

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 32



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A defence of Seneca and Plutarke

THE FAMILIARITY I have with these two men, and the ayde they affoord me in my old age, and my Booke meerey framed of their spoiles, bindeth me to wed and maintaine their honour. As for *Seneca*, amongst a thousand petty-Pamphlets, those of the pretended-reformed religion have published for the defence of their cause, which now and then proceed from a good hand, and which, pittie it is, it should not be employed in more serious and better subjects: I have heeretofore seene one, who to prolong and fill up the similitude, he would finde betweene the government of our unfortunat late king *Charles* the ninth and that of *Nero*, compareth the whilom lord Cardinall of *Lorene* unto *Seneca*; their fortunes to have beene both chiefe men in the government of their Princes, and therewithall their maners, their conditions and their demeanours: wherein (in mine opinion) he doth the saide lorde Cardinall great honour: for, although I be one of those that highly respect his spirite, his woorth, his eloquence, his zeale toward his religion and the service of his King; and his good fortune to have beene borne in an age, wherein hee was so new, so rare, and therewithall so necessarie for the common-wealth, to have a Cleargie-man of such dignitie and nobilitie, sufficient and capable of so weightie a charge: yet to confesse the truth, I esteeme not his capacitie such, nor his vertue so exquisitely unspotted, nor so entire or constant, as that of *Seneca*. Now this Booke whereof I speake, to come to his intention, maketh a most injurious description of *Seneca*, having borrowed his reproaches from *Dion* the Historian, to whose testimony I give no credite at all: For, besides, he is inconstant, as one who after he hath called *Seneca* exceeding wise, and shortly after termed him a mortall enemy to *Neroes* vices, in other places makes him covetous, given to usurie, ambitious, base-minded, voluptuous and under false pretences, and fained shewes, a counterfet Philosopher; his vertue appeareth so lively, and wisdom so vigorous in his writings; and the defence of these imputations is so manifest, as well of his riches, as of his excessive expences, that I beleeve no witnes to the contrarie. Moreover, there is great reason wee should rather give credite to Roman Historians in such things, then to Græcians and Strangers, whereas *Tacitus* and others speake very honourably of his life and death, and in all other circumstances declare him to have beene a most excellent and rarely-vertuous man. I will alleadge no other reproch against *Dions*

judgement, then this, which is unavoydable: that is, his understanding of the Roman affaires, is so weake and ill advised, as he dareth defend and maintaine *Julius Cæsars* cause against *Pompey*, and blusheth not to justifie *Antonius* against *Cicero*. But let us come to *Plutarch*: *John Bodine* is a good moderne Author, and endowed with much more judgement then the common-rabble of Scriblers and blur-papers which now adayes stuffe Stationers shops, and who deserveth to be judged, considered and had in more then ordinary esteeme. Neverthelesse I finde him somewhat malapert and bolde in that passage of his *Methode of Historie*, where he accuseth *Plutarke*, not onely of ignorance (wherein I would have let him say his pleasure, for that is no part of my subject) but also that he often writeth, things altogether incredible and meerely fabulous (these are his very words) If he had simply said things otherwise than they are, it had beene no great reprehension: for, what we have not seene, we receive from others and upon trust: And I see him sometimes, wittingly and in good earnest report one and same story diversly: As, the judgement, of three best captains that ever were, spoken by *Hannibal*, is otherwise in *Flaminius* his life, and otherwise in *Pyrrhus*. But to taxe him, to have taken incredible and impossible things for ready payment, is to accuse the more judicious author of the World of want of judgement. And see heere his example: As (saith he) when he reportes, that a Childe of *Lacedemon* suffered all his belly and guttes to be torne out by a Cubbe or yoong Foxe, which he had stolne, and kept close under his Garment, rather than he would discover his theft. First, I finde this example ill chosen: Forasmuch as it is verie hard to limite the powers of the soules-faculties, wheras of corporall forces, we have more law to limite and know them: And therefore, had I beene to write of such a subject I would rather have made choyce of an example of this second kinde. And some there be lesse credible. As amongst others, that which he reportes of *Pyrrhus*, who being fore wounded, gave so great a blow with a sword unto one of his enemies, armed at all assayes, and with al pieces, as he cleft him from the Crowne of the head downe to the grime, so that the body fell in two pieces. In which example I finde no great wonder, nor do I admit of his excuse, wherewith he cloaketh *Plutarke*, to have added this Word, (as it is said) to forewarne us, and restraine our beliefe. For, if it be not in things received by authoritie and reverence of antiquity or religion, neither would himselfe have received, nor proposed to us, to believe things in themselves incredible: And that (as it is saide) hee doeth not heere sette downe this phrase to that purpose, may easily be perceived, by what himselfe in other places telleth us upon the subject of the Lacedemonian Childrens patience, of examples happened in his time, much harder to be perswaded: As that which *Cicero* hath also witnessed before him, because, (as he saith) he had beene there himselfe: That even in their times, there were Children found prepared to endure all maner of patience, whereof they made trial before *Dianaes Aulter*, and which suffered themselves to bee whipped, till the blood trilled downe all partes of their body, not onely without crying, but also without sobbing: and some who voluntarily suffered themselvs to bee scourged to death. And what *Plutarke* also reporteth, and a hundreth other witnesses averre, that assisting at a sacrifice, a burning coale happened to fall into the sleeve of a Lacedemonian Childe, as he was busie at incensing, suffered his arme to burne so long, until the smel of his burnt flesh came to all the by-standers. There was nothing; according to their custome, so much called their reputation in question, and for which they endured more

blame and shame, than to be surprised stealing. I am so well instructed of those mens greatnesse of courage, that this report, doth not onely not seeme i n credible to me, as to *Bodine*, but I doe not so much as deeme it rare, or suppose it strange: The Spartane story is full of thousands of much more rare and cruell examples; then according to this rate, it containeth nothing but myracles. Concerning this point of stealing, *Marcellinus* reporteth, that whilest hee lived, there could never be found any kinde of torment, might in any sort compell the Ægyptians surprized filching (which was much used amongst them) to confesse and tell but their names. A Spanish Peasant being laide upon the racke, about the complices of the murther of the Pretor *Lucius Piso*, in the midst of his torments cried out, his friends should not stir, but with all securitie assist him, and that it was not in the power of any griefe or paine to wrest one word of confession from him: and the first day nothing else could possibly be drawne from him: The next morow as he was led toward the racke, to be tormented a new, he by strong violence freed himselfe from out his keepers hands, and so furiously ranne with his head against a Wall, that he burst his braines out, and presently fell downe dead. *Epicharis*, having glutted and wearied the moody cruelty of *Neroes* Satelites or officers, and stoutly endured their fire, their beatings, and their engins a whole day long, without any one voice or word of revealing hir conspiracy, and the next day after, being againe brought to the torture, with hir limbs bruized and broken, convayed a lasset or skirt of hir Gowne over one of the pillers of the Chaire, wherein she sate, with a sliding knot in it, into which sodainely thrusting hir head, she strangled herselfe with the weight of hir body: Having the courage to dye so, and steale from the first torments; seemeth shee not purposely to have lent hir life to the triall of hir patience of the precedent day, only to mocke that Tyrant, and encorage others to attempt the like enterprize against him? And he that shal enquire of our Argolettiers or Freebooters, what experiences they have had in these our late Civill wars, shall no doubt find effects and examples of patience, of obstinacy and stif-neckednes in these our miserable dayes, and amidst these effeminate, and puling worldlings far beyond the Ægyptian, and well worthy to be compared to those already reported of Spartan vertue. I know, there have beene found seely boores, who have rather endured to have their feet broiled upon a Greedyron, their fingers endes crusht and wrung with the lock of a Pistole, their eyes all bloody to be thrust out of their heades with wringing and wresting of a corde about their foreheads, before they would so much as be ransomed. I have seene and spoken with one, who had beene left all naked in a ditch for dead, his necke all bruised and swolne, with a halter about it, wherewith he had beene dragged a whole night at a horses taile through thick and thinne, with a hundred thrusts in his body, given him with daggers, not to kil him outright, but to grieve and terrifie him, and who had patiently endured all that, and lost both speech and sense, fully resolved (as himselfe told me) rather to die a thousand deaths (as verily, if you apprehend what he suffered, he past more then one full death) then promise any ransome; yet was he one of the wealthiest husbandmen in all his countrie. How many have bin seene, who have patiently endured to be burnt and rosted for unknowne and wilful opinions, which they had borrowed of others: My selfe have knowne a hundred and a hundred women (for, the saying is, Gaskoine heads have some prerogative in that) whom you might sooner have made to bite a red-hot piece of yron, then

recant an opinion, they had conceived in anger. They will be exasperated and growe more fell against blowes and compulsion. And he who first invented the tale of that woman, which by no threat or stripes, would leave to call her husband pricke-lowse, and being cast into a pond and duckt under water, lifted up her hands, and joyning her two thumbs-nailes in act to kill lice above her head, seemed to call him lousie still, devised a fable, whereof in truth we dayly see the expresse image in divers womens obstinacie and wilfulnesse. And yet *obstinacie is the sister of constancy*, at least in vigor and stedfastnesse.

A man must not judge that which is possible, and that which is not, according to that which is credible and incredible to our sense and understanding, as I have already saide elsewhere. And it is a great fault, wherein the greater number of men doe dayly fall (I speake not this of *Bodine*) to make a difficultie in believing that of others, which themselves neither can nor would doe. Every man perswades himselfe, that the chiefe-forme of humane nature is in himselfe; according to her, must all others be directed. The proceedings that have no reference to hirs, are false and fained. Is any thing proposed unto him of anothers mans faculties or actions? The first thing he calls to the judgement of his consultation, is his owne examples; according as it goeth in him, so goeth the worlds order. Oh dangerous sottishnesse, and intolerable foppery! I consider some men a farre-off, beyond and above my selfe, namely amongst those ancient ones: and though I manifestly acknowledge mine owne insufficiencie to follow or come neere them by a thousand paces, I cease not to keepe them still in view, and to judge of those wardes and springs that raise them so high; the seedes whereof I somewhat perceive in my selfe: as likewise I doe of the mindes extreame basenes, which amazeth me nothing at all, and I misbelieve no more. I see the turne those give to wind up themselves, and I admire their greatnesse, and those starts which I perceive to be so wondrous faire, I embrace them: and if with my strength I reach not unto them, at least my judgement doth most willingly apply it selfe unto them. The other example, he alledgeth of things incredible, and altogether fabulous, reported by *Plutarke*, is, that *Agesilaus* was fined by the Ephores, because he had drawne the hearts and good wills of all his fellow-citizens unto himselfe alone. I know not what marke of falsehood, or shew of impossibilitie he findes in it; but so it is, that *Plutarke* speakes there of things, which in all likelihood were better knowne to him, then to us: And it was not strange in *Greece*, to see men punished and exiled, onely because they were too popular, and pleased the common people over much. Witnesse the *Ostracisme* amongst the Athenians, and the *Petalisme* among the Siracusans. There is another accusation in the same place, which for *Plutarkes* sake doth somewhat touch me, where he saith, that he hath very well and in good trueth sorted the Romanes with the Romanes, and the Græcians amongst themselves, but not the Romanes with the Græcians, witnesse (saith he) *Demosthenes* and *Cicero*; *Cato* and *Aristides*; *Sylla* and *Lysander*; *Marcellus* and *Pelopidas*; *Pompey* and *Agesilaus*, deming thereby that hee hath favoured the Græcians, in giving them so unequal companions. It is a just reprovng of that, which is most excellent and commendable in *Plutarke*: For, in his comparisons (which is the most admirable part of his worke, and wherein in mine opinion hee so much pleased himselfe) the faithfulness and sinceritie of his judgement equalleth their depth and weight. He is a Philosopher that teacheth us

vertue. But let us see, whether wee can warrant him from this reproch of prevarication and falsehood. That, which I imagine hath given occasion or ground to this judgement, is, that great and farre-spreading lustre of the Romane names, which still are tingling in our eares, and never our of our mindes. We doe not thinke, *Demosthenes* may equall the glory of a Consull, of a Proconsull, and a Questor of this great Commonwealth of *Rome*. But he that shall impartially consider the truth of the matter, and men in themselves, which *Plutarke* did chiefly aime at, and more to balance their custome, their naturall dispositions and their sufficiencie, then their fortune: I am of a cleane opposite opinion to *Bodine*, and thinke that *Cicero* and old *Cato* are much behinde or short of their fellows. For this purpose, I would rather have chosen the example of yong *Cato* compared to *Phocion*: for in that paire might well be found a more likely disparitie for the Romanes advantage. As for *Marcellus*, *Sylla* and *Pompey*, I see very well, how their exploites of warre, be more swolne, glorious and pompous, then the Græcians, whome *Plutarke* compareth unto them; but the most vertuous and fairest actions, no more in warre, then elsewhere, are not alwayes the most famous. I often see the names of some Captaines smothered under the brightnesse of other names of lesser desert: witnesse *Labienus*, *Ventidius*, *Telesinus* and diverse others. And to take him in that sense, were I to complaine for the Græcians, might not I say, that *Camillus* is much lesse comparable unto *Themistocles*, the *Gracchi* to *Agis* and *Cleomenes*, and *Numa* to *Lycurgus*? But it is follie at one glance to judge of things with so many and diverse faces. When *Plutarke* compares them, he doth not for all that equall them. Who could more eloquently, and with more conscience note their differences? Doth he compare the victories, the exploites of armes, the power of the armies conducted by *Pompey* and his triumphs, unto those of *Agesilaus*? I doe not believe (saith he) that *Xenophon* himselfe (were he living) though it were granted him to write his pleasure for the advantage of *Agesilaus*, durst ever dare to admit any comparison betweene them. Seemeth he to equall *Lysander* to *Sylla*? There is no comparison (saith he) neither in number of victories, nor in hazard of battells betweene them: for, *Lysander* onely obtained two sea-battels, etc. This is no derogation from the Romanes. If he have but simply presented them unto the Græcians, what ever disparitie may be betweene them, he hath not in any sort wronged them. And *Plutarke* doth not directly counterpoise them. In some there is none perferred before others; He compareth the parts and the circumstances one after another, and severally judgeth of them. If therefore any would goe about to convince him of favour, hee should narrowly sift out some particular judgement; or in generall and plaine termes say, he hath missed in sorting such a Græcian to such a Romane, forasmuch as there are other more sortable and correspondent, and might better be compared, as having more reference one unto another.