

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 36



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Of the worthiest and most excellent men

IF A MAN should demaund of mee, which of all men that ever came to my knowledge, I would make choise-of, me seemeth, I finde three, who have beene excellent above all others. The one is, *Homer*, not that *Aristotle* or *Varro*, (for example sake) were not peradventure as wise and as sufficient as he: Nor that *Virgil*, (and possibly in his owne arte) be not comparable unto him. I leave that to their judgements that know them both. I who know but one of them, according to my skill may onely say this, that I cannot be perswaded, the Muses themselves did ever goe beyond the Roman.

*Tale facit carmen docta testudine, quale
Cynthius impositis temperat articularis.*

*He on his learned Lute such verse doth play,
As Phæbus should thereto his fingers lay.*

In which judgement, this must notwithstanding not be forgotten, that *Virgil* doth especially derive his sufficiency from *Homer*, and hee is his guide and Schoolemaister; and that but one only glance or sentence of the *Illiade*, hath given both bodie and matter to that great and divine Poem of the *Æneidos*. My meaning is not to account so: I entermix divers other circumstances, which yeeld this man most admirable unto me, and as it were beyond humane condition. And truely I am often amazed, that he who hath produced, and by his authoritie brought so manie Deities in credit with the World, hath not obtained to be reputed a God himselfe. Being blind and indigent; having lived before ever the Sciences were redacted into strict rules and certaine observations, hee had so perfect knowledge of them, that all those which since his time have labored to establish Pollicies or Common-wealths, to manage warres, and to write either of Religion or Philosophie, in what Sect soever or of all Attes, have made use of him, as of an absolutely-perfect Maister in the knowledge of all things; and of his Bookes, as of a Seminarie, a Spring-garden or Store-house of all kinds of sufficiency and learning.

*Qui quid sit purchrum, quid turpe, quid utile, quid non,
Plenius ac melius Chrysippo ac Crantore dicit.*

*What is faire, What is foule, What profit may, What not,
Better than Crantor or Chrysippus, Homer wrot.*

And as another saith:

*à quo ceu fonte perrenni
Vatum Pieriis labra rigantur aquis.*

*By whom, as by an ever-flowing-filling spring,
With Muses liquor Poets lippes are bath'de to sing.*

And another:

*Adde Heliconiadum comites, quorum unus Homerus
Astra potitus.*

*Muses companions adde to these, of all
One onely Homer hath in heav'n his stall.*

And another:

*cuiusque ex ore profuso
Omnis posteritas latices in carmina duxit,
Amnémque in tenues, ausa est deducere riuos:
Unius fœcunda bonis.*

*From whose large mouth for verse all that since live
Drew water, and grew bolder to derive,
Into thinne shallow rivers his deepe floods:
Richly Luxuriant in one mans goods.*

It is against natures course, that he hath made the most excellent production, that may be; for, the ordinarie birth of things, is imperfect: They are augmented by encrease, and coroborated by growth. He hath reduced the infancie of Poesie, and divers other Sciences to be ripe, perfect and compleate. By which reason he may be termed the first and last of Poets, following the noble testimony, antiquitie hath left us of him, that having had no man before him, whome he might imitate, so hath he had none after him, could imitate him. His wordes (according to *Aristotle*) are the onely words that have motion and action: they are the onely substantiall Wordes. *Alexander* the Great, having lighted upon a rich casket amongst *Darius* his spoyles, appoynted the same to be safely kept for himselfe, to keepe his *Homer* in: saying, he was the best adviser, and faithfulllest counselor he had in his military affaires. By the same reason saide *Cleomenes*, sonne to *Anaxandridas*, that he was the Lacedemonians Poet; for he was an excellent good teacher or Maister of Warre-like discipline. This singular praise and particular commendation hath also bin given him by *Plutarke*, where he saith, that he is the onely Author in the World, who yet never distasted Reader, or glutted man; ever shewing himselfe other, and different to the Readers; and ever flourishing with a new grace. That Wagge *Alcibiades*, demanding one of *Homers* bookes of one who prosessed letters, because he had it not, gave him a Whirrit on the care; as if a man should finde one of our Priests, without a Breviarie. *Zenophanes* one day made his moane to *Hieron* the Tyrant of *Siracusa*, that

he was so poore he had not wherewithall to finde two servants: How commeth that to passe? (answered *Hieron*) *Homer*, who was much poorer than thou art, dead as he is, findeth more then tenne thousand. What left *Panætius* unsaide, when he named *Plato* the *Homer* of Philosophers? Besides, what glory may be compared to his? There is nothing, liveth so in mens mouthes as his name and his workes; nothing so knowne and received as *Troy*, as *Hellen* and her Warres, which paradventure never were. Our Children are yet called by the names hee invented three thousand yeares since and more. Who knoweth not *Hector*? Who hath not heard of *Achilles*? Not onely some particular races, but most Nations seeke to derive themselves from his inventions. *Machomet*, second of that name, Emperour of Turkes, writing to Pope *Pius* the second: I wonder (saith he) how the Italians will bandie against me, seeing we have our common offspring, from the Troyans; and I as well as they have an interest to revenge the blood of *Hector* upon the Græcians, whom they favour against mee. Is it not a woorthy Comœdie, whereof Kings, Common-wealths, Principalities and Emperours, have for many ages together played their parts, and to which this great Universe serveth as a Theatre? seven cities of *Greece* strived amongst themselves about the places of his birth. So much honour his very obscuritie procured him.

Smyrna, Rhodes, Colophon, Salamis, Chios, Argos, Athenæ,

Rhodes, Salamis, Colophon, Chios, Argos, Smyrna, with Athens.

The other is *Alexander* the great. For, who shall consider his age, wherein hee beganne his enterprises; the small meanes he had to ground so glorious a desseigne upon the authoritie he attained-unto in his infancie, amongst the greatest Commaunders, and most experienced Captaines in the world, by whom he was followed: the extraordinarie favour, wherewith fortune embraced him, and seconded so many of his haughtie-dangerous exploités, which I may in a manner call rash or fond-hardie.

*Impellens quicquid sibi summa petenti
Obstaret, gaudénsque uiam fecisse ruina.*

*While he shot at the high'st, all that might stay
He for'st, and joyde with ruine to make way.*

That eminent greatnesse, to have at the age of thirtie yeares passed victorious through al the habitable earth, and but with halfe the life of a man to have attained the utmost endeavour of humane nature; so that you cannot imagine his continuance lawfull, and the lasting of his increase in fortune, and progresse in vertue even unto a just terme of age, but you must suppose something above man, to have caused so many Royal branches to issue from out the loines of his Souldiers, leaving the world after his death to be shared betweene foure successours, simple Captaines of his Armie, whose succeeders, have so long time since continued, and descendents maintained that large possession. So infinite, rare and excellent vertues that were in him, as justice, temperance, liberalitie, integritie in words, love toward his, and humanitie toward the conquered. For in truth, his maners seeme to admit no just cause of reproach: in deede some of his particular, rare and extraordinary actions, may in some sort be taxed. For it is impossible to

conduct so great, and direct so violent motions with the strict rules of justice. Such men ought to be judged in grose, by the mistris end of their actions. The ruine of *Thebes*; the murther of *Menander*, and of *Ephestions* Phisitian; the massacre of so many Persian prisoners at once: of a troupe of Indian Souldiers, not without some prejudice unto his word and promise: and of the Cosseyans and their little children, are escapes somewhat hard to be excused. For, concerning *Clitus*, the fault was expiated beyond it's merite; and that action, as much as any other, witnesseth the integritie and cheerefulnesse of his complexion, and that it was a complexion in it selfe excellently formed to goodnesse; And it was wittily saide of one, that *he had vertues by nature, and vices by accident*. Concerning the point, that he was somewhat to lavish a boaster, and over-impatient to heare himselfe ill-spoken-of; and touching those cratches, those armes, and those bits, which he caused to be scattered in *India*, respecting his age and the prosperitie of his fortune, they are in my conceit pardonable in him. He that shall also consider his many military vertues, as diligence, foresight, patience; discipline, policie, magnanimitie, resolution and good fortune; wherein, if *Haniballs* authoritie had not taught it us, he hath been the first and chief of men: the rare beauties, matchlesse features, and incomparable conditions of his person, beyond all comparison, and wonder-breeding; his carriage, demeanor, and venerable behaviour, in a face so yong, so vermeill, and heart-enflaming:

*Qualis ubi Oceani perfusus Lucifer unda,
Quem Venus ante alios astrorum diligit ignes.
Extulit os sacrum cælo, tenebrâsque resoluit.*

*As when the day-starre washt in Ocean-streames,
Which Venus most of all the starres esteemes,
Shewes sacred light, shakes darknesse-off with beames.*

The excellencie of his wit, knowledge and capacitie; the continuance and greatnesse of his glorie, unspotted, untainted, pure and free from all blame or envie: insomuch as long after his death, it was religiously believed of many, that his jewels or any thing he had worne, boaded and presaged them good lucke, that wore or had them about them. And that more Kings and Princes have written his jestes and actions, then any other historians, of what qualitie soever, have registred the jestes, or collected the actions of any other King or Prince that ever was: And that even at this day, the Mahometists, who contemne all other histories, by speciall priviledge, allow, receive, and onely honour his. All which premises duely considered together, he shall confesse, I have had good reason to preferre him before *Cæsar* himselfe, who alone might have made me doubt of my choise. And it must needes be granted, that in his exploits there was more of his owne; but more of fortunes in *Alexanders* atchievements. They have both had many things mutually alike, and *Cæsar* happily some greater. They were two thunder bolts, two fire-brands, or two swift torrents, able sundry wayes to over-runne, and turne the world topsiturvy.

*Et velut immissi diuersis partibus ignes
Arentem in siluam, & uirgulta sonantia lauro:
Aut ubi decursu rapido de montibus altis*

*Dant sonitum spumosi amnes, & in æquora currunt,
Quisque suum populatus iter.*

*As when on divers sides fire is applied
To crackling bay-shrubs, or to woods Sunne dried,
Or as when foaming streames from mountaines hie,
With downefall swift resound, and to sea flie;
Each-one doth havecke-out his way thereby.*

But grant *Cæsars* ambition were more moderate, it is so unhappy, in that it met with this vile subject of the subversion of his cuntry, and universall empairing of the world; that all parts imparcially collected and put together in the ballance, I must necessarily bend to *Alexanders* side. The third, and in my judgement, most excellent man, is *Epaminondas*. Of glorie he hath not so much as some, and is farre short of diverse (which well considered is no substantiall part of the thing) of resolution and true valour, not of that which is set-on by ambition, but of that, which wisdom and reason may settle in a well-disposed minde, hee had as much as may be imagined or wished for. He hath in mine opinion, made as great triall of his vertues, as ever did *Alexander* or *Cæsar*: for although his exploit of warre be not so frequent, and so high-raised, yet being thoroughly considered, they are as weightie, as resolute, as constant, yea and as authentically a testimonie of hardines and militarie sufficiencie, as any mans else. The Græcians, without any contradiction afforded him the honour, to entitle him the chiefe and first man among themselves: and *to be the first and chiefe man of Greece, is without all question to be chiefe and first man of the world*. Touching his knowledge and worth, this ancient judgement doth yet remaine amongst us, that *never was man who know so much, nor never man that spake lesse then he*. For he was by Sect a Pithagorian; and what he spake, no man ever spake better: An excellent and most perswasive Orator was he. And concerning his manners and conscience therein hee farre outwent all that ever medled with managing affaires: For in this one part, which ought especially to be noted, and which alone declareth what we are, and which onely I counterpoise to all others together, he giveth place to no Philosopher; no not to *Socrates* himselfe. In whom innocencie is a qualitie, proper, chiefe, constant, uniforme and incorruptible. In comparison of which, it seemeth in *Alexander* subalternall, uncertaine, variable, effeminate and accidentall. Antiquine judged that precisely to sift out, and curiously to prie into all other famous Captaines, there is in every one severally some speciall qualitie, which makes him renowned and famous. In this man alone, it is a vertue and sufficiencie, every where compleate and alike; which in all offices of humane life, leaveth nothing more to be wished-for. Be it in publike or private; in peaceable negotiations or warlike occupations; be it to live or die, greatly or gloriously, I know no form or fortune of man, that I admire or regard, with so much honor, with so much love. True it is, I finde his obstinacie in povertie, somewhat scrupulous; and so have his best friends pourtrayed-it. And this onely action (high notwithstanding and very worthy admiration) I finde or deeme somewhat sharpe; so as I would nor wish, nor desire the imitation thereof in me, according to the forme it was in him. *Scipio Aemilianus* alone (would any charge him with as fierce, and noblie-minded an end, and with as deepe and universall knowledge of Sciences) might be placed in the other scale of the ballance against him. Oh what a displeasure hath

swift-gliding Time done me, even in the nicke, to deprive our eyes, of the chieftest paire of lives, directly the noblest, that ever were in *Plutarke*, of these two truly-worthy personages: by the universall consent of the world, the one chiefe of Græcians, the other principall of Romanes. What a matter, what a workeman! For a man that was no Saint, but as we say, a gallant-honest man, of civill maners and common customes; of a temperate haughtinesse; the richest life I know (as the vulgar saying is) to have lived amongst the living, and fraughted with the richest qualities, and most to be desired parts (all things imparcially considered) in my humour, is that of *Alcibiades*. But touching *Epaminondas*, for a patterne of excessive goodness, I will here insert certaine of his opinions. The sweetest contentment he had in all his life, he witnesseth to have beene, the pleasure he gave his father and mother, of his victorie upon *Leuctres*: he staketh much, in preferring their pleasure, before his content, so just and full of so glorious an action. *Hee thought it unlawfull, yea were it to recover the libertie of his country, for any one to kill a man, except he knew some just cause.* And therefore was he so backward in the enterprise of *Pelopidas* his companion, for the deliverance of *Thebes*. He was also of opinion, that in a battle a man should avoide to encounter his friend, being on the contrary part; and if he met him, to spare him. And his humanitie or gentlenes, even towards his very enemies, having made him to be suspected of the Bœotians, forsomuch as after he had miraculously forced the Lacedemonians to open him a passage, which at the entrance of *Morea* neere *Corinth*, they had undertaken to make-good, he was contented, without further pursuing them in furie, to have marched over their bellies; was the cause he was deposed of his office of Captaine Generall. Most honourably for such a cause; and for the shame it was to them, soone after to be forced by necessitie to advance him to his first place: and to acknowledge how their glorie, and confesse that their safetie did onely depend on him: victory following him as his shadow, whither soever hee went: and as the prosperitie of his countrie was borne by and with him, so it died with and by him.