Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 1 · Chapter 21

Translation by HyperEssays (2020–26, Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International) · Last updated on November 1, 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

ESSAYS-1-21-20261101-113920

One Person's Gain Is Another Person's Loss

a Demades the Athenian condemned a man of his city who was making a living selling things needed for funerals, on the grounds that he wanted too much profit from it and that his profit could only come from the death of many. This verdict seems ill-conceived given that there is no profit that is not somebody else's loss and that, by his reckoning, any kind of gain would have to be condemned.

a The merchant prospers only from the extravagance of youth, the farmer from the high cost of grain, the architect from the destruction of houses, and officers of the law from people's lawsuits and arguments. The very status and the livelihood of religious authorities are derived from our deaths and our vices. As the ancient Greek comedy writer says, no doctor likes to see their friends in good health, nor soldiers peace in their city, and so on.[1]

a Worse yet, let each one of us look inward and we will find that most of our inner wishes are born and grow at the expense of others.

a And it occurred to me, as I was reflecting on this, that nature does not belie her general policy in this, for natural philosophers affirm that the birth, nourishment, and growth of one thing is the decline and destruction of another.

a *Nam quodcumque suis mutatum finibus exit,*
Continuo hoc mors est illius, quod fuit ante.

Whenever anything changes and escapes its bounds, at once it brings death to whatever was before. • Lucr., 2.753

Notes

1 The Greek playwright is Philemon. Montaigne would have had access to his works, most of which are lost, through Joannes Stobaeus's anthology, *Florilegium*, translated by Conrad Gessner in 1543.

Montaigne's Sources

Lucr.	Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*
Sen., Ben.	Seneca, *De Beneficiis*
Stob., Flor.	Stobaeus, *Florilegium*