

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 21



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On the Power of Imagination

a FORTIS *imaginatio generat casum* , as the scholars say. I am one of those people very susceptible to the pull of imagination. Everyone c suffers from a it but some are c bowled over by it. Its power pierces me and, because I lack the strength to fight it, I am practiced in evading it.

A powerful imagination causes the event

c The mere company of healthy and happy people would keep me alive. The sight of somebody else's torment torments me physically, and what I feel is often taken from what another feels. A stranger's constant cough will irritate my throat and lungs. I am less willing to visit the sick to whom I am obligated than those with whom I am less involved and to whom I pay less attention. I grab the disease I study and invite it in me. I am not surprised that imagination causes fevers and death in those who let it and encourage it.

c Simon Thomas was one of the great doctors of his generation. I remember meeting him once, in Toulouse, at the house of a rich old man who suffered from consumption. As he was discussing with him ways to get well, the doctor said that one of them would be to make his company enjoyable to me so that, by fixing his eyes on the youthfulness of my face and his thoughts on the overflowing cheerfulness and vigor of my youth, and by filling all his senses with the flourishing state I was in then, his condition could improve. But he forgot to mention that mine could worsen too!

c Gallus Vibius was so fully committed to studying the essence and course of madness that he unseated his own judgment and could never get it back again. He could claim to have gone crazy with wisdom.

c Some are so afraid they forestall their executioner's hand. One whose blindfold was being removed to hear his pardon read to him dropped dead on the scaffold, struck down by his imagination alone. We sweat, we shiver, we turn pale, we blush so shaken are we by the jolts of our imagination. Lying in bed we feel our bodies unsettled by its romp, sometimes until it kills us. And boiling youth, asleep, works up such a sweat that it satisfies in dreams its amorous cravings.

*Ut quasi transactis sæpe omnibus rebus profundant
Fluminis ingentes fluctus, uestémque cruentent.*

¶ Horns growing at night on someone who did not have any when they went to bed is nothing new. But the case of King Cipus of Italy is remarkable: After he took great pleasure in attending a bullfight during the day, and after he dreamed of having horns on his head the whole night, he did grow some on his forehead by sheer power of imagination.¹ Passion gave Croesus's son a voice which nature had denied him. And Antiochus caught a fever by the beauty of Stratonice so vividly imprinted on his soul.² Pliny says to have seen Lucius Cossitius³ turn from woman to man on his wedding day. Pontanus and others speak of similar metamorphoses in Italy in past centuries. And by his and his mother's overwhelming desire,

Uota puer soluit, quæ fœmina uouerat Iphis.

¶ When I passed through Vitry-le-François, I was able to meet a man named Germain by the bishop of Soissons at his confirmation whom all local people had seen and known as a girl called Marie until the age of 22. He had grown a big beard by then and was old and single. His member had appeared, he said, after a hard jump. (Local girls still have a song they sing to warn each other not to leap too far for fear of becoming a boy like Marie Germain!)*

¶ That this kind of accident occurs frequently is no surprise. Imagination is always so tied up in this subject that, in order not to return to the same thought and the same aching desire so often, it is better off incorporating once and for all this manly part in girls since it has some power over such things.

¶ Some credit the power of imagination for the scars of King Dagobert and of Saint Francis.⁵ They say that bodies are sometimes moved from where they are by it. And Celsus relates the story of a priest who transported his soul into such ecstasy that his body could remain a long while without breath or sensation. ¶ Saint Augustine mentioned another who, simply by being made to hear cries of lamentation and sorrow, would soon collapse and be taken so clean out of himself that they could shout and yell at him, pinch him, or burn him until he would come to. He would then testify to having heard voices, but as if from afar, and would notice his burn and pinch marks. And that this was no act to shut out all sensations could be seen in that he had, then, neither pulse nor breath.

¶ It is likely that belief in visions, enchantments, and other such extraordinary effects is rooted in the power of imagination, being particularly effective on the softer soul of common folks. This belief has been so forcefully imparted on them that they think they see what they do not see.

¶ I also suspect that this lovely impairment which ties everybody up in knots so much it is all anyone can talk about probably is the result of apprehension and fear.⁶ I know this from the experience of someone for whom I can vouch as though he were me, someone who could never be suspected of being weak or under a spell, who had heard from a comrade of

So that, as though everything had actually happened, they release a powerful stream and stain their garment. • LUCR., 4.1035

Iphis fulfilled as a boy vows made as a girl. • OV., MET., 9.794

his a story of extraordinary failure afflicting his friend at just the most inappropriate time. When he found himself in the same situation, the horror of this tale struck his imagination so forcefully that the same bad luck befell him. ¶ And he was, from then on, subject to it again. The unfortunate memory of his inadequacy was consuming and haunting him. He dreamed up an adequate solution to this nightmare: By confessing to his problem and bringing it up himself before the act, the tension in his soul was released and, with this trouble now expected, his burden eased and weighted less upon him. When he chose to take charge—his mind cleared and relaxed, his body forced to let someone else's awareness tempt it first, then seize it, and overpower it—he rid himself of the problem at once.

¶ True impotence aside, with whomever it has been done once, it can be done again. ¶ This ¶ misfortune ¶ is only to be feared when our soul finds itself too strained by desire and admiration, ¶ particularly in ¶ unexpected and pressing situations. ¶ There is no way ¶ to recover from this problem. I know a man who needed to introduce to it a body half-satisfied elsewhere ¶ to cool down this frenzy and who, with age, found himself less impotent for being less potent.

¶ I know another man who also needed the services of a friend who assured him he was in possession of a counter-battery of sure-fire enchantments with which to protect him. I should explain what happened: A count from an excellent family,⁷ with whom I was well acquainted, was marrying a beautiful woman who had once been courted by a man invited to the celebration. His friends were worried about him as was, in particular, an elderly relative of his who was presiding over and hosting the wedding so afraid was she—so she told me—of such sorcery. I asked her to leave it to me.

¶ By chance, I had in a trunk a little flat piece of gold engraved with some celestial figures meant to prevent sun-strokes and cure headaches. It was sewn to a ribbon which could be tied under the chin to hold the piece in place on the suture of the skull, some nonsense related to our topic. (Jacques Peletier had given me this peculiar present when he had lived at my house.) I decided to make good use of it: I told the count that he should try his luck, as anybody else would, even though some men wished him to fail, and that he should go to bed without fear. I told him I would do him a favor and, for his sake, let go of something miraculous in my possession as long as he promised me, on his honor, to keep it absolutely secret. He would only have to give me a sign, when we were to bring him his dinner at night,⁸ if things had gone wrong.

¶ The count had heard and worried so much about it that he found himself bound by the disorder of his imagination and signaled to me at the appointed time. I whispered to him to get up and pretend to shoo us out of the bedroom and, as a joke, to take and put on the robe I was wearing—we were close in size—which he did. Once we were gone, he was to leave to pass water and repeat some words three times and make some gestures. And each time he was tie the ribbon, which I slipped into his hand, around his lower back with the medal that was attached to it flat against the skin and the figure facing a certain way. With that done and the ribbon finally

in place and secured so as not to come loose or slip, he was to return to the business at hand with confidence and not forget to throw my robe over his bed so that it covered both of them.

◦ Most of the effect is in the pantomime. Our thinking is caught up in the idea that such odd means must come from some incomprehensible science; their meaninglessness gives them weight and solemnity. But these symbols of mine had much more to do with Venus than with the Sun, and more to do with action than protection.

◦ A quick and curious mood led me to this scheme so unlike my character. I am opposed to hidden and false courses of action and hate to be mixed up in trickery for fun or for profit. If the deed is not vicious, the path to it is.

◦ King Amasis of Egypt was unable to have sex with Ladice, a beautiful young Greek woman he had married. He, who was a fine companion to all others, believed a curse was involved and threatened to kill her. She used religion to hold him off, aptly so with things involving imagination. That very night, after she made vows and promises to Venus, he was miraculously restored thanks to her sacrificial offerings.

◦ But women are wrong to welcome us with these affected, aggressive, or distant attitudes that turn us off when they turn us on. Pythagoras's daughter-in-law used to say that a woman who goes to bed with a man must take her shame off with her shift, and put it back on with her shift.⁹ a The mind of the attacker alert to multiple dangers is easily confused. And those whom imagination has made to suffer this shame—and it does so only in first relations, so intense and rough are they, and also because in this first introduction we make of ourselves, we fear to fail—and those who have had a rough start, they despair and make themselves sick over this accident which stays with them in following attempts.

◦ Newlyweds should not rush or try things if they are not ready. Time is on their side. Better to face the embarrassment of not having done anything on the first night, when the nuptial bed is a source of worry and stress, and wait for a more private and less fraught opportunity than to face lasting misery for having been shocked and hurt by a first rejection. Before he can claim his prize, the patient must come forth, present himself, and try gently from time to time, without losing his head or inviting permanent defeat with countless attempts.¹⁰ Those who know their member to be naturally obedient, let them merely worry about outwitting their imagination.

◦ They are right to remark on how free and disobedient this member is, butting in when it is not needed and terribly defiant when we need it most. It challenges with such confidence the authority of our will and ignores our requests, mental or manual, with obstinacy and pride. But if it hired me to plead its case (because we rail against its disobedience and use it as proof of its guilt) I might cast suspicion on our other organs, its associates, for manufacturing this treacherous argument out of envy of the importance and sweetness of its use, and for turning the world against it and blaming it alone for their collective flaws.

€ Think about it: is there any part of our body which does not often ignore our will and act against it? Each has its own impulses that rouse and quiet them without our permission. Do the involuntary movements of our face often not testify to thoughts we were holding secret, betraying us to those who see us? Whatever animates this member also animates, without our knowledge, the heart, the lungs, and our pulse — the sight of a pleasant object spreading imperceptibly in us the fire of some feverish emotion. Is it only these muscles and veins that rise and fall without the consent of our will or our thoughts? We do not command our hair to stand on end and our skin to form goose bumps from desire or fear. Hands often move where we did not send them. The tongue freezes and the voice falters of their own accord.

€ We would readily add in its defense that, even with nothing to fry, hunger and thirst do not fail to excite the parts under their dominion. This other appetite does the same; no more, no less. And, like them, it abandons us whenever it sees fit, no matter how inconvenient. Those instruments which serve to empty the belly swell and relax against and in spite of our opinion, as do those in charge of releasing the kidneys. And whatever powers our will may well be granted over it — Saint Augustine alleges to have seen someone directing his bottom to fart as many times as he pleased; and Vives¹¹ took it further with another example of his own time of farts arranged to match the vocal register others would call out — no absolute obedience can be expected from this part either. Is there another more plainly conspicuous and chaotic? I know one to be so turbulent and rude that it has been making its master fart a powerful and never-ending fart for forty years. And so it will lead him to his grave. By God, I wish I had only known through stories how often our belly holding back a single fart can take us to the edge of a very disturbing death. Would that the emperor who gave us the freedom to fart anywhere had also given us the power to do so!¹²

€ We issue this condemnation on behalf of the will's rights but could we not more justly charge the will itself with rebellion and sedition for its unruliness and disobedience? Does it always want what we wished it wanted? Does it not often want what we forbid it to want, to our obvious detriment? Does it follow the conclusions of our reason?

€ In closing, I would ask that it should be considered that although my client's case is inextricably tied to that of its partner, only my client is being named, indiscriminately, in arguments and charges which cannot be brought against its alleged partner. For although she can sometimes call inappropriately, she can never say no; and her calls are silent and easy.¹³ The obvious hostility and illegitimacy of the accusers should be clear by now.

€ No matter, Nature will not be stopped. It will argue that lawyers and judges can quarrel and rule all they like, it did what was right granting this member some special privilege: to be the author of the sole immortal deed of mortals, a divine deed to Socrates — as Love is a desire for immortality and an immortal daemon itself.¹⁴

ª Imagination may well cause one person to shed the scrofula their companion takes back to Spain.¹⁵ This is why in these matters a

predisposed mind is usually required: Why do doctors attend first to their patients's belief, with many promises of healing, if not to allow for the effect of imagination to make up for the imposture of their potions? They know that one of the masters of their profession wrote of people for whom the mere sight of medicine did the trick.

^aAll this nonsense occurred to me now because of the tale an apothecary, a servant of my late father, told me. He was a simple man, a Swiss, hardly a frivolous or lying people. He had known for many years a merchant in Toulouse who, sickly and prone to kidney stones, had needed frequent enemas and had various kinds prescribed by doctors whenever he felt ill. Once brought in, nothing was done out of the ordinary. (He often checked by hand whether they were not too hot.) And so there he would be, lying down, in position, good to go; yet no injection would be given to him. After this ritual, the apothecary would leave and the patient would be cared for as if he had gotten the enema. He felt the same benefits from this as those who do receive them! If the doctor thought the procedure had been insufficient, he would give him two or three more in the same way. My witness swears that after the sick man's wife tried to save some money by filling them only with warm water (for he paid for them as if they had been administered) the outcome gave away her trickery: He found them ineffective and they had to go back to the original method.

^aA woman who believed she had swallowed a pin was crying and worrying about the unbearable pain in her throat where she thought it was stuck. But because there was no swelling or visible sign of change, a clever man who thought it was only belief and conjecture (because of a piece of bread that had pricked her on the way down) made her vomit and quickly threw into what she had thrown up a twisted pin. The woman, believing she had gotten rid of the pin, felt instantly free of pain.

^aI know that a gentleman who had hosted a good many people for dinner boasted, as a joke—for it was not the case—three or four days later, that he had served them cat pie. A young lady from the party was so horrified by it that she fell ill. Feverish and utterly unable to keep any food down, she could not be saved.

^aEven animals can be subject to the power of imagination, like us. Witness dogs who let themselves die from grief when they lose their master. We also see them yap and twitch when they dream, while horses we see whiny and thrash.

^aBut all of this can be explained by the tight stitching of mind and body whereby one communicates its fortune to the other. It is quite another thing that imagination sometimes acts not only on its own body but on someone else's, just like a body spreading its disease to its neighbor (as with the plague, the pox, or an eye infection carried from one to the other)

^a*Dum spectant oculi laesos, laeduntur et ipsi:
Multaque corporibus transitione nocent,*

Infected eyes infect the eyes that look at them. Many harmful things are transmitted from body to body. •
OV., REM., 615

^a Similarly when imagination is greatly agitated, it can project something capable of harming an outside object at a distance. They used to say that some Scythian women could kill someone with a mere glance if they had a grudge against them or were offended by them. Turtles and ostriches hatch their eggs by sight only, a sign that it possess some ability to propagate.¹⁶ As for sorcerers, they are said to have hostile and harmful eyes.

^a *Nescio quis teneros oculus mihi fascinat agnos*

I do not know whose eye bewitched
my tender lambs. • VERG., ECL., 3.103

^a I think magicians are not worth interrogating. Especially since we know from experience that women leave marks from their imagination on the body of the children they carry in their womb, like the one who gave birth to the Black child. And they presented King Charles of Bohemia, the Emperor, a girl from around Pisa, all hairy and bristly, whom her mother said was conceived this way because of an image of Saint John the Baptist hanging in her bed.¹⁷ The same goes for animals like Jacob's sheep, and partridges and hares too turned white by snow on mountains.

^a A cat was seen around my house not too long ago watching a bird perched high in a tree. After they stared at each other for a while, the bird let itself fall into the cat's paws, as if dead, either under the influence of its own imagination or drawn by some attractive force coming from the cat. Those who like falconry will have heard of the tale of the hunter who was staring at a falcon in flight and bet that he could bring it down to him solely by the power of his sight, which he did. Or so they say, for I leave the stories I borrow on the conscience of those from whom I take them.

^b The words are mine and come together by the proof of reason, not experience. Anyone is free to add their own examples. And those who have none should not doubt that there are plenty of them given the number and variety of events. ^c If I choose my examples poorly, let someone else choose them instead of me.

^c And so, in my study of our habits and changing ways, fantastic testimonies, as long as they are possible, are used as if they were true. Whether it happened or not, whether in Rome or Paris, to John or Peter, it always shows what humans are capable of. I will learn something useful from it. Body or shadow, I see it and profit from it equally. And, from among the various lessons often found in stories, I choose to use the one that is rarest and most memorable. There are authors whose end it is to speak of what happened. Mine, if I could get to it, would be to speak of what can happen.

^c It is rightly allowed in schools to presume similarities exist where there are none. But I do not. In this regard, I am more than faithful to history, to the point of religious superstition. In the examples that I have presented here, I have not dared to allow myself to change even the tiniest and most insignificant detail of what I have read, heard, done, or said. Out of principle, I would not make up one bit of it; out of ignorance, who knows?

^c On that point, I sometimes wonder whether it is even appropriate for a theologian, a philosopher, and such people with exquisite and exact

principles and prudence to write history. How can they rest their credibility on the credibility of the public? How can they vouch for the views of persons unknown and say their conjectures should be taken at face value? They would refuse to testify about complicated events they witness if they were under oath and before a judge. And there is no one they would fully vouch for, no matter how familiar they were with them. I think it is less hazardous to write about the past than about the present since the writer only has to account for borrowed truth.

◦ Some would have me write about the events of our time believing that my view of them is less hampered by passion than others, and that it is more direct because Fortune has given me access to the leaders of the various factions. What they do not say is that I would not take the trouble for all of Sallust's fame.¹⁸ I am a sworn enemy of commitment, diligence, and perseverance. Nothing goes more against my style than a long narrative. I pause so often, out of breath. I cannot properly compose or explain anything. I know less than a child of phrases and words used for the most common things. Hence I set out to say what I was able to say, fitting the subject matter to my abilities. If I followed others, my standards could fall short of theirs. Also they do not say that, as free as I am, I could have published what I would myself reasonably consider illegal and punishable opinions.

◦ Plutarch would readily admit about what he was able to do that it is someone else's responsibility whether their examples are true in every way, but that his responsibility is that they should be useful to posterity and presented so as to light our way to virtue. An old tale, unlike a medicinal drug, poses no danger if it one way or the other.

NOTES

- 1 King Cipus (or Cippus) is mentioned in Pliny's *Natural History* (11.45) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (15.552). The details of Cipus's day at a bullfight is likely from Pedro Mexía's *Silva de varia lección* (2.7) which was available to Montaigne in a French translation by Claude Gruget.
- 2 According to Plutarch, Antiochus, son of Seleucus I Nicator (successor of Alexander the Great and founder of the Seleucid Empire) fell desperately in love with his father's new wife, Stratonice. Unable to declare his love for her, Antiochus languished and chose to let himself die. But the king's physician, Erasistratus, diagnosed Antiochus's disease, identified the object of his love, and explained the problem to the king. To save his son, Seleucus made Antiochus king of Upper Asia and married him to Stratonice.
- 3 Cossitius's name sometimes appears as Consitius or Cossicius.
- 4 Montaigne's travel journal, in which he also recorded this story, shows that he stopped at Vitry-le-François in September 1580. The surgeon and

anatomist Ambroise Paré wrote of the same case in his *Oeuvres*, in 1575. There we learn Germain's full name: Germain Garnier.

- 5 Both stories are connected to Catholic figures. Francis of Assisi is said to have received the *stigmata*—the crucifixion wounds of Jesus Christ—in a religious ecstasy. Dagobert I, the last Merovingian king of the Franks, who may have suffered from leprosy, would have been cured of it after he had slept in a field in which two martyrs, Aureus and Justina of Mainz, were later discovered to have been buried. The morning dew would have healed his lesions.
- 6 What Montaigne is alluding to is the widespread fear at his time that spells called *nouements d'aiguillettes* (tyings of laces) were capable of inducing impotence in men to prevent the consummation of a marriage. The *aiguillettes* being tied (*nouements*; from *nouer*, to tie) are the laces that kept men's breeches closed, the early modern equivalent of a zipper. See Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 1565 *The Harvesters* for illustration. The lacing of the central reclining figure's breeches is clearly visible.
- 7 Notes found on a copy of the *Essays* belonging to an acquaintance of Montaigne, Florimond de Raemond, identify this man as Louis de Foix, count of Gurson (Boase 1928, 254). Montaigne and the count were indeed friends. *On the Education of Children* is dedicated to Louis de Foix's wife, Diane de Foix de Candale. His death is also mentioned in *The Taste of Good and Bad Things Depends Mostly on the Opinion We Have of Them*.
- 8 On their wedding night, the newlyweds would have been taken to their bedroom by parents (and sometimes guests) for a final blessing and then left alone while the wedding festivities continued. A late-night dinner (*réveillon*) was served to the guests and later brought to the couple. In early modern Europe, husbands and wives were not entitled to much privacy on their first night as a married couple largely because consummation determined whether the marriage agreement between the two families could be considered final.
- 9 Diogenes Laërtius, the source of this anecdote, says it was Pythagora's wife, Theano.
- 10 Montaigne liked puns and may have included one here. In the original French, this sentence reads: *Avant la possession prinse, le patient se doit à saillies et divers temps, legerement essayer et offrir, sans se piquer et opiniastrer, à se convaincre definitivement soy-mesme*. The last phrase, *à se convaincre*, can be read as *à ce con vaincre* meaning (in order) to get the better of this cunt. Étienne Tabourot's 1572 *Les Bigarrures*—a popular book in Montaigne's days—features a long poem written entirely around a series of similar puns, including the following two lines: *J'en suis à l'hospital, atteint & convaincu, / Pour un con mis à bas, & pour un con vaincu*. (I am hospitalized, infected and guilty / Brought down by a cunt and by a cunt defeated). Montaigne dictated much of his book to a secretary and was without a doubt very aware of what his words sounded like when spoken.

- 11 Juan Luis Vives's 1522 edition of Augustine of Hippo's *De Civitate Dei* included commentaries in which this anecdote is found.
- 12 According to Suetonius, Claudius, the Roman emperor, would have issued a decree to pardon a guest at a banquet who, embarrassed by his own growling stomach and gassiness, had made himself sick. . Villey (1920, 50) believes Montaigne is quoting from Guillaume Boucher's 1584 *Sérées*, a successful book of essays inspired by the first edition of Montaigne's own *Essays*.
- 13 In Montaigne's fictional defense of the penis, the vagina is its accomplice.
- 14 Both ideas—Love is a desire for immortality and Love is a daemon (a divine spirit)—are found in Plato's *Symposium*.
- 15 Scrofula, the *King's Evil*, is a disease caused by an infection of the lymph nodes of the neck. In England and France, kings were said to possess the power to cure scrofula by touch. People traveled from Spain and Italy to be healed by the touch of French kings. The practice was common during the medieval and early modern periods but slowly disappeared in the eighteenth century.
- 16 The source of the anecdote about turtles is Pliny's *Natural History*. Why Montaigne included ostriches too is not known.
- 17 Both stories, which share a similar explanation, were well known and Montaigne could have read them from multiple sources. In the first one, a princess married to a White man is accused of adultery for giving birth to a Black child. She is saved by Hippocrates, the Greek physician, who states that the portrait that hung by her bed and which resembled the child could have influenced the appearance of her baby. In the second story, the hairy camel-skin robe Saint John the Baptist is normally depicted wearing would have been the reason for the child's own hairiness.
- 18 Sallust is a first-century BCE Roman historian.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Aug., De civ. D.	Augustine, <i>City of God</i>
Boai., HP.	Boaistuau, Pierre, <i>Histoires Prodigieuses</i>
Diog. Laert.	Diogenes Laërtius, <i>Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers</i>
Hdt.	Herodotus, <i>Histories</i>
Lucret.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>

MONTAIGNE · ESSAYS

Mex., Silva	Mexía, Pedro, <i>Silva de varia lección</i>
Ov., Met.	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>
Ov., Rem.	Ovid, <i>Remedia Amoris</i>
Plin., HN	Pliny, <i>Natural History</i>
Plut., Demetr.	Plutarch, <i>Parallel Lives - Demetrius</i>
Sen., Controv.	Seneca the Elder, <i>Controversiae</i>
Suet., Claud.	Suetonius, <i>Divus Claudius</i>
Verg., Ecl.	Virgil, <i>Eclogues</i>