

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 39

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A consideration upon Cicero

ONE WORD more in comparison of these two. There are gathered out of *Ciceroes* writings and from *Plinies* (in mine opinion little agreeing with his unckle) infinit testimonies of a nature beyond measure ambitious. Amongst others, that they openly sollicite the Historians of their times, not to forget them in their writings: and fortune, as it were in spight, hath made the vanitie of their request to continue even to our daies, and long since the histories were lost. But this exceedeth all hearts-basenes in persons of that stampe, to have gone about to draw some principall glorie from prating and speaking, even to employ their private epistles written to their friends; in such sort, as some missing the opportunitie to be sent, they notwithstanding cause them to be published, with this worthie excuse, that they would not loose their travell and lucubrations. Is it not a seemely thing in two *Romane Consuls*, chiefe magistrates of the commonwealth, Emperesse of the world, to spend their time in wittily devising, and closely hudling-up of a quaint missive or wittie epistle, therby to attaine the reputation, that they perfectly understand their mother-tongue? What could a seely schoole-maister, who gets his living by such trash, doe worse? If the acts of *Xenophon*, or of *Cæsar* had not by much exceeded their eloquence, I can not beleieve, they would ever have written them. They have endeavored to recommend unto posteritie, not their sayings, but their doings. And if the perfection of well-speaking might bring any glorie sutable unto a great personage, *Scipio* and *Lelius* would never have resigned the honor of their Comedies, and the elegancies, and smooth-sportfull conceites of the Latin tongue, unto an Affrican servant: For, to prove this labor to be theirs, the exquisit eloquence, and excellent invention thereof doth sufficiently declare it: and *Terence* himselfe doth avouch-it: and I could hardly be removed from this opinion. It is a kinde of mockerie and injurie, to raise a man to worth, by qualities mis-seeming his place, and unfitting his calling, although for some other respects praise-worthie; and also by qualities that ought not to be his principall object. As he that would commend a King to be a cunning painter, or a skilfull architect, or an excellent harguibusier, or a never missing runner at the Ring. These commendations acquire a man no honour, if they be not presented altogether with those that are proper and convenient unto him, that is to say, justice, and the skill to governe, and knowledge to direct his people both in peace and warre. In this sort

doth Agriculture honor *Cyrus*, and Eloquence *Charlemaine*, together with his knowledge in good letters. I have in my time seen some, who by writing did earnestly get both their titles and living, to disavow their aprentissage, marre their pen, and affect the ignorance of so vulgar a qualitie; and which our people holdes, to be seldome found amongst wise-men, endeavoring to be commended for better qualities. *Demostenes* his companions in their ambassage to *Philip*, praised their Prince to be faire, eloquent, and a good quaffer. *Demostenes* said, they were commendations rather fitting a woman, an advocate, and a sponge, then a King.

*Imperet bellante prior, iacentem
Lenis in hostem.*

*Better he rule, who mercifull will rue
His foe subdued, then he that can subdue.*

It is not his profession to knowe, either how to hunt cunningly, or to dance nimblely.

*Orabunt causas alii, coelique meatus
Describent radio, & fulgentia sidera dicent:
Hic regere imperio populos sciat.*

*Others shall causes pleade, describe the skies
Motion by instrument, say how starres rise:
But let him knowe to rule (just, valiant, wise.)*

Plutarke saith moreover, that to appeare so absolutely excellent in these lesse-necessarie parts, is to produce a witnes against himselfe, to have ill spent his houres, and fondly bestowed his studie, which might better have beene employed to more behoofefull and profitable use. So that *Philip* King of *Macedon*, having heard great *Alexander* his sonne sing at a feast in vie of the best Musitians: *Art thou not ashamed* (said he unto him) *to sing so well?* And to the same *Philip*, said a Musitian, gainst whom he contended about his Art, *God forbid, my Sovereigne, that ever so much hurt should befall you, that you should understand these things better than my selfe.* A King ought to be able to answer, as did *Ipicrates* the Orator, who in his invective urged him in this manner. *And what art thou? thou shouldst so brave-it? Art thou a man at Armes? Art thou an Archer? Art thou a Pike-man? I am none of all those, but I am he who commaund all those.* And *Antisthenes* made-it as an argument of little valor in *Ismenias*, when some commended him to be an excellent Flutist. Well I wot, that when I heare some give themselves to imitate the phrase of my Essayes, I would rather have them holde their peace: They doe not so much raise the wordes, as deprese the sense; so much the more sharpely, by how much more obliquely. Yet am I deceived if some others take not more holde on the matter; and how well or ill soever, if any writer hath scattered the same, either more materiall, or at least thicker on his paper: That I may collect the more, I doe but huddle up the arguments or chiefe heades. Let me but adde what followes them, I shall daily increase this volume. And how many stories have I glanced-at therein, that speake not a word, which whosoever shall unfold, may from them draw infinit Essayes? Nor they, nor my allegations doe ever serve simply for examples, authoritie, or ornament. I doe not onely respect them for the use I draw from them. They often (beyond my purpose)

produce the seede of a richer subject, and bolder matter, and often collaterally, a more harmonious tune, both for me, that will expresse no more in this place, and for them that shall hit upon my tune.

But returning to vertue, I find no great choice, betweene him that can speake nothing but evill, and one that can talke nothing but well. *Non est ornamentum virile concinnitas. Finenesse is no great grace for a man. Wise men say, that in respect of knowledge, there is nothing but Philosophie, and in regard of effects, but Vertue:* which is generally fit for all degrees, and for al orders. Something there is alike in these two other Philosophers; for they also promise eternitie to the Epistles, they write to their friends. But after another fashion, and to a good purpose, accommodating themselves to others vanity; For they send them word, that if care to make themselves knowne unto future ages, and respect of renowne, doth yet retaine them in the managing of affaires, and makes them feare solitarinesse, and a retired life, to which they would call them, that they take no more paines for-it: forasmuch as they have sufficient credite with posteritie, by answering them; and were-it but by the Epistles they write unto them, they will make their name as famous, and as farre-knowne, as all their publike actions might do. Besides this difference, they are not frivolous, idle, and triviall Epistles, and onelie compact and held together with exquisit-choise words, huddled-up and ranged to a just-smoothe cadence, but stufft and ful of notable sayings, and wise sentences; by which a man doth not onely become more eloquent, but more wise, and that teach-us, not to say well, but to doe well. Fie on that eloquence, which leaves-us with a dessigne of-it, and not of things: unlesse a man will say, that *Ciceroes* being so exceedingly perfect, doth frame it selfe a body of perfection. I will further alleage a story, which to this purpose we reade of him, to make us palpably feele his naturall condition. He was to make an Oration in publike, and being urged betimes to prepare himselfe for it; *Eros* one of his servantes came to tell-him, the Auditorie was deferred till the morrow next; he was so glad of-it, that for so good newes he gave him his liberty. Touching this subject of Epistles, thus much I wil say; It is a worke wherin my friends are of opinion I can doe some-thing: And should more willingly have undertaken to publish my gifts, had I had who to speake unto. It had bin requisite (as I have had other times) to have had a certaine commerce to draw me on, to encorage me, and to uphold me. For, to go about to catch the winde in a net, as others doe, I cannot; and it is but a dreame. I am a sworne enemie to all falsifications. I should have bin more attentive, and more assured, having a friendly and strong direction, then to beholde the divers images of a whole multitude: and I am deceived, if it had not better succeeded with me. I have naturally a comicall and familiar stile: But after a maner peculiar unto my selfe, inept to all publike Negotiations, answering my speach, which is altogether, close, broken, and particular: I have no skill in ceremonious letters which have no other substance, but a faire contexture of complementall phrases and curteous wordes. I have no taste nor faculty of these tedious offers, of service and affection. I believe not so much as is said, and am nothing pleased to say more then I believe. It is farre from that which is used now-adayes: For, there was never so abject and servile a prostitution of presentations; life, soule, devotion, adoration, servant, slave; all these words are so generally used, that when they would expresse a more emphaticall intent and respective will, they have no meanes left them to expresse-it. I deadly hate to heare

a flatterer: which is the cause I naturally effect a pithy, sinnowie, dry, round, and harsh kinde of speach; which, of such as have no further acquaintance with me, is judged to encline to disdaine. I honor them most, whome I seeme to regarde least: And where my mind marcheth most cheerefully, I often forget the steppes of gravitie: And I offer my selfe but faintly and rudely to those whose I am indeede, and present my selfe least, to such as I have most given my selfe. Me thinkes they should reade it in my heart, and that the expression of my wordes, wrongeth my conception. To welcome, to take leave, to bid farewell, to give thanks, to salute, to present my service, and such verball complements of the ceremoniall lawes of our civilitie, I knowe no man so sottishly-barren of speach, as my selfe. And I was never employed to indite Letters of favour or commendatorie, but he for whome they were, judged them drie, barren, and faint. The Italians are great Printers of Epistles, where of I thinke I have a hundred severall Volumes. I deeme those of *Hanniball Caro* to be the best. If all the paper I have heeretofore scribled for Ladies were extant, at what time my hand was truly transported by my passion, a man should haply finde some page worthy to be communicated unto idle and fond-doting youth, embabuinized with this furie. I ever write my letters in posthaste, and so rashly-head-long, that howbeit I write intolerable ill, I had rather write with mine owne hand, than employ another: for I finde none that can followe me, and I never copie them over againe. I have accustomed those great persons that know mee, to endure blotts, blurres, dashes, and botches, in my letters, and a sheete without folding or margine. Those that cost me, either most labour or study, are they that are least worth. When I once beginne to traile them, it is a signe my minde is not upon them. I commonlie begin without project: the first word begets the second. Our moderne letters are more fraught with borders, and prefaces, than with matter, as I had rather write two, then fold and make up one, which charge I commonly resigne to others: So likewise when the matter is ended, I would willingly give another the charge, to adde these long orations, offers, praiers, and imprecations, which we place at the end of them, and wish hartily, some new fashion would discharge us of them. As also to superscribe them with a legend of qualities, titles, and callings, wherein, lest I might have tripped, I have often times omitted writing, especially to men of Justice, Lawyers, and Financiers. So many innovations of offices; so difficult a dispensation and ordinance of divers names and titles of honour, which being so dearely bought, can neither be exchanged or forgotten without offence. I likewise find-it gracelesse and idly-fond, to charge the front and inscription of the many bookes and pamphlets, which we daily cause to be imprinted with them.