

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 29



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ESSAYS-1-29-20231108-222151

Twenty-Nine Sonnets of Étienne de La Boétie

A To Madame de Grammont, Countess of Guissen¹

A Madam, I offer you none of mine. Either they are already yours or I find them unworthy of you. But I wanted these verses, wherever they may be seen, to come after your name to grant them the honor of having the great Corisande of Andoins as their conductor. You are, I believe, the right person for this gift for there are few women in France who understand and appreciate poetry better than you. And not one can breathe life into it as you do with the beautiful voice nature gave you when it found a million ways to make you beautiful. Madame, these verses deserve your affection. I know you will agree with me that there are none that have come out of Gascony that are so creative and sweet. And none that can claim a more talented author. Now, do not be upset that you have only the remains of what I have already published and dedicated to Monsieur de Foix,² your relative. There is something in them that is warmer and more alive because he wrote them when he was young and burning of a beautiful and noble desire. One day, Madam, I will whisper its secret to you. The other ones were written later, for his wife, when he was looking to get married. You can already feel in them a certain marital chill. But I am of those who believe that poetry is never as pleasant as when it finds a joyful and free subject.

c These verses are seen elsewhere.³

NOTES

- 1 This chapter is dedicated to Diane d'Andoins, countess of Guiche (here spelled Guissen). Montaigne had originally planned on reprinting La Boétie's *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* instead of his sonnets. However, with the conflict between Protestants and Catholics heating up, he realized that his friend's political writings could become a liability. He decided, at the last minute, not to include the *Discourse* and found unpublished poems to substitute for it.
- 2 In 1571, before he began working on the *Essays*, Montaigne had published a book of La Boétie's poetry, *Vers françois de feu Estienne de La Boetie*, which he had dedicated to Paul de Foix.
- 3 Montaigne crossed the sonnets off of his 1588 printed copy of the *Essays* and added this single sentence instead. He did not intend to have them reprinted in the updated edition he was working on in the early 1590s. They had been published "elsewhere" by then. No copy of that book remains today.