

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

# ESSAYS



## Book 2 · Chapter 8

Translation by Charles Cotton (1685, Public domain) · Last updated on June 21, 2026

HYPERESSAYS is a project to create a modern and accessible online edition of the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne. More information at [www.hyperessays.net](http://www.hyperessays.net)

ESSAYS-2-8-20260831-212202

---

## On the Affection of Fathers for Their Children

*To Madame d'Estissac*

MADAM, if the strangeness and novelty of my subject, which are wont to give value to things, do not save me, I shall never come off with honor from this foolish attempt: but 'tis so fantastic, and carries a face so unlike the common use, that this, peradventure, may make it pass. 'Tis a melancholic humor, and consequently a humor very much an enemy to my natural complexion, engendered by the pensiveness of the solitude into which for some years past I have retired myself, that first put into my head this idle fancy of writing. Wherein, finding myself totally unprovided and empty of other matter, I presented myself to myself for argument and subject. 'Tis the only book in the world of its kind, and of a wild and extravagant design. There is nothing worth remark in this affair but that extravagancy: for in a subject so vain and frivolous, the best workman in the world could not have given it a form fit to recommend it to any manner of esteem. Now, Madam, having to draw my own picture to the life, I had omitted one important feature, had I not therein represented the honor I have ever had for you and your merits; which I have purposely chosen to say in the beginning of this chapter, by reason that among the many other excellent qualities you are mistress of, that of the tender love you have manifested to your children, is seated in one of the highest places. Whoever knows at what age Monsieur d'Estissac, your husband, left you a widow, the great and honorable matches that have since been offered to you, as many as to any lady of your condition in France, the constancy and steadiness wherewith, for so many years, you have sustained so many sharp difficulties, the burden and conduct of affairs, which have persecuted you in every corner of the kingdom, and are not yet weary of tormenting you, and the happy direction you have given to all these, by your sole prudence or good fortune, will easily conclude with me that we have not so vivid an example as yours of maternal affection in our times.

I praise God, Madam, that it has been so well employed; for the great hopes Monsieur d'Estissac, your son, gives of himself, render sufficient assurance that when he comes of age you will reap from him all the

obedience and gratitude of a very good man. But, forasmuch as by reason of his tender years, he has not been capable of taking notice of those offices of extremest value he has in so great number received from you, I will, if these papers shall one day happen to fall into his hands, when I shall neither have mouth nor speech left to deliver it to him, that he shall receive from me a true account of those things, which shall be more effectually manifested to him by their own effects, by which he will understand that there is not a gentleman in France who stands more indebted to a mother's care; and that he cannot, in the future, give a better nor more certain testimony of his own worth and virtue than by acknowledging you for that excellent mother you are.

If there be any law truly natural, that is to say, any instinct that is seen universally and perpetually imprinted in both beasts and men (which is not without controversy), I can say, that in my opinion, next to the care every animal has of its own preservation, and to avoid that which may hurt him, the affection that the begetter bears to his offspring holds the second place in this rank. And seeing that nature appears to have recommended it to us, having regard to the extension and progression of the successive pieces of this machine of hers, 'tis no wonder if, on the contrary, that of children toward their parents is not so great.

To which we may add this other Aristotelian consideration, that he who confers a benefit on any one, loves him better than he is beloved by him again: that he to whom is owing, loves better than he who owes; and that every artificer is fonder of his work, than, if that work had sense, it would be of him; by reason that it is dear to us to be, and to be consists in movement and action; therefore every one has in some sort a being in his work. He who confers a benefit exercises a fine and honest action; he who receives it exercises the useful only. Now the useful is much less lovable than the honest; the honest is stable and permanent, supplying him who has done it with a continual gratification. The useful loses itself, easily slides away, and the memory of it is neither so fresh nor so pleasing. Those things are dearest to us that have cost us most, and giving is more chargeable than receiving.

Since it has pleased God to endue us with some capacity of reason, to the end we may not, like brutes, be servilely subject and enslaved to the laws common to both, but that we should by judgment and a voluntary liberty apply ourselves to them, we ought, indeed, something to yield to the simple authority of nature, but not suffer ourselves to be tyrannically hurried away and transported by her; reason alone should have the conduct of our inclinations. I, for my part, have a strange disgust for those propensions that are started in us without the mediation and direction of the judgment, as, upon the subject I am speaking of, I cannot entertain that passion of dandling and caressing infants scarcely born, having as yet neither motion of soul nor shape of body distinguishable, by which they can render themselves amiable, and have not willingly suffered them to be nursed near me. A true and regular affection ought to spring and increase with the knowledge they give us of themselves, and then, if they are worthy of it, the natural propension walking hand in hand with reason, to cherish them with a truly paternal love; and so to judge, also, if they be

otherwise, still rendering ourselves to reason, notwithstanding the inclination of nature. 'Tis oft-times quite otherwise; and, most commonly, we find ourselves more taken with the running up and down, the games, and puerile simplicities of our children, than we do, afterward, with their most complete actions; as if we had loved them for our sport, like monkeys, and not as men; and some there are, who are very liberal in buying them balls to play withal, who are very close-handed for the least necessary expense when they come to age. Nay, it looks as if the jealousy of seeing them appear in and enjoy the world when we are about to leave it, rendered us more miserly and stingy toward them; it vexes us that they tread upon our heels, as if to solicit us to go out; if this were to be feared, since the order of things will have it so that they cannot, to speak the truth, be nor live, but at the expense of our being and life, we should never meddle with being fathers at all.

For my part, I think it cruelty and injustice not to receive them into the share and society of our goods, and not to make them partakers in the intelligence of our domestic affairs when they are capable, and not to lessen and contract our own expenses to make the more room for theirs, seeing we beget them to that effect.

'Tis unjust that an old fellow, broken and half dead, should alone, in a corner of the chimney, enjoy the money that would suffice for the maintenance and advancement of many children, and suffer them, in the meantime, to lose their best years for want of means to advance themselves in the public service and the knowledge of men. A man by this course drives them to despair, and to seek out by any means, how unjust or dishonorable soever, to provide for their own support: as I have, in my time, seen several young men of good extraction so addicted to stealing, that no correction could cure them of it. I know one of a very good family, to whom, at the request of a brother of his, a very honest and brave gentleman, I once spoke on this account, who made answer, and confessed to me roundly, that he had been put upon this paltry practice by the severity and avarice of his father; but that he was now so accustomed to it he could not leave it off. And, at that very time, he was trapped stealing a lady's rings, having come into her chamber, as she was dressing with several others.

He put me in mind of a story I had heard of another gentleman, so perfect and accomplished in this fine trade in his youth, that, after he came to his estate and resolved to give it over, he could not hold his hands, nevertheless, if he passed by a shop where he saw anything he liked, from catching it up, though it put him to the shame of sending afterward to pay for it. And I have myself seen several so habituated to this quality that even among their comrades they could not forbear filching, though with intent to restore what they had taken. I am a Gascon, and yet there is no vice I so little understand as that; I hate it something more by disposition than I condemn it by reason; I do not so much as desire anything of another man's. This province of ours is, in plain truth, a little more decried than the other parts of the kingdom; and yet we have several times seen, in our times, men of good families of other provinces, in the hands of justice,

convicted of abominable thefts. I fear this vice is, in some sort, to be attributed to the fore-mentioned vice of the fathers.

And if a man should tell me, as a lord of very good understanding once did, that “he hoarded up wealth, not to extract any other fruit and use from his parsimony, but to make himself honored and sought after by his relations; and that age having deprived him of all other power, it was the only remaining remedy to maintain his authority in his family, and to keep him from being neglected and despised by all around,” in truth, not only old age, but all other imbecility, according to Aristotle, is the promoter of avarice; that is something, but it is physic for a disease that a man should prevent the birth of. A father is very miserable who has no other hold on his children's affection than the need they have of his assistance, if that can be called affection; he must render himself worthy to be respected by his virtue and wisdom, and beloved by his kindness and the sweetness of his manners; even the very ashes of a rich matter have their value; and we are wont to have the bones and relics of worthy men in regard and reverence. No old age can be so decrepit in a man who has passed his life in honor, but it must be venerable, especially to his children, whose soul he must have trained up to their duty by reason, not by necessity and the need they have of him, nor by harshness and compulsion,

*Et errat longe mea quidem sententia  
Qui imperium credat esse gravius, aut stabilius,  
Vi quod fit, quam illud, quod amicitia adjungitur.*

I condemn all violence in the education of a tender soul that is designed for honor and liberty. There is I know not what of servile in rigor and constraint; and I am of opinion that what is not to be done by reason, prudence, and address, is never to be affected by force. I myself was brought up after that manner; and they tell me that in all my first age I never felt the rod but twice, and then very slightly. I practised the same method with my children, who all of them died at nurse, except Léonor, my only daughter, and who arrived to the age of six years and upward without other correction for her childish faults (her mother's indulgence easily concurring) than words only, and those very gentle; in which kind of proceeding, though my end and expectation should be both frustrated, there are other causes enough to lay the fault on without blaming my discipline, which I know to be natural and just, and I should, in this, have yet been more religious toward the males, as less born to subjection and more free; and I should have made it my business to fill their hearts with ingenuousness and freedom. I have never observed other effects of whipping than to render boys more cowardly, or more wilfully obstinate.

Do we desire to be beloved of our children? Will we remove from them all occasion of wishing our death though no occasion of so horrid a wish can either be just or excusable? *Nullum scelus rationem habet.* Let us reasonably accommodate their lives with what is in our power. In order to this, we should not marry so young that our age shall in a manner be confounded with theirs; for this inconvenience plunges us into many very great difficulties, and especially the gentry of the nation, who are of a condition wherein they have little to do, and who live upon their rents only: for

He wanders far from the truth, in my opinion, who thinks that government more absolute and durable which is acquired by force than that which is attached to friendship. • TER., AD., 1.1.40

No wickedness has reason. • LIVY, 28.28

elsewhere, with people who live by their labor, the plurality and company of children is an increase to the common stock; they are so many new tools and instruments wherewith to grow rich.

I married at three-and-thirty years of age, and concur in the opinion of thirty-five, which is said to be that of Aristotle. Plato will have nobody marry before thirty; but he has reason to laugh at those who undertook the work of marriage after five-and-fifty, and condemns their offspring as unworthy of aliment and life.

Thales gave the truest limits, who, young and being importuned by his mother to marry, answered, "That it was too soon," and, being grown into years and urged again, "That it was too late." A man must deny opportunity to every inopportune action.

The ancient Gauls looked upon it as a very horrid thing for a man to have society with a woman before he was twenty years of age, and strictly recommended to the men who designed themselves for war the keeping their virginity till well grown in years, forasmuch as courage is abated and diverted by intercourse with women.

*Ma hor congiunto à giovinetta sposa,  
Lieto omai de'figli, era invilito  
Ne gli affetti di padre et di marito.*

Now, married to a young wife and happy in children, he was demoralized by his love as father and husband. • TASSO, GERUS., 10.39

The Greek history observes of Iccus the Tarentine, of Chryso, Astyllus, Diopompos, and others, that to keep their bodies in order for the Olympic games and such like exercises, they denied themselves during that preparation all commerce with Venus.

Muley Hassam, king of Tunis, he whom the Emperor Charles V restored to his kingdom, reproached the memory of his father Mahomet with the frequentation of women, styling him loose, effeminate, and a getter of children.

In a certain country of the Spanish Indies men were not permitted to marry till after forty age, and yet the girls were allowed at ten.

'Tis not time for a gentleman of thirty years old to give place to his son who is twenty; he is himself in a condition to serve both in the expeditions of war and in the court of his prince; has need of all his appurtenances; and yet, doubtless, he ought to surrender a share, but not so great an one as to forget himself for others; and for such an one the answer that fathers have ordinarily in their mouths, "I will not put off my clothes, before I go to bed," serves well.

But a father worn out with age and infirmities, and deprived by weakness and want of health of the common society of men, wrongs himself and his to amass a great heap of treasure. He has lived long enough, if he be wise, to have a mind to strip himself to go to bed, not to his very shirt, I confess, but to that and a good, warm dressing-gown; the remaining pomps, of which he has no further use, he ought voluntarily to surrender to those, to

whom by the order of nature they belong. 'Tis reason he should refer the use of those things to them, seeing that nature has reduced him to such a state that he cannot enjoy them himself; otherwise there is doubtless malice and envy in the case. The greatest act of the Emperor Charles V was that when, in imitation of some of the ancients of his own quality, confessing it but reason to strip ourselves when our clothes encumber and grow too heavy for us, and to lie down when our legs begin to fail us, he resigned his possessions, grandeur, and power to his son, when he found himself failing in vigor, and steadiness for the conduct of his affairs suitable with the glory he had therein acquired.

*Solve senescentem mature sanus equum, ne  
Peccet ad extremum ridendus, et ilia ducat.*

Dismiss the old horse in good time,  
lest, failing in the lists, the spectators  
laugh. • HOR., EPIST., 1.1.8

This fault of not perceiving betimes and of not being sensible of the feebleness and extreme alteration that age naturally brings both upon body and mind, which, in my opinion, is equal, if indeed the soul has not more than half, has lost the reputation of most of the great men in the world. I have known in my time, and been intimately acquainted with persons of great authority, whom one might easily discern marvellously lapsed from the sufficiency I knew they were once endued with, by the reputation they had acquired in their former years, whom I could heartily, for their own sakes, have wished at home at their ease, discharged of their public or military employments, which were now grown too heavy for their shoulders. I have formerly been very familiar in a gentleman's house, a widower and very old, though healthy and cheerful enough: this gentleman had several daughters to marry and a son already of ripe age, which brought upon him many visitors, and a great expense, neither of which well pleased him, not only out of consideration of frugality, but yet more for having, by reason of his age, entered into a course of life far differing from ours. I told him one day a little boldly, as I used to do, that he would do better to give us younger folk room, and to leave his principal house (for he had but that well placed and furnished) to his son, and himself retire to an estate he had hard by, where nobody would trouble his repose, seeing he could not otherwise avoid being importuned by us, the condition of his children considered. He took my advice afterward, and found an advantage in so doing.

I do not mean that a man should so install them as not to reserve to himself a liberty to retract; I, who am now arrived to the age wherein such things are fit to be done, would resign to them the enjoyment of my house and goods, but with a power of revocation if they should give me cause to alter my mind; I would leave to them the use, that being no longer convenient for me; and, of the general authority and power over all, would reserve as much as—I thought good to myself; having always held that it must needs be a great satisfaction to an aged father himself to put his children into the way of governing his affairs, and to have power during his own life to control their behavior, supplying them with instruction and advice from his own experience, and himself to transfer the ancient honor and order of his house into the hands of those who are to succeed him, and by that means to satisfy himself as to the hopes he may conceive of their future conduct. And in order to this I would not avoid their company; I

would observe them near at hand, and partake, according to the condition of my age, of their feasts and jollities. If I did not live absolutely among them, which I could not do without annoying them and their friends, by reason of the morosity of my age and the restlessness of my infirmities, and without violating also the rules and order of living I should then have set down to myself, I would, at least, live near them in some retired part of my house, not the best in show, but the most commodious. Nor as I saw some years ago, a dean of St. Hilary of Poitiers given up to such a solitude, that at the time I came into his chamber it had been two and twenty years that he had not stepped one foot out of it, and yet had all his motions free and easy, and was in good health, saving a cold that fell upon his lungs; he would, hardly once in a week, suffer any one to come in to see him; he always kept himself shut up in his chamber alone, except that a servant brought him, once a day, something to eat, and did then but just come in and go out again. His employment was to walk up and down, and read some book, for he was a bit of a scholar; but, as to the rest, obstinately bent to die in this retirement, as he soon after did.

I would endeavor by pleasant conversation to create in my children a warm and unfeigned friendship and good-will toward me, which in well-descended natures is not hard to do; for if they be furious brutes, of which this age of ours produces thousands, we are then to hate and avoid them as such. I am angry at the custom of forbidding children to call their father by the name of father, and to enjoin them another, as more full of respect and reverence, as if nature had not sufficiently provided for our authority. We call Almighty God Father, and disdain to have our children call us so; I have reformed this error in my family. And 'tis also folly and injustice to deprive children, when grown up, of familiarity with their father, and to carry a scornful and austere countenance toward them, thinking by that to keep them in awe and obedience; for it is a very idle farce that, instead of producing the effect designed, renders fathers distasteful, and, which is worse, ridiculous to their own children. They have youth and vigor in possession, and consequently the breath and favor of the world; and therefore receive these fierce and tyrannical looks—mere scarecrows—of a man without blood, either in his heart or veins, with mockery and contempt. Though I could make myself feared, I had yet much rather make myself beloved

There are so many sorts of defects in old age, so much imbecility, and it is so liable to contempt, that the best acquisition a man can make is the kindness and affection of his own family; command and fear are no longer his weapons. Such an one I have known who, having been very imperious in his youth, when he came to be old, though he might have lived at his full ease, would ever strike, rant, swear, and curse: the most violent householder in France: fretting himself with unnecessary suspicion and vigilance. And all this rumble and clutter but to make his family cheat him the more; of his barn, his kitchen, cellar, nay, and his very purse too, others had the greatest use and share, whilst he keeps his keys in his pocket much more carefully than his eyes. While he is pleased with his cheap and miserly table, everything goes to rack and ruin in every corner of his house, in play, drink, all sorts of profusion, making sport in their junkets with his vain anger and fruitless parsimony. Every one is a sentinel against

him, and if, by accident, any wretched fellow that serves him is of another humor, and will not join with the rest, he is presently rendered suspected to him, a bait that old age very easily bites at of itself. How often has this gentleman boasted to me in how great awe he kept his family, and how exact an obedience and reverence they paid him! How clearly he saw into his own affairs!

*Ille solos nescit omnia.*

I do not know any one that can muster more parts, both natural and acquired, proper to maintain dominion, than he; yet he is fallen from it like a child. For this reason it is that I have picked out him, among several others that I know of the same humor, for the greatest example.

It were matter for a question in the schools, whether he is better thus or otherwise. In his presence, all submit to and bow to him, and give so much way to his vanity that nobody ever resists him; he has his fill of assents, of seeming fear, submission, and respect. Does he turn away a servant? he packs up his bundle, and is gone; but 'tis no further than just out of his sight: the steps of old age are so slow, the senses so troubled, that he will live and do his old office in the same house a year together without being perceived. And after a fit interval of time, letters are pretended to come from a great way off; very humble, suppliant; and full of promises of amendment, by virtue of which he is again received into favor. Does Monsieur make any bargain, or prepare any despatch that does not please? 'tis suppressed, and causes afterward forged to excuse the want of execution in the one or answer in the other. No letters being first brought to him, he never sees any but those that shall seem fit for his knowledge. If by accident they fall first into his own hand, being used to trust somebody to read them to him; he reads extempore what he thinks fit, and often makes such a one ask him pardon who abuses and rails at him in his letter. In short, he sees nothing, but by an image prepared and designed beforehand and the most satisfactory they can invent, not to rouse and awaken his ill humor and choler. I have seen, under various aspects, enough of these modes of domestic government, long-enduring, constant, to the like effect.

Women are evermore addicted to cross their husbands: they lay hold with both hands on all occasions to contradict and oppose them; the first excuse serves for a plenary justification. I have seen one who robbed her husband wholesale, that, as she told her confessor, she might distribute the more liberal alms. Let who will trust to that religious dispensation. No management of affairs seems to them of sufficient dignity, if proceeding from the husband's assent; they must usurp it either by insolence or cunning, and always injuriously, or else it has not the grace and authority they desire. When, as in the case I am speaking of, 'tis against a poor old man and for the children, then they make use of this title to serve their passion with glory; and, as for a common service, easily cabal, and combine against his government and dominion. If they be males grown up in full and flourishing health, they presently corrupt, either by force or favor, steward, receivers, and all the rout. Such as have neither wife nor son do not so easily fall into this misfortune; but withal more cruelly and

He alone is ignorant of all that is passing. • TER., AD., 4.2.9

unworthily. Cato the elder in his time said: So many servants, so many enemies; consider, then, whether according to the vast difference between the purity of the age he lived in and the corruption of this of ours, he does not seem to shew us that wife, son, and servant, are so many enemies to us? 'Tis well for old age that it is always accompanied by want of observation, ignorance, and a proneness to being deceived. For should we see how we are used and would not acquiesce, what would become of us? especially in such an age as this, where the very judges who are to determine our controversies are usually partisans to the young, and interested in the cause.

In case the discovery of this cheating escape me, I cannot at least fail to discern that I am very fit to be cheated. And can a man ever enough exalt the value of a friend, in comparison with these civil ties? The very image of it which I see in beasts, so pure and uncorrupted, how religiously do I respect it!

If others deceive me, yet do I not, at least, deceive myself in thinking I am able to defend myself from them, or in cudgelling my brains to make myself so. I protect myself from such treasons in my own bosom, not by an unquiet and tumultuous curiosity, but rather by diversion and resolution. When I hear talk of any one's condition, I never trouble myself to think of him; I presently turn my eyes upon myself to see in what condition I am; whatever concerns another relates to me; the accident that has befallen him gives me caution, and rouses me to turn my defense that way. We every day and every hour say things of another that we might properly say of ourselves, could we but apply our observation to our own concerns, as well as extend it to others.

And several authors have in this manner prejudiced their own cause by running headlong upon those they attack, and darting those shafts against their enemies, that are more properly, and with greater advantage, to be turned upon themselves.

The late Mareschal de Montluc having lost his son, who died in the island of Madeira, in truth a very worthy gentleman and of great expectation, did to me, among his other regrets, very much insist upon what a sorrow and heart-breaking it was that he had never made himself familiar with him; and by that humor of paternal gravity and grimace to have lost the opportunity of having an insight into and of well knowing, his son, as also of letting him know the extreme affection he had for him, and the worthy opinion he had of his virtue. "That poor boy," said he, "never saw in me other than a stern and disdainful countenance, and is gone in a belief that I neither knew how to love him nor esteem him according to his desert. For whom did I reserve the discovery of that singular affection I had for him in my soul? Was it not he himself, who ought to have had all the pleasure of it, and all the obligation? I constrained and racked myself to put on, and maintain this vain disguise, and have by that means deprived myself of the pleasure of his conversation, and, I doubt, in some measure, his affection, which could not but be very cold to me, having never other from me than austerity, nor felt other than a tyrannical manner of proceeding." I find this complaint to be rational and rightly apprehended: for, as I myself know by too certain experience, there is no so sweet

consolation in the loss of friends as the conscience of having had no reserve or secret for them, and to have had with them a perfect and entire communication. Oh my friend, am I the better for being sensible of this; or am I the worse? I am, doubtless, much the better. I am consoled and honored, in the sorrow for his death. Is it not a pious and a pleasing office of my life to be always upon my friend's obsequies? Can there be any joy equal to this privation?

I open myself to my family, as much as I can, and very willingly let them know the state of my opinion and good will toward them, as I do to everybody else: I make haste to bring out and present myself to them; for I will not have them mistaken in me, in anything.

Among other particular customs of our ancient Gauls, this, as Caesar reports, was one, that the sons never presented themselves before their fathers, nor dared ever appear in their company in public, till they began to bear arms; as if they would intimate by this, that it was also time for their fathers to receive them into their familiarity and acquaintance.

I have observed yet another sort of indiscretion in fathers of my time, that, not contented with having deprived their children, during their own long lives, of the share they naturally ought to have had in their fortunes, they afterward leave to their wives the same authority over their estates, and liberty to dispose of them according to their own fancy. And I have known a certain lord, one of the principal officers of the crown, who, having in reversion above fifty thousand crowns yearly revenue, died necessitous and overwhelmed with debt at above fifty years of age; his mother in her extremest decrepitude being yet in possession of all his property by the will of his father, who had, for his part, lived till near fourscore years old. This appears to me by no means reasonable.

And therefore I think it of very little advantage to a man, whose affairs are well enough, to seek a wife who encumbers his estate with a very great fortune; there is no sort of foreign debt that brings more ruin to families than this: my predecessors have ever been aware of that danger and provided against it, and so have I. But those who dissuade us from rich wives, for fear they should be less tractable and kind, are out in their advice to make a man lose a real commodity for so frivolous a conjecture. It costs an unreasonable woman no more to pass over one reason than another; they cherish themselves most where they are most wrong. Injustice allures them, as the honor of their virtuous actions does the good; and the more riches they bring with them, they are so much the more good-natured, as women, who are handsome, are all the more inclined and proud to be chaste.

'Tis reasonable to leave the administration of affairs to the mothers, till the children are old enough, according to law, to manage them; but the father has brought them, up very ill, if he cannot hope that, when they come to maturity, they will have more wisdom and ability in the management of affairs than his wife, considering the ordinary weakness of the sex. It were, notwithstanding, to say the truth, more against nature to make the mothers depend upon the discretion of their children; they ought to be

plentifully provided for, to maintain themselves according to their quality and age, by reason that necessity and indigence are much more unbecoming and insupportable to them than to men; the son should rather be cut short than the mother.

In general, the most judicious distribution of our goods, when we come to die, is, in my opinion, to let them be distributed according to the custom of the country; the laws have considered the matter better than we know how to do, and 'tis wiser to let them fail in their appointment, than rashly to run the hazard of miscarrying in ours. Nor are the goods properly ours, since, by civil prescription and without us, they are all destined to certain successors. And although we have some liberty beyond that, yet I think we ought not, without great and manifest cause, to take away that from one which his fortune has allotted him, and to which the public equity gives him title; and that it is against reason to abuse this liberty, in making it serve our own frivolous and private fancies. My destiny has been kind to me in not presenting me with occasions to tempt me and divert my affection from the common and legitimate institution. I see many with whom 'tis time lost to employ a long exercise of good offices: a word ill taken obliterates ten years' merit; he is happy who is in a position to oil their goodwill at this last passage. The last action carries it, not the best and most frequent offices, but the most recent and present do the work. These are people that play with their wills as with apples or rods, to gratify or chastise every action of those who pretend to an interest in their care. 'Tis a thing of too great weight and consequence to be so tumbled and tossed and altered every moment, and wherein the wise determine once for all, having above all things regard to reason and the public observance.

We lay these masculine substitutions too much to heart, proposing a ridiculous eternity to our names. We are, moreover, too superstitious in vain conjectures as to the future, that we derive from the words and actions of children. Peradventure they might have done me an injustice, in dispossessing me of my right, for having been the most dull and heavy, the most slow and unwilling at my book, not of all my brothers only, but of all the boys in the whole province: whether about learning my lesson, or about any bodily exercise. 'Tis a folly to make an election out of the ordinary course upon the credit of these divinations wherein we are so often deceived. If the ordinary rule of descent were to be violated, and the destinies corrected in the choice they have made of our heirs, one might more plausibly do it upon the account of some remarkable and enormous personal deformity, a permanent and incorrigible defect, and in the opinion of us French, who are great admirers of beauty, an important prejudice.

The pleasant dialogue betwixt Plato's legislator and his citizens will be an ornament to this place, "What," said they, feeling themselves about to die, "may we not dispose of our own to whom we please? God! what cruelty that it shall not be lawful for us, according as we have been served and attended in our sickness, in our old age, in our affairs, to give more or less to those whom we have found most diligent about us, at our own fancy and discretion!" To which the legislator answers thus: "My friends, who are now, without question, very soon to die, it is hard for you in the condition you are, either to know yourselves, or what is yours, according to the

delphic inscription. I, who make the laws, am of opinion, that you neither are yourselves your own, nor is that yours of which you are possessed. Both your goods and you belong to your families, as well those past as those to come; but, further, both your family and goods much more appertain to the public. Wherefore, lest any flatterer in your old age or in your sickness, or any passion of your own, should unseasonably prevail with you to make an unjust will, I shall take care to prevent that inconvenience; but, having respect both to the universal interests of the city and that of your particular family, I shall establish laws, and make it by good reasons appear, that private convenience ought to give place to the common benefit. Go then cheerfully where human necessity calls you. It is for me, who regard no more the one thing than the other, and who, as much as in me lies, am provident of the public interest, to have a care as to what you leave behind you."

To return to my subject: it appears to me that women are very rarely born, to whom the prerogative over men, the maternal and natural excepted, is in any sort due, unless it be for the punishment of such, as in some amorous fever have voluntarily submitted themselves to them: but that in no way concerns the old ones, of whom we are now speaking. This consideration it is which has made us so willingly to enact and give force to that law, which was never yet seen by any one, by which women are excluded the succession to our crown: and there is hardly a government in the world where it is not pleaded, as it is here, by the probability of reason that authorizes it, though fortune has given it more credit in some places than in others. 'Tis dangerous to leave the disposal of our succession to their judgment, according to the choice they shall make of children, which is often fantastic and unjust; for the irregular appetites and depraved tastes they have during the time of their being with child, they have at all other times in the mind. We commonly see them fond of the most weak, rickety, and deformed children; or of those, if they have such, as are still hanging at the breast. For, not having sufficient force of reason to choose and embrace that which is most worthy, they the more willingly suffer themselves to be carried away, where the impressions of nature are most alone; like animals that know their young no longer than they give them suck.

As to the rest, it is easy by experience to be discerned that this natural affection to which we give so great authority has but very weak roots. For a very little profit, we every day tear their own children out of the mothers' arms, and make them take ours in their room: we make them abandon their own to some pitiful nurse, to whom we disdain to commit ours, or to some she-goat, forbidding them, not only to give them suck, what danger soever they run thereby, but, moreover, to take any manner of care of them, that they may wholly be occupied with the care of and attendance upon ours; and we see in most of them an adulterate affection, more vehement than the natural, begotten by custom toward the foster children, and a greater solicitude for the preservation of those they have taken charge of, than of their own. And that which I was saying of goats was upon this account; that it is ordinary all about where I live, to see the countrywomen, when they want milk of their own for their children, to call goats to their assistance; and I have at this hour two men-servants that never sucked women's milk more than eight days after they were born.

These goats are immediately taught to come to suckle the little children, know their voices when they cry, and come running to them. If any other than this foster-child be presented to them, they refuse to let it suck; and the child in like manner will refuse to suck another goat. I saw one the other day from whom they had taken away the goat that used to nourish it, by reason the father had only borrowed it of a neighbor; the child would not touch any other they could bring, and died, doubtless of hunger. Beasts as easily alter and corrupt their natural affection as we.

I believe that in what Herodotus relates of a certain district of Lybia, there are many mistakes; he says that the women are there in common; but that the child, so soon as it can go, finds him out in the crowd for his father, to whom he is first led by his natural inclination.

Now, to consider this simple reason for loving our children, that we have begot them, therefore calling them our second selves, it appears, methinks, that there is another kind of production proceeding from us, that is of no less recommendation: for that which we engender by the soul, the issue of our understanding, courage, and abilities, springs from nobler parts than those of the body, and that are much more our own: we are both father and mother in this generation. These cost us a great deal more and bring us more honor, if they have anything of good in them. For the value of our other children is much more theirs than ours; the share we have in them is very little; but of these all the beauty, all the grace and value, are ours; and also they more vividly represent us than the others.

Plato adds, that these are immortal children that immortalize and deify their fathers, as Lycurgus, Solon, Minos.

Now, histories being full of examples of the common affection of fathers to their children, it seems not altogether improper to introduce some few of this other kind.

Heliodorus, that good bishop of Trikkas, rather chose to lose the dignity, profit, and devotion of so venerable a prelacy, than to lose his daughter; a daughter that continues to this day very graceful and comely; but, peradventure, a little too curiously and wantonly tricked, and too amorous for an ecclesiastical and sacerdotal daughter.

There was one Labienus at Rome, a man of great worth and authority, and among other qualities excellent in all sorts of literature, who was, as I take it, the son of that great Labienus, the chief of Caesar's captains in the wars of Gaul; and who, afterward, siding with Pompey the great, so valiantly maintained his cause, till he was by Caesar defeated in Spain. This Labienus, of whom I am now speaking, had several enemies, envious of his good qualities, and, 'tis likely, the courtiers and minions of the emperors of his time who were very angry at his freedom and the paternal humor which he yet retained against tyranny, with which it is to be supposed he had tintured his books and writings. His adversaries prosecuted several pieces he had published before the magistrates at Rome, and prevailed so far against him, as to have them condemned to the fire. It was in him that this new example of punishment was begun, which was afterward

continued against others at Rome, to punish even writing and studies with death. There would not be means and matter enough of cruelty, did we not mix with them things that nature has exempted from all sense and suffering, as reputation and the products of the mind, and did we not communicate corporal punishments to the teachings and monuments of the Muses. Now, Labienus could not suffer this loss, nor survive these his so dear issue, and therefore caused himself to be conveyed and shut up alive in the monument of his ancestors, where he made shift to kill and bury himself at once. 'Tis hard to shew a more vehement paternal affection than this. Cassius Severus, a man of great eloquence and his very intimate friend, seeing his books burned, cried out that by the same sentence they should as well condemn him to the fire too, seeing that he carried in his memory all that they contained.

The like accident befell Cremutius Cordus, who being accused of having in his books commended Brutus and Cassius, that dirty, servile, and corrupt Senate, worthy a worse master than Tiberius, condemned his writings to the flame. He was willing to bear them company, and killed himself with fasting.

The good Lucan, being condemned by that rascal Nero, at the last gasp of his life, when the greater part of his blood was already spent through the veins of his arms, which he had caused his physician to open to make him die, and when the cold had seized upon all his extremities, and began to approach his vital parts, the last thing he had in his memory was some of the verses of his *Battle of Pharsalia*, which he recited, dying with them in his mouth. What was this, but taking a tender and paternal leave of his children, in imitation of the valedictions and embraces, wherewith we part from ours, when we come to die, and an effect of that natural inclination, that suggests to our remembrance in this extremity those things which were dearest to us during the time of our life?

Can we believe that Epicurus who, as he says himself, dying of the intolerable pain of the stone, had all his consolation in the beauty of the doctrine he left behind him, could have received the same satisfaction from many children, though never so well-conditioned and brought up, had he had them, as he did from the production of so many rich writings? Or that, had it been in his choice to have left behind him a deformed and untoward child or a foolish and ridiculous book, he, or any other man of his understanding, would not rather have chosen to have run the first misfortune than the other? It had been, for example, peradventure, an impiety in Saint Augustine, if, on the one hand, it had been proposed to him to bury his writings, from which religion has received so great fruit, or on the other to bury his children, had he had them, had he not rather chosen to bury his children.

And I know not whether I had not much rather have begot a very beautiful one, through society with the Muses, than by lying with my wife.

To this, such as it is, what I give it I give absolutely and irrevocably, as men do to their bodily children. That little I have done for it, is no more at my own disposal; it may know many things that are gone from me, and from

me hold that which I have not retained; and which, as well as a stranger, I should borrow thence, should I stand in need. If I am wiser than my book, it is richer than I.

There are few men addicted to poetry, who would not be much prouder to be the father to the *Aeneid* than to the handsomest youth of Rome; and who would not much better bear the loss of the one than of the other. For according to Aristotle, the poet, of all artificers, is the fondest of his work. 'Tis hard to believe that Epaminondas, who boasted that in lieu of all posterity he left two daughters behind him that would one day do their father honor (meaning the two victories he obtained over the Lacedaemonians), would willingly have consented to exchange these for the most beautiful creatures of all Greece; or that Alexander or Caesar ever wished to be deprived of the grandeur of their glorious exploits in war, for the convenience of children and heirs, how perfect and accomplished soever. Nay, I make a great question, whether Phidias or any other excellent sculptor would be so solicitous of the preservation and continuance of his natural children, as he would be of a rare statue, which with long labor and study he had perfected according to art. And to those furious and irregular passions that have sometimes inflamed fathers toward their own daughters, and mothers toward their own sons, the like is also found in this other sort of parentage: witness what is related of Pygmalion who, having made the statue of a woman of singular beauty, fell so passionately in love with this work of his, that the gods in favor of his passion inspired it with life,

*Tentatum mollescit ebur, positóque rigore,  
Subsidit digitis.*

The ivory grows soft under his touch  
and yields to his fingers. • Ov., MET.,  
10.283

---

#### MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

|               |                                             |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Hor., Epist.  | Horace, <i>Epistles</i>                     |
| Livy          | Livy, <i>History of Rome</i>                |
| Ov., Met.     | Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>                  |
| Tasso, Gerus. | Tasso, Torquato, <i>Jerusalem Delivered</i> |
| Ter., Ad.     | Terence, <i>Adelphi</i>                     |