

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 2



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On Drunkenness

THE world is nothing but variety and dissemblance: vices are all alike, as they are vices, and peradventure the Stoics understand them so; but although they are equally vices, yet they are not all equal vices; and he who has transgressed the ordinary bounds a hundred paces,

Quos ultra, citraque nequit consistere rectum,

should not be in a worse condition than he that has advanced but ten, is not to be believed; or that sacrilege is not worse than stealing a cabbage:

*Nec vincet ratio hoc, tantumdem ut peccet, idemque,
Qui teneros caules alieni fregerit horti,
Et qui nocturnus divum sacra legerit.*

There is in this as great diversity as in anything whatever.

The confounding of the order and measure of sins is dangerous: murderers, traitors, and tyrants get too much by it, and it is not reasonable they should flatter their consciences, because another man is idle, lascivious, or not assiduous at his devotion. Every one lays weight upon the sin of his companions, but lightens his own. Our very instructors themselves rank them sometimes, in my opinion, very ill.

As Socrates said that the principal office of wisdom was to distinguish good from evil, we, the best of whom are vicious, ought also to say the same of the science of distinguishing betwixt vice and vice, without which, and that very exactly performed, the virtuous and the wicked will remain confounded and unrecognized.

Now, among the rest, drunkenness seems to me to be a gross and brutish vice. The soul has greater part in the rest, and there are some vices that have something, if a man may so say, of generous in them; there are vices wherein there is a mixture of knowledge, diligence, valor, prudence, dexterity, and address; this one is totally corporeal and earthly. And the rudest nation this day in Europe is that alone where it is in fashion.

Beyond or within which, right is not. • HOR., SAT., 1.1.107

Nor will Reason ever prove this, that the sin is one and the same to cut young cabbages in a neighbor's garden and to steal by night the sacred emblems of the gods. • HOR., SAT., 1.3.115

Other vices discompose the understanding: this totally overthrows it and renders the body stupid.

*Cum vini vis penetravit ...
Consequitur gravitas membrorum, præpediuntur
Crura vacillanti, tardescit lingua, madet mens,
Nant oculi; clamor, singultus, iurgia, gliscunt.*

The worst state of man is that wherein he loses the knowledge and government of himself.

And 'tis said, among other things upon this subject, that, as the must fermenting in a vessel, works up to the top whatever it has in the bottom, so wine, in those who have drunk beyond measure, vents the most inward secrets.

*Tu sapientum
Curas et arcanum jocoso
Consilium retegis Lyæo.*

Josephus tells us that by giving an ambassador the enemy had sent to him his full dose of liquor, he wormed out his secrets. And yet, Augustus, committing the most inward secrets of his affairs to Lucius Piso, who conquered Thrace, never found him faulty in the least, no more than Tiberius did Cossus, with whom he intrusted his whole counsels, though we know they were both so given to drink that they have often been fain to carry both the one and the other drunk out of the Senate.

Hesterno inflatum venas, de more, Lyæo.

And the design of killing Caesar was as safely communicated to Cimber, though he would often be drunk, as to Cassius, who drank nothing but water. We see our Germans, when drunk as the devil, know their post, remember the word, and keep to their ranks:

*Nec facilis victoria de madidis, et
Blæsis, atque mero titubantibus.*

I could not have believed there had been so profound, senseless, and dead a degree of drunkenness had I not read in history that Attalus, having, to put a notable affront upon him, invited to supper the same Pausanias, who upon the very same occasion afterward killed Philip of Macedon, a king who by his excellent qualities gave sufficient testimony of his education in the house and company of Epaminondas, made him drink to such a pitch that he could after abandon his beauty, as of a hedge strumpet, to the muleteers and servants of the basest office in the house.

And I have been further told by a lady whom I highly honor and esteem, that near Bordeaux and about Castres where she lives, a country woman, a widow of chaste repute, perceiving in herself the first symptoms of breeding, innocently told her neighbors that if she had a husband she should think herself with child; but the causes of suspicion every day more and more increasing, and at last growing up to a manifest proof, the poor woman was reduced to the necessity of causing it to be

When the power of wine has penetrated us, a heaviness of the limbs follows, the legs of the tottering person are impeded; the tongue grows torpid, the mind is dimmed, the eyes swim; noise, hiccup, and quarrels arise. • LUCR., 3.476

Thou in thy cups blabbest out the secret counsels of the wise. • HOR., CARM., 21.1.114

Their veins yet full, as usual, of yesterday's wine. • VERG., ECL., 6.15

Nor is a victory easily obtained over men so drunk, they can scarce speak or stand. • JUV., 15.47

proclaimed in her parish church, that whoever had done that deed and would frankly confess it, she did not only promise to forgive, but moreover to marry him, if he liked the motion; whereupon a young fellow that served her in the quality of a laborer, encouraged by this proclamation, declared that he had one holiday found her, having taken too much of the bottle, so fast asleep by the chimney and in so indecent a posture, that he could conveniently do his business without waking her; and they yet live together man and wife.

It is true that antiquity has not much decried this vice; the writings even of several philosophers speak very tenderly of it, and even among the Stoics there are some who advise folks to give themselves sometimes the liberty to drink, nay, to drunkenness, to refresh the soul.

*Hoc quoque virtutum quondam certamine, magnum
Socratem palmam promeruisse ferunt.*

And the great Socrates is said, in these drinking bouts, to have carried off the palm. • MAX., EL., 1.47

That censor and reprover of others, Cato, was reproached that he was a hard drinker.

*Narratur et prisca Catonis
Sæpe mero caluisse virtus.*

And of the elder Cato it is said, that his virtue was often warmed with wine. • HOR., CARM., 21.3.11

Cyrus, that so renowned king, among the other qualities by which he claimed to be preferred before his brother Artaxerxes, urged this excellence, that he could drink a great deal more than he. And in the best governed nations this trial of skill in drinking is very much in use. I have heard Silvius, an excellent physician of Paris, say that lest the digestive faculties of the stomach should grow idle, it were not amiss once a month to rouse them by this excess, and to spur them lest they should grow dull and rusty.

And one author tells us that the Persians used to consult about their most important affairs after being well warmed with wine.

My taste and constitution are greater enemies to this vice than I am; for besides that I easily submit my belief to the authority of ancient opinions, I look upon it indeed as an unmanly and stupid vice, but less malicious and hurtful than the others, which, almost all, more directly jostle public society. And if we cannot please ourselves but it must cost us something, as they hold, I find this vice costs a man's conscience less than the others, besides that it is of no difficult preparation, nor hard to be found, a consideration not altogether to be despised.

A man well advanced both in dignity and age, among three principal commodities that he said remained to him of life, reckoned to me this for one, and where would a man more justly find it than among the natural conveniences? But he did not take it right, for delicacy and the curious choice of wines is therein to be avoided. If you found your pleasure upon drinking of the best, you condemn yourself to the penance of drinking of the worst. Your taste must be more indifferent and free; so delicate a palate is not required to make a good toper. The Germans drink almost indifferently of all wines with delight; their business is to pour down and not to taste; and it's so much the better for them: their pleasure is so

much the more plentiful and nearer at hand. Secondly, to drink, after the French fashion, but at two meals, and then very moderately, is to be too sparing of the favors of the god. There is more time and constancy required than so. The ancients spent whole nights in this exercise, and oftentimes added the day following to eke it out, and therefore we are to take greater liberty and stick closer to our work. I have seen a great lord of my time, a man of high enterprise and famous success, that without setting himself to't, and after his ordinary rate of drinking at meals, drank not much less than five quarts of wine, and at his going away appeared but too wise and discreet, to the detriment of our affairs. The pleasure we hold in esteem for the course of our lives ought to have a greater share of our time dedicated to it; we should, like shop-boys and laborers, refuse no occasion nor omit any opportunity of drinking, and always have it in our minds. Methinks we every day abridge and curtail the use of wine, and that the after breakfasts, dinner snatches, and collations I used to see in my father's house, when I was a boy, were more usual and frequent then than now. Is it that we pretend to a reformation? Truly, no: but it may be we are more addicted to Venus than our fathers were. They are two exercises that thwart and hinder one another in their vigor. Lechery weakens our stomach on the one side, and on the other, sobriety renders us more spruce and amorous for the exercise of love.

'Tis not to be imagined what strange stories I have heard my father tell of the chastity of that age wherein he lived. It was for him to say it, being both by art and nature cut out and finished for the service of ladies. He spoke well and little; ever mixing his language with some illustration out of authors most in use, especially in Spanish. Marcus Aurelius was very frequent in his mouth. His behavior was grave, humble, and very modest; he was very solicitous of neatness and propriety both in his person and clothes, whether on horseback or afoot: he was monstrously punctual in his word; and of a conscience and religion generally tending rather toward superstition than otherwise. For a man of little stature, very strong, well proportioned, and well knit; of a pleasing countenance, inclining to brown, and very adroit in all noble exercises. I have yet in the house to be seen canes poured full of lead, with which they say he exercised his arms for throwing the bar or the stone, or in fencing; and shoes with leaden soles to make him lighter for running or leaping. Of his vaulting he has left little miracles behind him: I have seen him when past three score laugh at our exercises, and throw himself in his furred gown into the saddle, make the tour of a table upon his thumbs, and scarce ever mount the stairs into his chamber without taking three or four steps at a time. But as to what I was speaking of before, he said there was scarce one woman of quality of ill fame in the whole province: he would tell of strange privacies, and some of them his own, with virtuous women, free from any manner of suspicion of ill; and for his own part solemnly swore he was a virgin at his marriage; and yet it was after a long practice of arms beyond the mountains, of which wars he left us a journal under his own hand, wherein he has given a precise account from point to point of all passages, both relating to the public and to himself.

And he was, moreover, married at a well advanced maturity, in the year 1528, the three-and-thirtieth year of his age, upon his way home from Italy. But let us return to our bottle.

The incommodities of old age, that stand in need of some refreshment and support, might with reason beget in me a desire of this faculty, it being as it were the last pleasure the course of years deprives us of. The natural heat, say the good-fellows, first seats itself in the feet: that concerns infancy; thence it mounts into the middle region, where it makes a long abode and produces, in my opinion, the sole true pleasures of human life; all other pleasures in comparison sleep; toward the end, like a vapor that still mounts upward, it arrives at the throat, where it makes its final residence, and concludes the progress.

I do not, nevertheless, understand how a man can extend the pleasure of drinking beyond thirst, and forge in his imagination an appetite artificial and against nature; my stomach would not proceed so far; it has enough to do to deal with what it takes in for its necessity. My constitution is not to care for drink but as following eating and washing down my meat, and for that reason my last draught is always the greatest. And seeing that in old age we have our palate furred with phlegms or depraved by some other ill constitution, the wine tastes better to us as the pores are cleaner washed and laid more open. At least, I seldom taste the first glass well. Anacharsis wondered that the Greeks drank in greater glasses toward the end of a meal than at the beginning; which was, I suppose, for the same reason the Germans do the same, who then begin the battle of drink. Plato forbids children wine till eighteen years of age, and to get drunk till forty; but, after forty, gives them leave to please themselves, and to mix a little liberally in their feasts the influence of Dionysos, that good deity who restores to younger men their gaiety, and to old men their youth; who mollifies the passions of the soul, as iron is softened by fire; and in his Laws allows such merry meetings, provided they have a discreet chief to govern and keep them in order, as good and of great utility; drunkenness being, he says, a true and certain trial of every one's nature, and, withal, fit to inspire old men with mettle to divert themselves in dancing and music; things of great use, and that they dare not attempt when sober. He, moreover, says that wine is able to supply the soul with temperance and the body with health. Nevertheless, these restrictions, in part borrowed from the Carthaginians, please him: that men forbear excesses in the expeditions of war; that every judge and magistrate abstain from it when about the administrations of his place or the consultations of the public affairs; that the day is not to be employed with it, that being a time due to other occupations, nor the night on which a man intends to get children.

'Tis said that the philosopher Stilpo, when oppressed with age, purposely hastened his end by drinking pure wine. The same thing, but not designed by him, despatched also the philosopher Arcesilaus.

But 'tis an old and pleasant question, whether the soul of a wise man can be overcome by the strength of wine?

Si munitæ adhibet vim sapientiæ.

To what vanity does the good opinion we have of ourselves push us? The most regular and most perfect soul in the world has but too much to do to keep itself upright, and from being overthrown by its own weakness. There is not one of a thousand that is right and settled so much as one

If he may mount an attack on the
fortress of wisdom • HOR., CARM.,
3.28.4

minute in a whole life, and that may not very well doubt, whether according to her natural condition she ever can be; but to join constancy to it is her utmost perfection; I mean when nothing should jostle and discompose her, which a thousand accidents may do. 'Tis to much purpose that the great poet Lucretius keeps such a clatter with his philosophy, when, behold! he goes mad with a love philter. Is it to be imagined that an apoplexy will not stun Socrates as well as a porter? Some men have forgotten their own names by the violence of a disease; and a slight wound has turned the judgment of others topsy-turvy. Let him be as wise as he will, after all he is but a man; and than that what is there more frail, more miserable, or more nothing? Wisdom does not force our natural dispositions.

*Sudores itaque, et pallorem exsistere toto
Corpore, et infringi linguam, vocemque aboriri,
Caligare oculos, sonere aures, succidere artus,
Denique concidere, ex animi terrore, videmus:*

He must shut his eyes against the blow that threatens him; he must tremble upon the margin of a precipice, like a child; nature having reserved these light marks of her authority, not to be forced by our reason and the stoic virtue, to teach man his mortality and our weakness; he turns pale with fear, red with shame, and groans with the choleric, if not with desperate outcry, at least with hoarse and broken voice:

Humani a se nihil alienum putet.

The poets, that feign all things at pleasure, dare not acquit their greatest heroes of tears:

Sic fatur lachrymans, classique immittit habenas.

'Tis sufficient for a man to curb and moderate his inclinations, for totally to suppress them is not in him to do. Even our great Plutarch, that excellent and perfect judge of human actions, when he sees Brutus and Torquatus kill their children, begins to doubt whether virtue could proceed so far, and to question whether these persons had not rather been stimulated by some other passion. All actions exceeding the ordinary bounds are liable to sinister interpretation, forasmuch as our liking no more holds with what is above than with what is below it.

Let us leave that other sect, that sets up an express profession of scornful superiority: but when even in that sect, reputed the most quiet and gentle, we hear these rhodomontades of Metrodorus: *Occupavi te, Fortuna, atque cepi: omnesque aditus tuos interclusi ut ad me aspirare non posses*; when Anaxarchus, by command of Nicocreon the tyrant of Cyprus, was put into a stone mortar, and laid upon with mauls of iron, ceases not to say, "Strike, batter, break; 'tis not Anaxarchus, 'tis but his sheath that you pound and bray so;" when we hear our martyrs cry out to the tyrant in the middle of the flame; "this side is roasted enough, fall to and eat, it is enough done; fall to work with the other;" when we hear the child in Josephus torn piece-meal with pincers, defying Antiochus, and crying out with a constant and assured voice: "Tyrant, thou lovest thy labor, I am still at ease; where is the pain, where are the torments with which thou

Sweat and paleness come over the whole body, the tongue is rendered powerless, the voice dies away, the eyes are darkened, there is ringing in the ears, the limbs sink under us by the influence of fear. • LUCR., 3.154

Let him not think himself exempt from that which is incidental to other men. • TER., HAUT., 1.1.25

Thus said he, weeping, and then set sail with his fleet. • VERG., AEN., 6.1

Fortune, I have got the better of thee, and have made all the avenues so sure thou canst not come at me. • CIC., TUSC., 5.9

didst so threaten me? Is this all thou canst do? My constancy torments thee more than thy cruelty does me. O pitiful coward, thou faintest, and I grow stronger; make me complain, make me bend, make me yield if thou canst; encourage thy guards, cheer up thy executioners; see, see they faint, and can do no more; arm them, flesh them anew, spur them up;" truly, a man must confess that there is some frenzy, some fury, how holy soever, that at that time possesses those souls. When we come to these Stoical sallies: "I had rather be mad than voluptuous," a saying of Antisthenes, *Μανειην μαλλον, η ησθειην*.¹ When Sextius tells us, "he had rather be fettered with affliction than pleasure:" when Epicurus takes upon him to play with his gout, and, refusing health and ease, defies all torments, and despising the lesser pains, as disdainingly to contend with them, he covets and calls out for others sharper, more violent, and more worthy of him;

*Spumantemque dari, pecora inter inertia, votis
Optat aprum, aut fulvum descendere monte leonem:*

who but must conclude that these are wild sallies pushed on by a courage that has broken loose from its place? Our soul cannot from her own seat reach so high; 'tis necessary she must leave it, raise herself up, and, taking the bridle in her teeth, transport her man so far that he shall afterward himself be astonished at what he has done; as, in war, the heat of battle impels generous soldiers to perform things of so infinite danger, as afterward, recollecting them, they themselves are the first to wonder at; as it also fares with the poets, who are often rapt with admiration of their own writings, and know not where again to find the track through which they performed so fine a career; which also is in them called fury and rapture. And as Plato says, 'tis to no purpose for a sober-minded man to knock at the door of poetry: so Aristotle says that no excellent soul is exempt from a mixture of madness; and he has reason to call all transports, how commendable soever, that surpass our own judgment and understanding, madness; forasmuch as wisdom is a regular government of the soul, which is carried on with measure and proportion, and for which she is to herself responsible.

Plato argues thus, that the faculty of prophesying is so far above us, that we must be out of ourselves when we meddle with it, and our prudence must either be obstructed by sleep or sickness, or lifted from her place by some celestial rapture.

And instead of timid beasts, wishes
some yellow lion or foaming board
would come from the mountain. •

VERG., AEN., 4.158

NOTES

- 1 *Μανείην μᾶλλον ἢ ἡσθεΐην*: "Better madness than pleasure."

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Hor., Carm.	Horace, <i>Odes</i>
Hor., Sat.	Horace, <i>Satires</i>
Juv.	Juvenal, <i>Satires</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Max., El.	Maximianus, <i>Elegies</i>
Ter., Haut.	Terence, <i>Heautontimorumenos</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>
Verg., Ecl.	Virgil, <i>Eclogues</i>