience, and penitence. I defend myself against temperance as I used to do against sensual pleasure, for temperance

pulls me too far back, to the point of numbness.

Now, I want to be master of myself in every direction. Wisdom has its excesses and needs moderation as much as folly does. So, fearing that I may dry up, wither, and grow heavy with wisdom, something that I do in the intervals that my ills allow me. . . .is to turn aside very gently and avert my eyes from this stormy and cloud-wracked sky that I have before me—which, thank God, I contemplate without terror, though not without strain and effort—and find myself spending time recalling periods of my past youth: 'My mind prefers what it has lost, and gives itself entirely over to by-gone memories' [Petronius].

Let childhood look ahead, old age backward; was not this the meaning of the double face of Janus? The years drag me along if they will, but facing backwards! While my eyes can still discern that beautiful season now expired, I will occasionally turn them that way. If youth has gone from my blood and my veins, at least I want not to uproot the picture of it from my memory: 'To be able to enjoy your former life again is to live twice' [Martial].

[C] Plato orders old men to attend the exercises, dancing and sports of the young, to enjoy in others the suppleness and beauty of body that they no longer have, and to recall to their memory the grace and privileges of that flowering age; and he wants them to award the victory •in those sports• to the young man who has most exhilarated and delighted the greatest number of them.

[B] Once I used to mark the dark and depressing days as extraordinary; they are now my ordinary days; it's the fine and serene ones that are extraordinary. I am close to the point where I shall jump for joy and accept as a new favour anything that does not actually hurt me. Tickle myself I may, but I cannot force a poor laugh out of this wretched body. I am cheerful only in fantasies and dreams, so as to •divert by

trickery the gloom of old age—a feeble struggle of art against nature! To •cure it would require more than a dream.

It is very silly to extend the period of our human ills by looking ahead to them, which everyone does, thereby being old before they are old! I would rather be old for less time. I snatch at even the slightest occasions of pleasure I can come across. I am aware of the view that several species of sensual pleasure are prudent, strong and glorious; this opinion has not enough power over me to give me an appetite for them. [C] I do not so much want noble, magnificent and ostentatious pleasures as ones that are sweet, easy, and ready to hand: ‘We are departing from what is natural, surrendering ourselves to the people, who are not a good guide in anything.’ [Seneca]

[B] My philosophy lies in action, in natural and present practice, and little in fantasy. I wish I could enjoy playing at cobnut or with a top! . . .

Sensual pleasure is a rather unambitious quality; it thinks it is rich enough without adding the prize of reputation; it likes itself more in the shadows. We should take the whip to a young man who spends time savouring the tastes of wine and of sauces. There is nothing I knew or valued less. I am learning about those tastes now, I am ashamed to say: but what else am I to do? I am even more ashamed and angry at the causes that drive me to this. It is for us to trifle and play the fool, and for young men to stand on their reputation and in the best place. They are going towards the world, towards reputation; we are coming from it. [C] ‘Let them have their arms, their horses, their spears, their swords, their contests in swimming and running; and from the many pastimes let our old men choose dice and knuckle-bones.’ [Cicero]

[B] The very laws send us back to our homes. The least I can do on behalf of this wretched state my age is pushing me

into is to provide it with toys and pastimes—as is done for childhood, into which we are indeed falling back. Wisdom and folly will both have plenty to do if they are to support and help me by their alternate services in this calamity of old age: ‘Mix a dash of folly into your wisdom’ [Horace].

Likewise I flee from the slightest pin-pricks; ones that once would not have scratched me now run right through me. . . . I have always been delicately sensitive to attacks of pain; now I am still more tender, and exposed on all sides: ‘The least shock will shatter a cracked vessel’ [Ovid]. My judgement prevents me •from kicking and grumbling against the discomforts that nature orders me to endure, but not •from feeling them. I, who have no other goal but to live and enjoy myself, would run from one end of the world to the other to seek a single year of pleasant and cheerful tranquillity. There is plenty of sombre, dull tranquillity for me, but it sends me to sleep and stupifies me; I can never be satisfied by it. If there is any man or any good fellowship of men in town or country, in France or abroad, residing or travelling, who like my humours and whose humours I like, they have only to whistle and I’ll provide them with essays in flesh and bone.

Since it is the privilege of the mind to rescue itself from old age, I do all I can to counsel mine to do so. Let it meanwhile sprout green and flourish, if it can, like mistletoe on a dead tree. But I’m afraid it is a traitor; it is so closely bound in brotherhood to the body that it is constantly deserting me to follow my body in its need. I take it aside and flatter it, I work on it, all for nothing. In vain I try to turn it away from this attachment; I offer it Seneca and Catullus, and the ladies, and royal dances; but if its partner—the body—has colic, it seems to have it too! Even the activities that are uniquely the mind’s cannot then arouse it; they obviously smell of boredom and failure. There is no liveliness

in what the mind comes up with at a time when there is none in the body.

[C] Our masters—the professors of theology—are wrong when, seeking to explain the extraordinary flights of our mind, they attribute some of them to divine rapture, to love, to warlike fierceness, the harshness of war, to poetry, to wine, and do not allow a proper share to *health*—bubbling, vigorous, full, lazy health such as my green and care-free years used sometimes to provide me with. That joyful fire gives rise to flashes in our spirit; they are lively and bright beyond our natural reach; they are among the lustiest, though not the most frenzied, enthusiasms.

No wonder then if the opposite state weighs down my mind, grips it and produces an opposite effect. ‘No task can bring it to its feet: it languishes with the body.’ [Maximianus] Furthermore, my mind wants me to be grateful to it because, it says, it brings much less to this bond than is usual with most men. At least, while we have a truce, let us banish ills and difficulties from our interpersonal relations. ‘While it can, let old age smooth away the wrinkles on its brow’ [Horace]. ‘Gloomy things should be made pleasant by jests’ [Sidonius Apollinarius].

I like the kind of wisdom that is gay and companionable; I shun harsh *mœurs* [see Glossary] and austerity, and am suspicious of grim faces: ‘The sullen arrogance of a gloomy face’ [Buchanan]. ‘That sad group also has its sodomites’ [Martial].

[C] I wholeheartedly agree with Plato that easy or difficult humours are great predictors of the goodness or evil of the soul. Socrates had a settled expression, but a serene and smiling one, not settled like that of old Crassus who was never seen to smile. [B] Virtue is a pleasant and gay quality.

·THE ADVANTAGES OF COMPLETE OPENNESS·

I know well that most of those who will frown at the freedom of my writings have more to frown at in the freedom of their own thoughts! I conform well to their hearts, but I offend their eyes. What a well-ordered mind it is that can sample the writings of Plato and ignore his alleged affairs with Phaedo, Dion, Stella and Archeanassa! ‘Let us be not ashamed to say what we are not ashamed to think’ [author unknown; Montaigne?].

[B] I hate a morose and gloomy mind that glides over life’s pleasures but holds onto its misfortunes and feeds on them—like flies that cannot cling to a highly polished and smooth body and so cling to rough and rugged places and stay there. . . .

Furthermore, I have ordered myself to dare to say whatever I dare to do, and I dislike even having *thoughts* that I cannot publish. The worst of my deeds and qualities does not seem to me as ugly as the cowardice of not daring to avow them. Everyone is discreet in confessing; they ought to be discreet in acting; boldness in sinning is somewhat made up for—and bridled—by boldness in confessing it. [C] Anyone who obliged himself to *tell all* would be obliging himself to do nothing that we are forced to keep quiet about. God grant that •this excessive licence of mine may draw men to be free, rising above those cowardly counterfeit ‘virtues’ that are born of our imperfections, and •that at the expense of my own lack of moderation I may draw them to the point of reason!

If you are to tell of a vice of yours, you must first see it and study it. Those who hide it from others usually hide it from themselves. They hold that it is not sufficiently hidden if they can see it; they withdraw it and disguise it from their own conscience. ‘Why does nobody confess his faults? Because he is still in their grip; even now he remains within them.

Men can relate their dreams only after waking up' [Seneca].

The body's diseases become •clearer as they grow bigger; what we called a touch of rheumatism or a sprain turns out to be gout. But as the soul's diseases grow in strength they become •more obscure; the more •spiritually ill a man is, the less he realises it. That is why they often need to be probed in daylight, cut and torn from the hollow of our breast by a pitiless hand. What applies to the benefactions we receive applies to the evils that we do: sometimes the only way to requite them is to acknowledge them. Is there some ugliness in our wrong-doing that dispenses us from the duty of acknowledging it?

[B] It is painful for me to dissemble, so I avoid taking others' secrets into my keeping, not having the heart to disavow what I know. I can keep quiet about it, but I cannot deny it without strain and displeasure. To be really secret, one must be so by nature, not by obligation. In the service of princes, secret-keeping is small thing if one is not also a liar. A man asked Thales of Milesia whether he should deny on oath that he had been a lecher; if he had asked me, I would have replied that he should not do so, for lying seems to me worse than lechery. Thales counselled him differently, telling him to swear the oath so as to shield the greater fault by the lesser one. Yet this counsel means not so much choosing between vices as increasing their number.

Be it said in passing that if a man of conscience has to weigh •an awkward situation against •a vice, he can easily strike the right bargain; but if he is caught between two vices, he has to make a tough choice. This happened to Origen, who had either to commit idolatry or submit to being carnally enjoyed by a big ugly Ethiopian paraded before him. He submitted to the first condition, sinfully, it is said. So those women nowadays who protest to us that they would rather have ten men on their conscience than a

single Mass would—by their false standards—not be making a bad choice.

There may be a lack of discretion in publishing one's defects this way, but there is no great danger of its becoming customary by example, for Aristo •was right when he• said that the winds men most fear are those that uncover them. We must tuck up this stupid rag that covers our *mœurs*. . . .

As a courtesy to the Huguenots who damn our private auricular confession, I make my confession in public, religiously and purely. St Augustine, Origen and Hippocrates publicly admitted the error of their opinions; I include my *mœurs* •as having errors that should be confessed•. I hunger to make myself known, I don't care to how many, provided I do it truthfully. Or, to put it better, I hunger for nothing, but I go in mortal fear of being mistaken for someone else by those who come to know my name.

If a man does everything for honour and glory, what does he think he gains by appearing before the world in a mask, concealing his true being from the people's knowledge? If you praise a hunchback for his fine build, he ought to take it as an insult. If people honour you for valour when you are really a coward, are they talking about *you*? They mistake you for somebody else. . . .

When King Archelaus of Macedonia was going along the street, someone threw water on him. His entourage wanted to punish the man. 'Ah yes,' he said, 'but he threw water not on me but on the man he thought I was.' [C] When somebody told Socrates that people were speaking ill of him he said 'No! There is nothing of me in what they say.'

[B] As for me, if someone praised me for being a good navigator, for being very modest, or for being very chaste, I would not owe him any thanks. Similarly, if someone called me a traitor, a thief or a drunkard, I would not think it was *me* he attacked. Those who misjudge what they are like may

feed on false approval; not I, who I see myself and search myself right down to my depths; I know well what belongs to me. I am satisfied to be less praised, provided I am better known. . . .

·SEXUAL ACTIVITY·

It pains me that my Essays merely serve ladies as a routine piece of furniture—something to put into their salon. This chapter will get me into the private drawing-room. I prefer my dealings with women to be somewhat private; the public ones lack intimacy and savour.

In farewells we exaggerate our affection for the things we are leaving. I am taking a last leave of the world's pastimes; here are our final embraces. But let us come to my theme.

What has the sexual act—so natural, so necessary and so right—done to mankind to make us unable to speak of it without shame and to exclude it from serious and decent conversation? We boldly utter the words 'kill', 'rob' and 'betray'; but *that* one we only dare [see Glossary] to mutter through our teeth. Does this mean that the less we breathe a word about it the more right we have to let it fill our thoughts?

<sup>[c]</sup> It is notable that the words least in use, least written and most hushed up are the best known and most widely recognised. To people of every age and every *mœurs* they are as well known as 'bread'. They are imprinted on everyone without being expressed; they have no voice, no spelling. It is notable<sup>1</sup> too this is an act that we have placed under the protection of silence, from which it is a crime to drag it out even to accuse and judge it. We dare not even whip it except in a roundabout and figurative way. What a favour to a criminal if he is so abominable that even the laws think it illicit to touch him or to see him! He is free and saved

through the kindness of the severity of his condemnation.

Is it not the same concerning books, which become all the more saleable and public by being suppressed? Personally, I intend to take Aristotle's advice literally: he says that bashfulness serves as an ornament in youth but a reproach in old age.

<sup>[B]</sup> In the school of the ancients—the school I cling to far more than to the modern, its virtues seeming greater to me and its vices less—these verses are preached: 'Those who excessively strive to flee from Venus fail just like those who follow her excessively.' [Plutarch] 'Thou alone, O goddess, rulest over the totality of nature; without thee nothing comes to the heavenly shores of light, nothing is joyful, nothing lovable.' [Lucretius]

I do not know who put Pallas and the Muses on bad terms with Venus and made them cold towards Cupid; yet I know of no deities better suited or more indebted to one another. Anyone who removes from the Muses their amorous fancies will be robbing them of the finest entertainment they can offer and of the noblest subject-matter of their works; and anyone who makes Cupid lose contact with poetry and its services will be disarming him of his best weapons. That opens the way to accusing both •the god of intimacy and affection and •the patron goddesses of humanity and justice with the vice of ingratitude and lack of appreciation.

I have not been so long struck off the roll of Cupid's attendants that I don't retain memories of his powers and merits: 'I know the traces of the ancient flame' [Virgil]. There is still some emotion and heat after the fever: 'Let me not lack that warmth in my winter years' [Johannus Secundus]. Dried out and weighed down as I am, I still feel some tepid remains of that past ardour: 'As the Aegean sea, when those winds

<sup>1</sup> [The two occurrences of 'It is notable' in this paragraph are a guess-work rendering of *Il est bon que*.]

have died that recently whipped and churned it up, does not at once grow calm but retains the roar and surge of the huge and thrashing waves' [Tasso]. To the best of my knowledge the powers and values of that god are found more alive and animated in the depictions of poetry than in their proper essence. . . .

Poetry presents an indefinable mood that is more amorous than love itself. Venus is not as beautiful—quite naked, alive and panting—as she is here in Virgil:

He wavered. Tenderly the goddess wrapped him  
 In her white arms and fondled him. In no time  
 He took in the familiar flame. The old heat  
 Ran through his bones and shook him to the  
 marrow,  
 As when a streak of flame, ripped lose by thunder,  
 Flashes and shoots through clouds with its intense  
 light.

\* \* \* \* \*

He then made tender love to her and melted  
 Into sweet slumber in his wife's embrace.

·SEX AND MARRIAGE·

What I find worth thinking about here is that he portrays her as a little too passionate for a married Venus. Within that wise contract, our sexual desires are not so wanton; they are darkened and more blunted. Cupid hates couples to be held together by anything but himself, and takes a slack part in partnerships that are set up and maintained under another title, as is marriage, where connections and wealth rightly weigh at least as much as graces and beauty. A man does not marry for himself, whatever he says; he marries at least as much for his posterity, for his family. . . . That is why I like the practice of having marriages arranged at the hands of a third party rather than our own, and by the

sense of others rather than our own. How contrary all that is to the conventions of love! So it is a kind of incest to employ in this venerable and sacred alliance the rapturous strivings of love's licentiousness (I think I have already said this somewhere). Aristotle says that a man should touch his wife prudently and soberly, for fear that by caressing her too lasciviously he might drive her out of her mind. What he says for our moral sense the doctors say for our ·bodily· health's sake: that a pleasure that is too hot, voluptuous and assiduous spoils the seed and hinders conception. They say, on the other hand, that for a kind of intercourse that is feeble (as this ·married· kind is, by nature) to be filled with a just and fertile heat, it should be undertaken rarely and at stated intervals. . . . I see no marriages that are sooner troubled and fail than those that progress by beauty and amorous desires. Marriage needs foundations that are more solid and durable; and we must keep on the alert. That boiling rapture is no good for it.

·AN ASIDE ON NOBILITY·

Those who think to honour marriage by joining love to it strike me as being like those who to promote virtue hold that nobility *is* virtue. Between these two there is some relationship, but great differences as well, There is no point in mixing up their names and titles; we wrong one or the other by confusing them. Nobility is a fine quality, and introduced with reason; but since it depends on others, and can fall to a vicious and worthless man, it is well below virtue in esteem. If it is a virtue at all, it is one that is

- artificial and visible,
- dependent on time and fortune,
- differing in style in various countries,
- living and mortal,
- having no more origin than the river Nile,



- genealogical and not individual,
- a matter of succession and resemblance. . . .

Knowledge, strength, goodness, beauty, riches—indeed all other qualities—can be passed along and shared, whereas *this* one is self-devouring, of no use in the service of others.

It was explained to one of our kings that a choice had to be made between two candidates for the same office: one was a nobleman, the other not. He ordered his people to choose, without regard to this quality, the one who had the greater merit; but if the worth should be exactly equal, they should in that case take nobility into account. That was giving it exactly its proper place. When a young unproven man asked Antigonus for the position held by his father—a valiant man who had just died—he replied: ‘My friend, in such promotions I have less regard for my soldiers’ nobility than for their prowess.’

[C] . . . The people of Calicut make their nobility into a superhuman species. Marriage is forbidden them, as is any profession but war. They can have their fill of concubines, and their women may have as many lovers; there is no jealousy here; but it is a capital and unpardonable crime to mate with anyone of a different rank. They feel defiled if they are even touched by them [i.e. by non-nobles] as they go by; and as their nobility is marvellously polluted and tainted by this, they kill those who have merely come a little too close to them; so that non-noble folk are forced to cry out at street corners as they walk along, like gondoliers in Venice, to avoid colliding; and the nobles order them to move aside in whatever direction they want. By such means the nobility avoid a disgrace that they consider indelible; the others avoid certain death. No stretch of time, no princely favour, no office, valour or wealth can enable a commoner to become a nobleman. This is reinforced by their custom of forbidding marriages across trades: a girl from a shoemaker’s

family cannot marry a carpenter; and parents are obliged to train their sons for their father’s calling—exactly that one: no other will do. By such means the distinctness and permanence of their status is secured.

·NOW BACK TO MARRIAGE·

[B] A good marriage, if there is such a thing, rejects the company and conditions of •love; it tries to reproduce those of •friendship. It is a sweet association in life, full of constancy, trust and countless useful and solid services and mutual obligations. No woman who savours the taste of it—‘whom the marriage-torch has joined with its long-desired light’ [Catullus]—would want to have the place of a •mistress or paramour to her husband. She is lodged in his affection far more honourably and securely if she is lodged there as a •wife. Even when he is swept off his feet with passion for someone else, let him be asked

- Would he prefer some shame to fall on his wife or his mistress?
- Whose misfortune would afflict him more?
- For which of them does he desire the greater respect?

In a sound marriage such questions admit of no doubt.

The price and the value of marriage is indicated by the fact that so few good ones are seen. Shape it well and accept it rightly and there is no finer element in our society. We cannot do without it, yet we go about debasing it. The upshot is like what is seen with cages: the birds outside are desperate to get in, and the ones inside are equally anxious to get out. [C] When Socrates was asked whether it was more appropriate to take or not to take a wife, he replied, ‘Whichever you do, you will be sorry.’ [B] It is a contractual engagement to which can be exactly applied the saying: ‘Man is to man either a god or a wolf.’ Many qualities must come together to construct it. Marriage is found nowadays to be better suited to simple and

commonplace souls, where luxury, curiosity and idleness do not disturb it so much. Unruly humours such as mine, loathing all bonds and obligations, are less fit for it: 'For me it is sweeter to live with no chain about my neck' [Maximianus].

Of my own choice, I would have fled from marrying Wisdom herself if she wanted me. But say what we will, the customs and practices of ordinary life carry us along. Most of my doings are governed by example, not by choice. Anyway, I did not really bid myself to it [i.e. to marriage]; I was led there, brought to it by external considerations. For not only inconvenient things, but anything at all, however ugly, vicious or repulsive, can become acceptable through some condition or circumstance. . . . And I was borne into it worse prepared and more recalcitrant than I am now after having tried it.

·FIDELITY IN MARRIAGE·

And, licentious though I am held to be, I have in truth more rigidly observed the laws of matrimony than I had either promised or hoped. It is no longer time to kick when we have let ourselves be hobbled! A man should husband his freedom wisely; but once he has been subjected to ·marriage·-obligation, he should keep to it under the laws of common duty, ·or· at least try to. Those ·husbands· who make this bargain and then behave with hatred and contempt are acting unjustly and harmfully. Equally unfair and hard is that fine rule that I see passed from hand to hand—like a sacred oracle—among the women: 'Serve your husband as your master, and guard against him as a traitor.' Which means 'Behave towards him with a constrained, hostile and suspicious reverence'—a challenge and a call to battle.

I am too soft for such thorny designs. To tell the truth, I have not yet attained the perfection of cleverness and refinement of wit that confuses reason with injustice, and

ridicules any order and rule that does not accord with my appetite. . . . Let us pass on.

Our poet ·Virgil· portrays a marriage full of concord and harmony, in which however there is not much fidelity. Did he mean to say that it is not impossible to surrender to the attacks of Cupid [see Glossary] and yet nevertheless to keep a sense of duty towards one's marriage; that one may injure marriage without tearing it totally apart? <sup>[C]</sup> A valet can cheat his master without hating him! <sup>[B]</sup> A wife may be attracted to a stranger by beauty, opportunity, destiny—

for destiny has a hand in it too: 'There's a destiny that rules the parts our cothes conceal; if the stars forsake you, it will do you no good to have a member of unheard-of length' [Juvenal]

—yet not be so totally ·attracted·, perhaps, that she does not still have some tie to her husband. They—·love and marriage·—are two projects that go by separate and distinct roads. A woman may give herself to a man whom she would not at all want to have married—I don't mean because of the state of his finances but because of his personal qualities. Few men have married their mistresses and not repented of it. <sup>[C]</sup> That even applies to the other world. What a wretched household Jupiter had with his wife, whom he had first frequented and enjoyed in love affairs! That is, as the saying goes, to shit in the basket and then put it on your head.

<sup>[B]</sup> I have in my time seen, in a high place, love shamefully and dishonourably cured by a marriage; the considerations are too different. We have no difficulty loving two different and contrary things. Isocrates said that the city of Athens was pleasing in the same way as a mistress served for love; everyone loves to come and wander around and spend time there, but no-one loved it well enough to marry it, that is, to reside and settle down there. I have been angry to see a husbands hating b their wives precisely because a they are

doing **b** them wrong. At least we should not love them less for our fault; at least they ought to be made dearer to us by our regrets and our sympathy.

They are different ends and yet (he is saying) they are somehow compatible. For its share, marriage has usefulness, justice, honour and constancy—a flat but more universal pleasure. Love is based on pleasure alone; and in truth its pleasure is more stimulating, lively and keen, a pleasure set ablaze by difficulties. It must have stabs of pain and anguish. Without arrows and flames, Cupid is no longer Cupid. The liberality of women is too profuse in marriage, and dulls the edge of passion and desire. <sup>[c]</sup> See the trouble that Lycurgus and Plato give themselves, in their laws, to avoid this disadvantage.

<sup>[b]</sup> Women are not at all wrong when they reject the moral rules proclaimed in society, inasmuch as it is the men who have made them without consulting the women. There is naturally some strife and wrangling between them and us; the closest communion we have with them remains turbulent and tempestuous.

In the opinion of our author, ·Virgil·, we treat women without due consideration, in the following way.

·WHAT WOMEN'S REAL NEEDS AND CAPACITIES ARE·

We realise that women have an incomparably greater capacity for the act of love than we do and desire it more ardently. **(i)** We know that this fact was attested in antiquity by that priest ·Tiresias· who had been first a man and then a woman: 'He knew Venus from both angles' [Ovid]. **(ii)** Moreover, we have learned of the evidence that was provided in different centuries by an emperor [Proculus] and an empress [Messalina] of Rome, masters at this work, and famous for it. (We know of their exploits from their own mouths.) He deflowered ten captive Sarmatian virgins in one night; but *she* in one night

was good for 25 encounters, changing partners according to her needs and preferences: 'At last she retired, her secret parts burning and tense with lust, exhausted by men but not yet satisfied' [Juvenal]. **(iii)** Then there was the plea lodged in Catalonia by a wife as plaintiff against her husband's too assiduous efforts; not, I think, because she was actually troubled by it. . . .but rather to have a pretext for pruning back and curbing the authority of husbands over their wives in the basic act of marriage, and also to show that the nagging and spitefulness of wives goes beyond the marriage-bed and tramples underfoot the graces and sweets of Venus. Her husband, a really depraved brute of a fellow, responded to this complaint that even on fast days he could not manage with fewer than ten times. Whereupon the good queen of Aragon, after mature deliberation with her council, intervened with the notable judgement—to provide for all time a rule and example of the moderation and modesty required in a proper marriage—that it is necessary to limit intercourse to six times a day; sacrificing much of the needs and desires of her sex in order, she said, to establish a scale that would be unexacting and therefore durable and unchanging. At which the doctors [here = 'academic moralists'] exclaim: What must the lusts and the appetites of women be if *that* is the rate set by their reason, their reformation, and their virtue, given the disparity of judgements on our appetites, and given that Solon, the head of the school of lawgivers, aims to avoid failure by setting the rate for such conjugal intimacy at three times a month?

·WHAT WE DO ABOUT THIS·

Having believed and taught all this, we proceed to assign to women sexual restraint as their particular share, under pain of punishments of the utmost severity. No passion is more urgent than this, yet we want them alone to resist it—not

simply as an ordinary vice but as an abomination and a curse, worse than irreligion and parricide; while *we* give way to it without blame or reproach. Even those who have tried to overcome it have sufficiently admitted the difficulty—or rather the impossibility—they had encountered in subduing, weakening, and cooling off the body by material remedies. Yet *we* want *them* to be •healthy, energetic, buxom, and well-nourished, and at the same time •chaste; both hot and cold at once. For marriage, which we say has the function of saving them from burning,<sup>1</sup> brings them but little cooling-off, given our *mœurs*. (i) If they take a husband in whom the vigour of youth is still boiling, he will boast of scattering it elsewhere: ‘A little more propriety, please, or I’ll take you to law. I paid a heavy price for your penis; it is not yours, Bassus; you have sold it’ [Martial]. (c) The philosopher Polemon was justly brought to justice by his wife, for sowing on a barren field the fruitful seed he owed to her fertile one. (ii) (B) If they take one of those broken-down ones, there they are in full wedlock worse off than virgins and widows. We take them to be well provided for because they have a man beside them—

just as the Romans assumed that the Vestal Virgin called Clodia Laeta had been raped simply because Caligula had made an approach to her, even though it was attested that that is all he had done

—but on the contrary their need is *increased* by their married state; because their ardour, which would have remained calm in their single state, is awoken by contact with any male company whatsoever. That explains why those monarchs of Poland, Boleslaus and Kinge his consort, agreed together to

take the vow of chastity on their wedding-day as they lay side by side, maintaining it in the teeth of the pleasure marriage offers; such considerations and circumstances made their chastity more meritorious.

·TRAINING WOMEN IN THE PRACTICES OF LOVE·

We train them from childhood in the ways of love: their grace, their clothes, their knowledge, their way of speaking—all their instruction has that one goal. Thie governesses impress on them nothing but the face of love, if only to disgust them with it by continually portraying it to them. My daughter—I have no other children—is of an age when the more passionate girls are legally allowed to marry. Her constitution makes her young for her age; she is slender and soft. Having been brought up by her mother in a quiet and private way, she is only just beginning to grow out of the naiveté of childhood. She was reading from a French book in my presence, and came across the word *fouteau*, the name of a well-known tree.<sup>2</sup> The woman she has for governess pulled her up short rather roughly and made her pass over that awkward bit. I let her do this, so as not to interfere with their rules, for I play no part at all in that upbringing; feminine government goes its own mysterious way; it should be left to them. But unless I am mistaken the company of twenty lackeys could not have imprinted on her imagination in six months the understanding of what those wicked syllables mean—how they are used and what they imply—that this good old women instilled by her one reprimand and prohibition: ‘The maid ripe for marriage loves to learn the steps of the Ionic dance, and to imitate those

<sup>1</sup> [‘But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn’, 1 Corinthians 7:9]

<sup>2</sup> [It means ‘beech’, but the episode that Montaigne reports here comes from its similarity to *foutre*, which was on a par in meaning and in vulgarity-level with ‘fuck’.]

lascivious movements. Indeed, from a tender age she trains herself for unchaste loves' [Horace].

Let women dispense with ceremony a little and become free to speak; in knowledge of such matters we are mere children compared with them. Hear them describing our wooings and our conversations with them; you will realise that we bring them nothing that they have not known and already assimilated without our help. . . . I happened to be one day in a place where without raising suspicions I could hear part of what they were saying to each other. If only I could repeat it! 'Good lord!', I said to myself, 'we make a fine use of our time studying the language of Amadis and the stories of Boccaccio and Aretino so as to appear sophisticated!' There is not a word, not an example, not a trick that they do not know better than our books do. It is a teaching that is born in their veins—'Venus herself inspired them' [Virgil]—which nature, youth and good health (those excellent schoolmasters) constantly inspire in their souls. They do not need to learn it; they give birth to it. 'Never did white dove nor any more lascivious bird you could name invite love's kisses with its pecking beak as much as a woman yearning for a host of men' [Catullus].

If that natural violence of their desire were not somewhat held in check by the fear and sense of honour they have been provided with, we would all be shamed. The whole movement of the social world is resolved into and leads towards this coupling; it is a matter infused through everything; it is the centre towards which all things look. We still see ordinances that wise Rome of old made to regulate love-affairs, and Socrates' precepts for the education of courtesans: 'And there are little books that love to lie strewn about in silken cushions: some of them are Stoic ones' [Horace]. There are enactments among Zeno's laws covering penetration and opening up for deflowering virgins. [Now

a [C]-tagged paragraph musing about what the content or purpose was of about fifteen ancient writings, some known only by title, which were evidently about sex and in some cases pornographic. Then:]

In bygone days fifty gods were assigned to this office; and a nation is known that kept boys and girls in their temples to be enjoyed, so as to lull to sleep the lusts of those who came to their devotions; and it was a ceremonious act to use them before coming to worship. [C] 'Sexual excesses are doubtless needed for sexual restraint, as fire is doused by fire' [Tertullian].

·MALE GENITALS·

[B] In most parts of the world this part of our body was deified. In a single province some peeled off the skin in order to offer and consecrate a piece of it, while others offered and consecrated their sperm. In another province the young men publicly pierced and opened it in various places between the flesh and the skin, and put skewers through these openings, the longest and thickest skewers they could stand; and then made a bonfire of those skewers as an offering to their gods. They were regarded as lacking in vigour and chastity if they were overwhelmed by the power of this cruel pain. Elsewhere, the most hallowed magistrate was recognised and revered by those parts, and in many processions an effigy of them was carried in pomp in honour of a variety of gods.

During the feast of Bacchus the ladies of Egypt wore one around their neck; it was of wood, exquisitely fashioned and as big and heavy as each could manage. In addition the statue of their god had one that was bigger than the rest of the body.

The married women hereabouts twist their headscarves into the shape of one that they wear over their foreheads

to glory in the enjoyment they have from it; and when they become widows they push it back and bury it under their hair. The wisest of the Roman matrons were granted the honour of offering crowns of flowers to the god Priapus; when their maidens came to marry, they were required to sit on his least decent parts.

I'm not sure that I haven't seen in my own lifetime something like a similar devotion. What was the meaning of that ridiculous flap that our fathers wore on their breeches, which is still seen on our Swiss ·guards·? Even today, why do we parade the shape of our genitals behind our breeches, and—what is worse—cheat and deceive by exaggerating their natural size? [C] I am tempted to believe that this sort of garment was invented in better and more conscientious ages so as not to deceive people, each man gallantly rendering in public an account of his endowments. . . .

[B] **That fine fellow** who when I was young castrated so many beautiful ancient statues in his great city so as not to corrupt our gaze—[C] following the advice of that other ancient worthy: 'Nude bodies shown in public lead to shameful acts' [Ennius]—[B] ought to have called to mind that (as in the mysteries of the Bona Dea, where all signs of masculinity were excluded) he would achieve nothing unless he also gelded horses, donkeys and finally everything in nature: 'All species on earth—both man and brute, dwellers in the sea, and flocks and painted birds—all dash madly into the flames of desire' [Virgil].

[C] The gods, says Plato, have supplied us with a rebellious and tyrannical member which, like an animal on the rampage, tries by the violence of its appetite to force everything to submit to it. To women too they have given a gluttonous and voracious animal which, if denied its food in due season, becomes frenzied and can brook no delay; breathes its raging madness into their bodies, blocks the passages, stops the

breathing, so causing a thousand sorts of ills, until it has sucked in the fruit of the common thirst and used it to irrigate and fertilise the depth of the womb.

[B] Now, **that lawgiver of mine** ought also to have called to mind that it is perhaps a more chaste and fruitful practice to let them know the living reality early, rather than leaving them to guess at it according to the freedom and heat of their imagination. Led by desire and hope, they replace the real ·sexual· parts by others up to three times as big. . . .

What harm is done by those enormous pictures that boys scatter over the corridors and staircases of our royal palaces ! They give women a cruel misunderstanding of our natural [here = actual] capacities. [C] For all we know, that may have been what Plato had in mind when he decreed—following the practice of other states with sound institutions—that men and women, old and young, should appear naked before each other in their gymnastic exercises. [B] The Indian women who see men in the raw have at least cooled their visual senses.

[Then half a page, mostly [C]-tagged, about the different views that have been held about the effect on virtue of visible nudity.]

·RETURNING TO WHAT WE DO ABOUT WOMEN'S NEEDS·

In short, we lure and excite them by every means; we constantly heat and stimulate their imagination; and then we gripe.

Let us admit it: there is hardly one of us •who is not more afraid of the disgrace that comes to him from his wife's vices than from his own; •who is not more concerned (what amazing charity!) for his dear wife's conscience than for his own; who would not rather commit theft and sacrilege, or that his wife were a murderer or a heretic, than not have her more chaste than he is. And our women would much rather

go to the law-courts in search of fees in the law-courts, or to the battlefield in search of reputations, than to have to mount such a difficult guard in the midst of idleness and pleasures. Don't they see that there is no merchant, no lawyer, no soldier who does not drop what he is doing so as to run after this other [i.e. to run towards a sexual escapade], nor any porter or cobbler, however weary with toil and faint with hunger? . . .

[C] Iniquitous appraisal of vices! Both men and women are capable of a thousand corrupt activities more harmful and unnatural than lasciviousness. But *we* create vices and weigh them not according to their nature but according to our self-interest, which gives them so many unequal shapes. [This seems to mean: 'so many shapes different from what they are actually like'.] The severity of our decrees makes women's engaging in this vice more vicious and ferocious than its nature warrants, and involves it in consequences worse than their cause.

[B] I'm not even sure that the campaigns of Caesar and Alexander surpass the stern resolve of a beautiful young woman, brought up in *our* way, in full view of and contact with the social world, and assailed by numerous examples to the contrary, keeping herself intact in the midst of a thousand continual and powerful solicitations. No *doing* is more thorny or more active than this *not doing*. I think it easier to keep on a suit of armour all one's life than to keep a maidenhead. And so the vow of virginity is the noblest of all the vows and also the harshest. [C] As Saint Jerome says, 'The Devil's power is in the loins'.

[B] We have certainly assigned to the ladies the most arduous and vigorous of human duties, and we leave them the glory of it, which should serve them as a singular spur to persevere in it. This is a fine occasion for them to defy us and trample underfoot that vain pre-eminence in valour and virtue that we claim over them. They will find, if they pay

attention, that it will make them not only much admired but also better loved.

·COURTSHIP·

A gallant man does not abandon his suit because he is refused, provided that the refusal is based on chastity, not on preference for someone else. We can swear, threaten and complain all we like; we are lying; we love them all the better for it. There is no allurements like wise conduct that is not heartless and surly. It is stupid and base to persist in face of hatred and contempt; but it is the exercise of a noble and magnanimous soul to persist in face of a virtuous and constant resolution mingled with an appreciative good-will.

They can recognise our services up to a certain degree, and honourably make us feel that they do not disdain us. [C] For the law that commands them to detest us because we worship them, and hate us because we love them, is indeed cruel, if only for the hardship it causes. Why should ladies not lend an ear to our requests and offers of service, provided they do not go beyond the bounds of their duty of modesty? What are we up to when we assume that they have some inner licentiousness of thought? A Queen in our own time used to say shrewdly that to shut out those advances was a sign of frailty and an accusation of one's own *facilité* [here = 'accusation that one is easy to persuade'], and that a lady who had not been tempted could not boast of her chastity.

[B] The boundaries of honour are by no means so narrowly drawn. It has room to relax; it can allow itself some freedom without transgressing. Along its frontiers there is territory that is free, indifferent [here = 'neither good or bad'], neutral. If a man has been able to pursue her honour and to bring it to bay in its own corner and stronghold, then he is a stupid fool if he is not satisfied with his fortune. The value of a victory is set by its difficulty. Do you want to know

what impact your courtship and your merits have had on her heart? Measure it by her *mœurs*. . . . The obligation for a benefit depends entirely on the will of the one who grants it. The other circumstances that enter into a benefit are dumb, dead, and fortuitous. It costs her more to give that little than it costs her companions to give everything. If rarity is valuable in anything, it must be so in this case; consider not •how little it is but •how few have it. The value of money changes with the coinage and the place where it is minted.

Whatever some men may be brought to say by frustration and bad judgement at the height of their distress, virtue and truth always regain the advantage. I have known women whose reputation was unjustly damaged over a long period and who were later restored to the unanimous esteem of mankind by their constancy alone, without effort or artifice. Everyone is sorry and retracts what he once believed. After being slightly suspect girls, they now hold the foremost rank among good and honoured women. When someone said to Plato ‘Everyone is speaking ill of you’, he said ‘Let them. I will live in a way that will make them change their tune.’

Besides •the fear of God and •the prize of so rare a glory, which must incite women to preserve themselves, •the corruption of our times forces them to do so; and if I were in their place, I would do *anything* rather than entrust my reputation to such dangerous hands. In my day, the pleasure of telling of an affair (a pleasure almost as sweet as the thing itself) was permitted only to those who had one single faithful friend •and were telling of their affair with her; nowadays, the most usual talk at table and when men get together consists of boasts about favours received and the secret liberality of the ladies. Truly one must be abject and base in heart to allow these tender gifts to be thus cruelly persecuted, ransacked, and pawed over by such ungrateful, indiscreet and fickle persons.

•JEALOUSY•

It is our exaggerated and improper harshness towards this vice—namely, non-chastity—that gives birth to jealousy, the most vain and tempestuous malady afflicting human souls: ‘Whatever stops us lighting one torch from another’s light?’ [Ovid] ‘They can go on giving; still nothing is lost’ [Priapeia]. Jealousy and its sister envy seem to me to be the most absurd of the bunch. About envy I can say almost nothing; this passion, which is portrayed as so strong and violent, is kind enough to have no hold on me. As for jealousy, I know it—by sight at least. Beasts can feel it too. When the shepherd Crastis fell in love with a nanny-goat, her mate was drawn by jealousy to charge him while he slept, butting his head and smashing it.

We have raised this fever to an excessive pitch, after the example of some barbarian nations. The better disciplined ones have been touched by it, which is reasonable, but not carried away: ‘There, never did adulterer stain with his blood the waters of Styx while he lay pierced by a husband’s sword.’ [Johannes Secundus] Lucullus, Caesar, Pompey, Antony, Cato and other fine men were cuckolds and knew it: they never made a commotion about it. In those days only one man who died of distress over it, namely Lepidus; who was a fool. . . . And when the god of our poet •Virgil• surprised one of his comrades lying with his wife, he was satisfied with putting them to shame; ‘And one wag among the gods wished that he could be shamed in that way!’ [Horace]. [There’s a half-page more about the attitudes in play when Vulcan discovers his wife Venus in the arms of Mars. Then a slight change of topic.]

As for the confusion of children, <sup>[C]</sup> apart from the fact that the gravest of lawgivers want it and legislate for it in their republics, <sup>[B]</sup> it does not affect the women, •who know which children are theirs, whereas a jealous husband may



be uncertain which are his. Yet this passion of jealousy is, I don't know how, more firmly seated in them than in men: 'Even Juno, the greatest goddess among the dwellers in heaven, feels the scourge of jealousy over her consort's daily wrongs' [Catullus]. When jealousy seizes these poor, weak defenceless souls, it is pitiful how it drags them about and cruelly tyrannises over them. It slips into them under the title of loving affection; but once it possesses them, those same causes that served as a basis for good-will now serve as a basis for deadly hatred. <sup>[C]</sup> Of all the illnesses of the mind, jealousy has the most things that feed it and the fewest things to remedy it. <sup>[B]</sup> The virtue, health, merit and reputation of the husband set fire to their [i.e. the wives'] ill will and fury: 'No hatreds are as bitter as those of love' [Propertius].

This fever uglifies and corrupts all that is otherwise beautiful and good in them; in a jealous woman, no matter how chaste she is and how good a housewife, every action smacks of bitterness and bullying. It is a frenzied agitation that drives them to an extreme completely contrary to what causes it. A good example of this flip between extremes was a man called Octavius in Rome. After lying with Pontia Posthumia, his delight in this so increased his love that he sought most urgently to marry her. When he could not win her over, his extreme love hurled him headlong into deeds of most cruel and mortal hatred; and he killed her. Similarly, the ordinary symptoms of that other love-sickness are intestine hatreds, plots, conspiracies—'We all know what a woman's rage can do' [Virgil]—and a fury that is all the more gnawing for being compelled to justify itself under the pretext of good-will.

•CHASTITY•

Now, the duty of chastity is wide-ranging. Is it *the will* that we want them [i.e. our women] to bridle? But the will is a

supple and active element; it is too quick to be held down. . . . It is not in their power—or perhaps in the power of chastity herself (she is female)—to protect themselves from sexual desire and lust. So if our sole concern is with their will, where do we stand? Imagine the great rush if man had the privilege of being borne on wings

**the next phrase:** *sans yeux et sans langue*

**literally meaning:** without eyes and without tongue

**probable meaning here:** with no-one to see or gossip about what he is doing

to the lap of every woman who would have him! <sup>[C]</sup> The Scythian women put out the eyes of all their slaves and prisoners of war in order to make use of them more freely and secretly.

Oh, what a terrific advantage lies in opportuneness! If I were asked what the first thing is in love, I would reply that it is knowing how to seize an opportunity; the second likewise, and the third as well. It is a factor that can achieve anything.

I have often lacked good fortune, but also sometimes lacked initiative. . . . These days love calls for more boldness, which our young men excuse on the pretext of ardour; but if women looked into the matter closely, they would find that it arises rather from lack of respect. I used to be devoutly afraid of giving offence, and am inclined to respect what I love. Besides, in these negotiations if you remove the respect you rub out the glamour. I like a lover to somewhat play the child, the timid slave, the servant. If not in this situation precisely but in others, I do have something of the stupid bashfulness that Plutarch speaks of; the course of my life has been harmed and blemished by it in various ways. It is a quality very ill-suited to my overall character; but then what are we but indiscipline and contradiction?

I am as sensitive about giving a refusal as about receiving one. It so weighs on me to weigh on others that when duty forces me to put pressure on someone's will in a doubtful matter where he has something to lose, I do it half-heartedly and against my grain. But if it concerns my own interests—<sup>[C]</sup> though Homer says truly that bashfulness is a stupid virtue in a needy man—<sup>[B]</sup> I usually engage a third person to blush in my place. I find it equally difficult to deny those who ask a service of me: I have occasionally had the will to refuse but not the strength.

So it is folly to try to bridle in women a desire that is so burning and so natural to them. And when I hear them boasting of how cold and virginal their wills are, I laugh at them; that really is leaning too far backward. It would have at least some appearance of truth (even if not completely credible) in the case of a toothless and decrepit old woman or a young one wasted by tuberculosis. But women who still live and breathe worsen the terms of the bargain by saying this, since ill-advised excuses serve as accusations. Like one of the gentlemen in my neighbourhood who was suspected of impotence. . . . Two or three days after his wedding, to prove his masculinity he went about boasting that he had ridden his wife twenty times the previous night. That was cited later to convict him of absolute ignorance and to annul the marriage.

Besides, those women are saying nothing worthwhile; for there is neither continence nor virtue if there is no urge to the contrary. 'That is true,' they should say, 'but I am not ready to give myself up.' The very saints put it thus. I am talking of women who seriously boast of their cold chastity and indifference, keeping a straight face and wanting to be believed. For when it is with an affected countenance in which the eyes belie their words, and with the jargon of their profession that has its effect in reverse, that's fine by me. I

am a strong admirer of naturalness and freedom; but there is no way out of it: if it is not completely simple and childish, it is unbecoming to ladies and out of place in this matter of courtship, and quickly turns into impudence. Their disguises and their shapes deceive only fools. Lying is in the seat of honour; it is a detour that brings us to the truth by the back door.

If we cannot hold back their imagination, what do we expect from them? Action? There are plenty of actions that corrupt chastity but escape the knowledge of others: 'What is done unwitnessed is done often' [Martial]. And the ones we fear the least are perhaps the most to be feared: women's silent sins are the worst. . . .

[Then a <sup>[C]</sup>-tagged passage about ways in which a woman's hymen may be ruptured without her losing her chastity—horse-riding, a careless obstetrician, etc.]

We could not precisely delimit for them the actions that we forbid them. We must frame our law in vague general terms. The very idea we form of their chastity is ridiculous; the extreme models of it that I know include •Fatua, the wife of Faunus, who after her wedding never let herself be seen by any man whatever, and •the wife of Hiero, who didn't realise that her husband's breath stank, thinking this was a quality common to all men. To satisfy us they have to be invisible and insensible [= 'not detectable by any of the other senses'].

So now let us admit that the crucial element in judging this duty lies principally in the will. Some husbands have suffered adultery not only without reproach or hostility towards their wives but with a strong sense of obligation to them and acknowledgement of their virtue. Many a woman who loved her honour more than her life has nevertheless prostituted herself to the insane lusts of a deadly enemy in order to save her husband's life, doing for him what she would never have done for herself. This is not the place to

dwell on such examples. They are too splendid and sublime to be rehearsed in the light of this chapter: let us keep them for a nobler place. [Then most of a page of extremely various ‘examples that shine with a more vulgar light’, after which Montaigne turns to the situation of husbands who don’t have this more-than-permissive attitude to their wives’ unchastity.]

·AN ASIDE ON CUCKOLDRY·

<sup>[B]</sup> Then what is the fruit of this painful anxiety? For however *justified* jealousy is, it remains to be seen whether suffering it *does* anything for us. Is there any man who thinks to shackle his women by his ingenuity? ‘Lock her up; shut her in. But who will guard the guardians? Your wife is clever: she will start with them!’ [Juvenal] What trick won’t suffice for them in such a knowing time ·as ours·?

Curiosity is always a fault, but here it is pernicious. It is folly to want to be enlightened about a disease

- for which there is no medicine that does not make it worse;
- the shame of which is increased and spread abroad chiefly by jealousy;
- the avenging of which hurts our children more than it cures us.

You wither and die in the search for such a hidden proof. How wretched are those husbands in my time whose search has succeeded!

If the informer does not present at the same time the remedy and his help, his information is noxious, and deserves a dagger-thrust more than if he called you a liar. The husband who works to do something about it [i.e. about his being a cuckold] is laughed at just as much as the one who knows nothing about it. Cuckoldry has an indelible stamp; once a man is branded with it he has it for ever; the punishment makes it

public more than the fault does. It’s a fine thing to see our private misfortunes torn out of the shadows and doubt, to be trumpeted on the theatrical stage, especially misfortunes that hurt only by being related. Marriages and wives are called ‘good’ not because they are good but because they are not talked about.

We should use our ingenuity to *avoid* getting this annoying and useless knowledge. It was the custom of the Romans when returning home from a journey to send word ahead to announce their arrival to their womenfolk so as not to surprise them. Similarly, a certain nation has introduced the custom that on the day of the wedding the priest opens the way to the bride, to free the groom from doubt and from pressure to investigate whether in this first trial she comes to him a virgin or damaged by someone else’s love.

‘But people talk!’ I know a hundred honourable men who are cuckolded, honourably and not very discreditably. A decent man is pitied for it, not despised. See to it that your misfortune is smothered by your virtue, so that good folk curse the cause of it and the man who wrongs you trembles to think of it. And then who is not talked about for this, from the least ·instance of cuckoldry· to the greatest? . . . Do you see how many honourable men have been included in this reproach in your presence? Don’t think that in other contexts *you* are spared.

‘But even the ladies will laugh at it!’ ·What does their mockery matter?· What do they laugh at more readily these days than a peaceful, orderly marriage? <sup>[C]</sup> Each one of you has cuckolded somebody. Well, nature is all equivalences—compensation and tit for tat. <sup>[B]</sup> The frequency of this event ought by now to have moderated its bitterness; it will soon have become customary.

This wretched misery is one you cannot even tell anyone about. . . . For what friend can you dare to confide your

worries to? Even if he does not laugh at you, will he not be put on the track and shown how to join in the kill?

[c] Wise men keep secret both the sweets of marriage and its bitternesses. For a talkative man like me, of all the distressing disadvantages of marriage one of the principal ones is this: custom has made it improper and prejudicial to tell anyone all that one knows and feels about it.

·BACK TO JEALOUSY·

[b] It would be a waste of time to give women the same advice in order to make jealousy distasteful to them. Their essence is so steeped in suspicion, vanity and curiosity that there is no hope of curing them ·of jealousy· by legitimate means. They often recover from this ailment by a form of health that is much more to be feared than the malady. Just as there are enchantments that can remove an evil only by loading it onto someone else, so too they readily transfer this fever ·of jealousy· to their husbands when they lose it.

All the same, to tell the truth, I do not know whether one can suffer anything worse from them than their jealousy; it is the most dangerous of their characteristics, as the head is the most dangerous part of their body. Pittacus said that every man has his curse: his was his wife's bad head [here = 'temper'], but for which he would think himself entirely happy. That's a *very* heavy misfortune that such a just, wise, valiant man should feel spoils the whole state of his life; what are we little fellows to do ·about it·?

[c] The senate of Marseilles was right to grant the request of the man who asked permission to kill himself so as to escape his wife's petulance, for this is a malady that can never be removed except by amputation; the only effective remedies for it are •flight and •endurance, both of which are very hard. [b] That man knew what he was talking about, it seems to me, who said that a good marriage needs a blind

wife and a deaf husband.

·DON'T OVER-PRESSURE WOMEN WITH OBLIGATIONS·

Let us see to it that the great and intense rigour of the obligation we lay on them [i.e. women] does not produce two effects contrary to our purpose: **(i)** whetting the appetites of their suitors and **(ii)** making the women more ready to surrender.

As for **(i)**: by raising the price of a place, we raise the price of conquering it and the desire to do so. May not Venus herself have cunningly raised the cost of her merchandise by making the laws pimp for her, knowing that it is an insipid pleasure unless it is given value by imagination and a high cost? . . . Cupid is a mischievous god; he makes it his sport to wrestle with piety and justice; glory for him means clashing his strength against all others' strength, all rules yielding to his. 'He is always hunting for occasions to do wrong.' [Ovid]

As for **(ii)**: Would we be cuckolded less often if we were less afraid of being so, according to women's character? For prohibition incites and invites them: 'What you want they don't: what you don't, they do' [Terence]; 'They are ashamed to go by the permitted way' [Lucan]. What better interpretation could we find for Messalina's conduct? At the start she cuckolded her husband in secret, as people do; but carrying on her affairs too easily because of his stupidity, she soon disdained that practice. Now see her make love openly, acknowledge her lovers, welcome them and grant her favours in sight of everyone. She wanted him to suffer from this. When that dull brute could not be aroused by all that, so her pleasures were made weak and insipid by the too-slack ease with which he seemed to permit and legitimise them, what did she do? Well, one day when her husband was out of the city, she—the consort of an Emperor alive and in good

health—married Silius, a man she had long since enjoyed, doing this at noon, in Rome the theatre of the world, with public pomp and festivity.

Doesn't it seem that either she was on her way to becoming chaste through her husband's nonchalance or else that she sought another husband who would stimulate her appetite by his jealousy <sup>[C]</sup> and excite her by standing up to her? <sup>[B]</sup> But the first trouble she had to face was also her last. That brute awoke with a start. One often does worse with these dozing dullards. I have found by experience that when this extreme tolerance comes apart, it produces the harshest vengeance, for in that case the anger and frenzy fuse into one and exxplode all their energy at the first attack. . . . He put her to death, together with a large number of those who were in complicity with her, even including ones who had had no choice and had been 'invited' to her bed with scourges.

·THOUGHTS ON LITERARY STYLE·

[There now begins the first of two long asides on writing. The essay's main topic, sex, will be resumed on page 53. After quoting some lines of Lucretius about love-making between Venus and Mars—lines that he seems to prefer to Virgil's (page 37) about Venus and Vulcan—Montaigne approvingly mentions a dozen Latin words/phrases that occur in one or both passages, and goes on to say that when he thinks about those words] I feel contempt for those little conceits and verbal tricks that have sprung up since. Those fine poets had no need for sharp and subtle word-play; their language is copious, full of a natural and constant power. They are all epigram—not only the tail but the head, stomach, and feet. There is nothing forced, nothing dragging; the whole thing moves at the same pace. <sup>[C]</sup> 'The texture of their work is manly; they are not concerned with little purple passages'[Seneca] <sup>[B]</sup> This is not a soft and merely inoffensive

eloquence; it is sinewy and solid, and it does not so much •please •the reader• as •fill and •ravish •him•; and it ravishes the strongest minds most. When I see these brave forms of expression—so full of life, so profound—I do not say that it is well *said*, I say that it is well *thought*. It is the liveliness of the imagination that fills the words and makes them soar: <sup>[C]</sup> 'The heart makes the man eloquent' [Quintilian]. <sup>[B]</sup> People these days call language 'judgement', and regard fine words as 'rich conceptions'.

This painting—I mean the kind of writing I have been praising in the ancients—is the result not so much of manual dexterity as of having the subject more vividly stamped on the soul. Gallus speaks simply because he conceives simply. Horace is not satisfied with a superficial expression; that would let him down. He sees more clearly and deeply into the thing; to express itself, his mind unlocks and ransacks the whole warehouse of words and figures of speech; as his concepts surpass the ordinary, it is not ordinary words that he needs. Plutarch says that he sees the Latin •language through •things. The same applies here: the sense illuminates and brings out the words, which are no longer wind but flesh and bone. <sup>[C]</sup> They mean more than they say. <sup>[B]</sup> Even weak-minded folk have some notion of this; for when I was in Italy I said whatever I pleased in everyday conversation, but for serious purposes I would not have dared to entrust myself to an idiom that I could neither bend nor turn out of its ordinary course. I want to do something of my own with it.

What enriches a language is its being handled and exploited by fine minds—not by making innovations as much as by expanding it through more vigorous and varied applications, by extending it and deploying it. They do not bring •new• words to it, but they enrich the words they use, giving more weight and depth to their meaning and use; they teach

the language unaccustomed rhythms, but prudently and shrewdly.

And how far this ability is from being given to everyone is seen in many of the French authors of our time. They are bold and proud enough not to follow the common road; but their lack of invention and discretion ruins them. All there is to be seen in them is a wretched affectation of originality, cold and absurd disguises, which instead of elevating their subject push it down. Provided they strut in their novelty, they care nothing about effectiveness. To seize on some new word they abandon the ordinary one, which is often stronger and more sinewy.

In our language I find plenty of stuff but a little lack of tailoring. There is no limit to what could be done with our jargon of hunting and warfare, which is a fruitful field for borrowing; and forms of speech, like seedlings, are made better and stronger by being transplanted. I find it—i.e. the jargon just mentioned—sufficiently abundant but not sufficiently tractable and vigorous. It usually succumbs under a powerful conception. If your pace is tense, you often feel that it is growing limp and giving way under you, and that when it fails, Latin comes to your aid, as Greek does to the aid of others.

Of some of the words I have just selected<sup>1</sup> it is hard for us to perceive the power, because use has somewhat cheapened their grace, and familiarity has made them commonplace. So too in our vulgar tongue there are some excellent phrases and metaphors whose beauty is fading with age, their colour tarnished by too frequent handling. But by that takes away none of their savour for those who have a good nose; nor does it detract from the glory of those ancient authors who were (as is likely) the first to shed this lustre on those words.

Scholarship treats things too subtly, in a style too artificial and different from the common and natural one. . . . I cannot recognise most of my ordinary emotions in Aristotle: they have been covered over and clad in a different gown for use by the schoolmen. God grant that are doing the right thing! If I were in that trade, just as they make nature artificial, I would make art natural. . . .

·INFLUENCES ON MY WRITING·

When I am writing, I can well do without the company and memory of my books, for fear they may interfere with my style. And also (to tell the truth) because the good authors humble me and dishearten me too much. I am inclined to do the trick of that painter who, after painting a wretched picture of some cocks, forbade his apprentices to let any natural cock enter his workshop. [C] And to give myself a little lustre I would need to adopt the device of the musician Antinonides who, when he had to perform, arranged that either before him or after him his audience should have their fill of some bad singers.

[B] But it is harder for me to do without Plutarch. He is so universal and so full that on all occasions, no matter how wild the subject you have chosen, he makes his way into your work and offers you a liberal hand, inexhaustible in riches and embellishments. It vexes me that those who hang around *him* are apt to pillage *me*. [C] I cannot be with him even a little time without taking out of the bowl a drumstick or a wing.

[B] For this project of mine it suits me to do my writing at home, deep in the country, where nobody can help or correct me and where I usually spend no time with any man who understands the the Latin of his Paternoster, let alone ·proper· French. I would have done it better somewhere

<sup>1</sup> [In the passage reported on, but not included, a page back.]

else, but the work would have been less *mine*; and its main goal and perfection is to be precisely mine. I would indeed correct an **accidental** error; I am full of them, since I run on carelessly. But to remove the imperfections that are **ordinary and constant** in me would be treachery.

When it is said to me, or I say to myself:

- ‘Your figures of speech are sown too densely’,
- ‘That’s a word of Gascon vintage’,
- ‘That’s a bad phrase’,
- ‘This is ignorant reasoning’,
- ‘This is paradoxical reasoning’,
- ‘This one is too mad’,
- <sup>[C]</sup>‘You are often playful; people will think that you are serious when you are only pretending’;<sup>1</sup>

<sup>[B]</sup> I reply ‘Yes, but I correct only the faults of **carelessness**, not those of **habit**. Don’t I always talk like that? Am I not portraying myself to the life? Enough then! I have done what I wanted: everyone recognises me in my book, and my book in me.’

Now, I have tendency to ape and to imitate; when I used to dabble in writing verse—I wrote it exclusively in Latin—it clearly revealed the poet I had just been reading; and some of my first essays smell a bit foreign. <sup>[C]</sup> In Paris I speak a language somewhat different from ‘the one I speak’ at Montaigne. <sup>[B]</sup> Anyone I look at with attention easily stamps something of himself. Whatever I contemplate I usurp: a silly expression, a nasty grimace, a ridiculous turn of speech. Faults even more so: once they prick me, they cling to me and will not leave me unless shaken off; I have more often been heard swearing from imitation than from my nature. . . .

I so easily receive these superficial impressions without

thinking of them that when I have had ‘Sire’ or ‘highness’ on my lips for three days in a row, those terms slip out a week later instead of ‘excellency’ or ‘lord’. And something I have said in jest I will say the following day seriously. That is why I am reluctant to write on well-worn topics, for fear of treating them at someone else’s expense. All topics are equally fertile for me. A fly will serve my purpose. (God grant that the topic I now have in hand was not taken up at the command of a will as light ·as a fly’s·!) Let me begin with any subject I please, for all subjects are linked to one another.

But my soul displeases me by ordinarily coming up with its deepest and maddest fancies, the ones I like best, quite unexpectedly and when I am least on the lookout for them. Then they quickly vanish away because just then there’s nothing to attach them to—on horseback, at table, in bed—but especially on horseback, the seat of my widest musings. When speaking, I have a fastidious zeal for attention and silence if I am in earnest; anyone who interrupts me stops me dead. On journeys the very exigencies of the roads cut down conversations; besides, I most often journey without the proper company for sustained conversation, which frees me to think my own thoughts.

It turns out as with my dreams; during them I commend them to my memory (for I often dream I am dreaming); but the next day I recall their colouring as it was—whether they were playful or sad or weird—but as for all the rest, the more I strain to find it the more I bury it in forgetfulness. Similarly with those chance reflections that drop into my mind: all that remains of them in my memory is an empty image, just enough to make me gnaw irritably away, uselessly seeking them.

<sup>1</sup> [Montaigne inserts after the third item in that list: ‘I do not avoid any ·phrases· that are used in the streets of France; those who try to fight usage with grammar make fools of themselves.’]

## ·SEXUAL LOVE AND HUMANITY·

Well now, setting books aside and speaking more directly and simply, I find after all that ·sexual· love is nothing but the thirst for the enjoyment of that pleasure <sup>[C]</sup> within a desired object, and that Venus is nothing but the pleasure of unloading our balls, analogous to the pleasure nature gives us when we are unloading other organs of ours; a pleasure that becomes wrong when it is enjoyed either excessively or indiscreetly. . . .

<sup>[B]</sup> And considering as I often do

- the ridiculous titillation of this pleasure,
- the absurd, mindless, giddy emotions it stirs up in Zeno and Cratippus,
- that reckless frenzy,
- that face inflamed with fury and cruelty in the sweetest act of love, followed by
- that grave, severe, ecstatic countenance in so silly an activity,
- <sup>[C]</sup> the fact that our delights and our excrements have been lodged together pell-mell,<sup>1</sup>
- <sup>[B]</sup> and that the highest pleasure is attended, like pain, with faintness and moaning,

I believe <sup>[C]</sup> that what Plato says is true: <sup>[B]</sup> Man is the plaything of the gods. . . .and that it was in mockery that nature bequeathed us this, the most confusing of our actions, to be the most common; so as to make us all equal, bringing to the same level the mad and the wise, men and beasts. . . .

We eat and drink as the beasts do, but those activities do not hamper the workings of our soul. So in them we keep our superiority over the beasts. But this ·activity of sexual intercourse· pushes every other thought under the yoke; by its imperious authority it makes a brute and a beast of all

the theology and philosophy there is in Plato; yet he does not complain of it. In everything else you can maintain some decorum; all other activities come under the rules of decency; ·but· this one cannot even be *imagined* except as flawed or ridiculous. To see this, try to find a wise and discreet way of doing it! Alexander used to say that he recognised himself as mortal chiefly by this activity and by sleep. Sleep stifles and suppresses the faculties of our soul; the sexual act likewise absorbs and disperses them. Truly it is a mark not only of our original corruption but also of our inanity and ugliness.

On the one hand Nature pushes us to it, having attached to this desire the most noble, useful and agreeable of its labours, ·namely begetting children·; on the other hand it lets us condemn and shun it as shameless and indecent, blush at it, and recommend abstinence. <sup>[C]</sup> Are we not then beasts to describe as ‘bestial’ the labour that makes us?

<sup>[B]</sup> In their religions all nations are alike in •many conventions—sacrifices, lights, incense, fasts, offering—and among other things in •the condemnation of this act. All their opinions tend that way, not to mention the widespread practice of cutting off the foreskin <sup>[C]</sup> which is a punishment for it. <sup>[B]</sup> Perhaps we are right •to blame ourselves for making such a stupid production as man, •to call shameful the act and the parts that are used in it. <sup>[C]</sup> (Mine are now truly shameful and pitiful.)

The Essenes, of whom Pliny speaks, were maintained for several centuries without nurses or baby-clothes by the influx of foreigners who. . . .continually joined them. An entire nation risked self-extermination rather than engage in women’s embraces, forfeiting the continuation of mankind rather than create a man. They say that Zeno lay with a woman only once in his entire life; and that that was out of

<sup>1</sup> [The preparer of this version cannot resist the temptation to quote here W. B.] Yeats: ‘Love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement.’]



civility, so as not to seem to have too stubborn a contempt for that sex.

[B] No man likes to be in on a birth: all men rush to be in on a death. [C] For someone's destruction, we choose an open field in broad daylight; for his construction, we hide in a dark little hollow. [B] It is a duty to hide and blush when making him; it is a glory and a source of many virtues to be able to unmake him. One is an offence, the other an act of grace. . . . The Athenians, to put the disgrace of those two activities on the same level, when they had to purify the island of Delos and justify themselves to Apollo, forbade all burial and all birth within its territory. 'We are ashamed of our very selves' [Terence]. . . .

[B] There are nations which cover themselves when eating. I know a lady (one of the greatest) who shares this opinion that chewing is a disagreeable grimace that takes away much of women's grace and beauty, and does not like to appear in public with an appetite. And I know a man who cannot bear to see anyone eat or to be seen eating. He avoids company when he is filling himself more than when he is emptying himself.

·AGAINST SELF-ABASEMENT·

In the empire of the Turk are found many men who, to outdo others, •never allow themselves to be seen eating a meal; who •eat only one meal a week, [C] who •cut and mangle their faces and limbs, who •never talk to anyone; all of them people who •think they are honouring their nature by denaturing themselves, who •pride themselves on their contempt,<sup>1</sup> who •think to• make themselves better by making themselves worse.

[B] What a monstrous animal, to be a horror to himself, [C] to whom his pleasures are a burden, and who clings to mis-

fortune! [B] There are some who hide their existence—'They give up their homes and domestic delights to go into exile' [Virgil]—hiding from the sight of other men; who avoid health and cheerfulness as hostile and harmful qualities. Not only several sects but several *nations* curse their birth and bless their death. [C] And there are some where the sun is hated and darkness worshipped.

[B] We are ingenious only in maltreating ourselves; that is the true quarry of the power of our mind—[C] a dangerous tool when out of control. [B] 'O pitiful men, who hold their joys a crime' [Maximianus].

Alas, poor man! You have enough inevitable misfortunes without increasing them by inventing others; your condition is wretched enough already without making it artificially so. You have enough uglinesses that are real and intrinsic to you without fabricating imaginary ones. [C] Do you find that you are too much at your ease unless your ease gives you displeasure? [B] Do you find that you have already fulfilled all the necessary duties that nature requires of you, and that nature is lacking and idle within you unless you bind yourself to new ones? You are not afraid to infringe nature's universal and undoubted laws, but you preen yourself on your own sectarian and imaginary ones; and the more particular, uncertain and controverted they are, the more effort you put into them. [C] The arbitrary rules of your own invention and the rules of your parish engross you and bind you; those of God and the world do not touch you. [B] Just run through a few examples that assertion; your life is made up of them.

·SEXUAL PURSUIT·

The lines of those two poets—Virgil and Lucretius—[see page 50]—treating sexual pleasure as they do with reserve and discretion, seem to me to reveal it and throw a closer

<sup>1</sup> [The French is *qui se prisent de leur mespris*; this has a verbal-overlap-within-a-contrast, which the present English version does not capture.]

light on it. The ladies cover their bosom with a veil, as do priests with many sacred objects; painters put shadows in their work to bring out the light more; and it is said that the sun and wind beat down harder when deflected than when direct. When the Egyptian was asked 'What are you carrying there, hidden under your cloak?', he gave a wise reply: 'It is hidden under my cloak so that you won't know what it is.' But some things are hidden in order to reveal them more.

Listen to this man, who is more open: 'And pressed her naked body against mine' [Ovid]. I can feel him gelding me! Let Martial pull up Venus's skirts as high as he likes; he does not succeed in revealing her as completely as that. He who says everything gluts us and disgusts us; one who is timid about expressing himself leads us on to think more than is there. There is treachery in that sort of modesty; especially when, as they do, they half-open such a beautiful highway for our imagination. Both that act and its portrayal should savour of theft.

I like the love-making of Spaniards and Italians, which is more respectful and timid, more mannered and less open.

(In ancient times someone or other wished his throat was as long a crane's neck so as to have more time to taste what he was swallowing. That wish is more appropriate in this hasty and headlong pleasure, especially for natures such as mine, for I have the failing of being too sudden.)

For them, to arrest its flight and prolong it on preliminaries, everything serves as a grace and reward: a glance, a bow, a word, a sign.

If a man could dine off the steam of a roast, wouldn't that be a fine saving? This is a passion that mingles very little essential solids with plenty of vanity and feverish dreams; it

should be rewarded and treated accordingly. Let us teach the ladies to make the most of themselves, to respect themselves, to beguile and fool us. We make our last attack the first one; the French impetuosity is always there. If the ladies string out their favours, offering them retail, then each man, according to his worth and merit, will find there some little scrap of pleasure, even in miserable old age.

He who has enjoyment only in enjoyment,<sup>1</sup> who must win all or nothing, who loves the chase only for the capture, has no business mixing with our sect. The more steps and degrees there are, the more height and honour there is in the topmost seat. We should take pleasure in being led there, as is done in splendid palaces, by varied portals and corridors, long and pleasant galleries, and many windings. This arrangement would turn to our advantage; stay there longer and love there longer; without hope and without desire we no longer achieve anything worthwhile.

Our mastery and entire possession is something for them to fear infinitely. Once they have wholly surrendered to the mercy of our faith and constancy, their position is hazardous. Those virtues are rare and exacting; as soon as we have them [i.e. the women], they no longer have us: 'As soon as eager longing is satisfied, our minds fear not for their pledged word nor care about perjury' [Catullus].

[C] A young Greek called Thrasonides was so in love with love that, having won his lady's heart, he refused to enjoy her so as not to weaken, glut and deaden by enjoyment that restless ardour that he gloried in and fed on.

[B] Food tastes better when it is expensive. Think how far kisses, the form of greeting peculiar to our nation, have had their grace cheapened by availability; Socrates says they are most powerful and dangerous for stealing our hearts. Ours

<sup>1</sup> [Meaning: 'He whose pleasure in sexual matters is confined to actual copulation'.]

is an unpleasant custom which wrongs the ladies who have to lend their lips to any man, however ugly, who comes with three footmen in his train: 'A bluish ice, from nostrils like a dog's, hangs down and bedews his beard. I would a hundred times rather kiss his behind' [Martial]. And we ourselves gain little from it; for as the world is divided, for three beautiful women we have to kiss fifty ugly ones. And for a tender stomach such as men of my age have, one bad kiss is too high a price for one good one.

In Italy they play the swooning suitor even with women who are for sale. They defend themselves thus: there are degrees in enjoying a woman; by such courtship they want to obtain for themselves the fullest enjoyment of all. Such women sell only their bodies; their wills cannot be up for sale: they are too free, too autonomous. It is her will that the Italians are after, they say. And they are right. What must be courted and ensnared is the will. I am horrified by the thought of a body given to me but lacking love. [He goes on with a page of examples, ancient and modern, illustrating this theme. Then:]

·WOMEN IN ITALY·

Those who know Italy will never find it strange if for this subject I do not seek examples elsewhere; for that nation may be called the teacher of the rest of the world in this matter. They generally have more beautiful women than we do and fewer ugly ones, though for rare and outstanding beauties I think we are on a par. And I think the same applies to intellects; they have more ordinarily good ones than we do, and it is obvious that brutish stupidity is incomparably more rare there than here. But in matchless minds, those of the highest rank, we concede nothing to them. If I had to extend this comparison to *valour*, it would seem to me

that the situation could now be said to be reversed: valour is more common and natural with us than with them; but we sometimes see it so full and vigorous in their hands that it surpasses the sturdiest examples of it that we have.

Marriages in that country are crippled in this: their custom commonly imposes such a harsh and slavish law on the wives that the slightest acquaintance with another man is as severe<sup>1</sup> an offence as the most intimate. The result of this law is that all approaches to the wives necessarily become substantial; and since whatever they do amounts to the same, the choice is made for them already. [C] And once they have broken through these partitions, believe me, they are on fire: 'Lust then breaks loose, like a wild beast first angered by its chains and then set free' [Livy]. [B] They ought to be given a little more rein: 'I recently saw a horse, straining at the bit, pulling with its mouth and running like lightning' [Ovid]. The desire for company is weakened by giving it a little freedom.

We run more or less equal risks. They are excessive in restraint, we in freedom. It is a fine practice of our nation that our sons are received into good families to be educated and brought up as pages, as in a school for nobility. . . . There are as many styles and forms as there are homes; and I have noticed that ladies who have tried to impose the most austere rules on the girls in their entourage have not produced any better results. There should be moderation; a good part of their conduct should be left to their own discretion; for, one way or another, no discipline can curb them in all directions. But it is quite true that a girl who has escaped, bag and baggage, from a free schooling, inspires much more confidence than one who emerges soberly from an austere prison of a school.

<sup>1</sup> [The French is *capitale*, but Montaigne probably didn't mean that literally.]

[Two short paragraphs—with four bits <sup>[B]</sup>-tagged and three <sup>[C]</sup>-tagged—that make an unilluminating and untidy transition from what has gone before to what comes next:]

·DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SEXES·

I commend gradation and delay in the dispensation of their favours. <sup>[C]</sup> Plato shows that in every kind of love the defenders are forbidden to be easy and quick. <sup>[B]</sup> To surrender completely in such a heedless and impetuous way is a sign of voracity, which they should hide with all their art. By acting in an orderly and measured way when distributing their gifts, they beguile our desire much better and hide their own. Let them always flee before us—I mean even those who intend to be caught: they conquer us best when retreating, like the Scythians. Indeed, by the law that nature gives them, it is not for them to will and desire; their role is to endure, obey, consent. That is why nature has given them an unfailing capacity ·to play this role·, a capacity that *we* have only rarely and unreliably. The time is always right for them, so that they will be always ready when our time comes: ‘they are born to be passive’ [Seneca]. And whereas nature has so arranged it that *our* appetites should show and declare themselves prominently, it has made *theirs* hidden and internal, providing them with organs <sup>[C]</sup> unsuited to making a display and <sup>[B]</sup> strictly defensive.

[A <sup>[C]</sup>-tagged anecdote about Alexander’s mating with a queen of the Amazons. Then:] <sup>[B]</sup> In virtually everything we are unjust judges of their actions, as they are of ours. I admit the truth when it goes against me, just as when it serves me. It is an ugly disorder that drives them to change so frequently and impedes them from settling their affections firmly on anyone whatsoever; as we see in that goddess ·Venus· to whom are attributed so many changes and so many lovers. Yet the truth is that it is contrary to the nature of love not

to be violent, and contrary to the nature of violence to be constant. Those who are astonished by this, who denounce and seek the causes of this female malady which they find unnatural and incredible, why don’t they see how often they accept it in themselves without being appalled and calling it a miracle? It would perhaps be more strange to find any stability in it. It is not a passion of the body alone. Just as there is no end to greed and ambition, so there is no end to debauchery. It still lives on after satiety; it can’t be supplied with any lasting satisfaction, any goal; it always proceeds beyond possession.

·MALE IMPOTENCE·

And fickleness is perhaps somewhat more excusable in them than in us. Like us they can cite in their defence the penchant we both have for variety and novelty; secondly they can cite, what we cannot, that they buy a pig in a poke;

<sup>[C]</sup> (Queen Joanna of Naples caused her first husband Andreosso to be strangled at the bars of her window by a gold and silver cord, plaited by her own hands, once she discovered that neither his organs nor his potency corresponded to the hopes she had conceived of his matrimonial duties from his stature, his beauty, his youth and his disposition, by which he had won her and deceived her);

<sup>[B]</sup> they can also cite this: since the active partner is required to make more effort than the passive one, we sometimes cannot provide for this necessity, whereas they always can.

<sup>[C]</sup> That is why Plato wisely established in his laws that those making a judgement on the suitability of a marriage should see the youths who aspired to it stark naked but the maidens naked only down to the girdle. <sup>[B]</sup> When they come to try us, they may perhaps find us not worthy of their choice: ‘She deserts his impotent bed after exploring his thighs and

his penis which, like a wet thong, refuses an erection to her exhausted hand' [Martial]. It is not enough that the will drives straight. Impotence and an inability to consummate legitimately annul a marriage: 'And seeks a more vigorous lover, to unseal her virgin zone' [Catullus]. . . .

But is it not a great impudence to bring our imperfections and weaknesses to a place where we want to please and leave a good reputation and good impression of ourselves? For the little that I need nowadays —'Limp, for a single encounter' [Horace]—I would not want to be a nuisance to a person whom I should revere and fear: 'Do not fear a man whose life, alas, has staggered past its fiftieth year' [Horace].

Nature should have been satisfied with making that age miserable, without also making it ridiculous. I hate to see it—on the strength of an inch of paltry vigour that heats it up three times a week—bustle about and swagger with the same vehemence as if it had a good day's legitimate work under its belt. Straw on fire!<sup>1</sup> [C] And I marvel when such a lively and frisky flame is quickly quenched and frozen cold. That appetite should belong only to the flower of beautiful youth. [B] If you want to find out, try relying on old age to further that tireless, full, constant and great-souled ardour that is in you; it will leave you stranded along the way! . . .

Any man who can without dying of shame await the morning that brings disdain from those lovely eyes that have witnessed his limpness and irrelevance—'Though silent, her features are eloquent with loud reproach' [Ovid]—has never known the happy pride of having conquered them and dimmed them by the vigorous exercise of a busy and active night. When I have seen one of them become weary of me, I have not promptly blamed her fickleness; I have

wondered whether I did not have reason rather to blame nature. Certainly it has treated me unfairly and unkindly, . . . [C] and inflicted the most enormous injury. Each of my parts makes me myself as much as does any other part; and none makes me more properly a man than this one.

[A messy [C]-tagged page that starts 'I owe to the public my portrait complete.' That echoes material begun on page 34, and also suggests that Montaigne—before getting side-tracked into a jumble of attacks on superficiality and mere politeness, and into some indecencies—was clearing his throat preparatory to the summing-up pages of this essay:]

·THE PLACE OF SEX IN MY LIFE·

[C] I like modesty. It is not by judgement that I have chosen this scandalous way of speaking; it's nature that chose it for me. I do not commend it, any more than I do any forms that are contrary to accepted practice; but I defend it, lessening the indictment by citing individual and general considerations. Let us get on.

Likewise,<sup>2</sup> [B] what basis can there be for that sovereign authority you assume over women who grant you their favours at their own expense, . . . so that you immediately invest yourselves with rights, cold disapproval and husbandly authority? It is a covenant freely entered into; why do you not stick to it if you want to hold them to it? [C] Voluntary agreements grant no prescriptive rights.

[B] It is contrary to the ·usual· form, but nevertheless true that in my day I handled this business (as far as its nature allows) as conscientiously as any other, and with a sort of justice; I did not show more affection to them than I felt, and portrayed to them, without decoration, my affection's decline,

<sup>1</sup> [Allusion to the proverb 'A whore's love is but straw on fire'.]

<sup>2</sup> *Pareillement*. It is not clear what the link is meant to be here; perhaps to the 'try relying on old age' passage a few paragraphs back.

its flourishing period and its birth, its fits and relapses. One does not always go about it at the same pace. I was so sparing with promises that I think I kept more than I ever vowed or owed. They found fidelity there, even to the extent of my serving their inconstancy—and I mean inconstancy admitted and at times repeated. I never broke with one of them as long as I was held there even by the tail-end of a thread. And no matter what occasions they gave me, I never broke with them to the point of scorn or hatred; for such intimacies, even when acquired on the most shameful terms, still oblige me to some good will.

I did sometimes show anger and somewhat heedless impatience over their ruses and evasions and our quarrels; for I am by nature subject to sudden emotions that are often harmful to my affairs, though they are slight and brief. If they wanted to test my freedom of judgement, I did not shirk giving them sharp paternal advice and pinching them where they smarted. If I left them any room to complain of me, it is rather for having found in me a love which by modern standards was stupidly conscientious. I kept my word in cases where I could easily have been excused; back then, women sometimes surrendered while saving their reputations, on conditions that they readily allowed their conqueror to break. More than once, in the interests of their honour, I have made my pleasure cool at the point of climax; and, when reason urged me, I have armed them against myself, so that they acted more safely and soberly by my rules, when they freely relied on them, than they would have done by their own.

<sup>[C]</sup> As far as I could, I personally assumed all the risks of our assignations so as to take the load off them; and I always arranged our meetings in the hardest and most unexpected ways, for they are the least open to suspicion. . . . It is easy to dare what nobody thinks you will dare, which is made easy

by its difficulty.

<sup>[B]</sup> Never were a man's approaches more friskily genital than mine were. This way of loving is more in harmony with the rules; but how ridiculous it is to people today, and how unsuccessful, who knows better than I? Yet I shall not be led to regret it; I have nothing more to lose there: 'As is shown by my votive tablet, I have hung up my dripping garments on the temple wall and dedicated them to the god of the sea' [Horace]. It is time now to talk of this openly. But—just as I might say to someone 'My friend, you are dreaming; love in this time of yours has nothing to do with faith and probity: "If you try to reduce all this to rational rules you will simply give yourself the task of going rationally insane"' [Terence]

—so in reverse if it were for *me* to start again, I would certainly adopt the same course and the same method, however fruitless it might be for me. <sup>[C]</sup> Incompetence and stupidity are praiseworthy in an activity that deserves no praise. <sup>[B]</sup> The further I go from twomens' attitude in this, the nearer I draw to my own.

I never threw myself completely into this business. I took pleasure in it, but did not forget myself. I kept intact the little sense and discretion nature has given me, in their interests and in mine: a little excitement but no madness. My conscience was compromised by it through lasciviousness and licentiousness, but not through ingratitude, treachery, malignity or cruelty. I did not purchase the pleasures of this vice at all costs, but was contented to pay its proper and simple cost. . . .

I hate almost equally •a stagnant and sleepy idleness and •a prickly and painful bustle. One pinches me, the other puts me to sleep; and I am no more fond of cuts than of bruises, of slashing blows than of blunt ones. When I was more fit for this business I found in it a just moderation between

those two extremes. Love is a lively emotion, light-hearted and alert; I was neither confused nor afflicted by it, but I was heated by it and *alteré* [= 'changed, somewhat for the worse']. That's the place to stop: only fools let it harm them.

When a youth asked the philosopher Panaetius whether it would be all right for a wise man to be in love, he replied: 'Let us leave aside the wise; but you and I, who are not, should not get involved in something so violent and disturbing, which enslaves us to others and makes us contemptible to ourselves.' He was right that something intrinsically so precipitous should not be entrusted to a soul that lacks the wherewithal to withstand its assaults and to act in ways that refute Agesilaus's assertion that wisdom and love cannot coexist.

It is indeed a vain pastime—unbecoming, shameful, and wrong—but I reckon that when it is carried on in this fashion ·of mine· it is healthy, appropriate for enlivening a sluggish mind and body. If I were a physician I would order it for a man of my temperament and condition, as readily as any other prescription, so as to liven him up and keep him in trim until he is well on in years, and to keep him from the clutches of old age. While we are only in its outskirts, and the pulse still beats—'While the hair is but newly grey, while old age is still fresh and erect, while there is still some thread for Lachesis to spin, while I can stand on my own feet without leaning on a stick' [Juvenal]—we need to be stirred and thrilled by some such biting agitation as this. See how much youth, vigour and gaiety it restored to wise Anacreon. . . .

Philosophy does not do battle against natural pleasures, provided that temperance accompanies them; [C] it preaches moderation in them, not avoidance; [B] its forces are marshalled against bastard and unnatural pleasures. It says that bodily appetites ought not to be augmented by the mind, and ingeniously warns us. . . . to avoid food and drink that

make us hungry and thirsty; [B] as in the service of love it orders us to take an object that simply satisfies the body's need and does not stir the soul, which should not make love its concern, but barely follow along accompanying the body.

But am I not right to think that these precepts—which are in my view nevertheless a trifle rigorous—apply ·only· to a body that performs its function, and that for a run-down body (as for a weak stomach) it is permissible to warm it up and support it by art, and by means of the imagination to restore appetite and joy to it, since, left to itself, it has lost them?

May we not say that during this earthly imprisonment there is nothing in us either purely corporeal or purely spiritual, and that we do wrong to tear a living man apart? And that it seems reasonable that we should adopt towards the enjoyment of pleasure at least as favourable an attitude as we do towards pain? Pain for example was acute to the point of perfection in the souls of saints doing penance; the body naturally had a share in it because of their union; yet it could have had little part in the cause. But they [i.e. the saints] were by no means content that the body should 'barely follow along, accompanying' the afflicted soul; they afflicted horrifying and appropriate torments on it, so that the body and the soul, vying with each other, would plunge the whole man into pain, all the more salutary for its harshness.

[C] In the parallel case of bodily pleasures, is it not unjust to cool the soul towards them and say that it should be dragged towards them as to some compelling obligation or some slavish need? It is for the soul, rather, to hatch them and foment them, and, since it has the governing authority, to come forward and welcome them. Just as in my opinion it is for the soul, in the pleasures that are its own, to inspire and infuse into the body all the feeling that their nature allows, and to work to make them sweet and salutary to it.

For it is, as they say, right that the body should never follow its appetites to the prejudice of the mind; so why is it not also right that the mind should not follow its appetites to the prejudice of the body?

<sup>[B]</sup> I have absolutely no other passion ·but love· to keep me going. What avarice, ambition, quarrels, lawsuits do for men who, like me, have no assigned occupation, love would do more agreeably. It would

- restore to me vigilance, sober behaviour, graceful manners, care for my person;
- secure my countenance so that the distortions of old age—those deformed and pitiable distortions—should not come to disfigure it;
- take me back to healthy and wise activities by which I might make myself more esteemed and more loved, clearing my mind of despair about itself and about how it is used, and bringing it to know itself again;
- divert me from a thousand troublesome thoughts, from a thousand melancholy moods, which idleness and the poor state of our health burdens us with in old age;
- warm up, at least in dream, this blood ·of mine· which nature is abandoning; and
- lift up the chin and stretch out a little the muscles (and the soul's vigour and exhilaration) for this poor man who is marching steadily towards his ruin.<sup>1</sup>

But I quite understand that love is a very hard commodity to recover. Through weakness and long experience, our tastes have become more delicate and discriminating. We ask for more when we bring less; we want the maximum of choice just when we least deserve to find favour. Knowing ourselves for what we are, we are less bold and more distrustful;

knowing our own circumstances—and theirs—nothing can assure us that we are loved. <sup>[B]</sup> [Here 'theirs' evidently refers to 'the circumstances' of any woman we might court.]

I feel shame for myself to be found among this green and ardent youth, 'in whose indomitable groin there is a tendon firmer than a young tree planted on the hillside' [Horace]. Why would we go presenting our wretchedness among this sprightliness? 'So that burning youth, not without many a laugh, may see our torch decayed into ashes' [Horace]. They have strength and reason on their side; let us make room for them; we can hold out no longer. <sup>[C]</sup> That sprig of budding beauty will not allow itself to be handled by such stiff hands or won over by purely material means. . . .

<sup>[B]</sup> Now, this is a transaction that requires mutuality and reciprocity. We can acknowledge the other pleasures we receive by recompenses of various kinds; this one can be repaid only in the same kind of coin. <sup>[C]</sup> In this love game, indeed, the pleasure that I give stimulates my imagination more sweetly than the pleasure I receive. <sup>[B]</sup> There is no nobility in a man who can get pleasure when he is not giving any; it is a mean soul that wants only to *take*, gets pleasure from fostering relations with persons to whom he is a debtor. There is no beauty, grace, or intimacy so exquisite that a gentleman should want them at this price. If they can be kind to us only out of pity, I would much rather not live at all than live on alms. I would want to be entitled to ask them for kindness in the style I have seen beggars use in Italy: '*Fate ben per voi*' = 'Do yourself a good turn'; <sup>[C]</sup> or in the manner in which Cyrus exhorted his soldiers: 'He who loves himself, let him follow me.'

<sup>[B]</sup> Someone will say to me: 'Go back again to women who are now in the same state as you are: fellowship in the same

<sup>1</sup> [This register of benefits includes four <sup>[C]</sup>-tagged bits.



misfortune will make them easier for you.’ Oh what a stupid and insipid compromise! ‘I have no desire to pluck hairs from a dead lion’s beard’ [Martial]. [C] One of the reproaches and accusations that Xenophon makes about Meno is that in his love-affairs he concerns himself only with partners past their bloom. I get more sexual pleasure from the mere sight of a young couple appropriately united in a tender embrace, or even from merely imagining it, than ‘I would get’ from being the second partner in a sad misshapen union. [B] I leave that fanciful appetite to the Emperor Galba, who devoted himself only to tough and ancient flesh; and to this poor wretch<sup>1</sup>: ‘O would the gods let me see you as you are, tenderly kiss your fading hair and clasp your withered body in my embrace!’

[C] And among the principal forms of ugliness I count all artificial and forced beauties. A young lad of Chio called Hemon, hoping that by fine clothes he could acquire the good looks that nature had deprived him of, came to the philosopher Arcesilaus and asked him if a wise man could ever find himself in love. ‘Oh yes,’ he replied, ‘but not with a dishonest dressed-up beauty such as yours.’ An ugly old age when openly avowed is in my opinion less old and less ugly than one smoothed out and painted over.

[B] Shall I say it, provided no-one takes me by the throat for it? Love never seems to me to be properly and naturally in season except in the age next to childhood: ‘A youth such that, if you put him among a band of maidens, a thousand experts would fail to pick him out, with his flowing hair and his sexually indeterminate face.’ [Horace]. . . . I find love already out of place in adult manhood. Let alone in old age: ‘For Cupid disdainfully flies past the withered oak’ [Horace].

[C] And Queen Margaret of Navarre greatly extends the privileges of women, ordering that they exchange the title ‘beautiful’ for ‘good’ when they reach the age of 30.

[B] The shorter the possession we give Cupid over our lives, the more value we’ll get from him. Look at his bearing! He is a beardless boy. Who does not know how greatly everything is done contrary to good order in his sect? Study, exercises and experience are routes to failure; there the novices are in charge: ‘Love knows no order’ [Saint Jerome]. Certainly love has more *style* when it is mixed with heedlessness and confusion; mistakes and failures give it point and grace; provided it is sharp and hungry, it matters little whether it is prudent. See how Cupid stumbles along, tripping and playing the fool; to guide him by art and wisdom is to clamp him in the stocks; to lay those hairy calloused hands<sup>2</sup> on him is to constrain his divine freedom.

Moreover, I often hear women portray this relationship as wholly spiritual [see Glossary], and disdain to consider the interests that the senses have in it. Everything contributes to it; but I may say this:

I have often found that we excuse the weakness of their minds because of their bodily beauties, I have yet to see the beauty of a man’s mind, however mature and wise, lead a woman to come to the aid of a body that is slipping, however slightly, into decline.

Why is not one of them seized with a desire for that noble Socratic exchange of body for mind, [C] purchasing at the price of her thighs a philosophical and spiritual relationship—the highest price she could ever get for them?

Plato decrees in his *Laws* that anyone who has achieved some signal and useful exploit in war may not for the

<sup>1</sup> [Ovid, writing to his wife from whom he was separated by permanent exile on the command of the Emperor Augustus.]

<sup>2</sup> [That is, the ones implied by ‘Let alone in old age’, just before the most recent [C]-tag.]

duration of that conflict—regardless of his ugliness or his age—be refused a kiss or other amorous favour from anyone he wants it from. What he finds so just in commendation of military worth, may it not also be used to commend worth of another kind? And why is no one of them ever moved <sup>[B]</sup> to win before her sisters the glory of a love so chaste? And I do mean *chaste*: ‘When he comes to the struggle, he rages in vain, as a great fire does at times, without force, in the stubble’ [Virgil, writing about an old horse]. The vices that are stifled in thought are not the worst.

To bring to an end this notable commentary which has escaped me in a flow of babble—a flow sometimes impetuous and harmful [here eight barely relevant lines by Catullus]—I say that males and females are cast in the same mould; apart from education and custom, the difference between them is not great. <sup>[C]</sup> In *The Republic* Plato even-handedly invites both to the fellowship of all studies, exercises, offices, warlike and peaceful vocations. And the philosopher Antisthenes eliminated any distinction between women’s virtue and our own. <sup>[B]</sup> It is much easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other. As the saying goes: the pot jeers at the kettle.

## 6. Fear. Royal liberality. Conquistadors

[Bewilderingly, Montaigne gave this essay the title ‘Coaches’, which is relevant only on page 64. On page 73 he says ‘Let us return to our coaches’, but he doesn’t. For ‘Conquistador’ see glossary.]

<sup>[B]</sup> It is very easy to prove that the great authors, when they write about causes, make use not only of those that they reckon to be true ·causes· but also those that they do not believe ·to be so·, provided they have some originality and beauty. They speak truly and usefully enough if they speak

ingeniously. We cannot be sure of the master cause, so we pile cause upon cause, hoping that it may happen to be among them: ‘Since it suffices not to give one single cause, many must be given, one of which only may be true’ [Lucetius].

You ask me: ‘What is the origin of our custom of saying “Bless you” when people sneeze?’ Well, we produce three sorts of wind: the one that comes from below is too foul; the one that issues through the mouth carries some reproach for gluttony; the third is sneezing. And because it comes from the head and is blameless, we give it this civil reception. Do not mock this piece of subtlety; it is, they say, from Aristotle.

·FEAR, ESPECIALLY FEAR OF DEATH·

It seems to me that I have read in Plutarch—who combined art with nature and judgement with knowledge better than any other author I know—the explanation that the heaving of the stomach that afflicts those who travel by sea arises from fear, having found some reason that shows that fear can produce such an effect. I am very subject to this trouble, and I *know* that fear is not the cause in my case; and I know it not by argument but by compelling experience. . . . Though many occasions for being afraid have arisen (if you count death as one), I have never felt, on water or anywhere else, fear that has confused or dazed me.

Fear sometimes arises from lack of judgement as well as from lack of courage. All the dangers I have seen I have seen with my eyes open, with my sight free, sound and whole; besides, it takes courage to be afraid. Once when I did have to flee, I managed my flight well and maintained more order than others did; my flight, <sup>[C]</sup> if not without fear, nevertheless <sup>[B]</sup> was without terror and without dismay; it was excited, but not dazed or distracted.

Great souls go far beyond that, showing us flights that are not merely composed and healthy but proud. Here let

me cite the one that Alcibiades relates, concerning Socrates, his companion in arms:

'I came across him after the rout of our army; he and Laches were among the last of the fugitives. I watched him at my leisure and in safety, for I was on a good horse and he on foot, which is how we had fought together. I noticed first how much presence of mind and resolve he showed, compared with Laches; next it was his confident walk, just like his usual one; his firm and steady gaze, considering and judging what was going on around him, looking now at some, now at others, friends and enemies, encouraging the friends and showing the others that he was a man to sell his life-blood very dear if anyone tried take it from him. That saved them, for men like that are not attacked; it's the fearful who are pursued.'

There you have the testimony of that great captain, teaching us (what we constantly experience for ourselves) that nothing casts us into dangers so much as an unthinking eagerness to keep clear of them: <sup>[C]</sup> 'Where there is less fear, there is generally less danger' [Livy].

<sup>[B]</sup> Our common people are wrong to say of anyone 'He fears death', when they mean that he thinks about it and foresees it. Foresight is equally appropriate for anything that concerns us, for good or ill. Considering and judging the danger is in a way the *opposite* of being stunned by it.

I do not feel myself strong enough to sustain the impact and impetuosity of this passion of fear, or of any other intense passion. If I were once conquered and thrown by it, I would never get up again wholly intact. Anything that made my soul lose its footing would never set it back upright in its place; it examines and searches itself all too keenly and deeply, but would never allow the wound that had pierced it close up and heal. Fortunately for me, no illness has yet

laid it low. Each attack on me I confront and oppose in full armour; so the first to get the better of me would leave me without resources. I have no secondary defence; wherever the torrent breaches my dyke, I will be helpless and drowned for good.

<sup>[C]</sup> Epicurus says that the wise man can never pass into a contrary state. I have an opinion about the reverse of this saying, namely that no man who has been a real fool once will ever be really wise.

<sup>[B]</sup> God sends cold according to the garment, and sends me passions according to my means of sustaining them. Nature, having uncovered me on one flank, has covered me on the other; having disarmed me of strength, it has armed me with insensibility and controlled apprehensiveness.

Now I cannot endure coach, litter or boat for long (and found them even harder to put up with in my youth); and I hate any means of conveyance other than horseback, both in the town and in the country. But I can tolerate a litter less than a coach; and for the same reason I can better tolerate being thrown about on a rough sea—which produces fear—than I can the motion experienced during calm weather. By that slight jolt made by the oars as they pull the boat from under us I somehow feel my head and stomach disturbed, just as I cannot bear a rickety chair under me. When sail or current bears us smoothly along or when we are towed, this uniform motion does not trouble me in the least. It is interrupted motion that upsets me, the more so when it is slow. I cannot describe the characteristics of this trouble in any other way. Doctors have told me to bind a towel as a compress around the lower part of my belly; I have never tried this, being accustomed to wrestle with my weaknesses and overcome them by myself.

## ·VARIOUS USES OF COACHES·

[C] If my memory of them were adequately furnished, I would not regret time spent listing here the infinite variety of historical examples of the use of coaches in the service of war, varying from one nation to another and from one century to another; they are, it seems to me, most effective and very necessary, so that it's a wonder that we don't use them any more.<sup>1</sup> I will merely say this: quite recently (in our fathers' time) the Hungarians put them to excellent use against the Turks; in each coach they had a lancer and a musketeer, together with a number of harquebuses in racks, loaded and ready, the whole thing covered with a wall of shields, like a frigate. They formed their battlefront of three thousand such coaches; after the cannon had played their part, they •had them advance and made the enemy swallow this salvo as a foretaste of what was to come (no slight advantage!), or else they •launched them into the enemy squadrons to break them and open them up. In addition to which they got help from them by using them •to cover the flanks of their troops marching through open country where they were vulnerable or •to provide speedy defence of an encampment, turning it into a fort.

In my own day a gentleman on one of our frontiers, who was very unwieldy of person and found no horse able to bear his weight, was involved in a feud and went about the countryside in a coach of this very description, and made out very well. But let us leave these war-coaches.

The kings of our first dynasty used to travel the land in a chariot drawn by four •oxen. [B] Mark Antony was the first to have himself drawn through Rome—with a minstrel-girl beside him—by •lions harnessed to a coach. Heliogabalus

later did the same, calling himself Cybele, the mother of the gods; and also, drawn by •tigers, he pretended to be the god Bacchus. On other occasions he harnessed two •stags to his coach; once it was four •dogs; another time he stripped naked and was drawn in solemn procession by four naked •girls. The Emperor Firmus had his coach drawn by enormous •ostriches; making it seem to fly rather than roll.

## ·POINTLESS DISPLAY·

The strangeness of these contrivances puts a certain idea into my head, namely that when monarchs work at showing off and making a display through excessive expenditure, this is a kind of timidity, a sign of their not having enough sense of what they are. This would be excusable when the monarch was in a foreign land; but among his subjects, where he is all-powerful, his rank gives him the highest degree of honour he can attain. Similarly it seems to me that it is superfluous for a gentleman to dress with studied care at home; his house, his servants, his cuisine are enough to vouch for him there.

[C] Isocrates' advice to his king seems to me reasonable: let his furniture and his tableware be magnificent, for such expenditure is of lasting value and is passed on to his successors; let him avoid all displays that immediately flow away out of use and memory.

[B] When I was a young man, lacking other adornments I liked to adorn myself in fine clothes, and they suited me well; there are folk on whom fine clothes weep.

## ·AGAINST PARADES AND FESTIVALS·

We have amazing stories about our kings' frugality over both personal expenditure and donations—kings great in

<sup>1</sup> [All previous translations have 'that we have lost all knowledge of them', but Montaigne clearly *hasn't* lost all knowledge of them. The present version takes '*en . . . connoissance*' to mean 'acquaintance with them' rather than 'knowledge of them'.]

reputation, in valour, and in fortune. Demosthenes fights tooth and nail against his city's law allotting public money to lavish games and feasts. He wanted their greatness to be displayed in the number of its well-armed fighting-ships and in good, well-equipped armies.

[C] Theophrastus is rightly condemned for asserting the opposite doctrine in his book on riches, in which he maintained that expenditure on festivals is the true fruit of opulence. These are pleasures, says Aristotle, •that touch only the lowest of the common people, •that vanish from memory as soon as people are sated with them, and •that no serious man of judgement can esteem.

The outlay would seem to me to be more royal—as well as more useful, just, and durable—if spent on •ports, harbours, fortifications and walls, on •splendid buildings, •on churches, hospitals and colleges, and •on improving streets and highways. In my time, Pope Gregory XIII left a favourable reputation behind him by so doing; and, by so doing, our own Queen Catherine would for many years leave evidence of her natural generosity and munificence [see Glossary], if her means were sufficient for her desires. Fortune has deeply distressed me by interrupting the construction of the handsome new bridge in our great city, depriving me of the hope of seeing it in regular use before I die.<sup>1</sup>

[B] Moreover, to the subjects who are spectators of these triumphs it seems that their own wealth is being flaunted and that they are being entertained at their own expense. Kings' subjects are apt to assume about the kings what we assume about our servants: that they should provide abundantly for everything we want, without laying a finger on it for themselves. That is why the Emperor Galba, having enjoyed •the playing of• a musician during dinner, called

for his chest, plunged in his hand and gave him a fistful of crowns saying 'This is not public money; it is my own.' At all events, the people are usually right: their eyes are feasted with what should go to feed their bellies.

•ROYAL LIBERALITY•

When a sovereign provides it, liberality itself does not shine as it should; it more rightly belongs to private citizens; for strictly speaking a king has nothing that is properly his own; he owes *himself* to others. . .

[C] The authority to judge is given not for the sake of the judge, but for the sake of the person judged. A superior is never appointed for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the inferior; a doctor for his patients, not for himself. All authority, like all art, has a goal outside itself.

[B] . . . Which is why the tutors of youthful princes who make a point of impressing on them that there is virtue in lavishness, who exhort them •to be unable to reject anything and •to hold that money is never better spent than when given away (a lesson that I have seen greatly favoured in my own lifetime) either are thinking more of their own good than of their master's, or else don't have a good understanding of whom they are talking to. It is all too easy to stamp liberality on someone who has the means to practice it all he wants at the expense of others. [C] And since generosity is measured not by the size of the gift but by the means of the giver, it amounts to nothing in such powerful hands. They find themselves prodigal before they are liberal. [B] So liberality is little to be commended compared with other royal virtues, and is the only one, said the tyrant Dionysius, that is fully compatible with tyranny itself. I would rather teach a king this line from one ancient ploughman: that is, 'If you want a good crop,

<sup>1</sup> [This was the bridge, completed after Montaigne's death, that is still called the *Pont Neuf* = 'new bridge'.]

you must broadcast your seed by hand, not pour it from your sack.' . . . So when a king has to make gifts or, to put it better, has to pay and restore to so many folk according to their deserts, he should distribute royally and advisedly. If a prince's liberality is indiscriminate and immoderate I would rather he were a miser.

Royal virtue seems mainly to consist in justice, and what most distinguishes kings is the kind of justice that accompanies liberality; they dispense all other kinds of justice through intermediaries; *that* one they reserve to themselves.

Immoderate largesse is a feeble means for them to acquire good will, for it alienates more people than it wins over.

[C] 'The more people you have helped by it, the fewer you can help in the future. Is there a greater folly than doing something you like in such a way that you can do it no longer?' [Cicero]

[B] And if it is exercised without regard for merit, it brings shame on him who receives it, and is received without gratitude. Tyrants have been sacrificed to the people's hatred by the very men they have unjustly advanced, since men of that sort reckon they can assure their possession of ill-gotten gains by showing hatred and contempt for the one they got them from, siding in that respect with the judgement and opinions of the people.

The subjects of a prince who gives excessively *ask* excessively, steering not by reason but by example. We certainly ought often to blush for our impudence. We are already overpaid by just standards when the recompense is equal to our services; for don't we owe something to our princes by natural obligation, 'i.e. without any payment being appropriate'? If our prince covers our expenses, he does too much; it is enough that he helps; anything above that is called a benefit, which cannot be demanded. . . . By our method, there is no end to it; what *has been* received is

forgotten; only *future* liberality is looked to affectionately. So the more a prince exhausts his wealth in giving, the poorer he is in friends. [C] How could he satisfy desires that grow the more they are fulfilled? The man whose thought is on *taking* no longer has it on what he has taken. Nothing is as characteristic of covetousness as ingratitude.

The example of Cyrus fits in here, to serve our kings today as a touchstone for discovering whether their gifts are well or ill bestowed

and to show them how much more happily that emperor distributed his gifts than they do theirs. They have been reduced to borrowing from subjects unknown to them—from those they have harmed rather than those they have helped—receiving helps from them that have nothing *gratuitous* about them but the name).

Croesus reproached Cyrus for his largesse, and calculated what his treasure would have amounted to if he had been more close-fisted. Cyrus sought to justify his liberality; so he dispatched messengers in all directions to the grandees of his empire whose interests he had individually advanced, begging each to help him with as much money as he could for an urgent need of his, and to write to him disclosing the amount. When all these statements were brought to him, he found that each of his friends, thinking it was not enough to offer merely as much as he had received from Cyrus's munificence, had included much of his own wealth. The total sum amounted to far more than Croesus' savings. Whereupon Cyrus said to him, 'I love riches *as much as* other princes do, and take care of them *more*. You see by what little outlay I have acquired the countless riches of so many friends, and how much better treasurers they are than would be hired men with no obligation and no affection, and how my wealth is better lodged *with them* than in my own

treasure-chests, calling down upon me the hatred, envy and contempt of other princes.'

<sup>[B]</sup> The emperors derived an excuse for the lavishness of their public games and spectacles from the fact that their authority depended somewhat (in appearance at least) on the will of the Roman populace, which had always been accustomed to be courted by that sort of spectacle and extravagance. Yet it was private citizens who had encouraged this custom of pleasing their fellow-citizens and their equals with such a profusion of magnificence drawn mainly from their own purses. It took on a quite different savour when their masters came to imitate them. <sup>[C]</sup> 'Taking money from rightful owners and giving it to others ought not to be regarded as liberality' [Cicero]. When his son tried winning the support of the Macedonians by presents, Philip reprimanded him in a letter with these words: 'What? Do you want your subjects to regard you as their purser, not as their king? Do you want to win them over? Do it with the benefits of virtue not by the benefits of your coffers.'

[Montaigne now devotes more than a page to uses of the arena for lavish displays under various emperors, of whom only Probus is named: forests, lakes, fighting platforms; fountains; thousand of wild animals killed, and hundreds of gladiators; spectators' seats decorated with jewels; banquets. It is not clear that Montaigne is as revolted by all this as we would be, but he does speak of these spectacles as 'vanities', and uses them as a bridge to his next topic.]

If there is anything excusable in such excesses, it is when the amazement is caused not by the expense but by the originality and ingenuity.

·HOW LITTLE WE KNOW·

Even in these vanities we discover how fertile those times were in minds different from ours. That sort of fertility is on

a par with all nature's other productions. Which is not to say that back then nature put forth its utmost effort. <sup>[C]</sup> We do not *go*; rather we *ramble*, turning this way and that. We retrace our steps. <sup>[B]</sup> I fear that our knowledge is weak in every direction; we do not see far **a** into the distance or far **b** into the past; our knowledge embraces little, and has a short life; short in both **b** extent of time and **a** extent of matter: 'Great heroes lived before Agamemnon; many they were, yet none is lamented, being swept away unknown into the long night' [Horace]. 'Before the Trojan War and the death of Troy, many other poets have sung of other wars' [Lucretius].

... Even if everything that has come down to us about the past by report were true and known to someone, it would be less than nothing compared with what we do not know. And against of a world that flows on while we are in it, how puny and stunted is the knowledge of the most curious men ! A hundred times more is lost for us than what comes to our knowledge, not only of individual events (which fortune often makes exemplary and weighty) but of the state of great polities and nations. When our artillery and printing were invented, we clamoured about miracles; yet at the other end of the world, in China, men had been enjoying them for the preceding thousand years. If we saw as much of the world as we don't see, it is to be believed that we would perceive an endless multiplication and succession of forms. Where nature is concerned, nothing is unique or rare; but where our knowledge is concerned, much certainly is, which constitutes a most pitiful foundation for our scientific laws, offering us a very false idea of everything.

Just as we vainly conclude today that the world is declining into decrepitude, using arguments drawn from our own decline and decadence—'Our age lacks vigour now: even the soil is less abundant' [Lucretius] —that same poet equally vainly inferred the world's birth and youth from the vigour

he saw in the minds of his time, fertile in novelties and inventions in various arts. [He quotes a few lines to that effect, also from Lucretius.]

·THE WESTERN CONQUESTS IN AMERICA·

Our world has just discovered another one: and who will answer for its being the last of its brothers, since until now its existence was unknown to the daemons, to the sybils, and to ourselves? It is no less big and full and solid than our own; its limbs are as well developed: yet it is so new, such a child, that it is still being taught its ABC; less than fifty years ago it knew nothing of writing, weights and measures, clothing, any sort of corn or vine. It was still naked at the breast, living only by what its nursing mother provided. If we are right to infer the end of our world, and that poet is right that his world is young, then this other world will only be emerging into light when ours is leaving it. The universe will be struck with the palsy: one of its limbs will be paralysed, the other fully vigorous.

I fear we<sup>1</sup> shall have considerably hastened the decline and collapse of this new world by our contagion, and that we shall have sold it our opinions and our skills at a very high price. It was an infant world; yet we have not

- whipped it and subjected it to our discipline through the advantage of our natural valour and strength, or
- won it over by our justice and goodness, or
- subjugated it by our magnanimity.

Most of the responses of its peoples, and most of our negotiations with them, show that they were in no way behind us in natural aptitude and clarity of mind. The awe-inspiring magnificence of the cities of Cuzco and Mexico—

and, among many similar things, the garden of that

king where all the trees and fruits and all the plants were, in size and arrangement, as in a normal garden, but all excellently wrought in gold; and in his curio room ·gold replicas of· all the animals native to his lands and his seas

—and the beauty of their workmanship in precious stones, feathers, cotton, and in painting shows that they were not behind us in craftsmanship either.

But as for piety, observance of the laws, goodness, liberality, loyalty and frankness, it served us well that they had more of those than we did; their superiority ruined them, sold them and betrayed them.

As for boldness and courage, as for firmness, constancy, resoluteness against pain, hunger and death, I would not hesitate to compare the examples I could find among them with the most celebrated ancient examples written in the annals of our world on this side of the ocean.

As regards those men who subjugated them, they'd have had no basis for their many victories if it hadn't been for •the ruses and tricks they used to deceive them, •the natural astonishment of those peoples at the sight of the totally unexpected landing of bearded men,

- unlike them in language, religion, build and countenance,
- coming from such a remote part of the world, where they had never imagined that there was anyone living;
- mounted on big unknown monsters, confronting ones who had never seen a horse or any other animal trained to support a man or any other burden;
- with a hard and shiny skin and a sharp glittering weapon, confronting ones who for the miracle of a

<sup>1</sup> [Regarding 'we': Montaigne knows that the conquistadors were Spanish, and he deplors their conduct; but here and elsewhere he thinks of the old world's invasion of the new in terms of what 'we' did to 'them'.]



mirror or a knife would barter a vast wealth of gold or pearls, and who had neither the knowledge nor the material to pierce our steel;

and for •the lightning and thunder of our cannons and harquebuses (which would have confused Caesar himself in his day if they had surprised him when he had had as little experience of them), confronting folk who were (in most regions) naked, with no arms except (at the most) bows, stones, sticks, and wooden shields; folk who, under pretence of friendship and good faith, were caught off their guard by their curiosity to see things strange and unknown.

·EXPLOITING THE AMERICANS' ADMIRABLE QUALITIES·

When I reflect on •the indomitable ardour with which so many thousands of men, women and children came so many times and threw themselves into certain danger in defence of their gods and their freedom; and on •the noble, stubborn willingness to suffer any extremity, any hardship including death, rather than to submit to the domination of those who had so shamefully deceived them (some of them choosing to starve to death in captivity rather than to accept food from the hands of such vilely victorious enemies), I conclude that anyone who attacked them on equal terms in arms, experience and numbers would have been involved in a conflict more dangerous for him than any other that we know of.

If only it had fallen to Alexander or to those ancient Greeks and Romans to make of this a most noble conquest, with such a huge transfer of so many empires, and such revolutions in the circumstances of so many peoples, falling into hands that would have gently polished and cleared away whatever was barbarous in them, encouraging and strengthening the good seeds that nature had produced in them, not only bringing to them the cultivation of land and

adornment of cities of our side of the ocean (so far as they were necessary to them) but also bringing to the natives of those lands the virtues of the Romans and the Greeks! What a renewal that would have been, what a restoration of the fabric of this world, if the first examples of our behaviour that were presented over there had called those peoples to admiration and imitation of virtue, creating between them and us a brotherly fellowship and understanding! How easy it would have been to have made good use of souls so unspoiled, so hungry to learn, and having for the most part such fine natural beginnings! We did the opposite: we took advantage of their ignorance and lack of experience to pervert them more easily towards treachery, debauchery and greed, toward every kind of cruelty and inhumanity, by the example and model of our own *mœurs*. Whoever put such a price on trade and commerce?

•So many cities razed,

•so many nations wiped out,

•so many millions of people put to the sword, and

•the loveliest and richest part of the world overthrown,

all for the trade in pearls and pepper! Tradesmen's victories! Ambition and public enmities never drove men against one another to such horrifying hostilities and to such miserable calamities.

·SOME SPANIARDS LOSE AN ARGUMENT·

Coasting the sea in search of their mines, certain Spaniards landed in a fertile, pleasant and well-populated countryside, and made their usual declarations to its people: **a** they were men of peace, coming from distant voyages, sent on behalf of **b** the king of Castile, the greatest monarch in the inhabited world, to whom **c** the Pope, representing God on earth, had granted dominion over all the Indies; that, if they would be tributaries to him they would be most kindly treated. They

asked for **a** food, and for **e** gold which they needed as a medicine; they incidentally insisted that **f** there is only one God, that our religion is the true one which they advised them to adopt—adding **g** a few threats.

In reply they were told that, **a** if they were men of peace, they didn't behave as though they were; **b** their king must be poor and needy since he came begging; **c** the man who had awarded their country to him was a man who loved dissension, since he gave to a third party something that was not his to give, putting the third party into conflict with its previous possessors; as for **a** food, they would supply some; they had very little **e** gold, it being something they did not highly value since it was of small practical use in life, their sole concern being to live in happiness and contentment; so they [the Spaniards] could boldly take any gold they could find except what was used in the service of their own gods. As for **f** there being only one God, they enjoyed the argument but did not intend to change their religion, having so profitably followed their own for such a long time and being unaccustomed to taking advice from anyone but their friends and acquaintances. As for their **g** threats, it was a sign of lack of judgement in them to go about threatening people without knowing anything about them or their resources; so let them get out of their territory quickly, for they were not used to giving a friendly reception to the greetings and warnings of armed foreigners. They would do to them what they had done to these others, showing them the heads of some executed men around their city.

There is an example of their infantile babbling! At all events, the Spaniards did not settle there or campaign there, or in many other places where they found none of the merchandise they were looking for, no matter what other conveniences could be found there. Witness my cannibals [see *Essays* book I, essay 31].

·THE CONQUESTS OF PERU AND MEXICO·

The last two kings whom the Spaniards drove out were kings over many kings, the most powerful kings in that new world and perhaps also in our own.

The first was the king of Peru, who was captured in battle and put to such an excessive ransom that it defies all belief; when this had been faithfully paid, and he had showed by his dealings that he was of a frank, noble and steadfast heart, a man of honest and tranquil mind, the conquerors. . . . [Let us spare ourselves the details. They plundered Peru for more gold, framed the king on a charge that he was trying to raise his provinces against them, tried him for this and condemned him to death, and—while he was being tortured—got him to accept Christian baptism, as their price for merely hanging him instead of burning him to death.]

The second was the king of Mexico: he had long held out during the siege of his city, showing (if ever a prince and people did so) what can be achieved by endurance and perseverance, when he had the misfortune to fall alive into his enemies' hands, on their promise to treat him like a king (and during his captivity he showed nothing unworthy of that title). Not finding after that victory as much gold as they had anticipated, they—the Spaniards—ransacked and searched everything, and then set about seeking information by inflicting the most painful tortures they could devise on the prisoners they held. But after getting nothing from this, having come up against hearts stronger than their tortures, they finally fell into such a rage that—contrary to their word and to all law of nations—they sentenced the king and one of the chief lords of his court to be tortured in each other's sight. [Again, let us spare ourselves the details, which are ghastly. The torture stopped, with the king nearly burned to death, 'because his fortitude made their cruelty more and more sameful'. After he tried to escape, they hanged him, and 'he

made an end worthy of a great-souled prince'. Montaigne goes on to describe an occasion when the Spaniards burned to death 'in the same fire' 460 prisoners of war.]

We have these accounts from the Spaniards themselves, for they not only admit them but boast of them and proclaim them. Would this be as a testimonial to their justice or to their religious zeal? Truly those methods are too contrary, too hostile, to such a holy purpose. If they had proposed to spread our faith, they would have reflected that faith grows not by possession of territory but by possession of men, and would have had killings enough through the necessities of war, without adding indiscriminate slaughter, as total as their swords and pyres could make it, as though they were butchering wild animals, sparing only as many as they calculated were needed for the wretched slavery of working and servicing their mines. So that several leaders of the conquistadors were punished by death in the lands they had conquered, by order of the kings of Castile who were justly shocked at their dreadful conduct; and almost all—not just the leaders—were looked down on and hated. Most were buried there, without any profit from their conquest. God allowed that their vast plunder should be engulfed either by the sea as they were shipping it or in that internecine strife in which they all devoured each other.

·MEXICAN COINAGE·

The gold actually received, even into the hands of a wise and thrifty prince [King Phillip II of Spain], falls far short of the expectations aroused in his predecessors and of the abundant riches discovered when men first went to those new lands; for while great profit is still being drawn from them, we see that it is nothing compared with what was to be expected. The first takings were very lavish because they knew nothing about the use of coinage; so that all their gold

was gathered in one place, used only for display and parade; like a chattel handed on from father to son by many powerful kings, who always worked their mines to make that great heap of vases and statues to adorn their palaces and their temples; whereas our gold is all in circulation and in trade. We cut it up small, and change it into a thousand forms; we scatter and disperse it. Just imagine what it would be like if our kings, over several centuries, had likewise—i.e. in Mexican fashion—piled up all the gold they could find and kept it idle!

The people of the kingdom of Mexico were somewhat more urban and more skilled in the arts than the other nations over there. Thus they judged, as we do, that the entire world was near its end, taking as a sign of this the desolation that we inflicted on them. They believed that the world's existence was divided into five periods, the lifetimes of five successive suns. Four suns had already done their time, the one shining on them now being the fifth. [He gives some details of how, according to Mexican belief, the different suns died: flood, the falling of the sky, fire, wind. Then:] After the death of that fourth sun, the world was in perpetual darkness for twenty-five years, during the fifteenth of which a man and a woman were created who remade the human race. Ten years later, on a certain day of their calendar, the sun appeared, newly created; and since then they have counted their years from that day. . . . Their dating of that fourth change tallies with that great conjunction of stars which—800 years ago, according to the reckoning of our astrologers—produced many great changes and innovations in the world.

·BACK TO ROYAL OSTENTATION·

As for pomp and magnificence, which led me into this subject, neither Greece nor Rome nor Egypt can compare any of their

constructions, for difficulty or utility or nobility, with the highway to be seen in Peru, built by their kings along 300 leagues from the city of Quito to the city of Cuzco. [He exclaims at length about the beauty of the road, its borders, and the palaces punctuating it; and about how difficult it must have been to do all this with the limited means available in Peru.]

Let us return to our coaches. Instead of using coaches or vehicles of any kind they have themselves carried on the

shoulders of men. The day he was captured, that last king of Peru was in the midst of his army, borne seated on a golden chair. The Spaniards in their attempts to topple him (as they wanted to take him alive) killed many of his bearers, but many more vied to take the places of the dead, so that, no matter how many they slaughtered, they could not bring him down until a mounted soldier dashed in, grabbed hold of him and pulled him to the ground.