

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 33

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The Story of Spurina

Philosophy thinks she has not ill employed her talent when she has given the sovereignty of the soul and the authority of restraining our appetites to reason. Among which, they who judge that there is none more violent than those which spring from love, have this opinion also, that they seize both body and soul, and possess the whole man, so that even health itself depends upon them, and medicine is sometimes constrained to pimp for them.

But one might, on the contrary, also say, that the mixture of the body brings an abatement and weakening; for such desires are subject to satiety, and capable of material remedies. Many, being determined to rid their soul from the continual alarms of this appetite, have made use of incision and amputation of the rebelling members; others have subdued their force and ardor by the frequent application of cold things, as snow and vinegar. The sackcloths of our ancestors were for this purpose, which is cloth woven of horse hair, of which some of them made shirts, and others girdles, to torture and correct their reins. A prince, not long ago, told me that in his youth upon a solemn festival in the court of King Francis I, where everybody was finely dressed, he would needs put on his father's hair shirt, which was still kept in the house; but how great soever his devotion was, he had not patience to wear it till night, and was sick a long time after; adding withal, that he did not think there could be any youthful heat so fierce that the use of this recipe would not mortify.

And yet perhaps he never essayed the most violent. For experience shows us, that such emotions are often seen under rude and slovenly clothes, and that a hair shirt does not always render those chaste who wear it. Xenocrates proceeded with greater rigor in this affair; for his disciples, to make trial of his continence, having slipped Lais, that beautiful and famous courtesan, into his bed, quite naked, excepting the arms of her beauty and her wanton allurements, her philters, finding that, in despite of his reason and philosophical rules, his unruly flesh began to mutiny, he caused those members of his to be burned that he found consenting to this rebellion. Whereas the passions which wholly reside in the soul, as ambition, avarice, and the rest, find the reason much more to do, because

it cannot there be helped but by its own means; neither are those appetites capable of satiety, but grow sharper and increase by fruition.

The sole example of Julius Caesar may suffice to demonstrate to us the disparity of these appetites; for never was man more addicted to amorous delights than he: of which one testimony is the peculiar care he had of his person, to such a degree, as to make use of the most lascivious means to that end then in use, as to have all the hairs of his body twitched off, and to wipe all over with perfumes with the extremest nicety. And he was a beautiful person in himself, of a fair complexion, tall, and sprightly, full faced, with quick hazel eyes, if we may believe Suetonius; for the statues of him that we see at Rome do not in all points answer this description. Besides his wives, whom he four times changed, without reckoning the amours of his boyhood with Nicomedes, king of Bithynia, he had the maidenhead of the renowned Cleopatra, queen of Egypt; witness the little Caesario whom he had by her. He also made love to Eunoe, queen of Mauritania, and at Rome, to Posthumia, the wife of Servius Sulpitius; to Lollia, the wife of Gabinius to Tertulla, the wife of Crassus, and even to Mutia, wife to the great Pompey: which was the reason, the Roman historians say, that she was repudiated by her husband, which Plutarch confesses to be more than he knew; and the Curios, both father and son, afterwards reproached Pompey, when he married Caesar's daughter, that he had made himself son-in-law to a man who had made him cuckold, and one whom he himself was wont to call Aegisthus. Besides all these, he entertained Servilia, Cato's sister and mother to Marcus Brutus, whence, every one believes, proceeded the great affection he had to Brutus, by reason that he was born at a time when it was likely he might be his son. So that I have reason, methinks, to take him for a man extremely given to this debauch, and of very amorous constitution. But the other passion of ambition, with which he was infinitely smitten, arising in him to contend with the former, it was soon compelled to give way.

And here calling to mind Mohammed, who won Constantinople, and finally exterminated the Grecian name, I do not know where these two were so evenly balanced; equally an indefatigable lecher and soldier: but where they both meet in his life and jostle one another, the quarrelling passion always gets the better of the amorous one, and this though it was out of its natural season never regained an absolute sovereignty over the other till he had arrived at an extreme old age and unable to undergo the fatigues of war.

What is related for a contrary example of Ladislaus, king of Naples, is very remarkable; that being a great captain, valiant and ambitious, he proposed to himself for the principal end of his ambition, the execution of his pleasure and the enjoyment of some rare and excellent beauty. His death sealed up all the rest: for having by a close and tedious siege reduced the city of Florence to so great distress that the inhabitants were compelled to capitulate about surrender, he was content to let them alone, provided they would deliver up to him a beautiful maid he had heard of in their city; they were forced to yield to it, and by a private injury to avert the public ruin. She was the daughter of a famous physician of his time, who, finding himself involved in so foul a necessity, resolved upon a high attempt. As every one was lending a hand to trick

up his daughter and to adorn her with ornaments and jewels to render her more agreeable to this new lover, he also gave her a handkerchief most richly wrought, and of an exquisite perfume, an implement they never go without in those parts, which she was to make use of at their first approaches. This handkerchief, poisoned with his greatest art, coming to be rubbed between the chafed flesh and open pores, both of the one and the other, so suddenly infused the poison, that immediately converting their warm into a cold sweat they presently died in one another's arms. But I return to Caesar.

His pleasures never made him steal one minute of an hour, nor go one step aside from occasions that might any way conduce to his advancement. This passion was so sovereign in him over all the rest, and with so absolute authority possessed his soul, that it guided him at pleasure. In truth, this troubles me, when, as to everything else, I consider the greatness of this man, and the wonderful parts wherewith he was endued; learned to that degree in all sorts of knowledge that there is hardly any one science of which he has not written; so great an orator that many have preferred his eloquence to that of Cicero, and he, I conceive, did not think himself inferior to him in that particular, for his two works against Cato were written to counterbalance the elocution that Cicero had expended in his Cato.

As to the rest, was ever soul so vigilant, so active, and so patient of labor as his? and, doubtless, it was embellished with many rare seeds of virtue, lively, natural, and not put on; he was singularly sober; so far from being delicate in his diet, that Oppius relates, how that having one day at table set before him medicated instead of common oil in some sauce, he ate heartily of it, that he might not put his entertainer out of countenance. Another time he caused his baker to be whipped for serving him with a finer than ordinary sort of bread. Cato himself was wont to say of him, that he was the first sober man who ever made it his business to ruin his country. And as to the same Cato's calling, him one day drunkard, it fell out thus being both of them in the Senate, at a time when Catiline's conspiracy was in question of which was Caesar was suspected, one came and brought him a letter sealed up. Cato believing that it was something the conspirators gave him notice of, required him to deliver into his hand, which Caesar was constrained to do to avoid further suspicion. It was by chance a love-letter that Servilia, Cato's sister, had written to him, which Cato having read, he threw it back to him saying, "There, drunkard." This, I say, was rather a word of disdain and anger than an express reproach of this vice, as we often rate those who anger us with the first injurious words that come into our mouths, though nothing due to those we are offended at; to which may be added that the vice with which Cato upbraided him is wonderfully near akin to that wherein he had surprised Caesar; for Bacchus and Venus, according to the proverb, very willingly agree.

But to me Venus is much more sprightly accompanied by sobriety.

The examples of his sweetness and clemency to those by whom he had been offended are infinite; I mean, besides those he gave during the time of the civil wars, which, as plainly enough appears by his writings, he practised to cajole his enemies, and to make them less afraid of his future

dominion and victory. But I must also say, that if these examples are not sufficient proofs of his natural sweetness, they, at least, manifest a marvellous confidence and grandeur of courage in this person. He has often been known to dismiss whole armies, after having overcome them, to his enemies, without ransom, or deigning so much as to bind them by oath, if not to favor him, at least no more to bear arms against him; he has three or four times taken some of Pompey's captains prisoners, and as often set them at liberty. Pompey declared all those to be enemies who did not follow him to the war; he proclaimed all those to be his friends who sat still and did not actually take arms against him. To such captains of his as ran away from him to go over to the other side, he sent, moreover, their arms, horses, and equipage: the cities he had taken by force he left at full liberty to follow which side they pleased, imposing no other garrison upon them but the memory of his gentleness and clemency. He gave strict and express charge, the day of his great battle of Pharsalia, that, without the utmost necessity, no one should lay a hand upon the citizens of Rome.

These, in my opinion, were very hazardous proceedings, and 'tis no wonder if those in our civil war, who, like him, fight against the ancient estate of their country, do not follow his example; they are extraordinary means, and that only appertain to Caesar's fortune, and to his admirable foresight in the conduct of affairs. When I consider the incomparable grandeur of his soul, I excuse victory that it could not disengage itself from him, even in so unjust and so wicked a cause.

To return to his clemency: we have many striking examples in the time of his government, when, all things being reduced to his power, he had no more written against him which he had as sharply answered: yet he did not soon after forbear to use his interest to make him consul. Caius Calvus, who had composed several injurious epigrams against him, having employed many of his friends to mediate a reconciliation with him, Caesar voluntarily persuaded himself to write first to him. And our good Catullus, who had so rudely ruffled him under the name of Mamurra, coming to offer his excuses to him, he made the same day sit at his table. Having intelligence of some who spoke ill of him, he did no more, but only by a public oration declare that he had notice of it. He still less feared his enemies than he hated them; some conspiracies and cabals that were made against his life being discovered to him, he satisfied himself in publishing by proclamation that they were known to him, without further prosecuting the conspirators. As to the respect he had for his friends: Caius Oppius, being with him upon a journey, and finding himself ill, he left him the only lodging he had for himself, and lay all night upon a hard ground in the open air. As to what concerns his justice, he put a beloved servant of his to death for lying with a noble Roman's wife, though there was no complaint made. Never had man more moderation in his victory, nor more resolution in his adverse fortune.

But all these good inclinations were stifled and spoiled by his furious ambition, by which he suffered himself to be so transported and misled that one may easily maintain that this passion was the rudder of all his actions; of a liberal man, it made him a public thief to supply this bounty and profusion, and made him utter this vile and unjust saying, "That if the most wicked and profligate persons in the world had been faithful in

serving him toward his advancement, he would cherish and prefer them to the utmost of his power, as much as the best of men." It intoxicated him with so excessive a vanity, as to dare to boast in the presence of his fellow-citizens, that he had made the great commonwealth of Rome a name without form and without body; and to say that his answers for the future should stand for laws; and also to receive the body of the Senate coming to him, sitting; to suffer himself to be adored, and to have divine honors paid to him in his own presence. To conclude, this sole vice, in my opinion, spoiled in him the most rich and beautiful nature that ever was, and has rendered his name abominable to all good men, in that he would erect his glory upon the ruins of his country and the subversion of the greatest and most flourishing republic the world shall ever see.

There might, on the contrary, many examples be produced of great men whom pleasures have made to neglect the conduct of their affairs, as Mark Antony and others; but where love and ambition should be in equal balance, and come to jostle with equal forces, I make no doubt but the last would win the prize.

To return to my subject: 'tis much to bridle our appetites by the argument of reason, or, by violence, to contain our members within their duty; but to lash ourselves for our neighbor's interest, and not only to divest ourselves of the charming passion that tickles us, of the pleasure we feel in being agreeable to others, and courted and beloved of every one, but also to conceive a hatred against the graces that produce that effect, and to condemn our beauty because it inflames others; of this, I confess, I have met with few examples. But this is one. Spurina, a young man of Tuscany,

*Qualis gemma micat, fulvum quæ dividit aurum,
Aut collo decus, aut capiti, vel quale per artem
Inclusum buxo aut Oricia terebintho
Lucet ebur,*

As a gem shines enchased in yellow gold, or an ornament on the neck or head, or as ivory has lustre, set by art in boxwood or Orician ebony, • VERG., AEN., 10.134

being endowed with a singular beauty, and so excessive, that the chastest eyes could not chastely behold its rays; not contenting himself with leaving so much flame and fever as he everywhere kindled without relief, entered into a furious spite against himself and those great endowments nature had so liberally conferred upon him, as if a man were responsible to himself for the faults of others, and purposely slashed and disfigured, with many wounds and scars, the perfect symmetry and proportion that nature had so curiously imprinted in his face.

To give my free opinion, I more admire than honor such actions: such excesses are enemies to my rules. The design was conscientious and good, but certainly a little defective in prudence. What if his deformity served afterwards to make others guilty of the sin of hatred or contempt; or of envy at the glory of so rare a recommendation; or of calumny, interpreting this humor a mad ambition! Is there any form from which vice cannot, if it will, extract occasion to exercise itself, one way or another? It had been more just, and also more noble, to have made of these gifts of God a subject of exemplary regularity and virtue.

They who retire themselves from the common offices, from that infinite number of troublesome rules that fetter a man of exact honesty in civil

life, are in my opinion very discreet, what peculiar sharpness of constraint soever they impose upon themselves in so doing. 'Tis in some sort a kind of dying to avoid the pain of living well. They may have another reward; but the reward of difficulty I fancy they can never have; nor, in uneasiness, that there can be anything more or better done than the keeping oneself upright amid the waves of the world, truly and exactly performing all parts of our duty. 'Tis, peradventure, more easy to keep clear of the sex than to maintain one's self aright in all points in the society of a wife; and a man may with less trouble adapt himself to entire abstinence than to the due dispensation of abundance. Use, carried on according to reason, has in it more of difficulty than abstinence; moderation is a virtue that gives more work than suffering; the well living of Scipio has a thousand fashions, that of Diogenes but one; this as much excels the ordinary lives in innocence as the most accomplished excel them in utility and force.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Verg., Aen.

Virgil, *Aeneid*