

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 33



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

HYPERESSAYS is a project to create a modern and accessible online edition of the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne. More information at www.hyperessays.net

FLORIO-2-33-20240215-142107

The History of Spurina

PHILOSOPHY thinketh, she hath not ill employed hir meanes, having yeelded the soveraine rule of our minde, and the authoritie to restraine our appetites unto reason. Amongest which, those who judge there is none more violent, than those which love begetteth, have this for their opinion, that they holde both of body and soule; and man is wholly possessed with them: so that health it selfe depended of them, and phisike is sometimes constrained to serve them insteede of Pandership. But contrariwise, a man might also say, that the commixture of the body doth bring abatement and weakenesse unto them; because such desires are subject to sacietie and capable of materiall remedies. Many who have endeavored to free and exempt their mindes from the continuall alarumes, which this appetite did assaile them with, have used incisions, yea and cut-off the mooving, turbulent and unruly parts. Others have alayed the force and fervency of them by frequent applications of cold things, as snow and vineger. The haire-cloths which our forefathers used to wear for this purpose, wherof some made shirts, and some wastebands or girdles, to torment their reignes. A Prince told me not long since, that being very yoong, and waiting in the Court of King *Francis* the first, upon a solemne feastival day, when all the Court indeavored to be in their best clothes, a humor possessed him to putte-on a shirt of haire-cloth, which he yet keepeth, and had beene his fathers; but what devotion soever possessed him, he could not possibly endure untill night to put it off againe, and was sick a long time after, protesting he thought no youthly heat could be so violent, but the use of this receipt would coole and alay; of which he perhappes never assayed the strongest: For, experience sheweth us, that such emmotion doth often maintaine it selfe under base, rude and slovenly cloathes: and haire-cloathes doe not ever make those poore that weare them. *Zenocrates* proceeded more rigorously; for, his Disciples to make triall of his continencie, having conveyed that beautious and famous curtizan *Lais* naked into his bed, saving the weapons of hir beauty, wanton alurements, and amorous or love-procuring pocions, feeling that maugre all Philosophicall discourses, and strict rules, his skittish body beganne to mutinie, he caused those members to be burned, which had listened to that rebellion. Whereas the passions that are in the minde, as ambition, covetousnesse and others, trouble reason much more: for, it can have no ayde but from it's owne

meanes; nor are those appetites capable of sacietie, but rather sharpened by enjoying, and augmented by possession. The example alone of *Julius Cæsar* may suffice to shew us the disparitie of these appetites, for never was man more given to amorous delights. The curious and exact care he had of his body, is an authentick witness of it, forsomuch as hee used the most lascivious meanes that then were in use, as to have the haire of his body smeered and perfumed all over, with an extreame and labored curiositie; being of himselfe a goodly personage, white, of a tall and comely stature, of a cheerfull and seemly countenance, his face full and round, and his eyes browne and lively; if at least *Suetonius* may be believed: For, the statues which nowadayes are to be seene of him in *Rome*, answer not altogether this portraiture wee speake of. Besides his wives, which he changed foure times, without reckoning the bies; or Amours in his youth with *Nicomedes* King of *Bythinia*, hee had the Maiden-head of that so farre, and highly-renowned Queene of *Ægypt*, *Cleopatra*; witness yong *Cæsarion*, whom he begotte of hir. He also made love unto *Eunoé* Queene of *Mauritania*, and at *Rome*, to *Posthumia*, wife unto *Servius Sulpitius*: to *Lolia*, wife to *Gabinius*: to *Tertulla*, of *Crassus*; yea unto *Mutia*, wife to great *Pompey*, which, as Historians say, was the cause hir Husband was divorced from her. Which thing *Plutarke* confesseth not to have knowne. And the *Curions* both father and sonne, twitted *Pompey* in the teeth, at what time he tooke *Cæsars* Daughter to wife, that he made himselfe Sonne in law to one, who had made him Cuckold, and himselfe was wont to call *Ægyptus*. Besides all this number, he entertained *Servilia* the sister of *Cato*, and mother to *Marcus Brutus*, whence (as divers hold) proceeded that great affection, he ever bare to *Marcus Brutus*; for his Mother bare him at such a time as it was not unlikely he might be borne of him. Thus, (as me seemeth) have I good reason to deeme him a man extreamelie addicted to all amorous licenciousnesse, and of a wanton-lascivious complexion. But the other passion of ambition, wherewith he was infinitely infected, and much tainted, when he came once to withstand the same, it made him presently to give ground. And touching this point, when I call *Mahamet* to remembrance (I meane him that subdued *Constantinople*, and who brought the final extermination of the name of *Græcians*) I know not where these two passions are more equally ballanced: equally an indefatigable letcher, and a never-tired souldier. But when in his life they seeme to strive and concurre one with another, the mutinous heate, doeth ever gourmandize the amorous flame. And the latter, although out of naturall season did never attaine to a full and absolute authority, but when he perceived himselfe to be so aged, that he was utterly unable longer to undergoe the burthen of Warre. That which is alleaged, as an example on the contrary side, of *Ladislaus* King of *Naples*, is very well worth the noting, who though he were an excellent, courageous and ambitious Captaine, proposed unto himselfe, as the principall scope of his ambition, the execution of his sensuality, and enjoyning of some rare and unmatched beauty. So was his death: Having by a continuall tedious siege brought the City of *Florence* to so narrow a pinch, that the inhabitantes were ready to yeeld him the victory, he yeelded the same to them, upon condition they would deliver into his hands a wench of excellent beauty that was in the city, of whom he had heard great commendations; which they were enforced to graunt him, and so by a private injury to warrant the publike ruine of the City. Shee was the Daughter of a notable rare Phisicion, and whilst he lived chiefe of his profession: Who seeing himselfe engaged in so stuprous a

necessity, resolved upon an haughtie enterprize; Whilest all were busie adorning his daughter, and besetting her with costly jewelles, that shee might the more delight and please this new Kingly lover, he also gave her an exquisitely-wrought, and sweetly-perfumed handkercher, to use in their first approaches and embracements, a thing commonly in use amongst the Women of that Country. This Handkercher strongly empoysoned according to the cunning skill of his Art, comming to wipe both their enflamed secret parts and open pores, did so readily convey and disperse it's poyson, that having sodainely changed their heate into colde, they immediately deceased one in anothers armes. But I will now returne to *Cæsar*. His pleasures could never make him loose one minute of an houre, nor turne one step from the occasions, that might any way further his advancement. This passion did so sovereignly oversway all others, and possessed his minde with so uncontrouled an authority, that shee carryed him whither it list. Truely I am grieved, when in other things I consider this mans greatnesse, and the wondrous partes that were in him; so great sufficiencie in all maner of knowledge and learning, as there is almost no science wherein he hath not written; He was so good an Orator, that divers have preferred his eloquence before *Ciceroes*: And himselfe (in mine opinion) in that facultie thought himselfe nothing short of him. And his two *Anti-Catoes*, were especially written to overballance the eloquence which *Cicero* had employed in his *Cato*. And for all other matters; was ever minde so vigilant, so active, and so patient of labour as his? And doubtlesse, it was also embellished with sundry rare seedes of vertue. I meane lively, natural and not counterfet. He was exceeding sober, and so homely in his feeding, that *Oppius* reporteth, how uppon a time, through a certaine Cookes negligence, his meat being dressed with a kinde of medicinable Oyle, in stead of Olive-oyle, and so brought to the boorde although he found it yet he fed hartily of it, only because he would not shame his Hoste. Another time he caused his Baker to be whipped, because hee had served him with other, than common houshold bread, *Cato* himselfe was wont to say of him, that hee *was the first sober man, had addrest himself to the ruine of his country*. And wheras the same *Cato* called him one day drunkard, it hapned in this maner. Being both together in the Senate house, where *Catilines* conspiracie was much spoken of, wherein *Cæsar* was greatly suspected to have a hand; a note was by a frend of his brought, and in very secret sort delivered him, which *Cato* perceiving, supposing it might be something, that the Conspiratours advertized him of, instantly summoned him to shew it, which *Cæsar* to avoide a greater suspition, refused not: It was by chance an amorous letter, which *Servilia Catoes* sister writ to him: *Cato* having read-it, threw it at him, saying, hold it againe thou drunkard. I say, it was rather a word of disdain and anger, than an expresse reproch of this vice; as often we nicke-name those that anger us, with the first nicke-names of reproaches, that come into our mouth, though meerly impertinent to those with whom wee fall out. Considering, that the vice wherwith *Cato* charged him, hath neere coherencie unto that, wherein he had surprised *Cæsar*: for *Venus* and *Bacchus* (as the vulgar Proverb saith) agree well together; but with me *Venus* is much more blithe and game-some, being accompanied with sobrietie.

The examples of his mildnes and clemencie, towards such as had offended him, are infinite: I meane, besides those he shewed during the civill warres, which (as by his owne writings may plainly appeare) he used to

blandish and allure his enemies, to make them feare his future domination and victorie the lesse. But if any shall say, those examples are not of validitie to witnes his genuine and naturall affabilitie, we may lawfully answer, that at least they shew us a wonderfull confidence, and greatnes of courage to have beene in him. It hath often befallen him, to send whole armies backe againe to his enemies, after he had vanquished them, without dayning to binde them so much, as with an oath, if not to favour, at least not to beare armes against him. He hath three or foure times taken some of *Pompeys* chiefe Captaines prisoners, and as often set them at libertie againe. *Pompey* declared all such as would not follow and accompanie him in his wars, to be his enemies; and he caused those to be proclaimed as friends, who either would not stirre at all, or not effectually arme themselves against him. To such of his Captaines as fled from him, to procure other conditions, he sent them their weapons, their horses and all other furniture. The Citties he had taken by maine force, he freed to follow what faction they would, giving them no other garison, then the memorie of his clemencie and mildnes. In the day of his great battle of *Pharsalia*, he expresly inhibited, that unlesse they were driven to unavoidable extremitie, no man should lay hands upon any Romane cittizen. In my judgement these are very hazardous partes, and it is no wonder, if in the civill warres or tumultuous broiles, we have now on foote, those that fight for the ancient lawes and state of their countrie, as he did, doe not follow and imitate the example. They are extraordinarie meanes, and which onelye belongs to *Cæsars* fortune, and to his admirable foresight, succesfully to direct, and happily to conduct them. When I consider the incomparable greatnes and unvaluable worth of his minde, I excuse Victorie, in that shee could not well give him over, in this most unjust and unnaturall cause. But to returne to his clemencie; we have divers genuine and lively examples, even in the time of his al-swaying government, when all things were reduced into his hands, and hee needed no longer to dissemble. *Caius Memmius*, had written certaine detracting and railing orations against him, which hee at full and most sharpely had answered, neverthesse hee shortly after helped to make him Consull. *Caius Calvus*, who had composed divers most injurious Epigrams against him, having employed sundrie of his friendes to bee reconciled to him againe, *Cæsar* descended to write first unto him. And our good *Catullus*, who under the name of *Mamurra* had so rudely and bitterly railed against him, at last comming to excuse himselfe, *Cæsar* that very night made him to suppe at his owne table. Having beene advertised how some were overlavish in rayling against him, all he did was but in a publike oration to declare how he was advertised of it. His enemies, he feared lesse then he hated them. Certaine conspiracies and conventicles were made against his life, which being discovered unto him, he was contented by an edict to publish, how he was throughly enformed of them, and never prosecuted the Authors. Touching the respect hee ever bare unto his friendes; *Caius Oppius* traveling with him, and falling very sicke, having but one chamber he resigned the same unto him, and himselfe was contented to lie all night abroad and upon the bare ground. Concerning his justice, he caused a servant of his, whom he exceedingly loved, to be executed, forsomuch as he had laine with the wife of a Roman Knight, although no man sued or complained of him. Never was man, that shewed more moderation in his victorie, or more resolution in his adverse fortune. But all these noble inclinations, rich gifts, worthy qualities, were altred, smothered and eclipsed by this furious passion of ambition; by which he suffered himselfe

to be so farre mis-ledde, that it may be well affirmed, she onely ruled the Sterne of all his actions. Of a liberall man, she made him a common theefe, that so hee might the better supply his profusion and prodigality; and made him utter that vile and most injurious speach; That if the wickedst and most pernicious men of the world, had for his service and furtherance beene faithfull unto him, he would to the utmost of his power have cherished and preferred them, as well as if they had beene the honestest: It so besotted, and as it were made him drunke with so extreame vanitie, that in the presence of all his fellow-cittizens he durst vaunt himselfe, to have made that great and farre-spread Romane Commonwealth, a shapelesse and bodillesse name; and pronounce, that his Sentences or Answers should thence forward serve as Lawes: And sitting, to receive the whole bodie of the Senate comming toward him; and suffer himselfe to be adored, and in his presence divine honours to be done him. To conclude, this onely vice (in mine opinion) lost, and overthrew in him the fairest naturall and richest genuitie that ever was; and hath made his memorie abhominable to all honest mindes, insomuch as by the ruine of his cuntry, and subversion of the mightiest State and most flourishing Common-wealth, that ever the worlde shall see, he went about to procure his glorie. A man might contrariwise finde diverse examples of greate persons, whome pleasure hath made to forget the conduct of their owne affaires, as *Marcus Antonius*, and others: but where love and ambition should be in one equall balance, and with like forces mate one another, I will never doubt, but *Cæsar* would gaine the prize and gole of the victorie. But to come into my path againe. It is much, by discourse of reason, to bridle our appetites, or by violence to force our members, to containe themselves within the bounds of duty. But to whippe us for the interest of our neighbors, not only to shake off this sweete pleasing passion, which tickleth us with selfe-joying pleasure, we apprehend and feel to see ourselves gratefull to others, and of all men beloved and sued unto: but also to hate and scorne those graces, which of it are the cause; and to condemne our beauty, because some others will be set on sire with it, I have seene few examples like to this. *Spurina* a yong Gentleman of *Thuscanie*,

*Qualis gemma micat fuluumquæ diuidit aurum,
Aut collo decus aut capiti, uel quale per artem,
Inclusum buxo aut Ericia terebintho,
Lucet ebur.*

*As when a precious stone cleare rayes doth spread,
Set in pure golde, adorning necke or head:
Or as faire Iv'ry shines in boxe enclos'de,
Or workemanly with Mountaine gumme dispos'de.*

being endowed with so alluringly-excessive and singular beautie, that the chastest eyes could not possibly gainestand or continently resist the sparkling glances thereof; not contented to leave so great a flame succourlesse, or burning fever remedillesse, which he in all persons, and every where enkindled, entred into so furious despite against himselfe and those rich gifts, nature had so prodigally conferred upon him (as if they must beare the blame of others faults) that with gashes, and skars, he wittingly mangled, and voluntarily cut that perfect proportion and absolute feature, which nature had so curiously observed in his

unmatched face; whereof to speake my opinion, such outrages are enemies to my rules. I rather admire, then honour such actions. His intent was commendable, and his purpose consciencious, but in my seeming somewhat wanting of wisdom. What? if his deformitie or uglinesse was afterward an instrument to induce others to fall into the sinne of contempt and vice of hatred, or fault of envy for the glory of so rare commendation; or of slander, interpreting his humour to be a frantike ambition; Is there any forme, whence vice (if so it please) may not wrest an occasion, in some maner to exercise it selfe? It had bene more just, and therewithall more glorious, of so rare gifts of God, to have made a subject of exemplar vertue and orderly methode. Those which sequester themselves from publike offices, and from this infinite number of thornie and so many-faced rules, which in civill life, binde a man of exact honesty and exquisite integritie: in mine opinion reape a goodly commoditie, what peculiar sharpnesse soever they enjoyne themselves. *It is a kinde of death, to avoide the paine of well-doing, or trouble of well-living.* They may have another prise, but the prise of uneasines me thinks they never had. Nor that in difficulty, there be any thing that is amid the waves of the worldly multitude, beyond keeping himselfe upright and untainted, answering loyally and truly discharging all members and severall parts of his charge. It is happily more easie, for one, in honest sort to neglect and passe over all the sexe, then duly and wholly to maintaine himselfe in his wives companie. And a man may more incuriously fall into povertie, then into plenteousnesse; being justly dispensed. Custome, according to reason, doth leade to more sharpnesse, then abstinence hath. *Moderation is a vertue much more toylesome, then sufferance.* The chaste and well living of yong *Scipio*, hath a thousand severall fashions; that of *Diogenes* but one. This doth by so much more exceede all ordinary lives in innocencie and unspottednesse, as those which are most exquisite and accomplished, exceede in profite and outgoe it in force.