

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 36

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On Cato the Younger

I am not guilty of the common error of judging another by myself. I easily believe that in another's humor which is contrary to my own; and though I find myself engaged to one certain form, I do not oblige others to it, as many do; but believe and apprehend a thousand ways of living; and, contrary to most men, more easily admit of difference than uniformity among us. I as frankly as any one would have me, discharge a man from my humors and principles, and consider him according to his own particular model. Though I am not continent myself, I nevertheless sincerely approve the continence of the Feuillans and Capuchins, and highly commend their way of living. I insinuate myself by imagination into their place, and love and honor them the more for being other than I am. I very much desire that we may be judged every man by himself, and would not be drawn into the consequence of common examples.

My own weakness nothing alters the esteem I ought to have for the force and vigor of those who deserve it. *Sunt qui nihil suadent, quam quod se imitari posse confidunt.* Crawling upon the slime of the earth, I do not for all that cease to observe up in the clouds the inimitable height of some heroic souls. 'Tis a great deal for me to have my judgment regular and just, if the effects cannot be so, and to maintain this sovereign part, at least, free from corruption; 'tis something to have my will right and good where my legs fail me. This age wherein we live, in our part of the world at least, is grown so stupid, that not only the exercise, but the very imagination of virtue is defective, and seems to be no other but college jargon:

*virtutem verba putant, ut.
Lucum ligna.*

Quam vereri deberent, etiam si percipere non possent.

'Tis a gewgaw to hang in a cabinet or at the end of the tongue, as on the tip of the ear, for ornament only.

There are no longer virtuous actions extant; those actions that carry a show of virtue have yet nothing of its essence; by reason that profit, glory, fear, custom, and other suchlike foreign causes, put us on the way to

There are who persuade nothing but what they believe they can imitate themselves. • CIC., DE OR., 100.7

They think words virtue, as they think mere wood a sacred grove. • HOR., EPIST., 1.6.31

Which they ought to reverence, though they cannot comprehend. • CIC., TUSC., 5.2

produce them. Our justice also, valor, courtesy, may be called so too, in respect to others and according to the face they appear with to the public; but in the doer it can by no means be virtue, because there is another end proposed, another moving cause. Now virtue owns nothing to be hers, but what is done by herself and for herself alone.

In that great battle of Plataea, that the Greeks under the command of Pausanias gained against Mardonius and the Persians, the conquerors, according to their custom, coming to divide among them the glory of the exploit, attributed to the Spartan nation the pre-eminence of valor in the engagement. The Spartans, great judges of virtue, when they came to determine to what particular man of their nation the honor was due of having the best behaved himself upon this occasion, found that Aristodemus had of all others hazarded his person with the greatest bravery; but did not, however, allow him any prize, by reason that his virtue had been incited by a desire to clear his reputation from the reproach of his miscarriage at the business of Thermopylae, and to die bravely to wipe off that former blemish.

Our judgments are yet sick, and obey the humor of our depraved manners. I observe most of the wits of these times pretend to ingenuity, by endeavoring to blemish and darken the glory of the bravest and most generous actions of former ages, putting one vile interpretation or another upon them, and forging and supposing vain causes and motives for the noble things they did.

A mighty subtlety indeed! Give me the greatest and most unblemished action that ever the day beheld, and I will contrive a hundred plausible drifts and ends to obscure it. God knows, whoever will stretch them out to the full, what diversity of images our internal wills suffer under. They do not so maliciously play the censurers, as they do it ignorantly and rudely in all their detractions.

The same pains and licence that others take to blemish and bespatter these illustrious names, I would willingly undergo to lend them a shoulder to raise them higher. These rare forms, that are culled out by the consent of the wisest men of all ages, for the world's example, I should not stick to augment in honor, as far as my invention would permit, in all the circumstances of favorable interpretation; and we may well believe that the force of our invention is infinitely short of their merit. 'Tis the duty of good men to portray virtue as beautiful as they can, and there would be nothing wrong should our passion a little transport us in favor of so sacred a form. What these people do, on the contrary, they either do out of malice, or by the vice of confining their belief to their own capacity; or, which I am more inclined to think, for not having their sight strong, clear, and elevated enough to conceive the splendor of virtue in her native purity: as Plutarch complains, that in his time some attributed the cause of the younger Cato's death to his fear of Caesar, at which he seems very angry, and with good reason; and by this a man may guess how much more he would have been offended with those who have attributed it to ambition. Senseless people! He would rather have performed a noble, just, and generous action, and to have had ignominy for his reward, than for glory. That man was in truth a pattern that nature chose out to show to what height human virtue and constancy could arrive.

But I am not capable of handling so rich an argument, and shall therefore only set five Latin poets together, contending in the praise of Cato; and, incidentally, for their own too. Now, a well-educated child will judge the two first, in comparison of the others, a little flat and languid; the third more vigorous, but overthrown by the extravagance of his own force; he will then think that there will be room for one or two gradations of invention to come to the fourth, and, mounting to the pitch of that, he will lift up his hands in admiration; coming to the last, the first by some space (but a space that he will swear is not to be filled up by any human wit), he will be astounded, he will not know where he is. And here is a wonder: we have far more poets than judges and interpreters of poetry; it is easier to write it than to understand it. There is, indeed, a certain low and moderate sort of poetry, that a man may well enough judge by certain rules of art; but the true, supreme, and divine poetry is above all rules and reason. And whoever discerns the beauty of it with the most assured and most steady sight, sees no more than the quick reflection of a flash of lightning: it does not exercise, but ravishes and overwhelms our judgment. The fury that possesses him who is able to penetrate into it wounds yet a third man by hearing him repeat it; like a loadstone that not only attracts the needle, but also infuses into it the virtue to attract others. And it is more evidently manifest in our theaters, that the sacred inspiration of the Muses, having first stirred up the poet to anger, sorrow, hatred, and out of himself, to whatever they will, does moreover by the poet possess the actor, and by the actor consecutively all the spectators. So much do our passions hang and depend upon one another. Poetry has ever had that power over me from a child to transpire and transport me; but this vivid sentiment that is natural to me has been variously handled by variety of forms, not so much higher or lower (for they were ever the highest of every kind), as differing in color. First, a gay and sprightly fluency; afterward, a lofty and penetrating subtlety; and lastly, a mature and constant vigor. Their names will better express them: Ovid, Lucan, Virgil. But our poets are beginning their career:

Sit Cato, dum vivit, sane vel Caesare major,

says one.

Et invictum, devicta morte, Catonem,

says the second. And the third, speaking of the civil wars betwixt Caesar and Pompey,

Victrix causa diis placuit, set victa Catoni.

And the fourth, upon the praises of Caesar:

*Et cuncta terrarum subacta,
Praeter atrocem animum Catonis.*

And the master of the choir, after having set forth all the great names of the greatest Romans, ends thus:

His dantem jura Catonem.

Let Cato, whilst he live, be greater than Caesar. • MART., 6.32

And Cato invincible, death being overcome. • MANILIUS, 4.87

The victorious cause blessed the gods, the defeated one Cato. • LUC., 1.128

And conquered all but the indomitable mind of Cato. • HOR., CARM., 2.1.23

Cato giving laws to all the rest. • VERG., AEN., 8.670

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Cic., De Or.	Cicero, <i>On the Orator</i>
Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Hor., Carm.	Horace, <i>Odes</i>
Hor., Epist.	Horace, <i>Epistles</i>
Luc.	Lucan, <i>Civil War</i>
Manilius	Manilius, <i>Astronomica</i>
Mart.	Martial, <i>Epigrams</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>