

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 • Chapter 33

Translation by Charles Cotton (1685, Public domain) • Last updated on June 18, 2026

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

ESSAYS-1-33-20260831-212142

Where Reason Goes Fortune Often Goes Too

The inconstancy and various motions of Fortune may reasonably make us expect she should present us with all sorts of faces. Can there be a more express act of justice than this? The Duc de Valentinois, having resolved to poison Adrian, Cardinal of Corneto, with whom Pope Alexander VI, his father and himself, were to sup in the Vatican, he sent before a bottle of poisoned wine, and withal, strict order to the butler to keep it very safe. The Pope being come before his son, and calling for drink, the butler supposing this wine had not been so strictly recommended to his care, but only upon the account of its excellency, presented it forthwith to the Pope, and the duke himself coming in presently after, and being confident they had not meddled with his bottle, took also his cup; so that the father died immediately upon the spot, and the son, after having been long tormented with sickness, was reserved to another and a worse fortune.

Sometimes she seems to play upon us, just in the nick of an affair; Monsieur d'Estrees, at that time ensign to Monsieur de Vendome, and Monsieur de Licques, lieutenant in the company of the Duc d'Ascot, being both pretenders to the Sieur de Fougueselles' sister, though of several parties (as it oft falls out among frontier neighbors), the Sieur de Licques carried her; but on the same day he was married, and which was worse, before he went to bed to his wife, the bridegroom having a mind to break a lance in honor of his new bride, went out to skirmish near St. Omer, where the Sieur d'Estrees proving the stronger, took him prisoner, and the more to illustrate his victory, the lady was fain

*Conjugis ante coacta noui dimittere collum,
Quam ueniens una atque altera rursus hyems
Noctibus in longis auidum saturasset amorem,*

to request him of courtesy, to deliver up his prisoner to her, as he accordingly did, the gentlemen of France never denying anything to ladies.

Compelled to abstain from embracing her new spouse in her arms before two winters pass in succession, during their long nights had satiated her eager love. •
CATULL., 68.81

Does she not seem to be an artist here? Constantine, son of Helena, founded the empire of Constantinople, and so many ages after, Constantine, the son of Helen, put an end to it.

Sometimes she is pleased to emulate our miracles we are told, that King Clovis besieging Angouleme, the walls fell down of themselves by divine favor and Bouchet has it from some author, that King Robert having sat down before a city, and being stolen away from the siege to go keep the feast of St. Aignan at Orleans, as he was in devotion at a certain part of the Mass, the walls of the beleaguered city, without any manner of violence, fell down with a sudden ruin. But she did quite contrary in our Milan wars; for, le Capitaine Rense laying siege for us to the city Arona, and having carried a mine under a great part of the wall, the mine being sprung, the wall was lifted from its base, but dropped down again nevertheless, whole and entire, and so exactly upon its foundation, that the besieged suffered no inconvenience by that attempt.

Sometimes she plays the physician. Jason of Pherae being given over by the physicians, by reason of an imposthume in his breast, having a mind to rid himself of his pain, by death at least, threw himself in a battle desperately into the thickest of the enemy, where he was so fortunately wounded quite through the body, that the imposthume broke, and he was perfectly cured. Did she not also excel the painter Protogenes in his art? who having finished the picture of a dog quite tired and out of breath, in all the other parts excellently well to his own liking, but not being able to express, as he would, the slaver and foam that should come out of its mouth, vexed and angry at his work, he took his sponge, which by cleaning his pencils had imbibed several sorts of colors, and threw it in a rage against the picture, with an intent utterly to deface it; when fortune guiding the sponge to hit just upon the mouth of the dog, it there performed what all his art was not able to do. Does she not sometimes direct our counsels and correct them? Isabel, Queen of England, having to sail from Zealand into her own kingdom, with an army, in favor of her son against her husband, had been lost, had she come into the port she intended, being there laid wait for by the enemy; but fortune, against her will, threw her into another haven, where she landed in safety. And that man of old who, throwing a stone at a dog, hit and killed his mother-in-law, had he not reason to pronounce this verse:

Ταυτόματον ἡμῶν καλλίω βουλεύεται,

Fortune has more judgement than
we. • MEN., MONO., 726

Iceles had contracted with two soldiers to kill Timoleon at Adrana in Sicily. They took their time to do it when he was assisting at a sacrifice, and thrusting into the crowd, as they were making signs to one another, that now was a fit time to do their business, in steps a third, who, with a sword takes one of them full drive over the pate, lays him dead upon the place and runs away, which the others see, and concluding himself discovered and lost, runs to the altar and begs for mercy, promising to discover the whole truth, which as he was doing, and laying open the full conspiracy, behold the third man, who being apprehended, was, as a murderer, thrust and hauled by the people through the press, toward Timoleon, and the other most eminent persons of the assembly, before whom being brought, he cries out for pardon, pleading that he had justly slain his father's

murderer; which he, also, proving upon the spot, by sufficient witnesses, whom his good fortune very opportunely supplied him withal, that his father was really killed in the city of Leontini, by that very man on whom he had taken his revenge, he was presently awarded ten Attic minae, for having had the good fortune, by designing to revenge the death of his father, to preserve the life of the common father of Sicily. Fortune, truly, in her conduct surpasses all the rules of human prudence.

But to conclude: is there not a direct application of her favor, bounty, and piety manifestly discovered in this action? Ignatius the father and Ignatius the son being proscribed by the triumvirs of Rome, resolved upon this generous act of mutual kindness, to fall by the hands of one another, and by that means to frustrate and defeat the cruelty of the tyrants; and accordingly with their swords drawn, ran full drive upon one another, where fortune so guided the points, that they made two equally mortal wounds, affording withal so much honor to so brave a friendship, as to leave them just strength enough to draw out their bloody swords, that they might have liberty to embrace one another in this dying condition, with so close and hearty an embrace, that the executioner cut off both their heads at once, leaving the bodies still fast linked together in this noble bond, and their wounds joined mouth to mouth, affectionately sucking in the last blood and remainder of the lives of each other.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Catull.	Catullus, <i>Poems</i>
Men., Mono.	Menander, <i>Monostichoi</i>