

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

# ESSAYS

**Book 2 · Chapter 2**

Translation by John Florio (1603, Public domain) · Last updated on January 5, 2024

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FLORIO-2-2-20240704-155941



## Of Drunkennesse

THE WORLD is nothing but varietie, and dissemblance. Vices are all alike, in asmuch as they are all vices: And so doe happily the Stoikes meane-it. But though they are equally vices, they are not equall vices; And that he who hath started a hundred steps beyond the limites

*Quos ultra citráque nequit consistere rectum,*

*On this side, or beyond the which  
No man can hold a right-true pitch.*

is not of worse condition, then he that is ten steps short of-it, is no whit credible: and that sacriledge is not worse then the stealing of a coleworte out of a garden.

*Nec uincet ratio, tantandem ut peccet, inémque,  
Qui teneros caules alieni fregerit horti,  
Et qui nocturnus diuûm sacra legerit.*

*No reason can evict, as great or same sinne taints  
Him that breakes in an others garden tender plants,  
And him that steales by night things consecrate to Saints.*

There is as much diversitie in that as in any other thing. The confusion of order, and measure of crimes, is dangerous: Murtherers, Traitors and Tyrants, have too much gaine by-it: it is no reason their conscience should be eased, in that some is either idle or lascivious, or lesse assiduous unto devotion. Every man poisseth upon his fellowes sinne, and elevates his owne. Even teachers doe often range it ill in my conceite. As *Socrates* saide, that the chiefest office of wisdom, was to distinguish goods and evils. We others, to whom the best is ever in vice, should say the like of knowledge, to distinguish vices. Without which, and that very exact, both vertuous and wicked menne remaine confounded and unknowne. Now drunkennesse amongst others, appeareth to me a grosse and brutish vice. The minde hath more parte else-where; and some vices there are, which (if

it may lawfully be spoken) have a kinde of I wot not what generositie in them. Some there are, that have learning, diligence, valour, prudence, wit, cunning, dexteritie, and subtletie joynd with them; whereas this is meere corporall, and terrestriall. And the grossest and rudest nation, that liveth amongst us at this day, is onely that which keepeth it in credite. Other vices but alter and distract the understanding, whereas this utterly subverteth the same, and astonieth the body.

*cùm uini uis penetrauit,  
Consequitur grauitas membrorum, præpediuntur  
Crura uacillanti, tardescit lingua, madet mens,  
Nant oculi, clamor, singultus, iurgia gliscunt.*

*When once the force of wine hath inly pierst,  
Limbes-heavinesse is next, legs faine would goe,  
But reeling can not, tongue drawles, mindes dispierst,  
Eyes swimme, cries, hickups, brables grow.*

The worst estate of man, is where he looseth the knowledge and government of himselfe. And amongst other things, it is said, that as must-wine boiling and working in a vessell, workes and sends upward what ever it containeth in the bottome, so doth wine cause those that drinke excessively of it, worke up, and breake out their most concealed secrets.

*tu sapientium  
Curas, & arcanum iocosum  
Consilium retegis Lyæo.*

*Thou (wine-cup) doest by wine reveale  
The cares, which wise men would conceale,  
And close drifts, at a merrie meale.*

*Josephus* reporteth, that by making an Ambassador to tipple-square, whom his enemies had sent unto him, he wrested all his secrets out of him. Neverthelesse *Augustus* having trusted *Lucius Piso*, that conquered *Thrace*, with the secretest affaires he had in hand, had never cause to be discontented with him; Nor *Tiberius* with *Cossus*, to whom he imparted all his seriousest counsels, although we know them both to have so given themselves to drinking of wine, that they were often faine to be carried from the Senate, and both were reputed notable drunkards.

*Hesterno inflatum uenas de more Lyæo.*

*Veines pufft-up, as is used alway,  
By wine which was drunke yesterday.*

And as faithfully was the complot and purpose to kill *Cæsar* committed unto *Cimber*, who would dayly be drunke with quaffing of wine, as unto *Cassius*, that drunke nothing but water, whereupon he answered very pleasantly. What? shall I beare a tyrant, that am not able to beare wine? We see our carousing tosse-pot German Souldiers, when they are most

plunged in their cups, and as drunke as rats, to have perfect remembrance of their quarter, of the watch-word, and of their files.

*nec facilis uictoria de madidis, &  
Blæsis, atque mero titubantibus.*

*Nor is the conquest easie of men sow'st,  
Lisping and reeling with wine they carow'st.*

I would never have believed so sound, so deepe and so excessive drunkennesse, had I not read in Histories, that *Attalus* having envited to sup with him (with intent to doe him some notable indignitie) the same *Pausanias*, who for the same cause killed afterward *Philip* King of *Macedone* (a King who by the eminent faire qualities that were in him, bore a testimony of the education he had learned in the house and company of *Epaminondas*) made him so dead-drunke, that insensibly and without feeling, he might prostitute his beautie as the body of a common-hedge-harlot, to mueltiers, groomes and many of the subject servants of his house. And what a Lady (whom I much honour and highly esteeme) told me, protesting, that neere *Burdeaux*, towards *Castres*, where her house is, a widdow countrywoman, reputed very chaste and honest, suspecting herselfe to be with childe, told her neighbours, tha had she a husband, she should verily thinke she were with childe. But the occasion of this suspition encreasing more and more, and perceiving herselfe so big-bellied, that shee could no longer conceale-it, shee resolved to make the parrish-priest acquainted with-it, whom she entreated to publish in the Church, that whosoever he were, that was guiltie of the fact, and would avow-it, she would freely forgive him, and if he were so pleased, take him to her husband. A certaine swaine or hyne-boy of hers, emboldned by this proclamation, declared, how that having one holliday found her well-tipped with wine, and so sound asleepe by the chimnie side, lying so fit and ready for him, that without awaking her he had the full use of her body. Whom she accepted for her husband, and both live together at this day. It is assured that antiquitie hath not greatly described this vice. The compositions of diverse Philosophers speake but sparingly of it. Yea, and some of the Stoikes deeme-it not amisse for man sometimes to take his liquor roundly, and drinke drunke, thereby to recreate his spirites.

*Hoc quoque uirtutum quondam certamine magnum  
Socratem palmam promeruisse ferunt.*

*They say, in this too, Socrates the wise,  
And great in vertues combats, bare the prize.*

*Cato* that strict censurer, and severe corrector of others, hath beene reproved for much drinking.

*Narratur & prisci Catonis  
Sæpe mero caluisse uirtus.*

*T'is saide, by use of wine repeated,  
Old Catoes vertue oft was heated.*

*Cyrus* that so far-renowned King, amongst his other commendations, meaning to preferre himselfe before his brother *Artaxerxes*, and get the start of him, aleageth, that he could drinke better, and tipple more then he. And amongst the best policed and formalest nations, the custome of drinking, and pledging of healths was much in use. I have heard *Silvius*, that excellent Phisitian of *Paris* affirme, that to preserve the vigor of our stomake from empairing, it is not amisse once a moneth to rowze up the same by this excesse of drinking; and lest it should grow dull and stupide thereby to stirre-it up. And it is written, that the *Persians*, after they had well tippled, were wont to consult of their chieftest affaires. My taste, my relish and my complexion, are sharper enemies unto this vice, then my discourse: For, besides that I captivate more easily my conceites under the auctoritie of ancient opinions, indeede I finde-it to be a fond, a stupide and a base kinde of vice, but lesse malicious and hurtfull then others; all which shocke, and with a sharper edge wound publike societie. And if we cannot give our selves any pleasure, except (as they say) it cost-us something; I finde this vice to be lesse chargeable unto our conscience then others; besides, it is not hard to be prepared, nor difficult to be found; a consideration not to be despised. A man well advanced in yeares and dignitie, amongst three principall commodities he told me to have remaining in life, counted this: and where shall a man more rightly finde-it, then amongst the naturall? But he tooke-it ill, delicatenesse, and the choise of wines is therein to be avoided. If you prepare your voluptuousnes to drinke it with pleasure and daintily neate, you tie your selfe unto an inconvenience to drinke-it other then is alwayes to be had. A man must have a milder, a loose and a freer taste. To be a true drinker, a man should not have so tender and squeamish a palat. The Germanes doe in a maner drinke equally of all sortes of wine with like pleasure. Their end is rather to gulpe it downe freely, then to taste it kindly. And to say truth they have it better cheape. Their voluptuousnesse is more plenteous and fuller. Secondly, to drinke after the French maner, as two draughts, and moderately, is over-much to restraine the favours of that God. There is more time and constancie required thereunto. Our forefathers were wont to spend whole nights in that exercise, yea often times they joyned whole long dayes unto them. And a man must proportion his ordinarie more large and firme. I have in my dayes seene a principall Lorde; a man of great employment and enterprises, and famous for good successe, who without straining himselfe, and eating but an ordinary meales-meate, was wont to drinke litle lesse then five bottles of wine, yet at his rising seemed to be nothing distempered, but rather as we have found to our no small cost in managing of our affaires, over-wise and considerate. The pleasure of that, whereof we would make account in the course of our life ought to be employed longer space. It were necessary, as shop-boyes or labouring people, that we should refuse no occasion to drinke, and continually to have this desire in our minde. It seemeth that we dayly shorten the use of this; and that in our houses, (as I have seene in mine infancie) breakefasts, nunchions, and beavers should be more frequent and oftner used, then now adayes they are. And should wee thereby in any sorte proceede towards amendment? No verily. But it may be, that we have much more given our selves over unto paillardise and all maner of luxurie then our fathers were. They are two occupations, that enter-hinder one another in their vigor. On the one side, it hath empaired and weakened our stomake,

and on the other, sobriety serveth to make us more jolly-quaint, lusty, and wanton for the exercise of love matters. It is a wonder to thinke on the strange tales I have heard my father reporte, of the chastitie of his times. He might wel speake of it, as he that was both by art and nature proper for the use and solace of Ladies. He spake little and well, few words, but to the purpose, and was ever wont to entermixe some ornament taken from vulgar bookes, and above all, Spanish, amongst his common speeches: And of all Spanish aucthors, none was more familiar unto him then *Marcus Aurelius*. His demeanour and carriage was ever milde, meeke, gentle, and very modest, and above all, grave and stately. There is nothing he seemed to be more careful-of, then of his honesty, and observe a kinde of decencie of his person, and orderly decorum in his habites, were it on foote or on horsebacke. He was exceeding nice in performing his word or promise; And so strictly conscientious and obsequous in religion, that generally hee seemed rather to encline toward superstition, then the contrary. Though he were but a little man, his courage and vigor was great: he was of an upright, and well proportioned stature, of a pleasing, cheerefull-looking countenance, of a swarthy hue, nimbly addicted, and exquisitely nimble unto all noble and gentleman-like exercises. I have seene some hollow staves of his filled with lead, which hee wont to use and exercise his armes withall, the better to enable him-selfe to pitch to barre, to throw the sledge, the cast the pole, and to play at fence: and shoes with leaden soles, which he wore to enure himselfe, to leape, to vault and to run. I may without blushing say, that in memory of himselfe, he hath left certain petty miracles amongst us. I have seene him when hee was past three-score yeeres of age mocke at all our sports, and out-countenance our youthfull pastimes, with a heavy furr'd Gowne about him to leap into his saddle; to make the pommada round about a Table upon his thumb; and seldom to ascend any staires without skipping three or foure steppes at once. And concerning my discourse, hee was wont to say, that in a whole Province there was scarce any woman of qualitie, that had an ill name. Hee would often report strange familiarities, namely of his owne, with very honest women, without any suspicion at all. And protested verie religiouslie, that when he was married, he was yet a pure Virgine; yet had he long time followed the warres beyond the Mountaines, and therein served long, whereof hee hath left a Journall-Booke of his owne collecting, wherein hee hath particularly noted, whatsoever happened day by day worthy the observation, so long as he served, both for the publike and his particular use. And he was well stricken in yeeres, when he tooke a wife. For returning out of *Italie*, in the yeere of our Lord, one thousand five hundred eight and twenty, and being full three and thirty yeeres olde, by the way hee chose himselfe a wife. But come wee to our drinking againe. The incommodities of age, which neede some helpe and refreshing, might with some reason beget in me a desire or longing of this faculty: for, it is in a man the last pleasure, which the course of our yeeres stealeth upon us. Good fellowes say, that naturall heate is first taken in our feete: That properly belongeth to infancie. From thence it ascendeth unto the middle region, where it is setled and continueth a long time: and in mine opinion, there produceth the onely true, and mooving pleasures of this corporall life. Other delights and sensualities in respect of that, doe but sleepe. In the end, like unto a vapour, which by little and little exhalet, and mounteth aloft, it comes unto the throate, and there makes hir last abode.

Yet could I never conceive, how any man may eyther encrease or prolong the pleasure of drinking beyond thirst, and in his imagination frame an artificiall appetite, and against nature. My stomacke could not well reach so farre: it is very much troubled to come to an end of that which it takes for his neede. My constitution is, to make an accompt of drinking, but to succeed meate, and therefore doe I ever make my last draught the greatest. And forasmuch as in age, we have the rooffe of our mouthes commonlie furr'd with rheume, or distempered, distasted, and altered through some other evill constitution, wine seemeth better unto us, and of a quicker relish, according as our pores be either more or lesse open and washed. At least I seldome relish the same very well, except it be the first draught I take. *Anacharsis* wondered to see the Græcians drinke in greater glasses at the end of their meales, then in the beginning. It was (as I imagine) for the very same reason, that the Germans doe-it, who never beginne to carowse, but when they have well fedde. *Plato* forbiddeth children to drink any wine, before they be eighteene yeeres of age, and to be druncke before they come to forty. But to such as have once attained the age of fortie, he is content to pardon them, if they chaunce to delight themselves with-it, and alloweth them somewhat largely to blend the influence of *Dionisius* in their banquets, that good God, who bestoweth cheerefulness upon men, and youth unto aged men, who alayeth and aswageth the passions of the minde, even as yron is made flexible by the fire: and in his profitable lawes drinking-meetings or quaffing companies as necessary and commendable (alwaies provided there be a chiefe leader amongst them to containe and order them) drunkenesse being a good and certaine tryall of everie mans nature; and therewithall proper to give aged men the courage to make merry in dancing and in musicke; things allowable and profitable, and such as they dare not undertake being sober and settled. That wine is capable to supply the mind with temperance, and the bodie with health. Notwithstanding these restrictions, partely borrowed of the Carthaginians, please him well. Let those forebeare-it that are going about any expedition of warre. Let every magistrate, and all judges abstaine from-it, at what time they are to execute their charge, and to consult of publike affaires. Let none bestow the day in drinking, as the time that is due unto more serious negotiations, nor the nights wherein a man intendeth to get children. It is reported, that *Stilpon* the Philosopher, finding himselfe surcharged with age, did purposely hasten his end, by drinking of pure wine. The like cause (though not wittingly) did also suffocate the vital forces, crazed through old-age of the Philosopher *Arcesilaus*. But it is an old and pleasant question, whether a wisemans mind were like to yeelde unto the force of wine.

*Si munitæ adhibet uim sapientiæ.*

*If unresisted force it bends,  
Gainst wisdom which it selfe defends.*

Unto what vanity doth the good opinion we have of our selves provoke-us? The most temperate and perfectest minde of the worlde, findes it too great a taske to keep hirselfe upright, lest she fall by hir owne weakenesse. Of a thousand there is not one perfectly righteous and settled but one instant of her life, and question might be made, whether according to her naturall

condition she might at any time be so. But to joyne constancie unto it, is her last perfection: I meane if nothing should shocke her: which a thousand accidents may do. *Lucretius* that famous Poet, may philosophie and bandie at his pleasure: Loe where he lieth senslesse of an amorous potion. Thinks any man, that an Apoplexie cannot as soone astonish *Socrates*, as a poore labouring man? Some of them have by the force of a sicknesse, forgot their owne names, and a slight hurt hath overthrowne the judgement of others. Let him be as wise as he can, in the end he is but a man; what is more fraile, more miserable, or more vaine? Wisedome forceth not our naturall conditions.

*Sudores itaque & pallorem existere toto  
Corpore, & infringi linguam uocémque aboriri  
Caligare oculos, sonare aures, succidere artus,  
Denique concidere ex animi terrore uidemus.*

*We see therefore, palenesse and sweats ore-grow,  
Our bodies, tongues doe falter, voyce doth breake,  
Eyes dazle, eares buzze, joynts doe shrincke below,  
Lastly we sound, by hart-fright, terrours weake.*

He must feele his eyes against the blow that threatneth him, being neere the brimme of a precipise, hee must cry out like a child. Nature having purposed to reserve these light marks of her auctoritie unto herselfe, inexpugnable unto our reason, and to the Stoicke vertue: to teach him his mortalitie and our insipiditie. He waxeth pale for feare, he blusheth for shame, he groaneth feeling the cholike, if not with a desperate and lowd-roaring voyce, yet with a lowe, smothered and hoarse-sounding noyse.

*Humani à se nihil alienum putet,*

*He thinkes, that nothing strange be can,  
To him that longs to any man.*

Giddie-headed Poets, that faine what they list, dare not so much as discharge their *Heroes* from teares.

*Sic fatur lachrymans, classíque immittit habenas.*

*So saide he weeping, and so saide,  
Himselfe hand to the steerage laide.*

Let it suffice him to bridle his affections, and moderate his inclinations; for, it is not in him to beare them away. *Plutarke* himselfe, who is so perfect and excellent a judge of humane actions, seeing *Brutus* and *Torquatius* to kill their owne children, remaineth doubtfull, whether vertue could reach so farre, and whether such men were not rather moved by some other passion. *All actions beyond the ordinarie limits, are subject to some sinister interpretation:* Forasmuch as our taste doth no more come unto that which is above it, then to that which is under it. Let us omit that other sect, which maketh open profession of fiercenes. But when in the very same sect, which is esteemed the most demisse, we heare the bragges of



*Metrodorus: Occupaui te, Fortuna, atque cepi: omnesque aditus tuos interclusi ut ad me aspirare non posses. Fortune, I have prevented, caught, and overtaken thee: I have mured and ramd uppe all thy passages, whereby thou mightest attaine unto me.* When *Anaxarcus*, by the appointment of *Nicocreon*, the tirant of *Cypres*, being laid along in a trough of stone, and smoten with yron sledges, ceaseth not to crie-out, streeke, smite, and breake; it is not *Anaxarcus*, it is but his vaile you martyr so. When we heare our martyrs, in the midst of a flame crie a loude unto the Tyrant, this side is rosted enough, chop-it, eate-it, it is full rosted, now begin on the other. When in *Josephus* we heare a childe all to rent with biting snippers, and pierced with the breath of *Antiochus*, to defie him to death, crie with a lowde-assured and undismaid voice; Tyrant thou loosest time, loe I am still at mine ease; where is that smarting paine, where are those torments, wherewith whilom thou didst so threaten me? My constancie doth more trouble thee, then I have feeling of thy crueltie: Oh faint-hearted varlet, doest thou yeelde when I gather strength? Make me to faint or shrink, cause me to moane or lament, force me to yeelde and sue for grace if thou canst; encourage thy satelites, harden thy executioners; loe how they droope, and have no more power; arme them, strengthen them, flesh them. Verely we must needes confesse there is some alteration, and some furie (how holy soever) in those minds. When we come unto these Stoick evasions; I had rather be furious then voluptuous: the saying of *Antisthenes*. *Μακείειν μᾶλλον ἢ ἠθρῆειν*, *Rather would I be mad, then merrie.* When *Sextius* telleth us, he had rather be surprised with paine, then sensuality; when *Epicurus* undertakes to have the gowte, to wantonize and fawne upon him, and refusing ease and health, with a heartie cheerefulnes defie all evils, and scornefully despising lesse sharpe griefes, disdainig to grapple with them, he blithely desireth and calleth for sharper, more forcible, and worthie of him:

*Spumantémque dari pecora inter inertia uotis  
Optat aprum, aut fuluum descendere monte leonem:*

*He wisht, mongst heartles beasts some foming Bore,  
Or mountaine-Lyon would come downe and rore.*

Who would not judge them to be pranks of a courage removed from his wonted seate? Our minde cannot out of hir place attaine so high. She must quit-it and raise hir-selfe a loft, and taking the bridle in hir teeth, carrie and transporte hir man so farre, that afterward he wonder at himselfe, and rest amazed at his actions. As in exploit of warre, the heate and earnestnes of the fight doth often provoke the noble minded-souldiers, to adventure on so dangerous passages, that afterward being better advised, they are the first to wonder at-it. As also Poets, are often surprised and rapt with admiration at their owne labors, and forget the trace, by which they past so happie a carier. It is that, which some terme a furie or madnes in them. And as *Plato* saith, that a settled and reposed man, doth in vaine knocke at Poesies gate. *Aristotle* likewise saith, that no excellent minde is freely exempted from some or other entermixture of folly. And hee hath reason, to call any starting or extraordinarie conceit (how commendable soever) and which exceedeth our judgement and discourse, folly. Forsomuch as *Wisedome*, is an orderly and regular managing of the minde, and which she addresseth with measure, and conducteth with proportion; And take hir

owne word for-it. *Plato* disputeth thus; that the facultie of professing and divination is farre above-us, and that when wee treat-e-it, wee must bee besides our selves: our wisdom must be darkned and over-shadowed by sleepe, by sickenes, or by drowzines; or by some celestiall furie, ravished from hir owne seate.