

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 36



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Of Cato the yonger

I AM NOT possessed with this common error, to judge of others according to what I am my selfe. I am easie to beleeeve things differing from my selfe. Though I be engaged to one forme, I do not tie the world unto-it, as every man doth: And I beleeeve and conceive a thousand manners of life, contrary to the common sorte: I more easily admit and receive difference then resemblance in us. I discharge as much as a man wil, another being of my conditions and principles, and simply consider of it in my selfe, without relation, framing it upon it's owne modell. Though my selfe be not continent, yet doe I sincerely commend and allow the continencie of the Capuchines, and Theatines, and highly praise their course of life. I doe, by imagination, insinuate my selfe into their place: and by how much more they be other then my selfe, so much the more doe I love and honour them. I would gladly have every man judged aparte, and not be drawne my selfe in consequence by others examples. My weakenesse doth no way alter the opinions I should have of the force and vigor of those that deserve-it. *Sunt, qui nihil suadent, quàm quod se imitari posse confidunt. There bee such as advise to nothing, but what they trust themselves can imitate.* Crawling on the face of the earth, I cease not to marke, even into the clowdes, the inimitable height of some heroicke mindes. It is much for me to have a formall and prescript judgement, if the effects be not so, and at least to maintaine this chiefe part exempted from corruption. It is something to have a good minde, when my forces faile me. The age we live in (at least our climate) is so dull and leaden, that not onely the execution, but the very imagination of vertue is farre to seeke, and seemes to be no other thing than a Colledge-supposition, and a gibrish-worde.

*virtutem verba putant, ut
Lucum ligna:*

*Vertue seemes nought to these,
As trees are wood, or woods are trees.*

Quam vereri deberent, etiam si percipere non possent. Which yet they should reverence, though they could not reach unto. It is an eare-ring or pendent to

hang in a cabinet, or at the tongues end, as well as at an eare for an ornament. There are no more vertuous actions knowne; those that beare a shew of vertue, have no essence of-it: for, profit, glorie, custome, feare, and other like strange causes direct-us to produce them. Justice, valour, integritie, which we then exercise, may by others consideration, and by the countenance they publicly beare, be termed so: but with the true worke-man, it is no vertue at all. There is another end proposed; another efficient cause. Vertue alloweth of nothing, but what is done by hir, and for hir alone. In that great battell which the Græcians under *Pausanias* gained of *Mardonius* and the Persians, the victors following their custome, comming to share the glorie and prise of the victory betweene them, ascribed the pre-excellencie of valor in that conflict to the *Spartane* nation. The Spartanes imparciall judges of vertue, when they came to decide, to what particular man of their countrie, the honour to have done best in that daie, should of right belong; they found that *Aristodemus* had most courageously engaged and hazarded himselfe: Yet gave him not the prise of honour of-it, because his vertue had beene thereunto incited, by an earnest desire to purge himselfe from the reproach and infamie, wherein he had incurred in the action at the *Thermopiles*, and from an all-daring ambition to die courageously, thereby to warrant his former imputation. Our judgements are yet sicke, and follow the depravation of our customes. I see the greatest parte of our spirites to affect wit, and to shew themselves ingenious, by obscuring and detracting from the glorie of famous and generall ancient actions, giving them some base and malicious interpretation, fondly and enviously charging them with vaine causes, and frivolous occasions. A subtill invention no doubt. Let any man present me, with the most excellent and blame-lesse action, and I will oppose it with fiftie vicious and bad intentions, all which shall carrie a face of likely-hoode. God knowes (to him that will extend them) what diversitie of images our internall will doth suffer: They doe not so maliciously as grosely and rudely endeavour to be ingenious with all their railing and detraction. The same paine a man taketh to detract from these noble and famous names, and the very same libertie, would I as willingly take to lend them my shoulders to extoll and magnifie them. I would endeavour to charge these rare and choyse-figures, selected by the consent of wise men, for the worldes example, as much, and as high, as my invention would give me leave with honour, in a plausible interpretation, and favourable circumstance. And a man must thinke, that the diligent labours of our invention, are farre beyond their merit. It is the parte of honest-minded men to pourtray vertue, as faire as possible faire may-be. A thing which would no whit be mis-seeming or undecent, if passion should transport-us to the favour and pursuite of so sacred formes, what these doe contrarie, they either doe-it through malice or knaverie, with purpose to reduce and sute their beliefe to their capacitie, whereof I lately spake: or rather as I thinke, because their sight is not of sufficient power or clearnes, nor addressed to conceive or apprehend the farre-shining brightnes of vertue in hir naturall and genuine puritie: As *Plutarke* saith, that in his time, some imputed the cause of *Cato* the yongers death to the feare he had conceived of *Cæsar*: whereat he hath some reason to be moved: by which a man may judge, how much more he would have beene offended with those that have ascribed the same unto ambition. Oh foolish people! Hee would no doubt have performed a faire action, so generous and so just, rather with ignominie,

then for glorie. This man was truely a patterne, whom nature chose to shew how farre humane vertue may reach, and mans constancie attaine-unto. But my purpose is not here to treat this rich argument: I will onely confront together the sayings of five Latin Poets upon *Catoes* commendations, and for the interest of *Cato*, and by incidencie for theirs also. Now ought a gentleman well-bred, in respect of others, finde the two former somewhat languishing. The third more vigorous, but suppressed by the extravagancie of force. He will judge there were yet place for one or two degrees of invention, to reach unto the fourth, in consideration of which he will through admiration joyne handes. For the last (yet first in some degree and space, but which space he will sweare, can by no humane spirit be filled-up) he wil be much amazed, he wil be much amated. Loe here are wonders, we have more Poets than judges and interpreters of Poesie. It is an easier matter to frame it, then to knowe-it: Being base and humble, it may be judged by the precepts and art of it: But the good and loftie, the supreme and divine, is beyond rules, and above reason. Whosoever discerneth hir beauty, with a constant, quicke-seeing, and settled looke, he can no more see and comprehend the same then the splendor of a lightning flash. It hath no communitie with our judgement; but ransacketh and ravisheth the same. The furie which pricketh and moves him that can penetrate hir, doth also stricke and wound a third man, if he heare-it either handled or recited. As the Adamant stone drawes, not onely a needle, but infuseth some of hir facultie in the same to drawe others: And it is more apparently seene in theaters, that the sacred inspiration of the Muses, having first stirred up the Poet with a kinde of agitation unto choler, unto grieffe, unto hatred, yea and beyond himselfe, whether and howsoever they please, doth also by the Poet strike and enter into the Actor, and consecutively by the Actor, a whole audiorie or multitude. It is the ligament of our sences depending one of another. Even from my infancie, Poesie hath had the vertue to transpierce and transport me. But that lively and feeling-moving that is naturally in me, hath diversly beene handled, by the diversitie of formes, not so much higher or lower (for they were ever the highest in every kind) as different in colour. First a blithe and ingenious fluiditie, then a quaint-witie, and loftie conceit. To conclude, a ripe and constant force. *Ovid*, *Lucane*, and *Virgill*, will better declare it. But here our Gallants are in their full cariere.

Sit Cato dum uiuit sanè uel Cæsare maior.

Let Cato Junior, while he doth live, greater than Cæsar be.

Saith one.

Et inuictum deuicta morte Catonem,

Cato unconquered, death being vanquished.

Saith another: And the third speaking of the civill warres betweene *Cæsar* and *Pompey*,

Victrix causa dijs placuit, sed uicta Catoni.

*The cause that overcame with Gods was greater;
But the cause overcome pleased Cato better.*

And the fourth upon Cesars commendations:

*Et cuncta terrarum subacta,
Præter atrocem animum Catonis.*

*Of all the earth all partes inthralld,
Catoes minde onely unappalled.*

And the hartes-maister, after he hath enstalled the names of the greatest Romanes in his picture, endeth thus:

his dantem iura Catonem.

*Chiefe justice Cato doe decree
Lawes that for righteous soules should be.*