

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 36

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On the Most Excellent Men

If I should be asked my choice among all the men who have come to my knowledge, I should make answer, that methinks I find three more excellent than all the rest.

One of them Homer: not that Aristotle and Varro, for example, were not, peradventure, as learned as he; nor that possibly Virgil was not equal to him in his own art, which I leave to be determined by such as know them both. I who, for my part, understand but one of them, can only say this, according to my poor talent, that I do not believe the Muses themselves could ever go beyond the Roman:

*Tale facit carmen docta testudine, quale
Cynthius impositis temperat articulis.*

and yet in this judgment we are not to forget that it is chiefly from Homer that Virgil derives his excellence, that he is guide and teacher; and that one touch of the Iliad has supplied him with body and matter out of which to compose his great and divine Aeneid. I do not reckon upon that, but mix several other circumstances that render to me this poet admirable, even as it were above human condition.

And, in truth, I often wonder that he who has produced, and, by his authority, given reputation in the world to so many deities, was not deified himself. Being blind and poor, living before the sciences were reduced into rule and certain observation, he was so well acquainted with them, that all those who have since taken upon them to establish governments, to carry on wars, and to write either of religion or philosophy, of what sect soever, or of the arts, have made use of him as of a most perfect instructor in the knowledge of all things, and of his books as of a treasury of all sorts of learning,

*Qui, quid sit pulcrum, quid turpe, quid utile, quid non,
Planius ac melius Chrysippo et Crantore dicit:*

and as this other says,

He plays on his learned lute a verse
such as Cynthian Apollo modulates
with his imposed fingers. • PROP.,
2.34.79

Who tells us what is good, what
evil, what useful, what not, more
clearly and better than Chrysippus
and Crantor? • HOR., EPIST., 1.2.3

*à quo ceu fonte perenni,
Vatum Pyeriis labra rigantur aquis;*

and the other,

*Adde Heliconiadum comites, quorum unus Homerus
Sceptra potitus;*

and the other,

*cuiusque ex ore profusos
Omnis posteritas latices in carmina duxit,
Amnemque in tenues ausa est deducere rivos.
Unius fecunda bonis.*

'Tis contrary to the order of nature that he has made the most excellent production that can possibly be; for the ordinary birth of things is imperfect; they thrive and gather strength by growing, whereas he rendered the infancy of poetry and several other sciences mature, perfect, and accomplished at first. And for this reason he may be called the first and the last of the poets, according to the fine testimony antiquity has left us of him, "that as there was none before him whom he could imitate, so there has been none since that could imitate him." His words, according to Aristotle, are the only words that have motion and action, the only substantial words. Alexander the Great, having found a rich cabinet among Darius's spoils, gave order it should be reserved for him to keep his Homer in, saying: that he was the best and most faithful counsellor he had in his military affairs. For the same reason it was that Cleomenes, the son of Anaxandridas, said that he was the poet of the Lacedaemonians, for that he was an excellent master for the discipline of war. This singular and particular commendation is also left of him in the judgment of Plutarch, that he is the only author in the world that never glutted nor disgusted his readers, presenting himself always another thing, and always flourishing in some new grace. That wanton Alcibiades, having asked one, who pretended to learning, for a book of Homer, gave him a box of the ear because he had none, which he thought as scandalous as we should if we found one of our priests without a Breviary. Xenophanes complained one day to Hiero, the tyrant of Syracuse, that he was so poor he had not wherewithal to maintain two servants. "What!" replied he, "Homer, who was much poorer than thou art, keeps above ten thousand, though he is dead." What did Panaetius leave unsaid when he called Plato the Homer of the philosophers?

Besides what glory can be compared to his? Nothing is so frequent in men's mouths as his name and works, nothing so known and received as Troy, Helen, and the war about her, when perhaps there was never any such thing. Our children are still called by names that he invented above three thousand years ago; who does not know Hector and Achilles? Not only some particular families, but most nations also seek their origin in his inventions. Mohammed, the second of that name, emperor of the Turks, writing to our Pope Pius II, "I am astonished," says he, "that the Italians should appear against me, considering that we have our common descent from the Trojans, and that it concerns me as well as it does them to revenge the blood of Hector upon the Greeks, whom they countenance

From which, as from a perennial spring, the lips of the poets are moistened by Pierian waters. • OV., AM., 3.9.25

Add the companions of the Muses, whose sceptre Homer has solely obtained. • LUCR., 3.1050

From whose mouth all posterity has drawn out copious streams of verse, and has made bold to turn the mighty river into its little rivulets, fertile in the property of one man. • MANILIUS, 2.8

against me." Is it not a noble farce wherein kings, republics, and emperors have so many ages played their parts, and to which the vast universe serves for a theater? Seven Grecian cities contended for his birth, so much honor even his obscurity helped him to!

Smyrna, Rhodos, Colophon, Salamis, Chios, Argos, Athenæ

The other is Alexander the Great. For whoever will consider the age at which he began his enterprises, the small means by which he effected so glorious a design, the authority he obtained in such mere youth with the greatest and most experienced captains of the world, by whom he was followed, the extraordinary favor wherewith fortune embraced and favored so many hazardous, not to say rash, exploits,

*impellens quicquid sibi summa petenti
Obstaret, gaudensque viam fecisse ruina;*

Bearing down all who sought to withstand him, and pleased to force his way by ruin. • LUC., 1.149

that greatness, to have at the age of three-and-thirty years, passed victorious through the whole habitable earth, and in half a life to have attained to the utmost of what human nature can do; so that you cannot imagine its just duration and the continuation of his increase in valor and fortune, up to a due maturity of age, but that you must withal imagine something more than man: to have made so many royal branches to spring from his soldiers, leaving the world, at his death, divided among four successors, simple captains of his army, whose posterity so long continued and maintained that vast possession; so many excellent virtues as he was master of, justice, temperance, liberality, truth in his word, love toward his own people, and humanity toward those he overcame; for his manners, in general, seem in truth incapable of any manner of reproach, although some particular and extraordinary actions of his may fall under censure. But it is impossible to carry on such great things as he did within the strict rules of justice; such as he are to be judged in gross by the main end of their actions. The ruin of Thebes and Persepolis, the murder of Menander and of Ephistion's physician, the massacre of so many Persian prisoners at one time, of a troop of Indian soldiers not without prejudice to his word, and of the Cossians, so much as to the very children, are indeed sallies that are not well to be excused. For, as to Clytus, the fault was more than redeemed; and that very action, as much as any other whatever, manifests the goodness of his nature, a nature most excellently formed to goodness; and it was ingeniously said of him, that he had his virtues from Nature, his vices from Fortune.

As to his being a little given to bragging, a little too impatient of hearing himself ill-spoken of, and as to those mangers, arms, and bits he caused to be strewed in the Indies, all those little vanities, methinks, may very well be allowed to his youth, and the prodigious prosperity of his fortune. And who will consider withal his so many military virtues, his diligence, foresight, patience, discipline, subtlety, magnanimity, resolution, and good fortune, wherein (though we had not had the authority of Hannibal to assure us) he was the first of men, the admirable beauty and symmetry of his person, even to a miracle, his majestic port and awful mien, in a face so young, ruddy, and radiant,

*Qualis, ubi Oceani perfusus Lucifer unda,
Quem Venus ante alios astrorum diligit ignes,
Extulit os sacrum coelo, tenebrasque resolvit;*

the excellence of his knowledge and capacity; the duration and grandeur of his glory, pure, clean, without spot or envy, and that long after his death it was a religious belief that his very medals brought good fortune to all who carried them about them; and that more kings and princes have written his actions than other historians have written the actions of any other king or prince whatever; and that to this very day the Mohammedans, who despise all other histories, admit of and honor his alone, by a special privilege: whoever, I say, will seriously consider these particulars, will confess that, all these things put together, I had reason to prefer him before Caesar himself, who alone could make me doubtful in my choice: and it cannot be denied that there was more of his own in his exploits, and more of fortune in those of Alexander. They were in many things equal, and peradventure Caesar had some greater qualities they were two fires, or two torrents, overrunning the world by several ways;

*Et velut immixti diversis partibus ignes
Arentem in silvam, et virgulta sonantia lauro
Aut ubi decursu rapido de montibus altis
Dant sonitum spumosi amnes, et in æquora currunt,
Quisque suum populatus iter.*

but though Caesar's ambition had been more moderate, it would still be so unhappy, having the ruin of his country and universal mischief to the world for its abominable object, that, all things raked together and put into the balance, I must needs incline to Alexander's side.

The third and in my opinion the most excellent, is Epaminondas.

Of glory he has not near so much as the other two (which, for that matter, is but a part of the substance of the thing): of valor and resolution, not of that sort which is pushed on by ambition, but of that which wisdom and reason can plant in a regular soul, he had all that could be imagined. Of this virtue of his, he has, in my idea, given as ample proof as Alexander himself or Caesar: for although his warlike exploits were neither so frequent nor so full, they were yet, if duly considered in all their circumstances, as important, as bravely fought, and carried with them as manifest testimony of valor and military conduct, as those of any whatever. The Greeks have done him the honor, without contradiction, to pronounce him the greatest man of their nation; and to be the first of Greece, is easily to be the first of the world. As to his knowledge, we have this ancient judgment of him, "That never any man knew so much, and spake so little as he"; for he was of the Pythagorean sect; but when he did speak, never any man spake better; an excellent orator, and of powerful persuasion.

But as to his manners and conscience, he infinitely surpassed all men who ever undertook the management of affairs; for in this one thing, which ought chiefly to be considered, which alone truly denotes us for what we are, and which alone I make counterbalance all the rest put

As when, bathed in the waves of Ocean, Lucifer, whom Venus loves beyond the other stars, has displayed his sacred countenance to the heaven, and disperses the darkness. • VERG., AEN., 8.589

And as fires applied in several parts to a dry wood and crackling shrubs of laurel, or as with impetuous fall from the steep mountains, foaming torrents pour down to the ocean, each clearing a destructive course. • VERG., AEN., 12.521

together, he comes not short of any philosopher whatever, not even of Socrates himself.

Innocence, in this man, is a quality peculiar, sovereign, constant, uniform, incorruptible, compared with which, it appears in Alexander subject to something else subaltern, uncertain, variable, effeminate, and fortuitous.

Antiquity has judged that in thoroughly sifting all the other great captains, there is found in every one some peculiar quality that illustrates his name: in this man only there is a full and equal virtue throughout, that leaves nothing to be wished for in him, whether in private or public employment, whether in peace or war; whether to live gloriously and grandly, and to die: I do not know any form or fortune of man that I so much honor and love. 'Tis true that I look upon his obstinate poverty, as it is set out by his best friends, as a little too scrupulous and nice; and this is the only feature, though high in itself and well worthy of admiration, that I find so rugged as not to desire to imitate, to the degree it was in him. Scipio Aemilianus alone, could one attribute to him as brave and magnificent an end, and as profound and universal a knowledge, might be put into the other scale of the balance. Oh, what an injury has time done me to deprive me of the sight of two of the most noble lives which, by the common consent of all the world, one of the greatest of the Greeks, and the other of the Romans, were in all Plutarch. What a matter! what a workman! For a man that was no saint, but, as we say, a gentleman, of civilian and ordinary manners, and of a moderate ambition, the richest life that I know, and full of the richest and most to be desired parts, all things considered, is, in my opinion, that of Alcibiades. But as to what concerns Epaminondas, I will here, for the example of an excessive goodness, add some of his opinions.

The greatest satisfaction he ever had in his whole life, he declared, was the contentment he gave his father and mother by his victory at Leuctra; wherein his deference is great, preferring their pleasure before his own, so dust and so full of so glorious an action.

He did not think it lawful, even to restore the liberty of his country, to kill a man without knowing a cause: which made him so cold in the enterprise of his companion Pelopidas for the relief of Thebes. He was also of opinion that men in battle ought to avoid the encounter of a friend who was on the contrary side, and to spare him.

And his humanity, even toward his enemies themselves, having rendered him suspected to the Boeotians, for that, after he had miraculously forced the Lacedaemonians to open to him the pass which they had undertaken to defend at the entrance into the Morea, near Corinth, he contented himself with having charged through them, without pursuing them to the utmost, he had his commission of general taken from him, very honorably upon such an account, and for the shame it was to them upon necessity afterward to restore him to his command, and so to manifest how much upon him depended their safety and honor; victory like a shadow attending him wherever he went; and indeed the prosperity of his country, as being from him derived, died with him.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Hor., Epist.	Horace, <i>Epistles</i>
Luc.	Lucan, <i>Civil War</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Manilius	Manilius, <i>Astronomica</i>
Ov., Am.	Ovid, <i>Amores</i>
Prop.	Propertius, <i>Elegies</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>