I

BOOK ONE

1. Of Means and Ends

"Par divers moyens on arrive à pareille fin" [By diverse means one arrives at the same end] (I: 1) and "De l’âge" [Of age] (I: 57)

The time has long passed since Pierre Villey’s disparagement of Book One’s early chapters—"All one can say about most of these chapters is that there is nothing to say"—held sway.1 There has recently been more and more to say, especially about the first. Celso Martins Azar Filho reports that the first chapter “is today considered a kind of introduction” to the Essays because it presents “ideas Montaigne judged fundamental and indispensable to understanding his work. . . . In fact, this text could be compared to the overture to an opera, in which most of the elements or themes to be developed are already present.”2 Lawrence D. Kritzman writes of this chapter that because “each of its stories possesses its own language that contradicts the meaning of another story” it serves “as a nuclear thematic model for the Essais.”3 For

3. Lawrence D. Kritzman, Destruction/Découverte: Le Fonctionnement de la Rhetorique dans les
Frieda S. Brown, it justifies its liminal position as “the gateway,” even if it cannot be said to possess “the rich development and fullness of later and better known essays.”

Hugo Friedrich writes that its content justifies its position as the first chapter, for it “sets up the predominant moral theme of the Essais, namely the question of whether one can come to an understanding of concrete changeable man with general, rigid maxims.”

Edwin M. Duval writes, “One could hardly imagine a better introduction to the Essays. I say ‘introduction’ in the strong sense of the term, for the logical path of the chapter seems made to lead us . . . from the active world of wars to the contemplative world of the Essays, from exercitus to the exercise of our natural faculties.”

I am particularly taken with Duval’s formulation, because the kind of reading in which I invite you to engage is indeed such an exercise in contemplation, where there is at each juncture a puzzle to be solved—that of discovering how does one chapter respond to its symmetrically-linked partner—and where each chapter, by virtue of its place in Montaigne’s overall scheme, has a claim on our attention. Wars and cruelty and begging for mercy are important (so much so that David Quint described his book Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy as “an extended commentary on Montaigne’s first essay”), but to the degree to which the Essays are not just the reflection of the writer’s thought and not merely historically conditioned by their times the last chapter of Book One should merit as careful a reading as the first.

“De l’aage” (1: 57) is much less studied than “Par divers moyens” because its apparent subject is much less compelling. Why should we care as much about natural life expectancy and compulsory retirement from public service as we would about how to escape from the wrath of a vengeful captor?

But if we are interested in why Montaigne ordered the chapters the way he did, if we can catch enough clues to begin to overhear one chapter conversing with another, and if we can tune in to the ways the Essays turn their topics into allusions to their own arrangement, then we can understand what Montaigne found interesting about tenure of office and the unnaturalness of natural deaths. This first symmetrical pair provides a good introduction.
to the others, for it will be characteristic of those as it is of this pair that the chapters speak not only of the same things but of opposite things. As we will see in this instance, the “pareille fin” to which “divers moyens” lead is life in the first chapter but in the last, death.

“La plus commune façon” [The commonest way]—the Essays’ first chapter began in 1580—“d’amollir les coeurs, de ceux qu’on a offensez, lors qu’ayant vengeance en main, ils nous tiennent à leur mercy, c’est de les émouuoir à commiseration & a pitié: toutes fois la braverie, la constance, & la resolution, moyens tous contraires ont quelque fois servi a ce mesme effet” [of softening the hearts of those we have offended, when with vengeance in hand they hold us at their mercy, is to move them to commiseration and pity; however, audacity, steadfastness, and resolution—entirely opposite means—have sometimes served to produce this same effect] (I: 1, 7a, DM 1; 3*). Thus the “divers moyens” to which the chapter’s title refers turn out to number only two, of which one is most commonly used while the other has only “sometimes” [quelque fois] worked. But from the evidence Montaigne goes on to cite, despite the minority status the first sentence gives it, the second method appears the better choice. Of the seven anecdotes related in 1580, to which an eighth was added in 1588 and two more after 1588, in only one is the first method successful—and then just barely. The citizens of Thebes, having brought their military captains to trial for having stayed in command past their allotted term, absolved “à toutes peines” [just barely] Pelopidas, who yielded under the weight of their accusations and made “supplications” to escape the penalty. On the other hand, Epamnondas proudly recounted his mighty deeds and reproached the Thebans for accusing him. He was let off as well, the citizens barely having the heart to cast their ballots, and walking away from the assembly singing his praises (I: 1, 8a, DM 5–6; 4*).

In all the other cases Montaigne cites, the second means is resorted to. In the 1580 edition, in five out of six cases where the second is tried it is successful; in the three added in subsequent editions it is not, but in none of those three is the first means even attempted. In three out of the five instances in 1580 in which the second method succeeds the first method had been first tried but proved fruitless.

It would appear that although the first method is the most commonly attempted (a conclusion to which we might have arrived anyway in presuming that most people lack the courage to try the other), the cumulative effect of the examples cited is to suggest that the second is the better choice. In this way, the chapter finds a parallel in “De l’aage,” where a certain common opinion is also shown to be wrong: “Je ne puis recevoir la façon dequoy nous establissons la durée de nostre vie. Je voy que les sages l’accoursissent bien
fort au pris de la *commune* opinion” [I cannot accept the *way* in which we establish the duration of our life. I see that the sages, as compared with the *common* opinion, make it a great deal shorter] (I: 57, 326a, DM 490; 236*). I have italicized *façon* and *commune* in this quotation from the first two sentences of I: 57 because they recall the first words of the first sentence of I: 1: “La plus *commune façon* d’amollir les coeurs, de ceux qu’on a offensez, lors qu’ayant vengeance en main. . . .” Thus Book One begins by setting up a verbal echo, and begins its conclusion by completing it.

Montaigne’s point is that an average human lifespan is shorter than we think, and that the common opinion is wrong as well that holds that most of us can expect to die of old age: “c’est la *façon* de mort la plus rare de toutes, & la moins en usage. Nous l’appelons seule naturelle, comme si c’estoit contre nature de voir un homme se rompre le col d’une cheute, s’estoufer d’un naufrage, se laisser surprendre à la peste ou à un pleuresi . . . on doit à l’aventure appeller plus tost naturel ce qui est general, *commun*, & universel” [it is the rarest *way* of dying of all, and the least in use. We call it alone natural, as if it were unnatural to see a man break his neck in a fall, drown in a shipwreck, fall victim to the plague or pleurisy. . . . One should perhaps instead call natural that which is general, *common*, and universal] (I: 57, 326a; DM 491–92; 236–37*). The first words of the other chapter—“La plus *commune façon*”—are echoed again here, where another *façon*, being rare, is not *commun[e]*.8

Other verbal echoes will lead us to see just how deeply these two chapters parallel each other. In the first one’s title, by diverse means “on arrive à pareille fin,” while the end of which Montaigne writes in the other is an end at which one likewise arrives: Cato the Younger thought that his age of 48 years was “bien meur & bien avancé, considerant combien peu d’hommes y *arrivent*” [very ripe and advanced, considering how few men *arrive* there] (I: 57, 326a, DM 491; 236*); the essayist goes on to declare, “mon opinion est de regarder que l’aage auquel nous sommes *arrivez*, c’est un aage auquel peu de gens *arrivent*” [my opinion is to consider that the age at which we have *arrived* is an age at which people few *arrive*] (I: 57, 326a, DM 493; 237*). Furthermore, death is an end at which we all arrive by diverse means: of a broken neck, of drowning, of pleurisy and the plague, and once in two or three hundred years, of old age.

In both chapters one arrives at one’s end by diverse means. In the chapter whose title makes a point of the diversity of those means, there is a choice of two such means, though the one commonly attempted, the evidence shows,

8. Old age was a “*façon de mort*” in 1580 and 1588; in 1595 it became an “espèce.”
is only rarely a genuine means to the end in question. In the other chapter, the means are genuinely diverse (ironically so, given that it is the other chapter’s title, not this one’s, that speaks of their diversity), though the one commonly thought to be common is, the evidence shows, rare.

Of all the cases cited in 1: 1, only one illustrates the title’s assertion by a contrasting diversity of means leading to the same end. In all the other cases, either the first means is tried unsuccessfully and then the second leads to the desired end, or only the second is attempted, and not always with success. Only in the case of Pelopidas and Epaminondas do both means lead to a “pareille fin.” And only in that case is the end really the same, that of avoiding death at the hands of the same avenger for the same reason. It is, indeed, a special case. By coincidence (or maybe not) it is also features the rarest of echoes with “De l’aage.” Pelopidas and Epaminondas were brought before the bar of justice and obliged to defend their lives “pour avoir continué leur charge outre le temps qui leur avoit esté prescript & preordonné” [for having continued their mandate beyond the time that had been prescribed and foreordained for them] (I: 1, 81, DM 5; 4*). In 1: 57 a death from old age is “la borne, au dela de laquelle nous n’yrons pas, & que la loy de nature a prescript pour n’estre point outre-passée” [the limit beyond which we will not go, and that the law of nature has prescribed not to be passed beyond] (I: 57, 326a, DM 492; 237*). Nowhere else in Book One do outre (either alone or as a prefix) and prescrit (whether masculine or feminine, singular or plural) appear in the same sentence. Both the law of nature and the law of Thebes prescribe a length of time that one cannot pass beyond.

Pelopidas and Epaminondas as military men who retire too late from their assigned duty find an inverse parallel in “De l’aage” when Montaigne takes up the case of soldiers retiring too soon. Servius Tullius let his knights retire from service at age 47; Augustus at 45. Montaigne thinks that is too young an age, preferring 55 or 60. In fact, “Je serois d’advis qu’on estan-

9. Epaminondas occupies a special place in Montaigne’s esteem, with Homer and Alexander one of the three greatest men of history in the chapter “Des plus excellens hommes [On the most excellent men] (II: 36)—in fact, of the three, “le plus excellent, à mon gré” [the most excellent, to my mind] (II: 36, 756a; 572). He is in Montaigne’s personal mythology the heroic equivalent of Plutarch, his most esteemed writer. Part of his fascination for Epaminondas is tied up with his fascination for Plutarch, that is for a part of Plutarch that will remain forever inaccessible to Montaigne, the Life of Epaminondas Plutarch wrote (together with the parallel Life of Scipio Aemilianus) that is missing from his Parallel Lives. “O quel desplaisir le temps m’a faict d’oster de nos yeux . . . la couple de vies justement la plus noble qui fust en Plutarque” [Oh, what pain time has given me by removing from our eyes . . . the most noble couple of lives that were in Plutarch] (II: 36, 757c; 573*). Epaminondas’ contemporary equivalent in Montaigne’s estimation is surely Etienne de La Boétie, whose text (the twenty-nine sonnets Montaigne made the centerpiece of Book One) likewise disappeared, in the passage of time, from the text of these Essays that, as I will try to show, have much in common with the Parallel Lives (a parallel that Marcel Tetel has suggested (Montaigne: Updated Edition. [Boston: G. K. Hall / Twayne’s World Authors Series, 1990], 87).
I. Book One

“De la tristesse” [Of sadness] (I: 2) and “Des prières” [Of prayers] (I: 56)

In “Des prières” Montaigne argues against praying any prayer but the Lord’s Prayer, which he finds suitable for all occasions: before and after meals, upon
rising and going to bed; indeed “à toutes actions particulieres, ausquelles on
a accoustumé de mesler des prieres, je voudroy que ce fut le seul patenostre
que les Chrestiens y emplioissent” [on all particular actions with which we
are accustomed to associate prayers, I should like it to be the Lord's Prayer
alone that Christians employ] (I: 56, 318a, DM 482; 230*). Not only is it
ture that it “dit tout ce qui nous sert” [says all that serves us] (I: 56, DM 483;
230*),

but no other prayer is going to do any good anyway, for God “nous
favorise selon la raison de sa justice, non selon nos inclinations & volon-
tez” [favors us according to the reason of his justice, not according to our
inclinations and desires] (I: 56, 318a, DM 483; 230*). Montaigne's posi-
tion against putting religious thoughts into any words other than those God
has prescribed extends to his approval of the Church's forbidding “l’usage
promiscue, temeraire & indiscret” [the promiscuous, reckless, and indiscreet
use] of the Psalms. “Cette voix est trop divine. pour n’avoir autre usage que
d’exercer les poulmons et plaire à nos oreilles. C’est de la conscience qu’elle
doit estre produite, & non pas de la langue” [This voice is too divine to have
no other use than to exercise our lungs and please our ears; it is from the con-
science that it should be produced, and not from the tongue] (I: 56, 320a,
DM 484–85; 232*). The prayers men make are too often not worth making,
and betray unchristian thoughts. “L’avaricieux le prie pour la conservation
vaine et superflue de ses tresors” [The miser prays to him for the vain and
superfluous conservation of his treasures] (I: 56, 324a, DM 486; 235); the
thief, the murderer, and the adulterer pray for success in their enterprises.

What could this drastic limitation of what ought to be said in prayer
have to do with sadness, the ostensible subject of I: 2, “De la tristesse”? We
can arrive at the answer once we realize that I: 2 is actually about emotions,
of which sadness is but one example, that are so great that they cannot be
expressed. Psammenitus, for example, said not a word when his daughter
was taken prisoner and his son put to death, but began to beat his head in

10. In post-1588 editions, “seul” is replaced by “sinon seulement, au moins toujours” [if not only,
at least always] (I: 56, 318c).

11. Altered after 1588 to “toute ce qu’il nous faut” [all we need], incorrectly attributed by Villey (p.
318) and by Rat (p. 303) to the “A” stratum.

12. Altered after 1588 to “et nous favorise selon la raison d’icelle, non selon nos demandes” [et
favors us according to its reasons, not according to our demands].

13. Fausta Garavini likewise notes that “the title ‘Of sadness’ is far from embracing all the content
of the chapter.” After the beginning, “it all has very little to do with sadness, except that what underlies
these successive displacements—from sadness to love to joy to shame—the leveling similarity that welds
these examples together is the excessive character of passion, whose effects are fatal.” Pp. 131–32 of her
article “Le Fantasme de la mort muette (à propos de I, 2, ‘De la tristesse”),” Bulletin de la Société des Amis
such passion is not just death but also silence.
grief when he saw one of his servants among the captives: “c’est, respondit-il, que ce seul dernier desplaisir se peut signifier par larmes, les deux premiers surpassans de bien loin tout moyen de se pouvoir exprimer” [“it is,” he said, “because this last grief alone can be signified by tears; the first two far surpass any power of expression”] (I: 2,12a, DM 8; 6). Montaigne cites the case of the painter who could depict the grief of the onlookers at Iphigenia’s sacrifice but “quand se vint au pere de la fille, il le peignit le visage couvert, comme si nulle contenance ne pouvoit representer ce degré de deuil” [when he came to the girl's father portrayed him with his face covered, as if no countenance could represent that degree of grief] (I: 2, 12a, DM 9; 6). Likewise, poets depict Niobe as mute as stone at the news of her children's death. As Petrarch wrote, speaking of love, not sadness, “Chi puo dir, com’ egli arde é in picciol fuoco” [He who can say how he burns, burns little] (I: 2, 13a, DM 10; 7); similarly, Seneca: “Curae leves loquuntur, ingentes stupent” [Light cares can speak, but heavy ones are mute] (I: 2, 13a, DM 11; 8). That this chapter, despite its title, is not about sadness but rather the impossibility of expressing, and in some cases even surviving, extremely strong emotions really becomes apparent when Montaigne leaves sadness behind to move on to instances of lust and unexpected pleasure, and then to examples of persons dying from joy: a mother who saw her son return from battle alive, Sophocles, Dionysius the tyrant, Talva, and Pope Leo X. He concludes with a curious case of death from shame, that of Diodorus the dialectician, who collapsed and died “pour en son eschole & en public ne se pouvoir desveloper d’un argument qu’on luy avoit faict” [because in his own school and in public he could not refute an argument that had been put to him] (I: 2, 14a, DM 12; 8*).

The discussion in “De la tristesse” turns not only away from its own title but towards the discussion in “Des prieres” of what Montaigne there says of what “doit estre produit” [should be produced] “de la conscience . . . & non pas de la langue” [from the conscience . . . and not from the tongue] (I: 56, 320a, DM 484–85; 232*). In 1: 2 a passion that can be expressed is not worth expressing (“Chi puo dir, com’ egli arde é in picciol fuoco”), while in 1: 56 a prayer of human invention, as opposed to the Lord’s Prayer, is not worth expressing, either because God knows our needs anyway and will dispense them according to his justice with no regard for our desire or because such prayers are selfish and criminal. What is genuine and heartfelt—be it grief or piety—cannot be expressed. In 1: 2 it cannot be expressed at all; in 1: 56 it cannot be humanly expressed, only divinely expressed in the words God gave us to say in the Lord’s Prayer.

Yet another instance of the general rule that the deepest passion cannot find expression is “la défaillance fortuite, qui surprent les amoureus si hors
de saison, cete glace qui les saisit par la force d’une ardeur extreme au giron mesme de la joüyssance” [the accidental failing that surprises lovers so unseas-
sonably, this freezing that seizes them by the force of extreme ardor in the very lap of enjoyment] (I: 2, 13ab, DM 11; 7). Montaigne added the words
I have italicized in 1588. The sexual context of this giron14 clashes intrigu-
ingly with the devotional context of an answering giron in “Des prières”: “la
loi divine . . . nous appelle à soy, ainsi fautier et destables comme nous sommes: elle nous tend les bras et nous reçoit en son giron, pour vilains, ords
et bourbeux que nous soyons” [divine law . . . calls us to herself, sinful and
detestable as we are; she stretches out her arms and receives us in her lap, no
matter how vile, filthy, and besmirched we are] (I: 56, 325a, DM 489; 236*).
Instead of praying even memorized prayers insincerely with “l’ame pleine de concupiscence, non tocheé de repentance” [our soul full of lust, untouched
by repentance] (I: 56, 325a, DM 489; 236), we should simply crawl into
that lap, and be suitably grateful that God pardons us. God as a mother with
outstretched arms and a waiting lap is now (beginning in 1588) paralleled by
a mistress with an equally welcoming lap, though it waits in vain.

In 1582 Montaigne made an addition to the beginning of I: 56: “Je pro-
pose icy des fantasies informes & irresolues, comme font ceux qui publient
des questions doubteuses à debattre aux escoles” [I put forward formless and
unresolved notions, as do those who publish doubtful questions to debate in
the schools] (I: 56, 317a’; 229).15 He doubtless inserted these introductory
remarks (which continue beyond the passage quoted here) to mollify the
Papal censor, who had objected to what he had written in this chapter about
the inefficacy of any prayer other than the Lord’s Prayer. Yet now the begin-
nning of this chapter also echoes the end of I: 2, with its account of Diodorus
the dialectician who died of shame “pour en son eschole & en public ne se
pouvoir desveloper d’un argument qu’on luy avoir faict” [in his own school
and in public not being able to refute an argument that had been put to him]
(I: 2, 14a, DM 12; 8).

We have seen that the two chapters talk about the same thing; do they
also talk about it in opposite ways, as do I: 1 and I: 57? Indeed, and by
repeating a certain word. In the first example in “De la tristesse” of an emo-
tion too great to be expressed, Psammenitus remained motionless and mute

14. And of this jouissance; elsewhere in the Essays, jouir can mean to have an orgasm: “Amasis, Roy
d’Egypte, espousa Laodice tresbelle fille Grecque: et luy . . . se trouva court à jouir d’elle, et menaça de
la tuer, estimant que ce fust quelque sorcerie” [Amasis, king of Egypt, married Laodice, a very beautiful
Greek girl; and he . . . fell short when it came to enjoying her, and threatened to kill her, thinking it was
some sort of sorcery] (I: 21, 101c; 71).

15. Essais. Reproduction photographique de la deuxième édition (Bordeaux 1582) (Paris: Société des
Textes Français Modernes, 2005), 296.
when his daughter was led away, and when his son was taken out to be killed, “se maintint en cete mesme contenance” [he maintained the same countenance] (I: 2, 11a, DM 7; 6*), which is to say that his countenance communicated nothing at all. And a painter chose to represent Iphigenia’s father with his face covered, “comme si nulle contenance ne pouvoit representer ce degre de deuil” [as if no countenance could represent that degree of grief] (I: 2,12a, DM 9; 6). In both instances, the countenance does not communicate, whether from taciturnity or invisibility. In “Des prieres,” a countenance is likewise associated with a failure to communicate: “Nous prions par usage et par coutume: ou, pour mieux dire, nous lisons ou prononçons nos prières: ce n’est en fin, que contenance” [We pray out of habit and custom, or to speak more correctly, we read or pronounce our prayers. It is, in the end, but countenance] (I: 56, 319a, DM 484; 230–31*). Prayer is communication with God, but here merely reading or pronouncing prayers is said to be mere countenance, undertaken by someone only pretending to pray and therefore not really communicating. It is all appearance, and is thus the opposite of Agamemnon’s countenance because his was entirely invisible, and communicated his grief all the better for that reason.

In a post-1588 alteration contenance in the I: 56 passage just quoted became mine [“outward show” or “facial expression”]. But in the meantime, two other contenances had appeared in I: 56, as Montaigne kept tinkering with the text. The first to be added, in 1588,16 appears in a passage whose sense parallels that of the passage just quoted about prayers spoken from habit which are nothing more than countenance: “Il semble à la verité, que nous nous servons de nos prieres, comme ceux qui emploient les paroles sainctes & divines à des sorceleries & effectz magiciens, & que nous facions nostre conte que ce soit de la contexture, ou son, ou suite des motz, ou de nostre contenance, que depende leur effect” [It seems, in truth, that we use our prayers like those who use holy and divine words for sorceries and magical effects; and that we count on their effect depending on the texture, sound, or sequence of the words, or on our countenance] (I: 56, 325ab, DM 489; 236*). The words “ou de nostre contenance” are those added in 1588. This passage is fascinating for the way it seems to allude to the phenomenon of which it is an instance, the repetition of words from one chapter to another—the common contexture linking chapters like these through the repetition of the word itself contenance. Montaigne’s zeal for using the same prayer (the Lord’s Prayer) on all sorts of different occasions and contexts now seems self-referential too, for that is what he does with particular words and

16. Villey incorrectly dates it from 1580.
“suite[s] des mots,” from outre and prescript in the previous pair of chapters to countenance here.

A third contenance appears in the following 1588 passage, concerning the proper use of the Psalms: “et y apporter le corps meme disposé en contenance qui tesmoigne une particuliere attention et reverence” [and always bring even the body disposed in a countenance that bears witness to a particular attentiveness and reverence] (I: 56, 321b; 232*). In opposition to the uncommunicative countenances of Psammenitus and Agamemnon, this one does communicate; in contrast to the other two in “Des prieres,” it is sincere.

To sum up, to the presence in I: 2 of a missing contenance (in the depiction of Agamemnon’s grief) I: 56 responds with a complicated series of textual changes in which contenances gradually appear and disappear, and whose expressive power is, ironically, problematic.

3. Something to Hide

“Nos affections s’emportent au dela de nous” [Our feelings carry themselves beyond us] (I: 3) and “Des senteurs” [Of smells] (I: 55)

In I: 3 Montaigne writes of posthumous concerns such as the belief that celestial favors “nous accompaignent au tombeau, & continuent à nos reliques” [accompany us to the tomb, and continue with our remains] (I: 3, 18a, DM 13; 10*). He cites, in 1580 (adding more later), the cases of: the defeated defenders of a besieged fortress being obliged to carry out the keys of the city on the body of the deceased commander of the siege; an argument over whether it was seemly to ask for safe conduct through enemy territory to carry the body of the Venetian commander to Venice, since in life he would never have been afraid of his enemies; King Edward I of England requesting that after his death his bones be carried onto the battlefield “comme si la destinée avoit fatalement ataché la victoire à ses membres” [as if destiny had fatally attached victory to his limbs] (I: 3, 18a, DM 14; 11); and Captain Bayard, who when mortally wounded had his steward set him at the base of a tree facing the enemy. Montaigne then provides (and in the 1580 edition concludes the chapter with) an “exemple aussi remarquable pour cete consideration, que nul des precedens” [example as remarkable for the present consideration as any of the preceding ones], that of the Emperor Maximilian, who had many great qualities, including physical beauty. But unlike most kings, who are not averse to conducting official business while seated on the
toilet, he would let no one see him in that situation. He would even urinate in private, “aussi religieux qu’une fille à ne descouvrir ny à medecin ny à qui que ce fut les parties qu’on a accoustumé de tenir cachées: & jusques à telle superstition, qu’il ordonna par parolles expresses de son testament, qu’on luy attachat des calessons quand il seroit mort” [as scrupulous as a virgin not to uncover, either to a doctor or to anyone else whatever, the parts that are customarily kept hidden: and to such a point of superstition that he ordered in so many words in his will that they should put underdrawers on him when he was dead] (I: 3, 18–19a, DM 16; 11*).

This piquant anecdote finds lexical and situational parallels in the following passage from “Des senteurs” (comprising a fourth of the fewer than two hundred words that made up that chapter in 1580): “La plus parfaicte senteur d’une femme c’est ne sentir à rien. Et les bonnes senteurs estrangerieres, on a raison de les tenir pour suspectes à ceus qui s’en servent, & d’estimer qu’elles soient employées pour couvrir quelque defaut naturel de ce costé là” [The most perfect smell for a woman is to smell of nothing. And perfumes are rightly considered suspicious in those who use them, and thought to be used to cover up some natural defect in that quarter] (I: 55, 314a, DM 481; 228). Some “défaut naturel” is what one could reasonably conclude Maximilian to have had and to have wanted to conceal. In that light, what the emperor refused to uncover parallels what perfumes are used to couvrir.

“Des senteurs” closed with the following Latin quotation in 1580 (and continued to include it in subsequent editions): “Posthume non bene olet, qui bene semper olet” [Postumus, one does not smell good who always smells good] (I: 55, 314a, DM 481; 228*). Considering that chapter I: 3 is about what happens after death, it is an interesting coincidence that Martial, the poet whose line Montaigne is citing, was addressing someone who happened to be named Postumus, the superlative of the adverb post in Latin, meaning a last-born male child. Martial (ca. 38–104 C.E.) spelled it without the h; Montaigne in quoting him spells it with.17 The word was “in late Latin written posthumus through erroneous attribution to humus the earth or (as explained by Servius [ca. 420 C.E.]) humare to bury” (Oxford English

17. Here is Martial’s epigram, whose fourth line Montaigne quotes: Esse quid hoc dicam, quod oles bene murrum / Quodque tibi est numquam non alienus odor? / Hoc mihi suspectum est, quod oles bene, Postume, semper: / Postume, non bene olet qui bene semper olet [What am I to understand from the circumstance, that your kisses always smell of myrrh, and that you never have about you an odor other than unnatural? That you always smell so agreeably, Postumus, makes me suspect that you have something to conceal. He does not smell pleasantly, Postumus, who always smells pleasantly] (Martial, Epigrams. Book 2. Bohn’s Classical Library (1897) at http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/martial_epigrams_book02.htm).
Humare becomes in French inhumé, a verb that appears twice in I: 3, and nowhere else: (1) in a 1588 addition: “par les loix Grecques, celuy qui demandoit à l’ennemy un corps pour l’inhumer, renonçait à la victoire” [by Greek laws he who asked the enemy for a body to bury it renounced the victory] (I: 3, 17b; 10); (2) in a post-1588 addition: the Athenians executed their captains because after a naval victory they pursued the enemy rather than “recueillir et inhumé leurs morts” [gather up and bury their dead] (I: 3, 20c; 13). These occurrences of the verb intimately connected to the h in “Posthume” as Montaigne spells it are part of the fabric of intratextual connections that he continued to create between his symmetrically paired chapters in successive editions. The last line of “Des senteurs” in the first edition uncannily combines the posthumous nature of those affections that “s’emportent au dela de nous,” in other words the entire argument of I: 3, with the argument and theme of I: 55. This is true even though the contexts—posthumous effects and smells—would seem at first glance to have nothing at all to do with each other.

The posthumous concerns listed in I: 3 are presented as absurdities, particularly as they culminate in Maximilian’s insistence on being buried in underpants. Montaigne remarks that the latter should have added a codicil to his will, that whoever attach them to his corpse be blindfolded. The idea that celestial favors accompany us to the tomb and continue with our remains is in Montaigne’s estimation wrong. Such favor may have existed in life for some but they do not persist beyond it, and are not, as Edward I seemed to have thought, destined to remain attached to our bones. “Des senteurs,” however, offers a concrete, material case of something that originates in a body yet does persist beyond it: senteurs. The 1588 edition develops this opposition between a persistence that isn’t (in I: 3) and a persistence that is (in I: 55) and a post-1588 addition develops it still more. A 1588 addition to I: 55 enriches the comparison by creating verbal echoes with the other chapter: “Quelque odeur que ce soit, c’est merveille combien elle s’attache à moy, et combien j’ay la peau propre à s’en abreuver. Celuy qui se plaint de nature, desquoy elle a laissé l’homme sans instrument à porter les senteurs aux nez, a tort, car elles se portent elles mesmes” [Whatever the odor is, it is a marvel how it attaches itself to me and how apt my skin is to imbibe it. He who complains of nature that she has left man without an instrument to carry smells to his nose is wrong, for they carry themselves] (I: 55, 315b; 228*). That smells “se portent elles mesmes” [carry themselves] places them in parallel with the affections that in I: 3’s title “s’emportent” [carry themselves away]. That Montaigne in this passage should focus on the portability of smells is a
direct invitation to read this chapter in tandem with I: 3, for in the instances he cites there that verb keeps insisting:

1. The defeated citizens of Rancon were obliged to “porter les clés de la place sur le corps” [carry the keys to the city on the body] (I: 3, 17a, DM 12; 10*) of their dead enemy.

2. A fellow officer was opposed to asking the enemy’s permission to “raporter” [carry back] the body of Bartolomeo Alviano through enemy territory to Venice (I: 3, 17a, DM 12; 10).

3. Edward I gave instructions to “porter” [carry] his bones into every battle against the Scots (I: 3, 18a, DM 14; 10–11).

To these from 1580 Montaigne added two more in 1588:

4. John Vischa wanted his followers to make a drum out of his skin to “porter” [carry] into battle (I: 3, 18b; 11).

5. There were Indians who “portoient” [carried] one of their captains’ bones into combat against the Spaniards (I: 3, 18b; 11).

In the first sentence of the passage quoted above I italicize “s’atache” [attaches itself] as well. Here’s why: when Montaigne writes of King Edward I of England requesting that after his death his bones be carried onto the battlefield he adds this remark: “comme si la destinée avoit fatalement ataché la victoire à ses membres” [as if destiny had fatally attached victory to his limbs] (I: 3, 18a, DM 14; 11). Odors are not only, as some believe posthumous powers to be, portable; like them, they are attachable as well.

The word play extends to the other instance of attaching in I: 3, Maximilian’s demand “qu’on luy attachat des calessons quand il seroit mort” [that one attach underdrawers on him when he died] (I: 3, 19a, DM 16; 11*). The connection is to the covering role those attachable drawers would play, for smells can cover too, as we have seen: “les bonnes senteurs estrangieres, on a raison de les tenir pour suspectes a ceux qui s’en servent, & d’estimer qu’elles soient emploiees pour couvrir quelque defaut naturel de ce costé la” [perfumes are rightly considered suspicious in those who use them, and thought to be used to cover up some natural defect in that quarter] (I: 55, 314a, DM 481; 314).

Montaigne made a distinction between his first two examples in I: 3 (the surrender of Rancon and Bartolomeo Alviano) and his third (Edward I, who wanted his bones carried onto future battlefields): “Les premiers ne reservent
I. Book One

au tombeau, que la reputation acquise par leurs actions passées: mais cetuy
cy y veut encore trainer la puissance d’agir” [The first examples reserve for
the tomb only the reputation acquired by their past actions; but the latter
wants to include as well the power to act] (I: 3, 18a, DM 14; 11*). In the
passage added to I: 55 in 1588 in which he shows that odors have the same
portability divine favor is claimed to have in I: 3 he goes on to explain how,
like the victory attached to Edward I’s bones, it has the power to act: “Les
medecins pourroient, croi-je, tirer des odeurs plus d’usage qu’ils ne font: car
j’ay souvent aperçeu qu’elles me changent, et agissent en mes esprits selon
qu’elles sont” [The doctors might, I believe, derive more use from odors
than they do; for I have often noticed that they change me and act upon my
spirits according to their properties] (I: 55, 315b; 229*). He cites incense in
churches, which has the power to awaken and purify the senses, leading us to
contemplation.

It is as if the parallel chapters were engaged over the years and through
successive editions in a continuing conversation, as additions in one reply
to things said in the other. We already saw instances of this in the previous
pairing, I: 2 and I: 56, finding alterations that added still more instances of
contenance to I: 56 as if in response to those in I: 2. So far we have seen this
happen in the case of porter, s’attacher, and agir (with I: 3 even appearing to
respond with two more instances of porter to I: 55’s reply to its first three
instances). It happens again in a post-1588 addition to I: 3 that appears to
echo two other words from the I: 55 passage just quoted, changer and selon:
“nature nous faict voir, que plusieurs choses mortes ont encore des relations
occultes à la vie. Le vin s’altere aux caves, selon aucunes mutations des sai-
sons de sa vigne. Et la chair de venaison change d’estat aux saloirs et de goust,
selon les loix de la chair vive, à ce qu’on dit” [nature shows us that many dead
things still have occult relations to life. Wine alters in the cellars according
to certain seasonal changes in its vine. And venison changes its condition and
flavor in the salting tubs according to the laws of the live flesh, so they say]
(I: 3, 21c; 13). Though both the preposition selon and the verb changer are
so common that one or the other of them can be found in almost any chap-
ter, they appear in the same sentence only here, in this late addition to I: 3,
and in the passage in I: 55 where Montaigne says that odors “me changent, et
agissent en mes esprits selon qu’elles sont” [change me and act upon my spirits
according to their properties] (I: 55, 315b; 229*). The conversation continues,
as well as the metafiction: like the dead and living venison chapters 3 and
55 have an occult relation to each other, each changing according to [selon]
changes that occur in the other.
4. Frivolous and Vain

“How the soul discharges its passions on false objects when the true are lacking” (I: 4) and “Of vain subtleties” (I: 54)

As Michel Butor points out (Essais sur les Essais, 164), “Des vaines subtilitez” (I: 54) is the central chapter of the Essays’ 107 (57 + 37 + 13), even though the last 13 chapters, comprising Book Three, would not appear until 1588. Yet Montaigne could have already envisioned that there would be 13 more chapters to complete the 94 in the first two books. In fact, there is evidence that he was aware in writing I: 54 that it would become the numerical center of the whole:

1. The last sentence of the chapter places the Essays themselves in a middle position, suggesting that the chapter itself could be a microcosm of the whole: “si ces essais estoient dignes qu’on en jugeat, il en pourroit advenir à mon advis, qu’ilz ne plairoient guiere aus espritz grossiers & ignorans, ny guiere aus delicatz & savans. Ceux la ny entendroint pas assez, ceux cy y entendroient trop, ils trouveroient place entre ces deux extremitiez” [if these essays were worthy of being judged, it seems to me that they would hardly please gross and ignorant minds nor delicate and scholarly ones either. The former would not understand enough; the latter would understand too much. They would find a place between these two extremities] (I: 54, 313a, DM 480; 227*). Montaigne made two successive changes to the very last words, each of which intensified this centering effect. The first change was to add the phrase “ils trouveroient place entre ces deux extremités,” which did not appear on page 480 of the 1580 but among the errata in the front of the book (“Les plus insignes fautes survenues en l’impression du premier livre” [The most egregious errors arising in the printing of the first book]). Of all the fautes it is by the far the most substantial, the other twenty-nine concerning only commas, periods, or the addition or alteration of at most one or two words at a time. The only erratum that is an entire sentence, it looks less like a printer’s error than an author’s afterthought. In any case, he apparently wanted to make sure these last words, which so curiously seem to allude to the chapter itself, would not get left out of his text. He had

another afterthought in 1582, when he changed these words to “Ils pourroient vivoter en la moyenne region” [They might be able to get by in the middle region]. Of these two changes the first (“ils trouveroient place entre ces deux extremitez”) situated the Essays between two extremities; the second (“Ils pourroient vivoter en la moyenne region”) placed them not just somewhere between two extremes but more precisely in the middle.

2. This middle chapter is a chapter about middles—middles between extremes that touch. Montaigne writes that at his house he and his friends had just been trying to see who could think of the greatest number of things “qui se tienent par les deux boutz estremes” [that are connected by two extremes], such as the title “Sire,” used only for kings and the lower social levels, nowhere in-between; similarly, “Dames.” He cites Democritus’s opinion that gods and beasts have senses more acute than men, “qui sont au moyen estage” [who are on the middle level] (I: 54, 311a, DM 577; 226*).

Sometimes the middle is a good place to be: “La foiblesse qui nous vient de froideur & desgoutement aux exercices de Venus, elle nous vient aussi d’un appetit trop vehement & d’une chaleur desreglee” [The incapacity that comes over us in the sports of Venus from lack of ardor and loss of attraction comes as well from too vehement a desire and an unruly lust] (I: 54, 312a; DM 477–78; 226*). “L’enfance & la decrepitude se rencontrent en imbecilité de cerveau. L’avarice & la profusion en pareil desir d’attirer & d’acquerir” [Infancy and decrepitude meet in weakness of the brain; avarice and extravagance, in a like desire to take and acquire] (I: 54, 312a, DM 479; 226).

Sometimes the middle is a bad place to be:

La bestise & la sagesse se rencontrent en mesme point de gout & de resolution à la souffrance des accidens humains. Les sages gourmandent & commandent le mal, & les autres l’ignorent. Ceux cy sont, par maniere de dire, au deça des accidens : les autres au dela, lesquels apres en avoir bien poisé & considéré les qualitez, les avoir mesurez & jugez telz qu’ils sont, ils s’eslancent au dessus par force d’un vigoreus courage. . . . L’ordinaire & moyenne condition des hommes loge entre ces deux extremitez, qui est de ceux qui aperçoivent les maux, les goustent, & ne les peuvent supporter.

[Stupidity and wisdom meet at the same point of feeling and of resolving to endure human accidents. The wise curb and control the evil; the others are not aware of it. The latter are, so to speak, on this side of accidents, the former beyond them; for the wise man, after having well weighed and considered their qualities and measured and judged them for what they are,
springs above them by the power of a vigorous courage. . . . The ordinary and middle condition of men lodges between these two extremes, which is that of those who perceive evils, feel them, and cannot endure them.] (I: 54, 312a, DM 478–79; 226*)

3. In I: 54 Montaigne refers to the overall shape of certain literary texts. “Nous voyons des oeufz, des boules, des ailes, des haches façonnées anciennement par les Grecs avec la mesure de leurs vers en les allongeant ou accourssissant: en maniere qu’ilz viennent à representer telle ou telle figure” [We see eggs, balls, wings, hatchets, shaped by the Greeks of old with the measure of their verses, by lengthening some lines and shortening others so as to represent one or another of these figures] (I: 54, 311a, DM 475; 225). In aligning his chapters in symmetrical pairs so that within each book those extremes touch, Montaigne gives a certain form to his Essays. What that form resembles is not a physical object like an egg or a hatchet but what he goes on to describe in “Des vaines subtilitez”: extremes that meet and a middle that is sometimes valorized and sometimes put into question. This is most readily apparent in Book One, whose middle is unlike any other chapter and is presented as a text by another hand, and one which turned up at the last minute by chance. Later on, in “De la vanité,” Montaigne would speak of the overall form of the Essays thus:

Mon livre est tousjours un. Sauf qu’à mesure qu’on se met à le renouvel-ler, afin que l’acheteur ne s’en aille les mains du tout vuides, je me donne loy d’y attacher (comme ce n’est qu’une marquerie mal jointe), quelque embleme supernumeraire. Ce ne sont que surpoids, qui ne condamnent point la premiere forme, mais donnent quelque pris particulier à chacune des suivantes par une petite subtilité ambitieuse. De là toutesfois il advien-dra facilement qu’il s’y mesle quelque transposition de chronologie, mes contes prenant place selon leur opportunité, non tousjours selon leur age.

19. Bernard Sève, in “Les ‘vaines subtilitez’: Montaigne et le renversement du pour au contre,” Montaigne Studies 16.1–2 (March 2004): 185–96, seems not to have realized that this passage appears in the 1580 version, which he criticizes for lacking “the idea of a passage from one healthy situation to another healthy situation by traversing a vain one” (194), a ‘dialectic’ he finds in certain post-1588 additions. For the wise were once ignorant, as all are in infancy, and then like most men aware and troubled by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, but progressed beyond that middle position by their intelligence and courage. Sève also misrepresents Montaigne in the 1580 version when he claims that although he mentions the intermediate zone there “it is not this zone that interests him there but what interests him is the topos of the extremes that touch” (193). But as we have seen, Montaigne does pay attention to middle zones in 1580, differentiating between the desirable and the undesirable.
I. Book One

[My book is always one. Except that at each new edition, so that the buyer may not come off completely empty-handed, I allow myself to add, since it is only a badly joined marquetry, some extra ornaments. These are only overweights, which do not condemn the original form, but give some special value to each of the subsequent ones, by a bit of ambitious subtlety. Thence, however, it will easily happen that some transposition of chronology may slip in, for my stories take their place according to their timeliness, not always according to their age.] (III: 9, 964c; 736*)

It is a marqueterie, “un ouvrage de menuiserie, composé de feuilles de différents bois plaquées sur un assemblage, et représentant diverses figures, ou d’autres ornements” [a piece of woodwork composed of veneers of different woods affixed to a structure and representing various figures or ornaments] (Littré). The number of chapters does not change; additions do not become new chapters but are added within existing ones, without destroying the original form. Despite his denigration of “vaines subtilitez” in I: 54, in this passage he reveals that he delights in incorporating from time to time “une petite subtilité ambitieuse.” His anecdotes are placed where they are by their “opportunité,” not their chronology. He writes, for example, of texts whose components are lengthened and shortened to fit an overall pattern in I: 54, for it is there that the opportunity presents itself to allude to such subtleties, as well as to middles between extremes that meet, in the central chapter of the Essays’ 107. Montaigne shortened and lengthened too, like the poets he pretends to criticize: to produce three volumes of roughly equal size despite the second volume having 35% fewer chapters than the first, the third having 65% fewer than the second and 77% fewer than the first, he made most of the 13 chapters of the third volume much longer than those in the preceding volumes, and he made one chapter in the second volume, the immense “Apologie de Raimond Sebond” (II: 12), 22 times longer than the average of the volume’s other chapters.

20. In “What does Montaigne mean by ‘marqueterie’?,” Studies in Philology 67. 2 (1970): 147–55, Barbara Bowen cites engravings of Androuet du Cerceau dating from about 1560 as evidence that Montaigne could have been familiar with floors constructed of marqueterie featuring complicated symmetrical and circular patterns. These engravings may be viewed at http://architectura.cesr.univ-tours.fr/Traite/Images/INHA-4R845/index.asp. Bowen suggests that the composition of each of the chapters is circular: “these patterns are strikingly reminiscent of the structure of an essay. If you select one line and follow it through the pattern, its progress seems to have no logic or symmetry, but if you stand back and consider the overall effect it is obvious that every line and shape is necessary to the symmetry of the whole. It is very tempting indeed to assume that Montaigne is thinking of a pattern of this type when he uses the word marqueterie” (154). But one needs to stand back at an even greater distance to see what Montaigne was actually alluding to, the symmetry of each of the Essays’ three books.
4. There is a mathematical reason that suggests, apart from what Montaigne wrote in “Des vaines subtilitez,” that he had already decided before the 1580 edition appeared that he would write 13 more chapters. It is not the reason Butor gave, which is far from convincing. Butor’s argument is based on his notion that Book One “is divided into three principal regions, whose articulations are chapters 19 and 39” (129). He arrives at this conclusion by reading groups of chapters as if they were all about the same thing (as he does with regard to these on pp. 73–74), which is not a good way to read them. He finds three thematic groups of 18 chapters in Book One, not including I: 19, I: 29, and I: 39; he divides Book Two into two groups of 18 chapters separated by II: 19, and Book Three into two groups of 6 separated by III: 7. Then he concludes, “Apart from the middles, the number of chapters in Book Two [36] is equal to ⅔ of those of Book One [54], and that of Book Three [12] to ⅓ of that of Book Two” (Butor’s italics, 174). He is right to see that the three middle chapters (I: 29, II: 19, III: 7) stand apart from the rest, but he is talking about five middles here because he includes I: 19 and I: 39.

I have a mathematically based observation of my own to make. It does not attempt to say why the first book has 57 and the second 37, but does suggest why, if those first two numbers have already been selected, the third number should be 13. It is that if we assign A to the number 57, B to 37, and C to 13, B/A + C/B = unity. That is, 37/57 + 13/37 = 1. Unity, one, as in “Mon livre est toujours un.” There are other trios of numbers that could be plugged in to come up with 1, but if A and B are determined as 57 and 37, then for unity to be achieved C has to be 13.21

21. There is another consideration that I do not present as proof of anything but that is immensely interesting though it has remained, I believe, unknown until now. Rabelais’s Quart Livre (1552), as Edwin M. Duval has shown, is symmetrically constructed (so too, he demonstrates, the Tiers Livre). In the numerical center of the Quart Livre (as in the Essays, the symmetry is determined by the number of chapters and their arrangement), a symmetrical pattern of 107 elements appears, when Pantagruel slays a whale that threatens to sink his fleet:

In chapter 34, the numerically central chapter of the book . . . Pantagruel fills the skin of the attacking monster with 107 well-placed harpoons hurled with deadly precision. The first harpoon strikes the beast dead center in the middle of its forehead, at a point equidistant from the second and third harpoons, which pierce its eyes on either side of its head. . . . Pantagruel multiplies patterns in which symmetry around a central point predominate. Between the triangle planted on the forehead and a single harpoon planted in the tail, he places three more harpoons equally spaced along the spine. . . . And around this second triad he constructs yet a third symmetrical pattern in which the three harpoons sticking perpendicularly out of the whale’s back mark the median position between two rows of 50 harpoons placed symmetrically along each flank. That these obvious geometrical representations of centered symmetry should appear at the precise numerical midpoint of the Quart Livre, and that Pantagruel should construct exactly three triads in a chapter that is both preceded and followed by exactly thirty-three chapters is impossible
Although I: 54 is the center of the Essays in their totality, the middle that occupies us here is the one in the center of Book One (I: 29) that makes it possible for such chapters as I: 1, I: 2, and I: 3 to find their counterparts in I: 57, I: 56, and I: 55—and “Des vaines subtilitez” (I: 54) in “Comme l’aime descharge ses passions sur des objects faux, quand les vrais luy defaillent” (I: 4), a title that by itself suggests that I: 4, like I: 54, will concern itself with examples of wasted effort. But more than that unites the chapters thematically. I: 54 is about extremes that—surprisingly, because of the great distance that separates them—touch. I: 4 is about the need for an object to touch, whether to strike in anger or to embrace in love. A man suffering from gout rejects his doctor’s advice to give up salted meats because, he says, he wanted to know who to get angry at, and in cursing now the beef tongue, now the ham, he feels better. The losing gambler chews up his cards; Xerxes whipped the sea. There must be something to take it out on: “le bras estant haussé pour frapper, il nous deut si le coup ne rencontre” [when the arm is raised to strike, it hurts us if the blow does not hit] (I: 4, 22a, DM 17; 14*). That rencontre encounters its like twice in “Des vaines subtilitez” when “La bestise & la sagesse se rencontrent en mesme point . . . de resolution à la souffrance des accidens humains” [Stupidity and wisdom meet at the same point . . . of resolving to endure human accidents] (I: 54, 312a, DM 478; 226*) and “L’enfance & la decrepitude se rencontrent en imbecilité de cerveau” [Infancy and decrepitude meet in weakness of the brain] (I: 54, 312a, DM 479; 226). This is a self-naming encounter, extremes—separated by the distance of fifty chapters—that meet.

Another encounter is completed in the very first sentence of I: 54: “Il est de ces subtilitez frivoles & vaines, par le moyen desquelles les hommes to attribute to chance. Whatever else may be signified by the patterns inscribed on the « Physetere » [the Whale] . . . the sign at the center of the Quart Livre serves first of all to signal the center of the epic with a conspicuous representation of its own median position in the book. (Duval, Quart Livre, 126; emphasis in original)

Was Montaigne aware of the Quart Livre’s symmetrical construction and its valorization of the center? Could he have known about the symmetrical arrangement of 107 harpoons? In his one passing mention of Rabelais he calls his books “simplement plaisans” [simply pleasant], like Boccaccio’s Decameron. But what did he really think? It is remarkable in any case that the two greatest prose authors of sixteenth-century France should have created symmetries around the same number. Perhaps it can be chalked up to chance. But just as it was not due to chance that Rabelais should “signal the center” of his book in the center of his book, so too in the case of “Des vaines subtilitez.” It is the center of the Essays and Montaigne signals that fact, particularly when its last line places the book whose middle it is in a certain middle region.

22. Looking for extremes that touch is not presented as wasted effort in I: 54, nor as a vain subtlety. But constructing poems in the shape of eggs and hatchets is, as well as throwing grains of millet through the eye of a needle.
cerchent quelque fois de la recommandation” [There are those frivolous and vain subtleties by means of which men sometimes seek commendation] (I: 54, 311a, DM 475; 225*). For in I: 4, pet owners who lavish affection on their little dogs because they don’t have a human being to devote their passion to, “à faute de prise legitime, plutost que de demeurer en vain” [lacking a legitimate object, rather than remain in vain (that is, remain idle)], their “partie amoureuse . . . s’en forge ainsi, une faulce & frivole” [loving part . . . thus creates a false and frivolous one] (I: 4, 22a, DM 18; 14*).

The first words of I: 54 (“Il est de ces subtilitez frivoles & vaines”) echo not only the “vain . . . & frivole” of I: 4, but also the last words of Montaigne’s address to the reader at the beginning of the Essays: “Ainsi, lecteur, je suis moy-mesme la matiere de mon livre: ce n’est pas raison que tu emploies ton loisir en un subject si frivole & si vain” [Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject] (“Au lecteur,” 3; 2). What Montaigne calls vain subtleties in I: 54—the man throwing millet grains through the eye of a needle, poets who lengthen and shorten their lines for the sake of an overall design, words like “Dame” and “Sire” that meet across great distances—are therefore not to be dismissed as silly and pointless even though he presents them that way, for inasmuch as they are “frivoles & vaines” they are the matter of which the book is composed, consubstantial with its author.

Indeed, the parlor game of finding the same word reappearing in distantly separated contexts (and indeed it was a game: “Nous venons presentement de nous joüer chez moy”) duplicates what is going on in the Essays. Montaigne invites his readers to play it too, to look for words that appear in distantly separated chapters and nowhere in between. Thus plomb [lead] can be found in I: 4 and in I: 54 but nowhere between—and nowhere else in Book One. In I: 4 it is one of those true but lacking objects in the chapter’s title that are the true culprits, the real causes of the passions the soul consequently discharges on false ones: “Ce ne sont pas ces tresses blondes, que tu deschires, ny la blancheur de cette poitrine, que despite tu bas si cruellement, qui ont perdu d’un mal'heureux plomb ce frere bien aymé: prens t’en ailleurs” [It is not those blond tresses that you are tearing, nor the whiteness of that bosom that in your anger you beat so cruelly, that have made you lose by an unlucky lead bullet that well-loved brother: place the blame elsewhere] (I: 4, 23a, DM 18; 14–15*) (the tresses and bosom are the bereaved’s own, in this extreme expression of grief). In I: 54 plomb is an element in which extremes meet: “Aristote dict que les cueus de plom se fondent & coulent de froid & de rigueur de l’hyver, comme d’une chaleur vehemente” [Aristotle says that pigs of lead will melt and run with the cold and the rigor of winter as with intense
heat] (I: 54, 312a, DM 478; 226). Like the Sire and Dame that appear in two opposite social strata but nowhere in between, plomb appears in these two distant (though structurally related) chapters and nowhere else in Book One. Thus the plomb in I: 54 is where extremes meet in two different ways, one with regard to what the chapter is talking about, the other with regard to what it does.

As do some of the other words I will cite, plomb does appear elsewhere in Montaigne (twice each in Books Two and Three). But it is important to remember that although Books One and Two appeared at the same time in 1580, Montaigne evidently made the decision to present them to the public as two separate books, each with its own possibilities of structure and subtlety. Why did he not simply issue one book with 94 (57 + 37) chapters? His decision to divide them into two suggests his interest in the form his text would take, a form in which the chapters and their placement would play a role. Separating them into two books made it easier for him to place the two lone appearances of certain words and word combinations in meaningful locations, for it meant he would not have to avoid using them in the other book. We will later see that dividing those 94 into two volumes also had the virtue of allowing him to create two significant centers, I: 29 and II: 19, that will prove to be linked to each other (and to the center of Book Three, III: 7) by the kind of singular lexical echoes that link the symmetrically arranged chapters.

Montaigne concludes that extremes that touch are not so rare a phenomenon as he had first thought: “j’ay trouvé . . . que nous avions pris pour un exercice malaisé & d’un rare subject, ce qui ne l’est aucunement, & qu’après que notre invention a esté eschaufée, elle discouvre un nombre infiny de pareilz exemples” [I have found . . . that we had taken for a difficult exercise and a rare subject what is not so at all; and that after our inventiveness has been warmed up, it discovers an infinite number of similar examples] (I: 54, 313a, DM 479; 227*). The word subject, treated this way, is in fact rare, for the only other place in 1580 where it is preceded by an indefinite article and an adjective is I: 4: “Nous voyons que l’ame en ses passions se pipe plustost elle mesme se dressant un faux subject & fantastique, voire contre sa propre creance, que de n’agir contre quelque chose. Quelles causes n’inventons nous des mal’heurs, qui nous adviennent?” [We see that the soul in its passions will sooner deceive itself by setting up a false subject and a fantastical one, even contrary to its own belief, than not act against something. What causes do we not invent for the misfortunes that befall us?] (I: 4, 22a, DM 18; 14*). Particularly striking is the combination in both passages of “un + adjective
+ subject” with “n’inventons nous” and “nostre invention.” The passage in I: 54 (“qu’apres que nostre invention a esté eschaufée, elle descouvre un nombre infiny de pareiz exemples”) now reveals a self-referential dimension, for it is itself one of those “pareiz exemples” of extremes that touch. At the very moment that Montaigne writes “nostre invention” he is creating an instance of distantly spaced words that touch.23

5. In or Out

“Si le chef d’une place assiegée doit sortir pour parlementer”
[Whether the head of a besieged place should go out to parley] (I: 5) and “D’un mot de Caesar” [On a saying of Caesar’s] (I: 53)

Each of these chapters focuses on an assertion presented as having attained the status of a proverb. In I: 5 it is this: “c’est une reigle en la bouche de tous les hommes de guerre de nostre temps, qu’il ne faut jamais que le gouverneur en une place assiegée sorte luy memes pour parlementer” [it is a rule in the mouth of all military men of our time, that the governor of a besieged place must never go out himself to parley] (I: 5, 26a, DM 21–22; 17*). In I: 53 it is what Caesar said: “Il se fait par un vice ordinaire de nature, que nous ayons & plus de fiance & plus de crainte des choses que nous n’avons pas veu & qui sont cachées & inconnues” [It happens by a common vice of nature that we have both more trust and more fear of things that we have not seen and that are hidden and unknown] (I: 53, 310a, DM 475; 225*)—I am quoting Montaigne’s own translation as given in the 1580 and 1588 editions. Both sayings give the same advice, though in different contexts: stay inside. Stay inside yourself (I: 5); stay inside the fort (I: 53).

Montaigne quotes Caesar at the end of this brief chapter to support the argument he has been making since the beginning that we spend too much time trying to know things that are “hors de nous” [outside us] (I: 53, 309a, DM 473; 224). We are never satisfied with what “tombe en nostre connoissance & jouissance” [falls within our knowledge and enjoyment] but instead “allons beant apres les choses avenir & inconnues, d’autant que les presentes ne nous soulent pas” [we go gaping after things to come and unknown, inas-

23. As Ian Maclean points out, I: 54 is itself a “mise en abyme” in its “relationship . . . to the Essais as a whole; the chapter could be construed as an example of subtilité denouncing subtilité in a work of subtilité denouncing subtilité” (p. 149 of “Montaigne, Cardano: The Reading of Subtlety/The Subtlety of Reading,” French Studies 37.2 [1983]: 143–56).
much as things present do not satiate us [I: 53, 309a, DM 474; 225]. Caesar was not speaking in a military context, despite his professional expertise in that domain, but was making an observation about human behavior in general. Yet his remark finds specific application in the military context to which I: 5 is devoted, where what is at issue is the grave risk one runs in going outside of one’s domain in a literal way, outside of the fortress one is charged with defending. As Montaigne’s examples show, treachery lurks; capture or worse may ensue for the governor of a besieged fortress who, however briefly, leaves the protecting walls behind.

But there are occasions when the conflicting claims of fear and trust can balance each other out. That is what Henry de Vaux discovered when he decided to accept the besieger’s invitation to come out and parley, for when he did, the enemy pointed out to him the extent to which his castle had been mined with explosives, set to go off at the touch of a spark. De Vaux “s’en sentit singulièrement obligé à l’ennemy, à la discretion duquel apres qu’il se fut rendu & sa troupe, le feu estant mis à la mine les estansons de bois venant à faillir le chasteau fut emporté de fons en comble” [felt remarkably obliged to the enemy, to whose discretion he surrendered himself and his forces. After this, the fire was set to the mine, the wooden props began to fail, and the castle was demolished from top to bottom] (I: 5, 27a, DM 23–24; 17*). These, the last words of I: 5 in 1580, echo some of the first words of I: 53:

If we sometimes spent a little consideration on ourselves, and employed in probing ourselves the time we put into checking up on others and learning about things that are outside us, we would easily sense how much this fabric of ours is built up of feeble and failing pieces.] (I: 53, 309a, DM 473; 224)

Having decided to “sortir” [come out], de Vaux “s’en sentit” [felt] obliged to the enemy for informing him that what was holding up his castle was about to “faillir” [fail], the besiegers “ayant par debors fait sapper la plus part du chasteau” [having from the outside sapped the greater part of the castle] (I:
5, 27a, DM 23; 17*). The same words reappear when just the opposite happens in I: 53: if we were to decide to stop investigating the things that are “hors” [outside] us, and instead remained inside ourselves, we “sentirions” [would sense] the alarming extent to which our fabric, our inner structure, is about to collapse because it is constructed out of “défaillantes” [failing] pieces. In both situations, the fabric—de Vaux’s castle, our “contexture”—is about to collapse because of its “pièces défaillantes,” but de Vaux had to come out to discover the imminent collapse while we have to stop going out. He had to look at the structure from the outside; we have to look at it from within.

In 1588 Montaigne intensified the connections between these chapters by adding this sentence to the end of I: 5, by way of commentary on the de Vaux episode: “Je me fie ayseement à la foy d’autruy, mais mal-aiseement le fairoi je lors que je donrois à juger l’avoir plustost faict par desespoir & faute de coeur, que par franchise, & fiaance de sa loyauté” [I put my trust easily in another man’s word. But I should do so reluctantly whenever I would give the impression of acting from despair and want of courage rather than freely and through trust in his honesty] (I: 5, 27b; 17). This new final sentence of I: 5 sets up a parallel with the final sentence of I: 53, Montaigne’s translation into French of what Caesar said: “Il se fait par un vice ordinaire de nature, que nous ayons & plus de fiaance & plus de crainte des choses que nous n’avons pas veu & qui sont cachées & inconnues” [It happens by a common vice of nature that we have both more trust and more fear of things that we have not seen and that are hidden and unknown] (I: 53, 310a, DM 475; 225*). The fiaance in Montaigne’s translation of Caesar’s “mot” is now anticipated by the fiaance of the new last words of I: 5, but even more than that, the fear, the crainte, against which Caesar balanced that trust has its parallel too, the faute de coeur. Montaigne’s translation makes Caesar’s two terms more nearly alike than they were in the original, thereby enhancing the parallel with the dilemma the equally balanced demands of fear and faith impose upon the governor of a besieged place who wonders whether he should go out to parley. Caesar’s “we trust more, and fear more violently [magis confidamus, vehementiusque exterramur]” Montaigne renders as “nous ayons et plus de fiaance et plus de crainte” [we have both more trust and more fear]. It is as if Caesar had written “magisque” instead of “vehementiusque” as the adverb modifying “exterramur.” Trust and fear are not on an equal basis in what Caesar wrote, but they are in Montaigne’s translation, the better to support the parallel with the other chapter.
6. Trouble Back Home

“L’heure des parlemens dangereuse” [Parley time is dangerous] (I: 6) and “De la parsimonie des anciens” [On the parsimony of the ancients] (I: 52)

Given its brevity, “De la parsimonie des anciens,” the shortest chapter in the *Essays* (257 words in 1580,24 with 28 added in 1588), seems to imitate the thrift it discusses: “a simple and brief enumeration of examples of the modest lifestyle of some great men of antiquity,” according to Alexandre Tarrette, whose “dryness and concision seem perfectly adapted to this theme.”25 By itself it could indeed seem wanting. George Hoffmann is probably not alone in finding it “totally inadequate. . . . As if anticipating revision that never came, this chapter remains in the larva-like state of the leçon, a Renaissance exercise of collecting quotations and material for future use. . . . [N]o critique, reflection, or personal anecdote ever transformed these notes on parsimony into a full-fledged essay. Clearly, he was not trying to write a masterpiece in the traditional sense of the term.”26 But if Montaigne’s masterpiece is something larger than any separate chapter, perhaps the answer to the question that reading I: 52 poses—Is this all there is?—is no.

As with the other chapter pairs, I: 52 will likely make more sense when read with its other half, I: 6. At first glance, however, the latter is hard to distinguish from I: 5, for both are about the dangers of parling with a besieging enemy. Their continuity is obvious from the first word of I: 6: “Toutes-fois” [However] (I: 6, 28a, DM 24; 18) and from Montaigne saying early on in that chapter “comme je viens de dire” [as I have just said] (I: 6, 28a, DM 24; 18), sending the reader back to something he had just said in I: 5. This continuity poses a challenge to the commonplace notion that the textual unit to be analyzed is the individual chapter, as André Tournon acknowledges: “We will accept, except for occasional proof of the contrary (for example in the case of a syntactical suture between chapters, as there is between I: 5 and I: 6 . . . ), that the objective unit to consider is the chapter.”27 But unless these two chapters about parling with the enemy can be differentiated from each other it will be impossible to see how I: 6 is more connected to I: 52 than I: 5 is. For Frieda S. Brown there is no difference:

24. Though in 1580, I: 55 (“Des senteurs”) was even shorter.
25. In a note on the chapter in Naya et al., *Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, I: 694.
27. *Route par ailleurs*, 12. He also cites I: 39 and I: 40 as being linked in this way.
the two chapters “constitute and should be read as a single commentary on
the subject.” For Tournon there is a difference, but I think he is mistaken
about what it is. In a note on I: 5 in his edition of the *Essais* he writes that
while both “treat of the risks in parleys” I: 5 does so “under the practical
angle of the precautions one should take” but I: 6 discusses them “from the
point of view of the ethics of war” (523). Yet battlefield ethics come up in
I: 5 just as much as they do in I: 6. It is in I: 5 for example that Montaigne
contrasts the Roman way of war to “la Grecque subtilité et astuce Punique,
où le vaincre par force est moins glorieux que par fraude” [Greek subtlety and
Punic cunning, according to which it is less glorious to conquer by force than
by fraud] (I: 5, 25c; 16). Alexandre Tarrête points out that the same moral
questions are raised in both chapters, writing in a note to I: 5, “Are all means
legitimate in order to win? What place should be given to trustworthiness in
dealings with the enemy? This chapter, like the one that follows it, asks these
questions” (in Naya et al., 593).

A hint of the real difference between the two can be glimpsed in their
titles: “Si le chef d’une place assiégée doit sortir pour parlementer” [Whether
the head of a besieged place should go out to parley] (I: 5), where the focus
is on a danger faced by one man vs. “L’heure des parlemens dangereuse”
[Parley time Is dangerous] (I: 6), where the danger is general. A comparison
of the anecdotes told in each brings the difference into clearer focus. Those
in I: 5 concern the risk the negotiator runs when negotiating, but those in I:
6 are about what can happen to the city’s inhabitants when he has left them
behind to go parley. In I: 5’s first story, the result of Lucius Marcius’ treach-
ery against the king of Macedonia, whom he had lulled into a temporary
truce, was that “le roy encourut sa derniere ruine” [the king incurred his final
ruin] (I: 5, 25a, DM 20; 16). No mention is made of what his subjects may
have suffered. When Guy de Rangon, defending his city against the seigneur
de l’Escut, went out to parley he remained close enough that when trouble
unexpectedly broke out between the armies he could retreat back into the
city, and Escut for his own safety went with him under his protection; here
too the focus is on the danger to the negotiators (in fact, the danger to the
negotiators for both sides). In the same chapter Henri de Vaux, as we saw a
few pages ago, was saved from death by coming out to parley.

But in I: 6 the focus is placed on what can happen to a besieged city’s
inhabitants when they have been left behind by a leader who has gone out

28. On p. 79 of Frieda S. Brown, “«Si le chef d’une place assiégée doit sortir pour parlementer»
and «L’heure des parlemens dangereuse»: Montaigne’s Political Morality and Its Expression in the Early
Essays.” In *O un Amy! Essays on Montaigne in Honor of Donald M. Frame*, edited by Raymond C. La
to parley. In the first anecdote the citizens of Mussidan were cut to pieces by a surprise attack that took place during the negotiations. It was during a parley that the town of Casilinum was taken by surprise (in a post-1588 addition; likewise Capua, Yvoy, Genoa, and Ligny-en-Barrois (in the 1580 and subsequent editions). In fact in some cases the negotiator himself is not under attack, but only the citizens he left behind: Giuliano Romero went out to parley and “trouva au retour sa place saisie” [on his return found his place seized] (I: 6, 29a, DM 26; 19). Likewise, Bertheville “estant sorty pour parlementer, pendant le parlement la ville se trouva saisie” [went out to parley, and during the bargaining the town was taken] (I: 6, 29a, DM 26; 19*).

Civilians left behind when their leader attends to military matters are likewise surprised by treachery in the following anecdote, which is the first and by far the longest told in I: 52, comprising 112 of the chapter’s 257 words, or 44%, in 1580; 39% in 1588.

Attilius Regulus general de l’armée Romaine en Afrique, au milieu de sa gloire & de ses victoires contre les Carthaginois, escrivit à la chose publique qu’un valet de labourage qu’il avoit laissé seul au gouvernement de son bien, qui estoit en tout, sept arpens de terre, s’en estoit enfuy, ayant desrobé ses utils de labourage, et demandoit congé pour s’en retourner y pourvoir, de peur que sa femme et ses enfans n’en eussent à souffrir. Le Senat pourveut à commettre un autre à la conduite de ses biens, & luy fit restablir ce qui luy avoit esté desrobé, et ordonna que sa femme et enfans seroient nourris aux despens du public.

[Attilius Regulus, general of the Roman army in Africa, in the midst of his glory and his victories against the Carthaginians, wrote to the Republic that a farm laborer whom he had left in sole charge of his estate, which was seven acres of land in all, had run away and stolen his farming tools; and he asked leave to return and look after this matter, for fear that his wife and children would suffer from it. The Senate provided another man to manage his property, caused what had been stolen to be returned to him, and ordered that his wife and children should be maintained at the public expense.] (I: 52, 308a, DM 471; 224)

It resembles what happens to Romero and Bertheville in I: 6, whose towns were seized in their absence. It is just the opposite, too, in a couple of ways: (1) the citizens in I: 6 suffered from someone coming into their city, while the family in I: 52 suffered from someone going away; (2) it was “au retour” [on his return] that Romero discovered the damage, while Attilius wanted to
“retourner” in order to undo the damage. Montaigne would add to the parallel in 1588 by characterizing successes due to taking unfair advantage on the battlefield as “des victoires desrobées” [stolen victories] (I: 6, 29b; 19*), setting up an echo with the servant “ayant desrobé ses utilz de labourage” and the Senate’s making good what had been “desrobé.”

7. Words, in Effect

“Que l’intention juge nos actions” [That intention judges our actions] (I: 7) and “De la vanité des paroles” [On the vanity of words] (I: 51)

Having alluded to how the Greeks praised the order and arrangement of the feast that Paulus Aemilius gave them after conquering Macedonia, Montaigne makes the remark “mais je ne parle point icy des effects, je parle des motz” [But I am not speaking at all here of effects, I am speaking of words] (I: 51, 307a, DM 468; 223*). Before that he had just been telling us about the inflated language in which the maître d’hôtel of a Roman cardinal spoke of his culinary responsibilities: “particularisant les qualitez des ingrediens & leurs effectz . . . tout cela enflé de riches & magnifiques parolles, & celles mesmes qu’on emploie à traiter du gouvernement d’un empire” [particularizing the qualities of the ingredients and their effects . . . all this swollen with rich and magnificent words, and the very ones we use to talk about the government of an empire] (I: 51, 306a; DM 467–68; 222–23). The “effects” that he says he is not talking about seem to refer to the “effectz” that the maître d’hôtel was speaking of a few lines before. In saying after he had alluded to the feast Paulus Aemilius prepared that he is speaking of “motz” instead of “effects” he seems to confess to wandering from the subject, that he erred in bringing up the Paulus Aemilius anecdote because it wasn’t about words, but only about the effect his banquet had on the Greeks (they liked it). Indeed, he immediately goes back to talking about words, in particular about inflated ones, though here too he will oppose those problematic motz to a certain effect: “Je ne sçay s’il en advient aux autres comme à moy: mais je ne me puis garder quand j’oy noz architectes s’enfler de ces gros motz de palastres, architraves, cornices d’ouvrage Corinthien & Dorique et semblables de leur jargon, que mon imagination ne se saisisse incontinent du palais d’Apolidon. Et par effet je trouve que ce sont les chetives pieces de la porte de ma cuisine” [When I hear our architects puffing themselves out with those big words like pilasters, architraves, cornices, Corinthian and Doric work, and such-
like jargon, I cannot keep my imagination from immediately seizing on the palace of Apollidon; and in effect I find that these are the paltry parts of my kitchen door] (I: 51, 307a, DM 469; 223*). The architects’ inflated words are deflated by a certain “effect.” The opposition between words and “effects” surfaces a fourth time in a post-1588 addition to this chapter in which Montaigne notes that L. Volumnius recommended Q. Fabius and P. Decius for consulships because being military men they were “grands aux effects; au combat du babil, rudes” [great in deeds; at combat in prattle, clumsy] (I: 51, 306c; 222). Throughout I: 51 Montaigne prefers deeds to words and attacks empty eloquence, true to his title’s indication of the emptiness, the “vanité,” of words.

Effects and paroles are brought into play and into a relationship with each other but in a quite different way in “Que l’intention juge nos actions.” In that chapter parole is understood in the sense of a promise, Henry VII of England “faillant à sa parole” [breaking his word] (I: 7, 30a, DM 29; 20) when he provided in his will that after his death his enemy the Duke of Suffolk (Edmund de la Pole), whom he had promised Phillip of Burgundy he would not harm (and kept prisoner in the Tower of London), be put to death. That the execution took place after the king’s death in no way freed the latter of his obligation to keep his word. In a similar yet contrasting case, the Count of Egmont, about to be executed together with the Count of Horn, asked to be beheaded first so that his death might free him from his obligation to Horn, whom he had unwittingly lured in a trap set for both. It is in commenting on Egmont that Montaigne brings “effects” into conflict with “parole.” Egmont in the essayist’s view was freed from his obligation already, because

Nous ne pouvons estre tenus au dela de nos forces & de nos moyens. A ceste cause, par ce que les effaictz & executions ne sont aucunement en nostre puissance, & qu’il n’y a rien en bon essiant en nostre puissance, que la volonté. . . . Par ainsi le Conte d’Aiguemond tenant son ame & volonté endebtée à sa promesse, bien que la puissance de l’effectuer ne fut pas en ses mains, estoit sans doubté absous de son devoir, quand il eut survescu le Conte de Horne. Mais le roy d’Angleterre faillant à sa parole, par son intention ne se peut excuser.

[We cannot be bound beyond our powers and means. For this reason—that we have no power to effect and accomplish, that there is nothing really

29. As Montaigne made clear in the 1580 edition: the “Comtes de Horne & d’Aiguemond, aus-quels il fit trancher la teste” [the Count of Horn and the Count of Egmont, both of whom he had beheaded] (DM 28). This phrase was deleted in 1588.
in our power but will—all man’s rules of duty are necessarily founded and established in our will. . . . Thus the count of Egmont, considering his soul and will in debt to his promise, though the power to carry it out was not in his hands, was certainly absolved of his duty even had he survived the count of Horn. But the king of England, in intentionally breaking his word, cannot be excused.\[\text{(I: 7, 30a, DM 29; 20)}\]

In I: 51 paroles and effects are opposed to each other (as words vs. deeds), while in I: 7 they are on the same side in the case of the count of Egmont and of hypothetical others who wish to put their parole (as promise) into effect but are prevented by circumstance from doing so. In the 1580 edition Henry VII “faillant à sa parole” found an inverted reflection in the defaillance [defect] of the common people that makes them liable to be manipulated by clever rhetoric, by “la vanité des parolles.” Rhetoric is un util inventé pour manier & agiter une tourbe & une commune despreèglee. . . . Il semble par là que les estatz qui dependent d’un monarque en ont moins de besoin que les autres. Car la bestise & facilité qui se trouve en la commune, & qui la rend subjecte à estre maniée & contournée par les oreilles au dous son de cete harmonie, sans venir à poisir & conoitre la verité des choses par la force de la raison, cete defaillance, ne se se trouve pas si aisément en un seul.

[an instrument invented to manipulate and agitate a crowd and a disorderly populace. . . . From that it seems that monarchical governments need it less than others: for the stupidity and facility that is found in the common people, which makes them subject to be led by the ears to the sweet sound of this harmony without weighing things and coming to know their truth by force of reason—this defect is not so easily found in a single ruler.] \(\text{(I: 51, 305–6a, DM 465–66; 222*)}\)

Their defaillance is that they are under the power of certain paroles, while Henry VII’s defaillance was that he broke away from the power of a certain parole. (In 1588 “defaillance” would be replaced by “facilité.”)

Montaigne follows the stories of Henry VII and the count of Egmont with a third instance of death freeing one (or not) from an obligation. Henry VII “ne se peut excuser, pour avoir retardé jusques apres sa mort l’exécution de sa desloyauté, non plus que le masson de Herodote, lequel ayant loyallement conservé durant sa vie le secret des tresors du roy d’Egypte son maistre, mourant les descouvrit à ses enfans” [cannot be excused merely on the ground that he delayed the execution of his dishonest plan until after his
death; any more than Herodotus’ mason, who, having loyally kept during his life the secret of the treasures of his master the king of Egypt, revealed it to his children as he died] (I: 7, 30a, DM 29–30; 20). That is all he tells us of the mason, but a detail from the passage in Herodotus to which he alludes resonates so strongly here that he must have been thinking of it—and may have wanted those of his readers familiar with Herodotus to think about it too. It is that when the mason’s two sons were stealing from the treasury, as he recommended they do after his death, one of them was caught in a trap the king had set and, realizing he could not get out of it, said to his brother, “cut off my head, lest I be seen and recognized and so bring you too to ruin.”

Like the Count of Egmont, the doomed brother (1) asks to be beheaded now, (2) knowing that he will be executed eventually, and (3) makes this request out of a sense of obligation to his partner in crime.

Similarly, another part of the story he doesn’t mention, though an even more essential one, may have a secret connection to something in its partner chapter, the humble kitchen door that the vanity of words—the fancy architectural terms—gives Montaigne the momentary illusion that he is staring at a palace. For Herodotus’ mason gave his sons access to the king’s treasure by making an opening—a kind of door—into the palace: “That he might store his treasure safely, [the king] made to be built a stone chamber, one of its walls abutting on the outer side of his palace. But the builder of it craftily contrived that one stone should be so placed as to be easily removed by two men or even by one” (Herodotus, 415). That is how the sons were able to go in and out with the treasure until the king began to notice it was disappearing. It is a hidden door in two senses: literally so in Herodotus’ story, and figuratively in I: 7 in that it is hidden in Montaigne’s allusion to the story. From there it may lead us to the imagined palace door in I: 51, the two ends of the intratext I: 7 and I: 51 together form connected by this secret passage.

8. Of Idleness and Horses

“De l’oisiveté” [On idleness] (I: 8) and “De Democritus et Heraclitus” [On Democritus and Heraclitus] (I: 50)

“De l’oisiveté” (I: 8) could almost have served as a preface to the Essays, for it is there that Montaigne speaks of the birth of his book:

Dernièrement que je me retiray chez moy, deliberé autant que je pourray de ne me mesler d’autre chose, que de passer en repos & à part ce peu qui me reste de vie, il me sembloit ne pouvoir faire plus grande faveur à mon esprit, que de le laisser en pleine oysiveté s’entretenir soi mesmes & s’arres-ter & rasseoir en soy, ce que j’esperois qu’il peut meshui faire plus aisement devenu avec le temps plus poisant & plus meur, mais je trouve . . . que au rebours faisant le cheval eschapé il se donne cent fois plus d’affaire à soy mesmes qu’il n’en prent pour autruy, & m’enfante tant de chimeres & monstres fantasques les uns sur les autres, sans ordre, & sans propos, que pour en contempler à mon aise l’ineptie & l’estrangeté j’ay commancé de les mettre en rolle, esperant avec le temps luy en faire honte à luy mesmes.

[Lately, when I retired to my home, determined so far as possible to bother about nothing except spending the little life I have left in rest and seclusion, it seemed to me I could do my mind no greater favor than to let it entertain itself in full idleness and stay and settle in itself, which I hoped it might do more easily now, having become weightier and riper with time. But I find . . . that, on the contrary, like a runaway horse, it gives itself a hundred times more trouble than it took for others, and gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monsters, one after another, without order and without purpose, that in order to contemplate their ineptitude and strangeness at my pleasure, I have begun to write them down, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself.] (I: 8, 33a; DM 31–32; 21*)

“De Democritus et Heraclitus” (I: 50) is likewise a meditation on Montaigne’s manner of self-exploration and his writing. In this chapter too horses and idleness are linked, as they are in I: 8 when he compares his idle mind to a runaway horse. The Leake Concordance confirms that nowhere else in Books One or Two do the words cheval and oisif/oisiveté in any of their forms make a joint appearance than in I: 8 and in the following passage in I: 50:

Toute action est propre à nous faire connoistre cete mesme ame de Caesar, qui se faict voir à ordonner & dresser la bataille de Pharsale, elle se faict aussi voir à dresser des parties oysives & amoureuses. On juge un cheval, non seulement à le voir manier sur une carriere, mais encore à luy voir aller le pas, voire & à le voir en repos à l’estable.

[Every action is apt to reveal to us this same soul of Caesar that shows itself in ordering and arranging the battle of Pharsalis: it shows itself as well in arranging idle and amorous affairs. One judges a horse not only by seeing it
handled on a race course but also in seeing it walk, and even at rest in the
stable.] (I: 50, 302a, DM 461; 219*)

The horse’s repose (“en repos à l’estable”) actually constitutes a third element
in this repeated cluster, for it was as a consequence of his retirement to his
estate to “passer en repos” his declining years that Montaigne’s idle mind
began to behave like a runaway horse.

Richard Scholar points out another parallel between the chapters. He
finds it in the opening lines of I: 50:

Le jugement est un util à tous subjets, & se mesle par tout. À cête cause
aus essais, que j’en fay icy, j’y employe toute sorte d’occasion. Si c’est un
subjet que je n’entende point, à cela mesme je l’essaie, sondant le gué de
biens loing, & puis le trouvant trop profond pour ma taille, je me tiens à la
rive. . . . Tantost je le promene à un subject noble & fort tracassé, auquel
il n’a rien à trouver de soy mesme, le chemin en estant si frayé & si batu
qu’il ne peut marcher que sur la piste d’autrui. Là il faict son jeu à trier la
route qui luy semble la meilleure, & de mille sentiers, il dict que cetuy cy
ou celuy là a esté le mieux choisi.

[Judgment is a tool to use on all subjects, and comes in everywhere. Therefore
in the tests that I make of it here, I use every sort of occasion. If it
is a subject I do not understand at all, even on that I essay my judgment,
sounding the ford from a good distance; and then, finding it too deep for
my height, I stick to the bank. . . . Sometimes I lead it to a noble and well-
worn subject in which it has nothing original to discover, the road being
so worn and so beaten that it can walk only in others’ footsteps. There it
plays its part by choosing the way that seems best to it, and of a thousand
paths it says that this one or that was the most wisely chosen.] (I: 50, 301-2a, DM 459–60; 219*)

Scholar writes that Montaigne here describes his

process of essaying . . . as a journey on which two characters have embarked:
the first person “I” (“je”), and his judgement. We might be reminded here
of an earlier chapter, “Of idleness” (I: 8), which also stages a psychodrama
involving two characters internal to Montaigne. “Of idleness” . . . has the
first person set off in hot pursuit of his runaway mind. In “Of Democritus
and Heraclitus,” the judgement has replaced the mind in the lead role
alongside the first person, and the balance of power is different: the first
person does not pursue so much as accompany his judgement on a journey; and he sets his judgement tests along the way.\(^{31}\)

Montaigne, as Scholar suggests, actually seems to speak of his judgment as if it were a horse, leading it (in fact, “walking” it: “je le promene”), fording a stream or not with it, letting it choose its own path when several are offered. Scholar, who like other readers of I: 8 finds it to be a “second preface” (Scholar, 24) to Book I, supplementing the “Au Lecteur,” makes the same observation of I: 50, and finds that to be an additional similarity between them: I: 50 “acts like a belated preface to Book I and a mirror-image of an earlier prefatory exercise, ‘Of idleness’ (I: 8). But where . . . ‘Of idleness’ describes a writer in hot pursuit of his runaway mind, ‘Of Democritus and Heraclitus’ presents essaying as the best way for him to give his mind free rein—while remaining in the saddle” (Scholar, 90).

Montaigne in I: 8 writes of fallow fields whose teeming abundance needs to be tamed by subjection to “certaines semences” [certain seeds] (I: 8, 32a, DM 30; 20) and of women who on their own can produce pieces of formless flesh but who for a good and natural offspring need to receive “une autre semance: ainsin est-il des esprits” [another kind of seed; so it is with minds] (I: 8, 32a, DM 30; 21), which require a definite subject to keep them reined in. Particularly is it true of Montaigne’s own mind, and this has implications for his writing, as he goes on to say, in the passage already quoted at length. In a post-1588 addition to I: 50, that sowing will return in a self-referential way, in the present participle semant [sowing], at a moment when Montaigne is talking about how he writes his \textit{Essays}. It follows immediately the passage, already quoted, in which he speaks of his judgment as if it were a horse.

[B] Je prends de la fortune le premier argument. Ils me sont également bons. Et ne [C] desseigne jamais de les produire entiers. Car je ne voy le tout de rien: Ne font pas, ceux qui promettent de nous le faire veoir. De cent membres et visages qu’a chaque chose, j’en prens un tantost à lecher seulement, tantost à effleurer; et par fois à pincer jusqu’à l’os. J’y donne une poincte, non pas le plus largement, mais le plus profondemment que je sçay. Et aime plus souvent à les saisir par quelque lustre inusité. Je me hazarderoy de traitter à fons quelque matière, si je me connoissoy moins. \textit{Semant} icy un mot, icy un autre, eschantillons despris de leur piece, escarrez, \textit{sans dessein et sans promesse}, je ne suis pas tenu d’en faire bon, ny de m’y tenir moy mesme,

\(^{31}\) Richard Scholar, \textit{Montaigne and the Art of Free-Thinking} (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 70.
sans varier quand il me plaist; et me rendre au doubt et incertitude, et à ma maistresse forme, qui est l’ignorance.

[(B) I take the first subject that chance offers. They are all equally good to me. And I (C) never plan to develop them completely. For I do not see the whole of anything; nor do those who promise to show it to us. Of a hundred members and faces that each thing has, I take one, sometimes only to lick it, sometimes to brush the surface, sometimes to pinch it to the bone. I give it a stab, not as wide but as deep as I know how. And most often I like to take them from some unaccustomed point of view. I would venture to treat some matter thoroughly, if I knew myself less well. Sowing a word here, there another, samples separated from their context, dispersed, without a plan and without a promise, I am not bound to make something of them or to adhere to them myself without varying when I please and giving myself up to doubt and uncertainty and my ruling quality, which is ignorance.] (I: 50, 302ac; 219*)

The phrase “sans dessein et sans promesse” at the very moment it asserts an absence of a plan may actually reveal the presence of one, for it appears to echo a parallel statement in the symmetrically matching “De l’oysiveté”: in retreating from active life, Montaigne let his mind fall into idleness but found that it “m’enfante tant de chimeres & monstres fantasques les uns sur les autres, sans ordre, et sans propos” [gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monsters, one after another, without order and without purpose] (I: 8, 33a; 21*) that he began to write them down, giving birth to the Essays. Although the construction “sans . . . et sans . . .” appears often in the Essays, only in these two instances are both of the following conditions met: (1) Montaigne is talking about his book and (2) the second term begins with the prefix pro. The manuscript evidence suggests that it was important to him that the second term begin with “pro-” because what he had first written (and then drew a line through, replacing it with “sans dessein et sans promesse”) also contained that feature: “Sans corps, sans proposition” [without order, without proposition].32

9. Lying, After a Fashion

“Des menteurs” [Of liars] (I: 9) and “Des coustumes anciennes” [Of ancient customs] (I: 49)

Montaigne begins “Des menteurs” (I: 9) by talking about the faculty of memory, and about how poorly endowed his is. “Il n’est homme à qui il siese si mal de se mesler de parler de la memoire qu’à moy. Car je n’en reconnoy quasi nulle trasse chez moy: & ne pense qu’il y en aye au monde une si monstrueuse en defaillance” [There is no man whom it would so little become to meddle with talking about memory. For I recognize almost no trace of it in me, and I do not think there is another one in the world so monstrously deficient] (I: 9, 34a, DM 32; 21*). In the same passage (in the 1580 edition, at least—before some additions from 1588 and later came in between) he goes on to say that good liars better have a good memory: “Ce n’est pas sans raison qu’on dit, que qui ne se sent point assez ferme de memoire, ne se doit pas mesler d’estre menteur” [It is not unreasonably said that anyone who does not feel sufficiently strong in memory should not meddle with being a liar] (I: 9, 35a, DM 33; 23*).

But in “Des coustumes anciennes” (I: 49) he seems to say that he has a better memory than nearly anyone else:

J’excuserois volontiers en nostre peuple de n’avoir autre patron & regle de perfection que ses propres meurs & usances: car c’est un commun vice, non du vulgaire seulement, mais quasi de tous hommes, d’avoir leur visée & leur arrest sur le train auquel ils sont nais. . . . Mais je me plains de sa particuliere indiscretion, de se laisser si fort piper & aveugler à l’autorité de l’usage present, qu’il soit capable de changer d’opinion et d’advis tous les mois, s’il plait à la coustume, & qu’il juge si diversement de soy mesmes.

[I should be prone to excuse our people for having no other pattern and rule of perfection than their own manners and customs; for it is a common vice, not of the vulgar only but of almost all men, to fix their aim and limit by the ways to which they were born. . . . But I do complain of their particular lack of judgment in letting themselves be so thoroughly fooled and blinded by the authority of present usage that they are capable of changing opinion and ideas every month, if custom pleases, and that they judge themselves so diversely.] (I: 49, 296a, DM 450–51; 215–16)
Their problem is that they live only in the present, and they forget the past. Specifically, they forget how enthusiastically they approved a certain fashion that they now ignore in their infatuation with the new. Despite what Montaigne says in I: 9 about having a worse power of recollection than anyone else (“Il n’est homme” [There is no man] with less right to speak of memory than him), in I: 49 he shows that he has a better memory than “quasi de tous hommes” [almost all men], for only he can remember how things used to be: “Je veux icy entasser aucunes coutumes anciennes que j’ay en memoire, les unes de mesmes les nostres, les autres differentes: afin qu’ayant en imagination cete continuelle variation des choses humaines nous en ayons le jugement plus esclaircy & plus ferme” [I want to pile up here some ancient fashions that I have in my memory, some like ours, others different, to the end that we may strengthen and enlighten our judgment by reflecting upon this continual variation of human things] (I: 49, 297a, DM 452; 216). And then he provides, out of his storehouse of memory, a long list of ancient Roman customs that differ greatly from sixteenth-century practice.

It is as if his memory were so poor that when he writes I: 49 he has forgotten what he had said in I: 9 about how poor a memory he has. Either that, or he is lying—which in I: 9 he said one must have a superior memory to do. Montaigne, not for the first or last time, incarnates the Epimenidean paradox about the Cretan who may or may not be telling the truth about all Cretans being liars. It is fitting that he should do so here, in a pair of chapters of which one is about liars.

Lying, the declared theme of I: 9, is metafictionally thematic in Montaigne’s contradicting in I: 49 what he says in I: 9. But equally so is fashion, the declared subject of I: 49. For his self-contradiction is, in the experience of a reader who reads the Essays from beginning to end, situated in time, and in the realm of fashion “souvent les formes mesprisées reviennent en credit, & celles la mesme tumvent en mespris tantost apres, & qu’un mesme jugement preigne en l’espace de quinze ou vingt ans deus ou trois, non diverses seulement, mais contraires opinions, d’une inconstance & legereté incroyable” [despised fashions often return into favor, and these very ones soon after fall back gain into contempt; and the same mind, in the space of fifteen or twenty years, may be so incredibly inconsistent and frivolous as to adopt two or three opinions that are not merely diverse but contrary] (I: 49, 297a, DM 452; 216*). What happens in fashion happens in the Essays, at a distance of, say, forty chapters instead of twenty years. That is, Montaigne

33. Montaigne alludes to the Liar Paradox in the “Apologie de Raimond Sebond”: “Si vous dites: Je ments, et que vous disiez vray, vous mentez donc” [If you say, “I lie,” and if you are speaking the truth, then you lie] (II: 12, 527b; 392).
changes his opinion after a while as the fashionable change theirs, and into not just a different opinion but its opposite.

A parallel phenomenon is the return of the same: in the realm of fashion, after many years abandoned modes re-emerge; in the Essays, words return in one chapter after having been dormant since appearing in an earlier one, rarely seen words that sometimes never appear in the book except in two such distantly-spaced chapters structurally linked by the symmetry surrounding the center of the book. For example, one of the curious customs Montaigne relates is that the ancient Romans

se torchoient le cul . . . avec une esponge. Voylà pourquoi SPONGIA est un mot obscène en Latin: & estoit cete esponge atachee au bout d’un baston, comme tesmoigne l’histoire de celuy qu’on menoit pour estre presente aux bestes devant le peuple, qui demanda congé d’aller à ses affaires, & là n’ayant autre moien de se tuer, il se fourra ce baston & esponge dans le goisier & s’en estoufa.

[wiped their ass . . . with a sponge—that is why SPONGIA is an obscene word in Latin—and this sponge was attached to the end of a stick, as is shown by the story of the man who was being taken to be thrown to the beasts in front of the people, and who asked permission to go and answer the call of nature; and having there no other way to kill himself, he stuffed the stick and sponge down his throat and choked himself.] (I: 49, 298a; DM 454–55; 217*)

The phrase “mot . . . en Latin” appears also in I: 9, and nowhere else:

Je sçay bien que les grammairiens font difference entre dire mensonge & mentir: & disent que dire mensonge c’est dire chose faulce, mais qu’on a pris pour vraye, & que la definition du mot de mentir en latin, d’ou nostre François est party, porte autant comme aller contre sa conscience, & que par consequence cela ne touche que ceux qui disent contre ce qu’ils sçavent.

[I know very well that the grammarians make this distinction between telling a lie and lying: and they say that telling a lie means saying something false but which we have taken for true, and that the definition of the word “to lie” in Latin, from which our French is taken, implies going against our conscience, and thus applies only to those who say what is contrary to what they know.] (I: 9, 35a, DM 33; 23*)

34. The passage to which Montaigne refers in Aulus Gellius, perhaps at second hand, makes the
It is a hardly a coincidence that the identical words “mot . . . en Latin” should be attached to words that rhyme (“esponge” and “mensonge”) and that the story Montaigne tells to show what Romans did with sponges is also the story of a lie (the one the victim told to get to use it).

In 1588 Montaigne added a passage to I: 9 that created a new parallel between the chapters, echoing the following passage, already quoted: “un mesme jugement preigne en l’espace de quinze ou vingt ans deus ou trois, non diverses seulement, mais contraires opinions” [the same mind, in the space of fifteen or twenty years, might adopt two or three opinions that are not merely diverse but contrary] (I: 49, 297a, DM 452; 216*). The relevant addition has to do with negotiators who over the course of their career work for different masters and in different situations. The details of a lie one has concocted are likely to escape all but the most powerful memories, and he has seen and been amused by those who choose their words to suit their negotiations and please the great to whom they are speaking: “il faut que leur parole se diversifie quand et quand; d’où il advient que de mesme chose ils disent gris tantost, tantost jaune” [their words must become diverse accordingly. So it happens that they describe the same thing as now gray, now yellow], and what they say is reported as containing things “si contraires” [so contrary] that they trip themselves up, for how could they remember “tant de diverses formes, qu’ils ont forgées à un mesme subject?” [so many diverse forms into which they have cast the same subject?] (I: 9, 36b; 23*). With this addition Montaigne deepens the analogy between lying and fashion. What happens to the same mind [“un mesme jugement”] over the course of several years of changing fashions is that it becomes diverse and contrary as it adapts to those fashions; what happens to lies a negotiator tells as circumstances change is precisely the same: a same subject he will give diverse and even contrary accounts.35

10. Excess Baggage

“Du parler prompt ou tardif” [Of prompt or slow speech] (I: 10) and “Des destries” [Of war horses] (I: 48)

In “Des destries” (I: 48), Montaigne writes admiringly of how “nos

---

35. Unaware of the metafictional dimension, the editors of the new Pléiade edition find that I: 49 is nothing but an “inventory” of “pointless or inconsequential practices with regard to fashion, hygiene, or food” and that Montaigne even seemed “tired” [fatigué] by the time he reached its conclusion (Bal-samo et al., 1478).
ancestres . . . en tous les combats solemnelz . . . se mettoient tous à pié, pour ne se fier à nulle autre chose, qu’à leur force propre” [our ancestors . . . in all serious engagements . . . all fought on foot, so as to trust to nothing but their own strength] (I: 48, 289a, DM 446; 211*). For in the heat of battle a horse is less an advantage than a liability: “Ses playes & sa mort tirent la vostre en consequence, son effray ou sa fureur vous rendent ou temeraire ou lache” [His wounds and his death bring on yours as a consequence; his fright or his furor make you rash or cowardly] (I: 48, 289a, DM 447; 211*). For the same reason he prefers the sword to the pistol:

Comme je conseilleroy de choisir les armes les plus courtes & celles dequoy nous nous pouvons le mieux respondre. Il est bien plus seur de s’asseuer d’une espée que nous tenons au poing, que du boulet qui eschappe de nostre pistole, en laquelle il y a plusieurs pieces, la poudre, la pierre, le roüet, desquelles la moindre qui viendra à faillir vous fera faillir vostre fortune.

[Just as I should advise the choice of the shortest weapons, and those that we can answer for best. It is much surer to rely on a sword that we hold in our hand than on the bullet that escapes out of our pistol, in which there are several parts—the powder, the flint, the lock—the least of which, by failing, will make your fortune fail.] (I: 48, 290a, DM 447–48; 211*)

It is a mistake, in other words, to depend more than absolutely necessary on the paraphernalia one brings to the encounter. A certain Poyet learned this very lesson in a completely different sort of context in “Du parler prompt ou tardif” (I: 10). He was given the task “de faire la harangue au Pape” [of making the harangue to the Pope] (I: 10, 39a, DM 41; 26) when the latter met with François I at Marseilles. A lawyer renowned for his eloquence, Poyet had come with a speech all prepared, but at the last moment it was decided that a different theme than the one originally chosen would be more appropriate, so that “sa harangue demeuroit inutile & luy en falloit promptement refaire une autre” [so that his harangue was useless, and he had to draft another promptly] (I: 10, 39a, DM 41; 26). But this he was unable to do on such short notice, so Cardinal du Bellay had to give the speech in his place.

Montaigne begins this chapter by making a distinction between two kinds of public speakers: “les uns ont la facilité & la promptitude, & . . . le boute-hors si aisé qu’à chaque bout de champ ils sont prests: les autres plus tardifz ne parlent jamais rien qu’élaboré et premedité” [some have facility and promptness, and . . . can get it out so easily that at every turn they are ready; whereas others, slower, never speak except with elaboration and
premeditation] (I: 10, 39a, DM 38; 25). As I: 10 is based on a distinction between the two categories of prompt and slow speech, I: 48 is based on a distinction between two ways of fighting, for each of which Montaigne gives two opposing instances: (1) fighting on foot vs. fighting on horseback, and (2) the simple and reliable sword vs. the complicated and unreliable pistol. The trouble with fighting on horseback and with using a firearm is that one is encumbered with excess baggage—the horse liable to fright, impetuosity, wounds or death; the machinery of the pistol any of whose several parts might fail to function. The same trouble afflicts those who, like Poyet, are burdened with the useless encumbrance of a speech they have spent a long time preparing but which they cannot make fit the situation that suddenly presents itself, on those occasions when public speaking (as it does in a court of law or a meeting of heads of state at a politically charged moment) resembles a field of battle, when “les commoditez de l’advocat le pressent à toute heure de se mettre en lice” [the lawyer’s opportunities press him at every moment to enter the lists] (I: 10, 39a, DM 40; 25*).

By contrast, Severus Cassius did better when he relied on his improvisatory powers instead of preparing in advance. It was said of him “qu’il disoit mieus sans y avoir pensé, qu’il devoit plus à la fortune qu’à sa diligence” [that he spoke better without having thought about what he was going to say; that he owed more to fortune than to diligence] (I: 10, 40a, DM 42; 26). Montaigne puts himself in this category: “Je cognois, par experience, cette condition de nature, qui ne peut soustenir une vehemente premeditation et laborieuse. . . . Mais, outre cela, la solicitude de bien faire, et cette contention de l’ame trop bandée et trop tendue à son entreprise, la met au rouet, la rompt, et l’empesche” [I know by experience this sort of nature that cannot bear vehement and laborious premeditations. . . . But besides this, the anxiety to do well, and the tension of straining too intently on one’s work, put the soul on the rack, break it, and make it impotent] (I: 10, 40ac; 26). In “Des destries” the problem with the pistol as opposed to the sword is that “il y a plusieurs pieces, la poudre, la pierre, le rouet, desquelles la moindre qui viendra à faillir, vous fera faillir votre fortune” [there are several parts—the powder, the flint, the lock—the least of which, by failing, will make your fortune fail] (I: 48, 290a, 211*). This rouet, a piece that, though small, is essential to a firearm’s mechanism, is on the metafictional level a small yet significant part of the Essays’ mechanics, echoing its homonym in the structurally related chapter I: 10. In both chapters, a rouet is connected with the failure of a system to work. Its gives the lie to the notion that Montaigne’s avowed preference for speaking without lengthy preparation applies as well
to his writing. I: 10’s rouët was in fact long in coming, only appearing as a post-1588 addition.

That preparation may well extend, as others have suggested, to a system of sequential echoes paralleling the symmetrical ones. For rouet occurs but one other time in Book One, in the chapter that immediately precedes I: 10, when François I bragged of having “mis au rouet” [trapped by encirclement] (I: 9, 37a; 24*). Francesco Taverna, catching him in a lie by inducing him to say too much and thus reveal his master’s guilt in murdering the King’s envoy in Milan. The sequential and the symmetrical echoes among this word’s only appearances in Book One—in chapters I: 9, I: 10, and I: 48—are of equal strength but are based on different parallels. The sequential echo of “avoir mis au rouet” (I: 9) with “la met au rouet” (I: 10) includes mettre + à as well, and in both instances involves speaking. Taverna was caught saying too much; the speaker in I: 10 has too much to say, since he has thought in advance about what he is going to say, to say anything at all. The symmetrical echo between “la met au rouet” (I: 10) and the “rouët” as part of the firing mechanism in I: 48 draws out the parallel between the inability of an over-prepared speaker to speak and the inability of a pistol to fire when one of its pieces fails. Anticipating the bullet that, when the rouët does not fail, “eschappe de nostre pistole” [escapes out of our pistol] (I: 48, 290a, DM 447; 211), speech placed on the rack is likened to water that “par force de se pres-
er de sa violence et abondance, ne peut trouver issuë en un goulet ouvert” [because of the violent pressure of its abundance cannot find its way out of an open gutter pipe] (I: 10, 40a; 26*). The “fortune” that will fail in the case of the man who tries to fire the jammed pistol in I: 48 also finds a parallel in the “fortune” of the speaker in the I: 10 passage. For the passage about putting one’s soul on the rouët derives from the example of Severus Cassius, who “devoit plus à la fortune qu’à sa diligence” [owed more to fortune than to his diligence] (I: 10, 40a, DM 42; 26*) because he was a speaker who, like Montaigne himself, excelled in an impromptu setting but was likely to fail when encumbered with advance preparation. The fortune that fails in one instance succeeds in the other.

More evidence about the long-term preparation that went into the Essays, particularly as they evolved over time, arises from a 1588 addition to I: 48 which responds to the anecdote in I: 10 about the two harangues for the Pope—the one Poyet had prepared but couldn’t give, and the one Cardinal du Bellay gave in his place. The Indians in Mexico were so amazed by the sight of conquistadors on horseback that they thought both the men and the horses must be either gods or animals of a nobler nature than their
own. “Aucuns, apres avoir esté vaincus, venant demander paix et pardon aux hommes, et leurs chevaux, avec une toute pareille harangue à celle des hommes, prenant leur hannissement pour langage de composition et de tre-fve” [Some, after being vanquished, coming to ask for peace and pardon of the men and bring gold and food, did not fail to go and offer the same to the horses, with a harangue just like one for the men, taking their neighing for a language of conciliation and truce] (I: 48, 293b; 214). These two harangues answer the two in I: 10. There are other harangues in the Essays, but only here do they come in pairs.

11. Enough Already

“Des prognostications” [Of prognostications] (I: 11) and “De l’incertitude de nostre jugement” [Of the uncertainty of our judgment] (I: 47)

While chapters I: 9 and I: 49 deal with the past (with the way it resurfaces in the present in both lies and fashion), and chapters I: 10 and I: 48 with the need to act effectively on the spur of the present moment, I: 11 and I: 47 concern the future, for in both Montaigne writes of the impossibility of predicting what will come from the limited perspective the present offers. In I: 11 he criticizes both ancient reading of entrails and present-day attempts to read the future in stars and dreams—“notable exemple de la forcenée curiosité de nostre nature s’amusant à preoccuper les choses futures, comme si elle n’avait pas assez affaire à digérer les presantes” [a notable example of the frenzied curiosity of our nature, which wastes its time anticipating future things, as if it did not have enough to do digesting the present] (I: 11, 41a, DM 45; 27). In 1: 47 he writes of the impossibility of predicting the outcome of certain military behaviors and tactics, considering such questions as what might happen if one pursued a defeated adversary (pushed by despair, would he suddenly fight back with renewed vigor?); whether one’s soldiers should be sumptuously accoutered or armed only for necessity (would they fight more valiantly in order to save their personal property or would they fight more tentatively for fear of losing it?); whether soldiers should be given licence to taunt the enemy (would it increase the courage of the taunters, making them think their opponents would then give them no mercy, or would it only make the enemy fight more courageously, now having a personal interest in the outcome?); or whether one should charge the enemy or stand firm to await his charge.
(would a charge give one’s soldiers greater momentum or would it merely waste their strength?). You just cannot predict what will happen, despite the best laid plans and most well considered reasons. “Ainsi nous avons bien accoustumé de dire avec raison que les advenemens & issues dependent mesme en la guerre pour la pluspart de la fortune. Laquelle ne se veut pas renger & assujetir à nostre discours & prudence” [Thus we are quite wont to say, with reason, that events and outcomes depend for the most part, even in war, on Fortune, who will not fall into line and subject herself to our reason and foresight] (I: 47, 286a, DM 442; 209*).

Yet the specific language in which he expresses his contempt for the notion that the future can be predicted in I: 11, in the passage I quoted about our frenzied curiosity wasting its time anticipating future things “comme si elle n’avoit pas assez affaire à digérer les presantes” [as if it did not have enough to do digesting the present] (I: 11, 41a, DM 45; 27), appears to have some predictive power of its own, anticipating the language with which he will in I: 47 criticize those who do not pursue their military advantage. Perhaps, he writes, an exculpatory defense of the error we made in not pursuing the enemy at Montcontour, or of the King of Spain not pressing the advantage he had over us at Saint Quentin, was that one “pourra dire ceste faute partir d’une ame enyvrée de sa bonne fortune, & d’un courage lequel plein & gorgé de ce commencement de bon heur, perd le goust de l’accroistre, des jà par trop empesché à digérer ce qu’il en a” [could say that this mistake came from a soul intoxicated with its good fortune and a heart full and gorged with such a happy beginning losing the hunger to increase it, already too overcome to digest what it already has] (I: 47, 281a, DM 429–30; 205*). While “à digérer” does appear elsewhere in the Essays, only in these two instances does it do so in the context of having enough on one’s plate already. The echo points to an interesting case of the same and the precisely opposed, for neither our natural curiosity (in I: 11) nor the commander too soon sated with success (in I: 47) is able to digest what must presently be consumed, with the contrasting difference that the former errs in reaching for more while the latter errs in not doing so.

Thus despite the different routes they take to get there, the two chapters are in the end talking about the same thing: predicting the future. “Des prognostications” (I: 11) even presents its own instance of a failure to pursue a military advantage, the question to which “De l’incertitude de nostre jugement” (I: 47) devotes so much space. In fact, in the 1580 edition it was the only anecdote in I: 11 and took up half the chapter. It is ostensibly told to illustrate the force of superstition and false prophecy, yet it concludes with an instance of the same failure to pursue an advantage for which both
I. Book One

French troops and the Spanish king will be taken to task in I: 47. François, Marquis de Sallusse, was a lieutenant in the army of François I who owed his position to the French king’s favor but decided to go over to the side of Charles V because of some prognostications predicting disaster for the French cause. But his defection was not nearly as great a catastrophe as it might have been, “Car ayant & villes & forces en sa main, l’armée ennemye . . . à trois pas de luy, & nous sans soubson de son faict, il estoit en luy de faire pis qu’il ne fist” [for having both cities and forces in hand, the enemy army . . . three steps away, and us without a suspicion of his action, he could have done worse than he did] (I: 11, 42a, DM 46; 28), as the French side lost but one town as a result. Torn between his belief in omens and his affection for François I, and thus “combattu de diverses passions” [conflicted by diverse passions], he was unable to act decisively and pursue the advantage that lay in his grasp.

12. Anagrams

“De la constance” [Of constancy] (I: 12) and “Des noms” [Of names] (I: 46)

Nicolas Denisot, we are told in “Des noms” (I: 46), anagrammatized his name into the “Conte d’Alsinois,” under which pseudonym he produced paintings and poems (I: 46, 279a, DM 427; 203). Anagrammatization, the rearrangement of constituent elements in a meaningful manner, is a pertinent way to describe what happens when elements of an anecdote in one chapter reappear in a new arrangement in an anecdote in the symmetrically corresponding chapter. For instance, in both “Des noms” (I: 46) and “De la constance” (I: 12) a story is told of a man who suddenly sees the danger he is in and takes quick action to get out of it. In one instance, the peril arose when the man came “hors du couvert” [out from the cover] (I: 12, 46a, DM 49; 31*) that a building provided and exposed himself to artillery fire; in the other, a man realized the danger his sinful life posed for the salvation of his soul when, “ayant recouvré une garce” [having picked up a wench] (I: 46, 277a, DM 422; 201) (though recouvrir derives from “récupérer” and not “recouvrir,” the echo does suggest itself), he found out that her name was Marie. The coincidence between her name and that of the Virgin mother of Christ struck him with such force that he suddenly sent the girl away, and made amends the rest of his life. In consideration of this miracle a chapel was built on the site of his house, which later became the cathedral of Poitiers. It happens that there is a coincidence of sorts between the wench
named Marie—“[la] garce . . . Marie” (I: 46, 277a, DM 422–23; 201)—and the name of the man in the other story, the “Marquis de Guast”: the Mar matching the Mar, the is the ie (in pronunciation), and the Gua the ga. One is nearly the anagram of the other.

The very first sentence of I: 12 makes couvrir a key word in the discussion carried out in that chapter: “La loy de la resolution & de la constance ne porte pas que nous ne nous devions couvrir autant qu’il est en nostre puissance, des maux & inconveniens qui nous menassent” [The precepts of resoluteness and constancy do not state that we must not cover ourselves as much as it lies in our power from the evils and troubles that threaten us] (I: 12, 45a, DM 47; 30*). Thus the Marquis de Guast could be forgiven for his lack of constancy in jumping out of the way of the cannonball he saw coming (he had seen the enemy apply the match), the danger to which he had inadvertently exposed himself by abandoning the couvert of the building he had just left. Buildings figure largely in both stories: in each story there are two, one of which offers protection and the other danger. The windmill from whose shelter the Marquis de Guast emerged had protected him momentarily as he stealthily approached the city of Arles on a reconnoissance mission; his opponents “se promenoient sus le theatre des arenes” [were walking on top of the city’s amphitheater] (I: 12, 46a, DM 49; 31), which offered them the opportunity to aim a cannon at him with deadly precision. The house in which the young debauchee lived and entertained his wenches, and thereby endangered his soul, was replaced by one more likely to protect such souls from damnation: “en consideration de ce miracle il fut basti en la place où estoit la maison de ce jeune homme une chappelle au nom de nostre Dame, & depuis l’Eglise que nous y voyons” [in consideration of this miracle there was built, on the spot where this young man’s house was, a chapel in the name of Our Lady, and, later on, the church that we see there] (I: 46, 277a, DM 423; 201).

Another pair of echoing anecdotes emerges with a post-1588 addition to I: 12. In this instance the recombinable elements are (1) the verb reculer [to retreat] in both instances designating a false retreat, (2) a plethora of insults (expressed as “force reproches” and “mille injures”), and (3) the honor of one’s ancestors. Montaigne recounts that when Darius set out to conquer the Scythians he was frustrated because they kept retreating before his advance. Consequently he sent to their king “force reproches pour le voir toujours reculant devant luy et gauchissant la meslée” [many reproaches because he saw him always retreating before him and avoiding battle]. The king replied that as nomads with no cultivated lands or settlements the Scythians were accustomed to being on the move, but that if he was really spoiling for a fight he should try approaching “le lieu de leurs anciennes sepultures” [the place
of their ancient burials], ground the Scythians would defend to the death (I: 12, 45c; 30). In I: 46 Montaigne tells of a friend whose dinner guests began to make extravagant claims for their bloodlines on the flimsiest of evidence. Instead of taking his place at the table, the host “se recula” [retreated] with deep bows, pretending to beg their pardon for having dared to associate with such noble personages as themselves. Then he dropped the mask, and berated them with “mille injures” [a thousand insults] for their pretensions and admonished them, “ne desadvouons pas la fortune et condition de nos ayeulx” [Let us not disown the fortune and condition of our forefathers] (I: 46, 278b; 203). He berated them, that is, because there were abandoning their actual ancestry, which ought to have been good enough, for a fake one, and thereby being untrue to their forefathers, who had no such pretensions. The anecdote first appeared in 1588, but in a latter revision Montaigne added the point about their forefathers being content with the status they had: “[B] Contentez vous, de par Dieu, de ce [C] dequoy nos peres se sont contentez et de ce [B] que nous sommes” [(B) Content yourselves, by God, with (C) what our fathers contented themselves and with (B) what we are] (I: 46, 278bc; 203*). The post-1588 addition intensifies their connection to their ancestors, as if it were Montaigne’s intent to make the anecdote even more closely parallel the one about the Scythians, whose devotion to their ancestors’ honor was absolute.

13. A Waiting Game

“Ceremonie de l’entreveuë des roys” [Ceremony at the interview of kings] (I: 13) and “De la bataille de Dreux” [On the Battle of Dreux] (I: 45)

Both of these chapters are about waiting (attendre) and what it would be better (mieux) to do. In I: 13, it is alleged that “en toutes assemblées . . . il touche aux moindres de se trouver les premiers à l’assignation, d’autant qu’il est mieux deu aux plus apparans de se faire attendre” [in all assemblies . . . the lesser should be first at an appointment, since it is more seemly that the more prominent should make others wait for them] (I: 13, 48a, DM 51; 32*). In I: 45, those critical of Monsieur de Guise’s conduct at the Battle of Dreux said that “il valloit mieux se hazarder prenant l’ennemy par flanc, qu’attendant l’avantage de le voir en queue souffrir une si lourde perte” [it would have been better to take the risk of attacking the enemy by the flank than to suffer so heavy a loss by waiting for the advantage of catching him by the rear] (I: 45, 274a, DM 418; 200*).
Both chapters are also about whether it is better to go *ahead* (*devant*) to meet the party one is expecting—an invited guest in I: 13, the advancing enemy army in I: 45—or to wait for them to arrive. In I: 13, it is suggested “que c’estoit incivilité à un gentil-homme de partir de sa maison . . . pour aller au devant de celuy qui le vient trouver, pour grand qu’il soit, & qu’il est plus respectueux & civil de l’attandre pour le recevoir” [that it would be incivility for a gentleman to leave his house . . . in order to go *ahead* to meet the person who is coming to see him, however great he may be; and that it is more respectful and civil to wait to receive him] (I: 13, 48a, DM 51; 32*). In I: 45: “Philopoemen en une rencontre contre Machinidas ayant envoyé *devant* pour attaquer l’escarmouche bonne troupe d’archiers & gens de traict . . .” [Philopoemen, in an encounter with Machanidas, having sent *ahead* a good force of archers and darters to begin the skirmish . . .] (I: 45, 274a, DM 419; 200*). Although he did send his archers ahead, the point of the story is that once they engaged the enemy he did not then send the rest of his army ahead to save the archers from slaughter, despite the pleas of his soldiers that he do so, but wisely *waited* until the enemy came to him before attacking.

These two chapters apply the same principles in two very different—indeed opposite—contexts, hospitality (I: 13) and war (I: 45). In the *Essays*’ metafiction they prove the truth of the assertion Montaigne makes in I: 45 that one should keep in mind the whole (the way the chapters fit together in the entirety of the work) and not just the part (the individual chapter): “que le but et la visée, non seulement d’un capitaine, mais de chaque soldat, doit regarder la victoire en gros, & que nulles occurrences particulieres, quelque interest qu’il y ayt, ne le doivent divertir de ce point là” [that the goal and aim not only of a captain but of every soldier must be the victory as a whole, and that no particular occurrences, of whatever interest to himself, should divert him from that goal] (I: 45, 274a, DM 418–19; 200).

### 14. More Than One Port in a Storm

“*Que le goust des biens et des maux depend en bonne partie de l’opinion que nous en avons*” [That the taste of good and evil things depends in large measure on the opinion we have of them] (I: 14) and “*Du dormir*” [On sleep] (I: 44)

Montaigne writes in his chapter on sleep that “j’ay remarqué pour chose rare de voir quelquefois les grands personnages, aux plus hautes entreprinses et importans affaires, se tenir si entiers en leur assiette, que de n’en accourcir
pas seulement leur sommeil” [it has struck me as a rare thing to see sometimes great personages, in the loftiest undertakings and most important affairs, remain so utterly unmoved as not even to curtail their sleep] (I: 44, 271a, DM 113; 198*). He cites, among others, two particular notable figures who had no trouble sleeping before they were about to commit suicide. One of them is the Emperor Otho, who decided to kill himself one night, but only “après avoir mis ordre à ses affaires domestiques” [after having put his domestic affairs in order], after which he slept so deeply that his servants could hear him snoring. The other is Cato, who had resolved on suicide, but waited until the senators he was sending away had left the “port d’Utique” [port of Utica]. The messenger he sent to the port returned and awakened him to say that a “tourmente” [storm] had held them back; Cato went back to sleep until word would come that they had made it to safety (I: 44, 271a; DM 413–14; 198). Both anecdotes find echoes in I: 14 (hence my added italics). The “grands personnages” who face death so calmly (either by suicide in the cases of Otho and Cato, or in an impending battle in the other examples cited there) find their counterpart at the other end of the social scale:

Combien voit-on de personnespopulaires & communes, conduitest à la mort, & non à une mort simple, mais meslée de honte & quelquefois de griefs tourmens, y apporter une telle assurance . . . qu’on n’y aperçoit rien de changé de leur estat ordinaire: establissans leurs affaires domestiques, se recommandans à leurs amis.

[How many persons from among the common folk do we see, led to their death, and not to a simple death, but one mixed with shame and sometimes with grievous torments, bring to it such an assurance . . . that we notice nothing changed from their ordinary manner: putting their domestic affairs in order, commending themselves to their friends.] (I: 14, 51a, DM 55–56; 34*)

These two passages in I: 14 and I: 44 are the only ones in the Essays where anyone puts his “affaires domestiques” in order. Here Montaigne sees ("j’ay remarqué pour chose rare de voir," “Combien voit-on de . . . ”) another instance of extremes that touch, as they do in chapters I: 4 and I: 54, when the humblest and the most exalted do the same things: face their certain death unmoved (“se tenir si entiers en leur assiette,” “on n’y aperçoit rien de changé de leur estat ordinaire”) and put their domestic affairs in order.

The story of Otho’s suicide “a beaucoup de choses pareilles” [has many things like] those of the story of Cato’s, and one of them is that the latter
likewise echoes a passage in I: 14, one that appears just before the one that Otho’s story echoes: “Or cete mort que les uns appellent des choses horribles la plus horrible, qui ne sçait que d’autres la nomment l’unique port des tourmens de cette vie? le souverain bien de nature? seul appuy de nostre liberté? & commune et prompte recepce à tous maux?” [Now this death, which some call the most horrible of horrible things, who does not know that others call it the only port of safety from the torments of this life, the sovereign good of nature, the sole support of our freedom, and the common and prompt remedy for all evils?] (I: 14, 51a, DM 55; 33–34*). The unique port in I: 14 finds its unique echo in the port d’Utique in I: 44; the tourmens of this life in I: 14 find their counterpart in the tourmente [storm] that kept Cato’s allies from leaving the port in I: 44. But this port means exactly the opposite of the other, because the senators would not be safe until they left it, while the port in I: 14 is the place of safety to which one goes. The reason the “unique port” is a refuge is that it is suicide, the act in which both Cato and Otho were about to engage. Their self-immolations, which loom so large in I: 44, are more than matched by those recited in I: 14: the twenty-five heads of households in Milan who killed themselves within a week (I: 14, 53a; 35), the Xantians (I: 14, 53a; 35), and even children (I: 14, 54a; 36). Post-1588 additions to the list include the wives of Narsinga (I: 14, 52c; 34–35), Turks and Greeks (I: 14, 53c; 35), and Portuguese Jews (I: 14, 53c; 35–36). In another instance of a famously sound sleeper, Marius, even after he had drawn up his forces and given the word for the battle to begin, “se coucha dessoubs un arbre” [lay down under a tree] to rest and fell into such deep slumber that he was just barely awakened by the rout and flight of his men, having seen none of the combat. It was said that it was because he was so tired from lack of sleep “que nature n’en pouvoit plus” [that nature could hold out no longer] (I: 44, 272a, DM 417; 199). The only other passage in the Essays where trees bear witness to the unstoppable force of nature appears in I: 14: “forcerons nous la generale habitude de nature, qui se voit en tout ce qui est vivant sous le ciel, de trambler sous la douleur? Les arbres mesmes semblent gemir aux offences, qu’on leur faict” [Shall we violate the general law of nature, which can be observed in all that lives under heaven, that we shall tremble under pain? The very trees seem to groan at the blows that are given them] (I: 14, 55–56a, DM 64; 37).

Another famous personage in I: 44 who needed his rest was Alexander the Great, who on the day appointed for battle against Darius slept so soundly and so late that one of his generals was obliged to come into his room and call him by name two or three times to wake him up (I: 44, 271a; 198). But that same Alexander, in a 1588 addition to I: 14, is presented in an opposite
light: “Qui rechercha jamais de telle faim la seurté et le repos, qu’Alexandre et Caesar ont fait l’inquietude et les difficultez” [Who ever with such hunger sought security and repose as Alexander and Caesar sought unrest and difficulties?] (I: 14, 61b; 42). Alexander in I: 44 provides an example of an unquenchable desire for repose, the sleep from which it was so hard to awaken him; here in I: 14, the same Alexander is cited as one hardly hungry for rest. Both chapters praise his courage in the face of danger, though in precisely opposed ways: in I: 14 he seeks out danger instead of repose; in I: 44 he is so unafraid of danger that he can repose, falling into unworried sleep just before he must face it.

15. Custom and Princely Grandeur

“On est puny pour s’opiniaster à une place sans raison” [One is punished for stubbornly defending a place without reason] (I: 15) and “Des lois somptuaires” [On sumptuary laws] (I: 43)

Despite their disparate subjects—war and fashion—in both of these chapters the case is made that the lesser should respect the greater, the conclusion is drawn that the greater have certain prerogatives the lesser do not enjoy, and custom is said to sanction that distinction. In I: 15 those attacked by a more powerful enemy are justly punished with death for putting up a useless resistance (despite what Montaigne says in I: 1, where such behavior is sometimes rewarded with mercy). In I: 43 he addresses the problem of the lower classes wearing clothing appropriate only to their betters. In both situations princely grandeur is a determining factor.

In I: 15 a certain coustume obliges defenders facing long odds to respect the grandeur of a prince. Valor has its limits; when it goes too far, it turns into vice. Thus is born “la coustume” [the custom] of punishing with death those who defend a place that cannot be held. But one must take into account as well “la grandeur du prince conquerant” [the grandeur of the conquering prince], his reputation, the respect he is owed (I: 15, 68a, DM 75, 77; 47, 48). In I: 43 in the choice of what clothes to wear la coustume obliges one to respect the grandeur of a prince:

[A] Car dire ainsi, qu’il n’y aura que les princes qui puissent porter du velours & de la tresse d’or, & l’interdire au peuple, qu’est ce autre chose que mettre en credit ces vanitez là, & faire croistre l’envie à chacun d’en user? Que les rois quittent hardiment ces marques de grandeur, ilz en ont assez
d’autres: [B] telz excez sont plus excusables à tout autre qu’à un prince. [A] Par l’exemple de plusieurs nations nous pouvons apprendre assez de meilleures façons de nous distinguer exterieurement & nos degrez (ce que j’estime à la verité estre bien requis en un estat) sans nourrir pour cet effect cête corruption & incommodité si apparente. C’est merveille comment la coutume en ces choses indifferentes plante aisément & soudain le pied de son autorité.

[(A) For to say that none but princes shall be allowed to wear velvet and gold braid, and to forbid them to the people, what else is this but to give prestige to these vanities and increase everyone’s desire to enjoy them? Let kings boldly abandon these marks of grandeur; they have enough others; (B) such excesses are more excusable in any other than in a prince. (A) From the example of many nations we may learn enough better ways of distinguishing ourselves and our rank externally (which I truly believe to be very necessary in a state), without for this purpose fostering such manifest corruption and harm. It is amazing how easily and quickly custom, in these indifferent things, establishes the footing of its authority.] (I: 43, 268–69ab, DM 409–10; 196*)

The “grandeur du prince conquerant” of I: 15 already found an echo in 1580 in the “marques de grandeur” that belong to “les princes” in I: 43. Montaigne would enhance the echo in 1588 by adding another prince with the insertion “telz excez sont plus excusables à tout autre qu’à un prince [such excesses are more excusable in any other than in a prince].” The new prince is much closer to grandeur than the first. The three terms coutume, prince and grandeur appear in other chapters but only in these two are all three logically connected: a custom that obliges one to respect princely grandeur.

In another 1588 addition to I: 43 Montaigne complains of the new custom of removing one’s hat in the presence of the king, and even in the presence of the king’s subalterns as well: “contre la forme de nos peres et la particuliere liberté de la noblesse de ce Royaume, nous nous tenons descouverts bien loing autour d’eux en quelque lieu qu’ils soient: et comme autour d’eux, autour de cent autres, tant nous avons de tiercelets et quartelets de Roys” [contrary to the ways of our fathers and the particular privilege of the nobility of this kingdom, we stand bareheaded at a long distance around our kings, wherever they may be, and not only around them but around a hun-

36. Villey, Tournon, and Balsamo et al. erroneously date these words from 1580. The only edition I could find that correctly shows it to be an addition from 1588 is Screech’s translation (p. 300).
dred others, so many kinglets and semi-kinglets do we have] (I: 43, 270b; 107*). He subsequently found an anecdote paralleling this one to add to the corresponding chapter: the Portuguese invading the Indies “trouverent des estats avec cette loy universelle et inviolable, que tout ennemy vaincu du Roy en presence, ou de son Lieutenent, est hors de composition de rançon et de mercy” [found states with this universal and inviolable law, that any enemy conquered in the King’s presence, or in that of his lieutenant, is excluded from consideration for ransom or mercy] (I: 15, 68–69c; 48*). In both anecdotes the king’s presence causes a special rule to be observed (that of having to remain bareheaded in I: 43, that of not being eligible for ransom or mercy in I: 15), a custom that is equally observed in the presence of the king’s lesser versions (his tiercelets and quarterlets in I: 43, his lieutenant in I: 15).

16. Judging Julian

“De la punition de la couardise” [On the punishment of cowardice] (I: 16) and “De l’inequalité qui est entre nous” [On the inequality that is between us] (I: 42)

Consider these two passages, the first from I: 16, the second from I: 42.

Ammianus Marcellinus raconte, que l’Empereur Julien condemnna dix de ses soldats, qui avoyent tourné le dos à une charge contre les Parthes, à estre dégradés, et apres à souffrir mort, suyvant, dict il, les loix anciennes. Toutesfois ailleurs pour une pareille faute il en condemne d’autres, seulement à se tenir parmy les prisonniers soubs l’enseigne du bagage.

[Ammianus Marcellinus relates that Emperor Julian condemned ten of his soldiers, who had turned their backs in a charge against the Parthians, to be degraded and afterward to suffer death, according, he says, to the ancient laws. Elsewhere, however, for a similar fault, he condemns others merely to stay among the prisoners under the baggage ensign.] (I: 16, 70a, DM 80; 49)

Ses courtisans louoient un jour Julien l’Empereur de faire bonne justice: Je m’en orguillerois volontiers, dict il, de ces loüanges, si elles venoient de personnes qui osassent accuser ou mesloüer mes actions contraires, quand elles y seroient.
[One day the Emperor Julian's courtiers were praising him for being so just. “I would readily take pride in these praises,” he said, “if they came from people who dared to accuse or dispraise my unjust actions, if there should be any.”] (I: 42, 266–67a, DM 407; 195)

These are the only two mentions in Book One of Julian the Apostate, who is important enough to have a chapter devoted entirely to him in the 19th—and central—chapter of Book Two. Both I: 16 and I: 42 concern not only Julian, but the way he administered justice—a justice in both chapters contradictory or potentially so: in I: 16 he punishes cowardice in two contrasting ways; in I: 42 he opens up the possibility that while some of his judgments may be just others may be unjust. What is more, the second of these passages appears to refer to the first, since in it he dares his flatterers to remember such a contradictory administration of justice as the first passage in fact recounts. Both anecdotes come from the same source, the Ammianus Marcellinus to whom Montaigne credits the first story in I: 16 and from whom the second is also taken.

But how does this help us to read these two chapters? Are these just minor, decorative details and does the real sense of the chapters lie elsewhere? Or are they to be considered as some sort of sign pointing to what makes these chapters parts of a single text? On the face of it, it is hard to imagine a connection between the punishment of cowardice and the inequality between kings and their subjects (the “nous” of I: 42’s title). Yet Montaigne treats of them in such a way as to make them related: what Julian is complaining about in I: 42 is that the overwhelming awe his subjects feel for his royal office prevents them from judging him for his real personal qualities. Montaigne complains at the beginning of the chapter that we do not properly judge men if we neglect to distinguish between innate qualities and extraneous considerations: “à propos de l’estimation des hommes, c’est merveille que sauf nous nulle chose ne s’estime que par ses propres qualitez. Nous louons un cheval de ce qu’il est vigoureux & adroit, non de son harnois. . . . Pourquoi de mesmes n’estimons nous un homme par ce qui est sien?” [apropos of judging men, it is a wonder that, ourselves excepted, nothing is evaluated except by its own qualities. We praise a horse because it is vigorous and skillful, not for his harness. . . . Why do we not likewise judge a man by what is his own?] (I: 42, 259a, DM 393; 189). Now “De la punition de la couardise” (I: 16) is even more obviously about judging men. In considering whether cowardice should be punished by death or by shaming, Montaigne argues that we should make a distinction
entre les fautes qui viennent de nostre foiblesse & celles qui viennent de nostre malice. Car en celles ici nous nous sommes bandés à nostre escent contre les regles de la raison, que nature a emprintes en nous: & en celles là, il semble que nous puissions appeller à garant cete mesme nature, pour nous avoir laissé en telle imperfection & deaillance.

[between the faults that come from our weakness and those that come from our malice. For in the latter we have tensed ourselves deliberately against the rules of reason that nature has imprinted in us; and in the former it seems that we can call on this same nature as our warrantor, for having left us in such imperfection and weakness.] (I: 16, 70a, DM 78–79; 48)

Human weakness is excusable; malice is not. Hence perhaps the justice in Julian’s decision to punish some with death, and others not. To appreciate the skill with which he could discern those who behaved in a cowardly manner out of malice from those who did so from natural weakness is to be granted an insight into his personal qualities that the flatterers in I: 42 were prevented from seeing.

I: 42 thus discusses the general problem (judging our fellow men) of which I: 16 considers a particular instance (judging the conduct, in this case the cowardly conduct, of some men). I: 42’s opposition of extraneous considerations vs. innate qualities is paralleled by I: 16’s opposition of cowardly acts vs. the inner motivation for those acts. It is in both cases the latter that must be judged—whether it was “malice” or “weakness” in the case of cowardice.

17. Glory, Given and Taken

“Un trait de quelques ambassadeurs” [What some ambassadors did] (I: 17) and “De ne communiquer sa gloire” [On not sharing one’s fame] (I: 41)

Montaigne tells in I: 17 of the decision certain French ambassadors made not to communicate to their king François I all that his enemy Charles V told them to tell him because they considered it too insulting. They left out two items in particular, an insult directed at the French army and a challenge to a duel. Montaigne comments, “j’ay trouvé bien estrange, qu’il fut en la puisance d’un ambassadeur de dispenser sur les advertissemens, qu’il doit faire à son maistre” [I found it very strange that it should be in the power of an ambassador to make his choice of the information that he should give to his
I. Book One

master] (I: 17, 73a, DM 85; 188). I: 41 has an anecdote of its own about the same Charles V:

Quand l’Empereur Charles cinquiesme passa en Provence l’an 1537 on tient que Anthoine de Leve voyant son maistre resolu de ce voyage, & l’estimant luy estrre merveilleusement glorieux, opinoit toustefois le contraire, & le desconseilloit: a ceste fin que toute la gloire & honneur de ce conseil en fut attribué à son maistre.

[When the Emperor Charles V came into Provence in the year 1537, they say that Antonio de Lyva, seeing his master resolved on this expedition and believing that it would add wonderfully to his glory, nevertheless expressed a contrary opinion and advised him against it; to this end, that all the glory and honor of this plan should be attributed to his master.] (I: 41, 256a, DM 390; 188)

In both stories, a sovereign’s subordinate takes it upon himself, for his sovereign’s greater glory, not to communicate à son maistre [to his master] all that he could have said—Charles V’s insulting remarks in I: 17, the subordinate’s own opinion in I: 41. Montaigne approves of Antoine de Leve’s behavior but disapproves of the ambassadors’.37 Although the phrase “à son maistre” appears five other times in the Essays only in these two chapters does it involve not communicating to one’s master. Both these stories—as was the case with those about Julian the Apostate in I: 16 and I: 42—were taken from a single source, in this instance the “histoire du Seigneur de Langey” (I: 17, 73a, DM 84; 50) (actually the Mémoires of Martin and Guillaume du Bellay) that he credits in one instance but not the other (noted by Balsamo et al., 1353, 1460), as he had likewise done with his source for the two Julian anecdotes, crediting Ammianus Marcellinus in I: 16 but not in I: 42. The two stories display a complementary symmetry in that the message that was supposed to have been communicated from Charles V in I: 17 is not received, while in I: 41 the message that might have been communicated to Charles V (Lyva’s actual opinion about whether the Emperor should visit

37. Timothy Hampton writes that the ambassadors’ decision not to tell all “became a test case for Renaissance writers on diplomacy” and that Montaigne was not the only writer to comment on it. “For Montaigne, the hierarchy of relations between master and servant structures the function of the ambassador, who does his duty to the extent that he reports accurately what he has seen” (Fictions of Embassy: Literature and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009): 49. But the larger picture provided by the echoing and opposing passage in I: 41, where Montaigne approves of a subordinate not telling his sovereign all he might, suggests he might not have felt all that strongly about it. The ambassadors’ silence, for the Essays, serves a larger purpose.
Provence) is not sent. In no other chapter is a message from or to Charles V not communicated.

It is as if the two chapters were communicating with each other. What is more, while I: 41, as its title indicates, is about communicating (or not communicating) and glory, so too is I: 17. Montaigne writes that when he travels he always hopes to learn something “par la communication d’autrui” [by communication with others] (I: 17, 72a, DM 82; 49), trying to get people he meets to talk about subjects they know best. Unfortunately what most often happens is that they prefer to talk about a profession other than their own, “estimant que c’est autant de nouvelle reputation acquise: tesoing le reproche qu’Archidamus fait à Periander, qu’il quittoit la gloire de bon medecin, pour acquerr celle de mauvais poëte” [thinking this is so much new reputation acquired; witness the reproach Archidamus made to Periander, that he was abandoning the glory of a good doctor for that of a bad poet] (I: 17, 72a, DM 82; 49). In symmetrical contrast to Periander’s abandoning his own gloire for one he didn’t deserve but sought for his own aggrandizement to acquire, in I: 41 Catulus Luctatius flees the enemy with his soldiers so that they would still appear to be obeying his orders: “c’estoit abandonner sa reputation pour couvrir la honte d’autrui” [that was abandoning his reputation to cover the shame of others], thereby showing that he is willing to “communiquer son honneur & d’estrener autrui de sa gloire” [communicate his honor and endow another with his glory] (I: 41, 256a, DM 389; 188*). Both abandon their rightful glory, but one of them does it to selfishly acquire a glory that isn’t his and the other to selflessly give up a glory that is. While Periander hoped to acquire “autant de nouvelle reputation,” Luctatius was willing to “abandonner sa reputation” to cover his soldiers’ shame.

18. Empty Signs

“De la peur” [On fear] (I: 18) and “Consideration sur Cicéron” [A consideration on Cicero] (I: 40)

In I: 18 Montaigne illustrates the power of fear with the story of a “port’enseigne” [standard-bearer] at the siege of Rome who panicked and ran out through a hole in the ruins with the standard in his hand, thinking he was fleeing the enemy but in fact advancing toward them. But when he saw the latter “se renger pour le soutenir” [draw up their ranks to resist him] he turned around and went back in through the same hole, having ventured three hundred paces toward the enemy (I: 18, 75a, DM 88; 52*). Some three hundred
pages later in the 1580 edition, something of that incident crops up again in Montaigne’s description of what Seneca’s and Epicurus’ letters were not, and by implication what Cicero’s letters were: “ne sont ce pas lettres vuides & descharnées, qui ne se soutiennent que par un delicat choix de motz entas-sez & rangez à une juste cadence, ains farcies & pleines de beaux discours de sapience” [these are not mere empty and fleshless letters, *holding together* only by a delicate choice of words piled up and *arranged* in precise cadence, but letters stuffed full of the fine arguments of wisdom] (I: 40, 252a, DM 387; 185). Seneca’s and Epicurus’ letters, that is, contain wisdom lacking in Cicero’s, which are empty and fleshless, holding together only by the way their words are chosen and arranged. The words that repeat here are themselves, in a self-naming metafiction, chosen and arranged. These are the only two places in the *Essays* where any form of the words “ranger” and “soutenir” appear together, and in both instances it is the former that enables the latter to happen: the besieging troops arrange themselves (se rengent) to bear up against (soutenir) the sortie of which they think the sudden appearance of the enseigne is the sign; it is because Cicero’s delicately chosen words are arranged (rangez) a certain way that his letters hold together (se soutiennent). Cicero’s letters find themselves in a position akin to that of the port’enseigne: “sustained” [soutenues] by that which is “arranged” [rangez], as the standard-bearer was “resisted” [soutenu] in a different sense (indeed, an opposite sense) of the word by the soldiers who were lined up [rangés] against him.

What is the point behind *this* delicate choice of echoing words? The answer may lie in the nature of Montaigne’s criticism of the letters’ author as well as in what happens to those letters. The problem Montaigne claims to have with Cicero’s letters is that they are empty signifiers, devoid for the public of what private meaning they may have originally had, devoid even of that private meaning because they (both Cicero’s and Pliny’s) were never even delivered in the first place:

Mais cecy surpasse toute bassesse de coeur en personnes de tel rang, d’avoir voulu tirer quelque principale gloire du caquet & de la parlerie, jusques à y employer les lettres privées écrites à leurs amis: en manière, que aucunes ayant failli leur saison pour estre envoyiées, ils les font ce neantmoins publier avec cête digne excuse, qu’ils n’ont pas voulu perdre leur travail & veillées.

[But this surpasses all baseness of heart in persons of such rank: to have wanted to derive some great glory from mere babble and talk, to the point of publishing their private letters written to their friends; and even though some of these failed to be sent, they were published nonetheless, with this
worthy excuse, that the writers did not want to lose their labor and their vigils.] (I: 40, 249a, DM 383; 183)

Now the *enseigne* [the standard] that the standard-bearer carried when he rushed out of the city would in normal circumstances have borne a very specific meaning: that there was an army right behind it charging out to meet the enemy. Such is the meaning that the enemy troops read into it, “estimant que ce fut une sortie que ceux de la ville fissent” [who thought this was a sortie made by those in the city]. But, like the letters Cicero published even though they never reached their addressees—letters that, when published, meant nothing and that never did successfully convey a meaning to a private reader—the *enseigne* the unwitting soldier bore was a sign devoid of content. Though his gesture, however unintentional, did for one brief moment have a certain magnificent, if empty—and unconscious—eloquence. Montaigne may have seen himself in that unwitting sign-bearer, for elsewhere he writes of how one can create meaning without meaning to: “la fortune montre . . . la part qu’elle a en tous ces ouvrages, par les graces et beautez qui s’y treuvent, non seulement sans l’intention, mais sans la cognoissance mesme de l’ouvrier” [Fortune shows . . . the part she has in all these works by the graces and beauties that are found in them, not only without the workman’s intention, but even without his knowledge] (I: 24, 127a; 93). The *Essays* are rich in such graces and beauties that closer inspection reveals not to be due to chance after all.

One emerges in a post-1588 addition to I: 40 in which Montaigne praises his own writing in the same terms with which he criticized Cicero’s. Cicero’s letters “ne se soutienent que par un *delicat* choix de motz entassez & rangez à une juste cadence” [hold together only by a *delicate* choice of words *piled up* and *arranged* in precise cadence] (I: 40, 252a, DM 387; 185). Montaigne says of his *Essays* that no writer has sown his text with more material, so much so that “Pour en *ranger* davantage, je n’en *entasse* que les testes” [In order to *line up* more, I *pile up* only the *heads*]. His anecdotes, he adds, often bear the seeds of a material richer and bolder than their immediate use, sounding “un ton plus *delicat*, et pour moy qui n’en veux exprimer d’avantage, et pour ceux qui rencontreront mon air” [a more *delicate* note, both for myself, who does not wish to express anything more, and for those who get my drift] (I: 40, 251c; 185*). How strange that Montaigne should castigate Cicero’s style for being nothing but a *delicate* choice of words *piled up* [entassez] and *arranged* [rangez], when he should also say that his own practice of writing is to *ranger* and *entasser* in order to create something *delicat*! Nowhere in the *Essays* do two of these words, *ranger* and *entasser*, appear together but on these two
neighboring pages from the post-1588 “Consideration sur Cicéron.” That is
certainly “un delicat chois de motz” [a delicate choice of words].

Yet his dismissal of Cicero is not absolute: “Fy de l’eloquence qui nous
laisse envie de soy, non des choses. Si ce n’est qu’on die que celle de Cicero
estant en si extreme perfection se donne corps elle mesme” [Fie on the elo-
quence that leaves us craving itself, not things. Unless we say that Cicero’s,
being of such extreme perfection, gives itself substance] (I: 40, 252a, DM
388; 185*). Montaigne gives substance to a hidden text within his text by
his delicate choice of words, and this is true not only of the choice of words
that makes his criticism of Cicero’s writing strangely relevant to his praise of
his own but also of the word choices that make that praise parallel the story
of the misguided “port’enseigne qui . . . se jetta l’enseigne au poing hors la
ville droit aux ennemis . . . & . . . en fin voiant la troupe de monsieur de
Bourbon se renger pour le soutenir . . . tournant teste rentra” [standard-bearer
who . . . threw himself, standard in hard, outside of the city right toward the
enemy . . . and . . . at last seeing Monsieur de Bourbon’s men arrange them-

selves to resist him . . . turning his head back, returned] (I: 18, 75a, DM 88,
52*). We recall that Montaigne in that post-1588 addition to “Consideration
sur Cicéron” says of his Essays that he has put so much material in them that
“Pour en ranger davantage, je n’en entasse que les testes” [To cram in more, I
pile up only the heads]. Neither his

histoires . . . ny mes allegations ne servent pas toujours simplement
d’exemple, d’authorité ou d’ornement. Je ne les regarde pas seulement par
l’usage que j’en tire. Elles portent souvent, hors de mon propos, la semence
d’une matiere plus riche et plus hardie, et sonnent à gauche un ton plus
delicat, et pour moy qui n’en veux exprimer d’avantage, et pour ceux qui
rencontreront mon air.

[stories . . . nor my quotations serve always simply for example, authority,
or ornament. I do not esteem them solely for the use I derive from them.
They often carry, outside of my subject, the seeds of a richer and bolder
material, and sound off to the side a more delicate note, both for myself,
who do not wish to express anything more, and for those who get my drift.]
(I: 40, 251c; 185*)

I suggested a moment ago that Montaigne may have seen himself in the stan-
donard-bearer. His delicate choice of words indeed points to that possibility, as
well as reveals that the anecdote of the “port’enseigne” is an example of what
he is referring to when he says that his stories carry the seeds of a richer and
bolder material and can mean something more than what they mean in their immediate context. Like the “port’enseigne” [the sign carrier] who carried his sign *hors* [outside] the place in which one would normally have expected him to remain, Montaigne’s stories “portent” their signs *hors* [outside] the context in which one would have expected *them* to remain.

That delicate choice of words extends to his seeking to *ranger* so much into his text that only the *testes* show, for those two words occur together in no other chapter but these. The *testes* that show are, self-referentially, these—and the one the standard-bearer turned around once he saw the soldiers *se ranger* against him.

Here in summary form are the words repeated between the story of the standard-bearer in I: 18, Montaigne’s description of how he wrote the *Essays* in I: 40, and his description of how Cicero wrote his letters in I: 40:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the standard-bearer:</th>
<th>the <em>Essays</em>:</th>
<th>Cicero:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(I: 18)</td>
<td>(I: 40)</td>
<td>(I: 40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>se reng</em></td>
<td><em>renger</em></td>
<td><em>rangez</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>entasser</em></td>
<td><em>entas</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>delicat</em></td>
<td><em>delicat</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>soust</em>er*</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>se soutiennent</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>tes</em></td>
<td><em>tes</em>es*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>port’enseigne</em></td>
<td><em>portent</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>hors</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>hors</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One word (*renger*) is found in all three; four (*renger, teste, porte, hors*) are shared by the standard-bearer’s story and the description of the *Essays*; two (*renger, soutenir*) are shared by the standard-bearer and Cicero; three (*renger, entasser, delicat*) by the *Essays* and Cicero. Nowhere else in the *Essays* do *renger* and *entasser* appear together than in the two sequential passages in I: 40, nor *renger* and *teste* than in the standard-bearer’s story and the description of the *Essays*.

**19. Prolonging Life**

“*Qu’il ne faut juger de nostre heur, qu’apres la mort*” [That our happiness must not be judged until after death] (I: 19) and “*De la solitude*” [On solitude] (I: 39)

The exhortation in “De la solitude,” to “s’en contenter, sans desir de prolon-
gement de vie ny de nom” [be content, with no desire of prolonging life or reputation] (I: 39, 248a, DM 382; 183*) echoes the warning implicit in the cautionary tale of Pompey in I: 19, who died too late, exchanging his status of conqueror of half the world for that of a miserable suppliant to officials of the king of Egypt: “tant cousta à ce grand Pompeius l’alongement de cinq ou six mois de vie” [such was the cost to this great Pompey of lengthening his life five or six months] (I: 19, 79a, DM 92; 54). It is a significant echo, a good example of Montaigne’s penchant for a delicate choice of words: these are the only places where either prolongement or alongement appear in the Essays. He tightened the resemblance in a post-1588 alteration, changing alongement in I: 19 to prolongation.

In both passages the same message is conveyed: do not seek to prolong your life. Yet in all other regards the two chapters are opposed. In I: 19 Montaigne keeps insisting that no man should be judged happy until his death, because you never know what might happen: “la fortune quelque fois guette à point nommé le dernier jour de nostre vie pour montrer sa puis-sance de renverser en un moment ce qu’elle avoit basty en longues années” [Fortune sometimes lies in wait precisely for the last day of our life, to show her power to overturn in a moment what she has built up over many years] (I: 19, 79a, DM 92–93; 54–55). But in I: 39 he insists that we can prepare for our declining years in such a way as to minimize risk. All we have to do, it seems, is to depend on ourselves and not others, as if we were the masters of our fate: “faisons que nostre contentement dépende de nous. Desprenons nous de toutes les liaisons qui nous attachent à autruy. Gaignons sur nous de pouvoir à bon escient vivre seulz & y vivre à nostre aise” [let us make our contentment depend on ourselves; let us cut loose from all the ties that bind us to others; let us win from ourselves the power to live really alone and to live that way at our ease] (I: 39, 240a, DM 364; 177).

Both chapters focus in these contrasting ways on the “bout” [end] of one’s “vie” [life], thanks to a 1588 addition to I: 19, “Au jugement de la vie d’autruy, je regarde toujours comment s’en est porté le bout” [In judging the life of another, I always observe how the end turned out] (I: 19, 80b; 55*)—which set up an echo to this passage in I: 39: “Or c’est assez vescu pour autruy, vivons pour nous au moins ce bout de vie” [Now that’s enough lived for others; let us live for ourselves at least this end of life] (I: 39, 242a, DM 368; 178*). In I: 19 this bout of vie is unpredictable, liable to be different from what we expect; in I: 39, on the contrary, it appears that with prudent planning the same bout de vie can be made predictably comfortable, that our future happiness can be made to depend on ourselves.

At the same time he made an alternation in I: 39 so that another echo would emerge. In 1580 the text was: “Il faut avoir femmes, enfans, biens
I. Book One

& sur tout de la santé, qui peut, mais non pas s’y attacher en maniere que nostre bon heur en despande” [One must have wife, children, goods, and above all health, if one can, but not attach ourselves to them in such a way that our happiness depends on them] (I: 39, DM 365–66; 177*). In 1588 he deleted the bon, so that the text would henceforth read “que tout nostre heur en despande” (I: 39, 241b).38 From then on the passage would echo the title of the other chapter: “Qu’il ne faut juger de nostre heur, qu’après la mort”—a title that I: 39, by arguing that we can guarantee “nostre heur” by depending only on ourselves, contradicts. Nowhere else will “nostre heur” appear.

20. Unmasking Masks

“Que philosopher c’est apprendre à mourir” [That to philosophize is to learn to die] (I: 20) and “Comme nous pleurons et rions d’une mesme chose” [How we cry and laugh at the same thing] (I: 38)

Montaigne seeks to unmask death, particularly on the last page of “Que philosopher c’est apprendre à mourir”:

Les enfants ont peur de leurs amis mesmes quand ilz les voyent masquez, aussi avons nous. Il faut oster le masque aussi bien des choses que des personnes. Osté qu’il sera, nous ne trouverons au dessoubz, que cete mesme mort, qu’un valet ou simple chambriere passerent derniere sans peur.

[Children fear even their friends when they see them masked, and so do we ours. We must strip the mask from things as well as from persons; when it is off, we shall find beneath only that same death which a valet or a mere chambermaid passed through not long ago without fear.] (I: 20, 96a, DM 120; 68)

Another unmasking can take place, however, if we pay attention to where masks and children appear in Montaigne. Beneath the disguise, that is, of their ostensibly different subjects—learning to die vs. laughing and crying at the same thing—chapters I: 20 and I: 38 turn out to be, like the playfellow beneath the mask, surprisingly familiar.39 I: 38 certainly begins with what

38. Though given as 241a in Villey, who ignores the change; in a post-1588 alteration, Montaigne deleted “tout.”
39. As Jean Starobinski also points out, finding that in both essays Montaigne tears away the
Montaigne tells us we will find once we remove the mask, namely death: Antigonus weeping when presented with the head of his enemy Pyrrhus, the Duke of Lorraine grieving at his enemy’s burial, the count of Monfort showing sorrow over the body of his, and finally Caesar turning his eyes away from the head of his archrival Pompey. As the children at the end of I: 20 were surprised to discover the face of a friend beneath the scary mask, onlookers in the scenes recounted at the beginning of I: 38 may have been surprised to discover Antigonus and Caesar behaving as if the severed head of their enemy were that of a friend. Children—and masks—indeed have a role to play here, as they did in I: 20, for Montaigne goes on to say that

il ne faut pas croire que cette contenance fut toute fausse & contrefaict. . . . Car bien que à la vérité la pluspart de nos actions ne soient que masque & fard . . . il faut considérer comme nos ames se trouvent souvent agitées de diverses humeurs. . . . D’où nous voyons non seulement aus enfants qui vont tout nayvement après la nature, pleurer & rire souvent de mesme chose.

[We must not believe that his countenance was entirely false and counterfeit. . . . Although most of our actions are indeed only mask and disguise . . . we must consider how our soul is often agitated by diverse passions. . . . We see children, who quite spontaneously follow nature, often cry and laugh at the same thing.] (I: 38, 233–34a, DM 355–57; 172–73*)

Thus, at the moment in I: 38 when its title is implanted in the body of the chapter, Montaigne is alluding not only to that title but also to the chapter with which this one is paired, the one that closed, as this one begins, with a discussion of masks and of children.

In a typically Montaignian piece of metafiction, the “mesme chose” that is literally the same thing both in the body of I: 38 and in its title is at the same time the same thing—that is, death—that its associated chapter (I: 20) was almost entirely about, as its title made clear. For Montaigne has recourse to the example of children who laugh and cry at the same thing in order to say that we all do the same, and that this phenomenon is the reason why Antigonus wept when one would have expected him to rejoice. In a post-1588 addition to I: 20 Montaigne will even enunciate the central thesis of I: 38 (that we laugh and cry at the same thing): “La vie n’est de soy ny bien ny mal: c’est la place du bien et du mal selon que vous la leur faictes” [Life is neither a good nor an evil in itself: it is the scene of good and evil depending on how you make it for them] (I: 20, 93c; 65*).
In two more post-1588 additions, one to each chapter, Montaigne creates yet another echo, one in which weeping, life, death, and the span of a hundred years are all linked. In I: 20 he writes: “c’est pareille folie de pleurer de ce que d’icy à cent ans nous ne vivrons pas, que de pleurer de ce que nous ne vivions pas il y a cent ans” [it is as foolish to weep because we shall not be alive a hundred years from now as it is to weep because we were not alive a hundred years ago] (I: 20, 92c; 64*). In I: 38, Xerxes, contemplating his army crossing the Hellespont, quivered with delight to see so many thousands under his command. “Et, tout soudain, en mesme instant, sa pensée luy suggerant comme tant de vies avoient à defailir au plus loing dans un siécle, il refroigna son front, et s’attrista jusques aux larmes” [And quite suddenly, in the same instant, as his thought suggested to him how all those lives would give out within a century at the latest, he knit his brows and was saddened to tears] (I: 38, 235c; 174*). That death is certain to come within a hundred years is a constant in both passages, though in I: 20 it is one’s own death and in I: 38 the death of others.

21. Powers of Attraction

“De la force de l’imagination” [On the power of the imagination] (I: 21) and “Du jeune Caton” [On Cato the Younger] (I: 37)

Did Cato the Younger kill himself for less than noble motives? Montaigne rejects that idea. “Plutarque dict, que de son temps il y en avoit qui attribuoyent la cause de la mort du jeune Caton à la crainte qu’il avoit eu de Caesar, dequoy il se picque avecques raison” [Plutarch is rightly annoyed that in his time there were some who attributed the cause of the younger Cato’s death to the fear he had of Caesar] (I: 37, 231a, DM 352; 170), whose armies were about to overrun Cato’s. In other words, “Il y en a, qui de frayeur anticipent la main du bourreau” [There are some who, out of fear, anticipate the hand of the executioner]. What is interesting is that those “other words” come from the companion chapter, “De la force de l’imagination” (I: 21, 98a, DM 121; 68–69). Fear is the supposed cause of death in both instances, even though Cato was not said (by those to whose slander Montaigne objects) to have died, as do those awaiting execution in I: 21, from the power of imagination itself, but by his own hand. Often not only do related topics emerge in these parallel chapters but the same words too. In the two passages concerning death by fright “il y en avoit qui” [there were some who]
attributed the cause of Cato’s death to the fear he had of Caesar, while “Il y en a qui” [There are some who], out of fear anticipate the executioner’s hand.

Consider the multiple echoes that surface in this sentence from the chapter on Cato: “il ne se reconnoit plus d’action vertueuse. Celles qui en portent le visage elles n’en ont pas pourtant l’essence. Car le profit, la gloire, la crainte, l’acoutumance, & autres telles causes estrangeres nous acheminent à les produire” [There are no more virtuous actions to be seen; those that wear virtue’s face do not for all that have its essence; for profit, glory, fear, habit, and other such extraneous causes lead us to produce them] (I: 37, 230a, DM 351; 170*). This chapter, especially in its 1580 version, was about the difference between surface appearances and deeper truth, and thus about the desirability of penetrating to the essence of human behavior. Essence is at issue in the other chapter, the only other place in Book One in 1580 where the word appears: Gallus Vibius “banda si bien son ame, & la tendit à comprendre & imaginer l’essence de la folie” [strained his soul so hard, and stretched it to understand and imagine the essence of madness] (I: 21, 98a, DM 121; 68*) that he went mad. One thing these verbal and other echoes sometimes show is a playfulness on Montaigne’s part, with one chapter undercutting the seriousness of the other. This is evident as well in the way the causality linking visage and produire in the sentence from I: 37 quoted above finds a weird parallel in the anecdote Montaigne tells in I: 21 of Cyppus, who having attentively watched a bullfight and then dreamed all night of horns on his head, “les produit en son front” [produced them on his forehead] (I: 21, 98a, DM 122; 69*) by the power of imagination. His visage was considerably altered by what was “produced” by the force of imagination, in a comic counterpart to the serious observation in the companion chapter that actions have the visage of virtue, but only the visage, because of the causes having nothing to do with virtue that lead us to produce those actions.

A substantial post-1588 addition at the end of I: 37 adds more parallels. From the beginning (i.e., 1580) the chapter had closed with five poetic quotations (from Martial, Manilius, Lucan, Horace, and Virgil) in praise of Cato. In the addition he prefaces them by imagining how an “enfant bien nourry” [well-educated child] (I: 37, 231c; 171*) would judge them, finding the third more vigorous than the first two but ruined by excess, clapping his hands at the fourth, and thunderstruck by the fifth. He sets up the well-educated child as an ideal reader, his response a good indication of Montaigne’s own appreciation of the five passages he is about to quote. Now he matches this in a concurrent post-1588 addition near the end of the companion chapter in which he speaks of himself as a child deficient in literary prowess: “il n’est rien si contraire à mon stile qu’une narration estendue: je
me recoupe si souvent à faute d’haleine, Je n’ay ny composition, ny explica-
tion qui vaille, ignorant au-delà d’un enfant des frases et vocables qui servent aux choses plus communes” [there is nothing so contrary to my style as an extended narration. I cut myself off so often for lack of breath; I have neither composition nor development that is worth anything; I am more ignorant than a child of the phrases and terms that serve for the commonest things] (I: 21, 106c; 76). In this post-1588 addition appearing in the same place in I: 21 as the other one does in I: 37, that is at the conclusion of the chapter, Montaigne also uses a child, though an ignorant one this time—thus conforming to his frequent practice in these symmetrical echoes of matching what is at once both the same and precisely the opposite—as a standard by which literary value may be judged. And he identifies himself with the child in both instances, despite the child being ignorant in one instance but well-informed in the other. In I: 37 the well-informed child’s opinion of each poetic quotation is the same as his; in I: 21 the child’s ignorance is the same as his.

This is a metafictional moment, for the genius of Montaigne’s writing style, certainly that aspect of it that concerns us in this study, is that he writes in fragments (cutting himself off as he says for lack of breath) instead of in an extended narration, and yet the fragments are connected. The various parts of an extended narration are connected by continuity and context; even when they are not continuous they are still part of the same story. Montaigne connects his pieces in a radically different way, and what is metafictional about this passage is that his complaint that his literary ignorance is like a child’s is itself one of the connections.

In an anecdote dating from the 1580 edition, he writes in I: 21 of a cat staring at a bird perched at the top of a tree, “et, s’estans fichez la veuë ferme l’un contre l’autre quelque espace de temps” [and, after they had been locked in a firm gaze one against the other for some time], the bird fell as if dead between the cat’s paws, either intoxicated by its own imagination “ou attiré par quelque force attractive du chat” [or drawn by some attracting force of the cat] (I: 21, 105a, DM 151; 75*). In a post-1588 addition to I: 37 the “veuë ferme” and the situation of being “attiré par quelque force attractive” find their echoes (the beauty to which he is alluding is that of poetry when it is so good as to be “excessive” and “divine”):

Quiconque en discerne la beauté d’une veue ferme et rassise, il ne la void
pas, non plus que la splendeur d’un esclair. Elle ne pratique point nostre
jugement: elle le ravit et ravage. La fureur qui espoinçonne celui qui la
sçait penetrer, fiert encore un tiers à la luy ouyr traitter et reciter: comme
l’aymant, non seulement attire un’aiguille, mais infond encore en icelle sa faculté d’en attirer d’autres.

[Whoever discerns its beauty with a firm and settled gaze does not see it, any more than he sees the splendor of a lightning flash. It does not persuade our judgment, it ravishes and overwhelms it. The frenzy that goads the man who can penetrate it also strikes a third person on hearing him discuss it and recite it, as a magnet not only attracts a needle but infuses into it its own faculty of attracting others.] (I: 37, 231–32c; 171*)

Divine poetry resembles the cat in having a strange attractive force, yet is just the opposite in that its attractive force cannot be received by regarding it with a “veuë ferme.”

22. Complementarities and Buried Allusions

“Le profit de l’un est dommage de l’autre” [One man’s profit is another man’s loss] (I: 22) and “De l’usage de se vestir” [On the custom of wearing clothes] (I: 36)

At about three hundred thirty words one of the shortest chapters in the Essays (and the only one to which no addition was made), I: 22 compels the question, is this all there is? Of course by now we know that whatever is in any given chapter is not all there is, and that the rest of it can be found in its relation to its symmetrical complement. In the case of I: 22 and I: 36 Montaigne has planted the most obvious of clues to their complementarity by placing in both the expression “generale police”—whose two components appear separately 42 and 60 times respectively but together only in these two chapters. In I: 22, he writes of Demades of Athens condemning an undertaker for profiting from the death of others. Montaigne remarks that this condemnation was unjust, for “il ne se fait nul profit qu’au dommage d’autrui” [no profit is made except at the expense of others], and then reflects that it is an even broader phenomenon than that, for “nature ne se dément point en cela de sa generale police” [Nature here was not belying her general polity], since the birth and growth of anything is the change and corruption of another (I: 22, 107a, DM 132–33; 77*). In I: 36, he wonders whether the tendency of the natives of the New World to wear few or no clothes is forced on them by their warm climate or if it was humanity’s original state. He remarks that we must distinguish man-made from natural laws, and “recourir à la generale
police du monde, où il n'y peut avoir rien de contrefaict” [turn for advice to the general polity of the world, where there can be nothing counterfeit] (I: 36, 225a, DM 346; 166*).

What we would miss if we didn’t read these chapters in twos is that the invention of clothing in I: 36, which goes against the “generale police” of a world in which there can be nothing artificial, is a specific instance of the rule obeyed by another “generale police,” that of nature in I: 22 according to which the birth, nourishment, and growth of each thing is the alteration and corruption of another. For the human race began, he argues in I: 36, with sufficient natural covering against the elements, a protection every other living being still enjoys, “mais comme ceux, qui esteignent par artificielle lumiere celle du jour, nous avons esteint & estouffé nos propres moyens par les moyens empruntez & estrangiers” [but like those that block out the light of day with artificial light, we have extinguished and smothered our own means with borrowed and foreign means] (I: 36, 225a, DM 347; 167*). Our original innate protection has undergone alteration and corruption, extinguished by what has taken its place. Clothing’s “profit” is the “loss” of that original tougher hide and hair.

Metafictionally, the complementarity that is the theme of one of these chapters (I: 22), that everything comes into existence at the expense of something else, is true of the way it relates to the other one. Indeed, all the chapters in pairs are each other’s complement.

A post-1588 addition to I: 36 enhances the complementarity. I: 22 begins with the first of many examples of the general rule that one person profits from another’s loss, the sale of things necessary for “enterremens” [burials] of which Demades complained. In the addition Montaigne comes up with an instance of a burial that serves the same function as clothing, protection from the cold (he never speaks in that chapter of it having any other purpose): “Alexandre veit une nation en laquelle on enterre les arbres fruitiers en hiver, pour les defendre de la gelée” [Alexander saw a nation in which they bury fruit trees in winter to protect them from the frost] (I: 36, 228c; 169*).

23. Here and There

“De la coustume et de ne changer aisément une loy receüe” [On custom, and on not lightly changing an accepted law] (I: 23) and “D’un defaut de nos polices” [On a defect in our polities] (I: 35)

The lack to which I: 35’s title alludes is one for which Montaigne’s father, when he was mayor of Bordeaux, had a remedy in mind. It was to set up
a sort of bulletin board where employers and job-seekers, and others with mutually complementary needs—“des conditions, qui s’entrecherchent” [situations that seek each other out]—could register their requests with an official appointed for that purpose. It would be a “moyen de nous entr’advertir” [a means of informing each other] and promote commerce and the common weal (I: 35, 223a, DM 343–44; 165*).

To this proposed remedy for a lack in our “polices” [polities] I: 23 counters with the assertion that any innovation in our “police” is dangerous:

Il y a grand doute, s’il se peut trouver si evident profit au changement d’une loy receüe telle qu’elle soit, qu’il y a de mal à la remuer: d’autant qu’une police bien instituée c’est comme un bastiment de diverses pieces jointes ensemble d’une telle liaison, qu’il est impossible d’en esbranler la moindre, que tout le corps ne s’en sente.

[It is very doubtful whether there can be such evident profit in changing an accepted law, of whatever sort it be, as there is harm in disturbing it; inasmuch as a well set-up polity is like a structure of diverse parts joined together in such a relation that it is impossible to budge the least of them without the whole body feeling it.] (I: 23, 119a, DM 146; 86*)

Montaigne’s father, of course, did not propose that a law be changed but that a new one (or a new state institution) be added. Yet that too is condemned in I: 23: the lawmaker of the Thurians ordained that whoever wanted to abolish an old law “ou en establir une nouvelle” [or establish a new one] (I: 23, 119a, DM 146; 86) present himself to the public with a rope around his neck so that if the proposal was not adopted he should be immediately strangled. Even just a new way of doing things is censured as well in I: 23. The ephor who cut the two strings Phrynis had added to the harp “ne s’esmaie pas, si elle en vaut mieux, ou si les accords en sont mieux remplis: il luy suffit pour les condamner, que ce soit une alteration de la vieille façon” [does not worry whether music is the better for it or the chords are richer; for him to condemn them, it is enough that they represent an alteration of the old way] (I: 23, 119a, DM 146–47; 86*). Like Phrynis’ new strings, Montaigne’s father’s innovation would have enriched urban life and commerce, but because it was an innovation would have endangered the stability of the very polity it was intended to improve.

The contradiction is striking between Montaigne’s approval of his father’s innovation to remedy a defect in our “polices” in I: 35 and the argument he presents in I: 23 that any innovation whatsoever in our “police” is wrong. But we would probably not have noticed the contradiction unless we read the two
chapters together. Of course, that is precisely the metafiction awaiting our
discovery: I: 23’s condemnation of change and I: 35’s proposal for change are
“des conditions, qui s’entrecherchent” [situations that seek each other out] (I: 35, 223a, DM 344; 165*). I: 35’s proposal is a microcosm of what is going
on between I: 35 and I: 23. To this I: 23 replies with a microcosm of its own,
the polity as “un bastiment de diverses pieces jointes ensemble d’une telle
liaison, qu’il est impossible d’en esbranler la moindre, que tout le corps ne s’en sente” [a structure of diverse parts joined together in such a relation that
it is impossible to budge the least of them without the whole body feeling it.] (I: 23, 119a, DM 146; 86*). The Essays are such a structure, where important
pieces fit together—the opposing chapters, pressing each against the other in
the symmetrical design. Were one to go missing the whole structure would
suffer.

24. How to Paint a Dog

“Divers evenemens de mesme conseil” [Various outcomes from
the same plan] (I: 24) and “La fortune se rencontre souvent au
train de la raison” [ Fortune is often met in the path of reason]
(I: 34)

In I: 24 Montaigne recounts that Augustus, on the advice of his wife, par-
doned Lucius Cinna when he plotted against his life, a clemency that appears
to have preserved the emperor from subsequent conspiracies. But when Fran-
çois de Guise followed the same course of action, showing mercy to one
would-be assassin, he did not do as well as Augustus, for he died at the hands
of another assassin shortly thereafter. Montaigne meditates on how a diversity
of outcomes can arise from the same plan, attributing it to the role chance
plays in human affairs: “au travers de tous nos projects, de nos conseils &
precautions la fortune maintient tousjours la possession des evenemens”
[athwart all our plans, counsels, and precautions, Fortune still maintains her
grasp on events] (I: 24, 127a, DM 158; 92*). Fortune is fully as much the
subject of this chapter as it is of I: 34, where it is directly evoked in the title.

Fortune in I: 24 plays a major role not only in political conspiracies but
in medicine too, as well as other arts:

Il en est de mesmes en la peinture, qu’il eschape par fois des traitz de la
main du peintre surpassans sa conception & sa science, qui le tirent luy
mesmes en admiration, & qui l’estonnent. Mais la fortune monstre bien
encores plus evidemmant la part qu’elle a en tous ces ouvrages par les graces & beautez qui s’y treuvent, non seulement sans l’invention, mais sans la cognoissance mesmes de l’ouvrier. Un suffisant lecteur descouvre souvant es escritz d’autruy des perfections autres que celles que l’auteur y a mises & aperceües, & y preste des sens & des visages plus riches.

[Sometimes there escape from the painter’s hand touches so surpassing his conception and his science as to arouse his wonder and astonishment. But Fortune shows still more evidently the part she has in all these works by the graces and beauties that are found in them, not only without the workman’s intention, but even without his knowledge. A sufficient reader often discovers in other men’s writings perfections beyond those that the author put in or perceived, and lends them richer meanings and aspects.] (I: 24, 127a, DM 160–61; 93*)

Imitating Epimenides (the Cretan who said all Cretans were liars), Montaigne here poses us a paradox of astonishing subtlety. For at the same moment that he is telling us that certain readers are likely to discover things in a text the author never intended, and that the painter is sometimes surprised by the wonder of what he has, without intending to, done, he seems to be inviting us to discover just such perfections and richer aspects in the text of the Essays, and to dare us to decide whether it was Fortune that placed it there, or Montaigne himself. For in I: 34 we are told of just such a painter as the one in I: 24 whose science was surpassed by the hand of Fortune—and what is more significant, in the same turn of phrase.

Surpassa elle pas Protogenes en la science de son art? Cestuy cy estoit peintre, & ayant parfaict l’image d’un chien las & recreu, à son contentement en toutes les autres parties, mais ne pouvant représenter à son gré l’escume & la bave, despité contre sa besongne prit son esponge, & comme elle estoit abreuvée de diverses peintures, la jetta contre pour tout effacer. La fortune porta tout à point le coup à l’endroit de la bouche du chien, & y parfournit ce à quoy l’art n’avoit peu attaindre. N’adresse elle pas quelquefois nos conseils & les corige?

[Did she not surpass Protogenes in the science of his art? He was a painter, and having completed the picture of a tired and panting dog to his satisfaction in all the other parts but unable to show the foam and slaver as he had

40. Changed to “l’intention” in a post-1588 revision.
desired, vexed with his work, he took his sponge, which was soaked with various colors, and threw it at the picture to blot it out completely. Fortune guided the throw with perfect aptness right to the dog's mouth, and accomplished what art had been unable to attain. Does she not sometimes address our plans and correct them?] (I: 34, 221a, DM 341–42; 64*)

The last sentence alludes to the “conseil” of I: 24’s title, which is shown in that chapter to be in Fortune’s hands; more remarkably, the combination of surpasser and science appears nowhere else than in these two passages about Fortune guiding the painter’s hand. In the I: 24 passage Montaigne immediately goes on to say that the same thing happens in writing, virtually daring us to wonder if these symmetrically-placed twin instances of Fortune surpassing a painter’s science are due to Fortune or to Montaigne. The latter seems far more likely, and the metafiction intentional. The fiction is that Fortune guides the writer’s hand; the metafiction is that it doesn’t. The fiction is that the grace, beauty, and perfection evident in the occurrence of these self-echoing passages in structurally-related parts of the work are the result of Fortune or of the cleverness of the able reader who finds them, and that Montaigne had no idea they were there; the metafiction is that Montaigne knows exactly what he was doing. Both passages are immediately preceded by a discussion of Fortune’s role in medicine. In I: 24, we can see the connecting tissue in the following passage, when Montaigne says that not only in medicine but also in such other arts as poetry we can see Fortune at work:

Nous appelons les medecins heureus, quand ilz arrivent à quelque bonne fin . . . la fortune preste la main à ses operations . . . Or je dy que non en la medecine seulement, mais en plusieurs arts plus certaines la fortune y a bonne part. Les saillies poetiques, qui emportent leur autheur mesme & le ravissent hors de soy, pourquoi ne les atribuerons nous à son bon heur? puis qu’il confesse luy mesmes qu’elles surpassent sa suffisance & ses forces, & les reconnoit venir d’ailleurs que de soy.

[We call doctors fortunate when they attain some good end. . . . Fortune lends her hand in their operations. . . . Now, I say that not only in medicine but in many more certain arts Fortune has a large part. Poetic sallies, which transport their author and ravish him out of himself, why shall we not attribute them to his good luck? He himself confesses that they surpass his ability and strength, and acknowledges that they come from something other than himself.] (I: 24, 127a, DM 160–61; 92–93)
In I: 34, he preceded the passage about Protogenes with this anecdote:

Quelque fois elle [la fortune] fait la médecine. Jason Phereus estant abandonné des medecins pour une apostume, qu’il avoit dans la poitrine, ayant envie de s’en défaire au moins par la mort, se jetta en une bataille à corps perdu dans la presse des ennemis, où il fut blessé à travers le corps si à point que son apostume en creva & guerit. Surpass elle pas Protogenes . . . ?

[Sometimes she [Fortune] practices medicine. Jason of Pheres, given up by the doctors because of an abscess in his chest, wished to get rid of it by death if necessary, and threw himself bodily into the thick of the enemy in a battle, where he was wounded through the body so exactly that his abscess burst and he was cured. Did she not surpass Protogenes . . . ?] (I: 34, 221a, DM 341–42; 164)

In the story of Augustus and Cinna, Montaigne recounts that when the emperor was trying to decide whether to pardon him or not among the thoughts going through his mind was this one: “sera il absous ayant deliberé non de me meurtrir seulement, mais de me sacrifier? Car la conjuration estoit faicte de le tuer, comme il feroit quelque sacrifice” [“Shall he be absolved when he has decided not merely to murder me but to sacrifice me?” For the conspiracy was formed to kill him while he would be performing some sacrifice] (I: 24, 125a, DM 153–54; 91*). In a post-1588 addition to I: 34, Montaigne added an allusion to this passage in recounting another failed assassination attempt. Icetes had persuaded two soldiers to kill Timoleon. “Ils prindrent heure sur le point qu’il fairoit quelque sacrifice” [They chose the hour when he would be performing some sacrifice] (I: 34, 222c; 164*). The phrase occurs in no chapter other than these two.

A 1588 addition to I: 34 creates yet another connection to I: 24: “Pour la fin. En ce faict icy se descouvre il pas une bien expresse application de sa faveur, de bonté et piété singuliere? Ignatius Pere et fils, proscripts par les triumvirs à Romme, se resolurent à ce genereux office de rendre leurs vies entre les mains l’un de l’autre, et en frustrer la cruauté des Tyrans” [A final example. Does not the fact which is about to be related reveal a very express act of Fortune’s favor, of her singular kindness and piety? The Egnatii, father and son, proscribed by the triumvirs at Rome, resolved on the noble device of giving up their lives at each other’s hands, in order to frustrate the cruelty of the tyrants] (I: 34, 222b; 165). This b-stratum addition, which occurs at the end of the chapter (and would continue to despite later additions), as
Montaigne emphasizes by prefacing it by “Pour la fin,” matches the last story in I: 24, which likewise tells of someone proscribed by the Triumvirate who decides, like the Egnatii, to die rather than flee. A Roman who, “fuyant la tyrannie du Triumvirat” [fleeing the tyranny of the Triumvirate] (I: 24, 132a; 97), and having escaped his pursuers a thousand times already, decided one day to give up himself up, coming out of his hiding place to call out to some soldiers who had passed right by him, thus “s’abandonnant volontairement à leur cruauté, pour ôter eux et luy d’une plus longue peine” [abandoning himself to their cruelty in order to rid them and himself of further trouble] (I: 24, 132a; 97).

25. Well-Nourished Daughters

“Du pedantisme” [On pedantry] (I: 25) and “De fuir les voluptez au pris de la vie” [To flee from sensual pleasures at the price of life] (I: 33)

I: 33 is surely one of the strangest chapters in the Essays. Very brief (less than two pages in Balsamo et al.) and subject to no additions since its first appearance in 1580 (just some slight rewording), it devotes slightly more than half of its space to the story of Saint Hilary of Poitiers and his daughter Abra, “sa fille unique, . . . poursuivie en mariage par les plus apparens seigneurs du pays, comme fille tres bien nourrie, belle, riche, & en la fleur de son aage” [his only daughter, . . . sought in the marriage by the most eminent lords of the country, as a girl well brought up, beautiful, rich, and in the flower of her youth] (I: 33, 219a, DM 336; 162). Hilary wrote her from abroad to say that she should remove her affection from the pleasures and advantages those suitors offered, for he had found a much better husband for her in his travels, who would give her priceless riches. His intent had been to wean her from earthly distractions the better to fit her for heaven, but since it occurred to him that the quickest way to achieve that would be for her to die, he ceaselessly prayed for that to occur. Sure enough, shortly after his return she did succumb, which made him very happy. His wife, impressed with heaven’s attractions and her spouse’s power of prayer, successfully requested the same favor for herself.

The chapter begins with a brief exploration of the rather more reasonable notion that “il est heure de mourir lors qu’il y a plus de mal que de bien à vivre: & que de conserver nostre vie à nostre tourment & incommode
c’est choquer les reigles mesmes de nature” [it is time to die when there is more evil than good in living; and that to preserve our life to our torment and discomfort is to shock the very laws of nature] (I: 33, 218a, DM 333; 161*). But the ground shifts somewhat when Montaigne considers those who have urged others to consider leaving this life in order to withdraw not from torment but from “des honneurs, richesses, grandeurs, & autres faveurs & biens” [honors, riches, dignities, and other favors and goods] (I: 33, 218a, DM 334; 162). One he has found making such an exhortation is Seneca, who wrote to Lucilius that he should untie the knot that binds him to the pomp of public life and withdraw to a philosophical solitude, and that if he cannot untie it, then he should cut it by withdrawing from life itself.

Montaigne finds such advice unsurprising coming from a Stoic like Seneca, but it is “estrange qu’il soit emprunté d’Epicurus, qui escrit à ce propos, choses toutes pareilles à Idomeneus” [strange that it should be borrowed from Epicurus, who writes things just like it on this subject to Idomeneus] (I: 33, 218a, DM 335; 162). The chapter then concludes with the story of Saint Hilary, whose infanticidal prayer so shocks the laws of nature to which Montaigne appealed in the beginning that one imagines he (not Saint Hilary) must surely be joking. There does seem to be some hint of irony in the manner Montaigne introduces this dreadful account: “Si est ce que je pense avoir remarqué quelque trait semblable parmi nos gens, mais avec la moderation Chrestienne. S. Hilaire . . . ” [Yet I think I have noticed something like it among our people, but with Christian moderation. Saint Hilary . . . ] (I: 33, 219a, DM 335; 162). Christian moderation is more immoderate than the pagan variety, for Hilary “semble encherir sur les autres de ce qu’il s’adresse à ce moyen de prime face, qu’ilz ne prennent que subsidieremant, & puis que c’est à l’endoroit de sa fille unique” [seems to outdo the others, in that he addresses himself from the first to this means, which the others adopt only as a subsidiary; and besides, it concerns his only daughter] (I: 33, 219a, DM 336–37; 162). What is repeated in this chapter, besides the motif of death’s attractiveness, is repetition itself: the reappearance of a sentiment (death’s seductiveness) in a context where it seems out of place. What was appropriate for the stoic Seneca to say was less so for the original Epicurean and still less so for a father with regard to his daughter.

Montaigne begins I: 25 by recalling that as a child he wondered why it is that schoolmasters are more often the butt of jokes than objects of respect. As an adult he began to see that in fact they often proved to be ridiculous figures, puffed up by borrowed wisdom that they were incapable of usefully applying to their own lives. Yet he continued to wonder why men who
possessed such riches were not improved by them: “Mais d’où il puisse adven-
ir qu’une ame garnie de la connaissance de tant de choses n’en deviene pas
plus vive & plus esveillée, & qu’un esprit grossier & vulgaire puisse loger en
soy, sans s’amender, les discours & les jugemens des plus excellens espritz que
le monde ait porté, j’en suis encore en doute” [But how it is possible that
a soul furnished with the knowledge of so many things should not thereby
become keener and more alert, and that a crude and commonplace mind can
harbor within itself, without being improved, the reasonings and judgments
of the greatest minds that the world has produced—that still has me puzzled]
(I: 25, 134a, DM 168; 98*). Borrowed knowledge doesn’t seem to rub off
on the new owner. “Nous de mesmes, nous prenons en garde les opinions &
le scàvoir d’autruy, & puis c’est tout, il les faut faire nostres. . . . Que nous
sert il d’avoir la panse pleine de viande, si elle ne se digere, si elle ne se trans-
forme en nous?” [We do the same, taking the opinions and the knowledge
of others into our keeping, and then that is all. We must make them our
own. . . . What good does it do us to have our belly full of meat if it is not
digested, if it is not transformed into us?] (I: 25, 137a, DM 174; 101*).

Both chapters, then, are about borrowed ideas, yet in precisely opposite
ways. In 1: 25 Montaigne criticizes those who borrow opinions from others
without making them their own, whereas in I: 33 the borrowed opinion para-
doxically belongs more to the borrower (Seneca) than to the one he borrowed
it from (Epicurus).

On a metafictional level, borrowing is what goes on between symmetri-
cally linked chapters that repeat each others’ discourse. In the case of these
two, the borrowing is about borrowing itself. It is also about Hilary’s daugh-
ter, who was “poursuivie en mariage . . . comme fille tres bien nourrie” [pur-
sued in marriage . . . as a girl well brought up] (I: 33, 219a, DM 335; 162).
For in I: 25 Montaigne writes of another daughter valued in the marriage
market because of how she was “nourrie”:

François duc de Bretaigne . . . , comme on luy parla de son mariage avec
Isabeau fille d’Escoce, & qu’on luy adjouta qu’elle avoit esté nourrie sim-
plement & sans aucune instruction de lettres, respondit qu’il l’en aimoit
mieux, & que une fame estoit assez scàvante quand elle scavoit mettre dif-
ference entre la chemise & le pourpoint de son mary.

[Francis, duke of Brittany . . . when they were talking to him about his
marriage with Isabel, a princess of Scotland, and told him that she had been
brought up simply and without any instruction in letters, replied that he
loved her the better for it, and that a woman was learned enough when she knew how to distinguish between her husband’s shirt and his doublet.] (I: 25, 140a, DM 180; 103)

The verbal echo is not only striking but unique, as no other “fille nourrie” appears in the Essays. Villey explains in a footnote that when Montaigne says that Hilary’s “fille” was “tres bien nourrie” he means “D’une très bonne éducation” [with a very good education] (219n), which is precisely the opposite of the way the “fille” in I: 25 was “nourrie”: “simplement & sans aucune instruction de lettres” [simply and without any instruction in letters]. Abra would not have been seduced by her father’s advice had she been, like Isabeau, illiterate, for Hilary had communicated it to her in a letter (as Seneca had to Lucilius and Epicurus to Idomeneus). As it was his theology that made Hilary desire his daughter’s death, so too was it theology that kept Isabeau unlettered: “& nous & la Theologie ne requerons pas beaucoup de science aux fames” [neither we nor theology require much learning of women] (I: 25, 140a, DM 179–80; 103), Montaigne writes, in introducing the anecdote about Isabeau and her husband’s contentment in her education, or lack thereof.

A third case of borrowing appears in the title of I: 33. For the motif of fleeing “les voluptez” was already present in I: 25’s discourse on what ought to be taught to the young: in Sparta they were taught “à se desmeler des appats de la volupté” [to disentangle themselves from the lures of sensual pleasure] (I: 25, 143a, DM 184; 105).

A fourth instance of borrowing emerges when we realize that what Seneca advised Lucilius to do—“de se retirer de cête presse du monde, à quelque vie solitaire, tranquille & philosophique” [to retire from this crowded world to some solitary, tranquil and philosophical life] (I: 33, 218a, DM 334; 162*)—was anticipated in the companion chapter by the “philosophes retirez de toute occupation publique” [philosophers retired from all public occupation] who were “mesprisés par la liberté comique de leur temps: mais au rebours des nostres” [mocked by the comic license of their times, but treated in the opposite way in ours] (I: 25, 134a, DM 169; 98*). What Seneca wants for Lucilius, in other words—short of death—is the vocation that was the ancient, and nobler, equivalent of the figure that in its debased modern form is the subject of the chapter with which this one is symmetrically paired, the pedant detached from the world.

41 A post-1588 revision deleted “mais au rebours des nostres.”
26. God’s Wrath and the Weather

“De l’institution des enfans” [On the education of children] (I: 26) and “Qu’il faut sobrement se mesler de juger des ordonnances divines” [That we should meddle soberly with judging divine ordinances] (I: 32)

Chapter I: 26 is obviously about the education of children, but in the following passage it also touches on the topic at the heart of I: 32, the difficulty of figuring out the will of God based on what happens around us:

Quand les vignes gelent en son vilage mon prestre en argumente l’Ire de Dieu sur la race humaine, & juge que la pepie en tienne des-jà les Cannibales. A voir nos gueres civiles, qui ne crie que cete machine se bouleverse, & que le jour du jugement nous tient au colet, sans s’adviser que plusieurs pires choses se sont veües, & que les dix mille parts du monde ne laissent pas de galler le bon temps ce pendant. A qui il gresle sur la teste tout l’hemisphere semble estre en tempeste & orage.

[When the vines freeze in his village my priest argues from it God’s wrath on the human race, and judges that the Cannibals are already dying of the croup! Seeing our civil wars, who does not cry out that this mechanism is being turned upside-down and that the day of judgment has us by the throat, without reflecting that many worse things have happened, and that ten thousand parts of the world are meanwhile having a fine old time. To whom hail falls on the head the whole hemisphere seems to be in tempest and storm.] (I: 26, 157a, DM 206–7; 116*)

In I: 32 he argues that God’s judgment is not behind the outcomes of those same civil wars, alluding in particular to the Protestants who were claiming that a recent victory meant that God favored their cause:

aux gueres où nous sommes pour la religion, ceux qui eurent l’avantage au rencontre de la Rochelabelle faisans grand feste de cet accident, & se servans de cete fortune pour certain approbation de leur party: quand ils viennent apres à excuser leurs defortunes de Moncontour & de Jarnac, sur ce que ce sont verges & chastimemens paternelz, s’ilz n’ont un peuple du tout à leur mercy ilz luy font assez aisément sentir que c’est prendre d’un sac deux mouldures, & de mesme bouche souffler le chaud & le froid.
[In the wars we are in for the sake of religion, those who had the advantage in the encounter at La Rochelabelle make much ado about this incident and use their good fortune as a sure approbation of their party; but when they come later to excuse their misfortunes at Moncontour and Jarnac as being fatherly rods and chastisements, unless they have their following completely at their mercy, they make the people sense readily enough that this is getting two grinding fees for one sack, and blowing hot and cold with the same mouth.] (I: 32, 216a, DM 331–32; 160*)

In both chapters Montaigne argues that one cannot figure out God’s intention from the outcome of events on earth, and in particular from the limited perspective of those trying to figure it out. In I: 26, his point is that as bad as the damage from France’s civil wars may be, it doesn’t mean that it is the end of the world for the rest of the world. In I: 32, though his point is that the Protestants who interpret their victories as a sign of God’s favor and their defeats as his fatherly chastisements are speaking out of both sides of their mouth, at the same time he reveals that their point of view is just as limited as those in I: 26 who think the end of the world has come, since they think that the outcome of their battles is entirely determined by what is going on between them and God.

In I: 32 he complains of people who claim to discern God’s designs, faisans estat de trouver les causes de chacsque accident, & de veoir dans les secretz de la volonté divine, les motifs incomprehensibles de ses operations. Et quoque la variété & discordance continuelle des evenemens les rejette de coin en coin, & d’orient en occident, ils ne laissent de suivre pourtant leur estef, & de mesme creon peindre le blanc & le noir.

[claiming to find the cause of every incident and to see in the secrets of the divine will the incomprehensible motives of his works; and although the variety and continual discordance of events tosses them from corner to corner and from east to west, yet they do not stop chasing their ball and painting black and white with the same pencil.] (I: 32, 215a, DM 331; 160)

The village priest in I: 26 had made the same mistake, claiming to discern God’s judgments and to see their consequences on earth. But viewed from another angle, these two chapters are precisely opposed on this topic, for while the priest claimed to know what was happening in the land of the Cannibals, which is to say in the western hemisphere, because he assumed
that what was true in his little locality was true everywhere else, those Montaigne criticizes in I: 32 are in fact confronted with the evidence that things are not the same everywhere, and this “discordance continuelle” sends them “d’orient en occident”—which just happens to be the same direction the priest’s extrapolations took him, as he imagined what the weather in the western hemisphere was based on what was happening on his side of the Atlantic.

This mutual echoing and opposing symmetry has a metafictional resonance, for when in both chapters Montaigne argues against ignoring what may be happening in the rest of the world, in some other hemisphere, he may be nudging his readers toward the realization that there is more going on than they suspect, that something happening in a chapter in the book’s other hemisphere (the one on the other side of the dividing line formed by the central chapter) may be relevant to what is happening in the chapter they are reading.

Things can happen together in both hemispheres on the lexical level, too. The passage in I: 32 in which the Protestants counted their losses at Montcontour and Jarnac as mere “verges & chastimemens paternelz” [paternal rods and punishments] (I: 32, 216a, DM 331; 160*) finds an echo in a post-1588 addition to I: 26 where Montaigne expresses his disgust with the “façon de chastiement” [manner of punishment] schoolmasters employed, which Villey in a note tells us was to strike the pupils with “verges” (166n4)—as in fact Montaigne makes explicit in the next sentence, though he does not use that word, when he writes of classrooms “jonchées . . . de tronçons d’osier sanglants” [strewn . . . with bloody birch rods] (I: 26, 166c; 123*). Nowhere else in Book One does a chastiement (as a noun) appear in the form of unspared rods.

As we have seen, Montaigne goes on in that passage about the Protestants to say that their boasting of a victory as proof that God is on their side and yet saying of their defeats that they are just a fatherly chastisement (as opposed to indicating he was not on their side) is to “de mesme bouche soufler le chaud & le froid” [blow hot and cold with the same mouth] (I: 32, 216a, DM 331–32; 160*). As he did with the post-1588 addition to I: 26 of an allusion to punishment by rods, he makes another post-1588 addition to I: 26 to set up an echo with this passage. It consists of four words inserted into a sentence dating from the 1580 edition. He writes that it is a widespread opinion that a boy should not be raised by his parents because their affection would prevent them from inuring him to hardship: “(A) Ils ne le sçauroient souffrir revenir suant et poudreux de son exercice, (C) boire chaud, boire froid, (A) ny le voir sur un cheval rebours” [(A)They could not endure his returning sweating dusty from his exercise, (C) drinking hot, drinking cold,
(A) or see him on a skittish horse] (I: 26, 153ac; 113). Nowhere else do chaud and froid appear in the same mouth.

In that same passage in I: 32 about the Protestants having it both ways, we can find, sandwiched between the chastising rods and the cold and the hot in the same mouth yet another lexical link to the companion chapter: “c’est prendre d’un sac deux mouldures” [it is to get two grinding fees for one sack] (I: 32, 216a; DM 331; 160*). This finds its parallel in what Montaigne says about the benefits of foreign travel for the child one intends to educate: “pour faire d’une pierre deux coups” [to make two blows with one stone] (I: 26, 153a, DM 199; 112), he should be taken at a very early age to neighboring countries where the language is most distant from our own because if the language acquisition does not begin early the tongue cannot be formed. The other “coup” for the “pierre” of travel for the child is to learn foreign customs and ways of thinking, and to “frotter et limer nostre cervelle contre celle d’autruiy” [to rub and polish our brains by contact with those of others] (I: 26, 153a, DM 199; 112).

Both the passage in I: 32 and this one in I: 26 are ones where more than one lexical echo appears, which suggests that Montaigne purposely planted them in both. The allusion to getting two payments for producing the same sack of grain appears, as noted, between the other two echoes of chastising rods and blowing hot and cold; the idea of getting two for one with regard to taking the young abroad occurs immediately before the passage about the disadvantage of doting parents raise their own child into which he inserted “boire chaud, boire froid” with its allusion to “souffler le chaud et le froid” in the other passage.

On the metafictional level, Montaigne gets two uses out of the topos itself of getting two uses out of the same thing by placing that topos in symmetrically matching chapters. One use is the purpose it serves in its immediate context in each chapter, as a way of advancing the argument being made; the other is that of pointing to the Essays’ symmetrical structure.

27. Things to Come

“C’est folie de rapporter le vray et le faux à nostre suffisance”
[It is folly to measure the true and false by our own competence] (I: 27) and “Des cannibales” [On cannibals] (I: 31)

Julius Caesar held that “il est souvent advenu que la nouvelle a devancé l’accident” [it has often happened that the report has preceded the event] (I:
Ordinarily, writes Montaigne, we would dismiss such a claim had we heard it from a figure of lesser stature. He laughs, for example, at Froissart’s assertion that the Comte de Foix learned of the defeat of King John of Castille in a distant city the day after it took place. Yet not only did Caesar make such a claim, but Plutarch did as well, writing that the news of Antonius’ defeat in Germany was made public in Rome on the very day it happened. Montaigne argues that we should not dismiss such a seeming impossibility out of hand, for that would show a lack of respect for Caesar and Plutarch: “dirons nous pas que ces simples gens la se sont laissés piper aprés le vulgaire?” [shall we say that these simple men let themselves be tricked like the common herd?] (I: 27, 180–81a, 133–34*). In a clever twist, Montaigne arranges for his denial that Plutarch and Caesar could have been “pipés” [tricked] into believing that the report could precede the event itself seem like the report of an event yet to come when in the accompanying chapter “Des cannibales” (I: 31) he writes that the Native Americans who were brought to Rouen were “bien miserables de s’estre laissés piper” [very much to be pitied for having let themselves be tricked] (I: 31, 213a, DM 326; 158–59) by the desire to see new things.

Montaigne is open not only to the possibility of reports anticipating events as Caesar and Plutarch allege but also to that of the “prognostique des choses futures” [prognostication of future things] (I: 27, 179a, DM 243; 132*) in general. That particular prognostication metafictionally prognosticates itself, for in I: 31 a prophet among the cannibals “prognostique les choses à venir” [prognosticates things to come] (I: 31, 208a, DM 313; 154*)—words that appear together nowhere else.

In both chapters Montaigne writes of simple folk and their ability or inability to discern the truth. He begins I: 27 with the suggestion that “Ce n’est pas à l’adventure sans raison, que nous attribuons à simpless & à ignorance la facilité de croire & de se laisser persuader . . . à estre menés par les oreilles” [Perhaps it is not without reason that we attribute to simplicity and ignorance a readiness to believe and to be persuaded . . . to be led by the ears] (I: 27, 178a, DM 242–43; 132*). But he says the opposite in I: 31 in presenting a certain simple man as a reliable witness precisely because of his simplicity. The man had lived for a decade or more in the New World and was Montaigne’s source for many details on the life of its inhabitants. “Cet homme que j’avoy, estoit homme simple & grossier, qui est une condition propre à rendre véritable tesmoignage. . . . Ou il faut un homme tres fidele, ou si simple qu’il n’ait pas dequoy bastir & donner de la vraisemblance à des inventions fauces” [This man I had was a very simple and crude fellow, which is a condition likely to produce true testimony. . . . You need either a
very honest man, or one so simple that he has not the stuff to build up false inventions and give them verisimilitude] (I: 31, 205a, DM 303–04; 152*). Clearly the two chapters are speaking the same language, as if they were conversing together, for the two terms “fauz” and “vray semblable” appear when Montaigne in I: 27 points out that simple folk are not necessarily wrong in their belief in prophecy: “c’est une sotte presumption d’aller desaignant & condamnant pour faux ce qui ne nous samble pas vray semblable” [it is foolish presumption to go around disdaining and condemning as false what does not strike us as plausible] (I: 27, 178a, DM 243; 132*). A man less simple and ignorant than Montaigne’s eyewitness would be inclined to embroider the truth to show off his knowledge.

I would like everyone to write what he knows, and as much as he knows, not only in this, but in all other subjects; for a man may have some special knowledge and experience of the nature of a river or a fountain, who in other matters knows only what everybody knows. However, to circulate this little scrap of knowledge, he will undertake to write the whole of physics.] (I: 31, 205a, DM 305; 152)

The man projecting from his knowledge of a river useless conclusions about things of which he is as ignorant as anyone else finds a counterpart in I: 27 in a man who projects an inaccurate conclusion from his ignorance of a river: “Celuy qui n’avoit jamais veu de riviere à la premiere qu’il r’encontra il pensa que ce fut l’Ocean” [He who had never seen a river thought that the first one he came across was the ocean] (I: 27, 179a, DM 245; 133). But Montaigne himself comes close to resembling that man in a 1588 addition to I: 31 in which he says that if the Dordogne River doesn’t stop eroding its banks it will change the face of the world—as if it had the destructive powers of an ocean:

Quand je considere l’impression que ma riviere de Dordoigne faict de mon temps, vers la rive droicte de sa descente, & qu’en vingt ans elle a tant gagné, & desrobé le fondement à plusieurs bastimens, je vois bien que c’est une agitation extraordinaire: car si elle fut tousjours allée ce train, ou deut aller à l’advenir, la figure du monde seroit renversée.
[When I consider the inroads that my river, the Dordogne, is making in my lifetime into the right bank in its descent, and that in twenty years it has gained so much ground and stolen away the foundations of several buildings, I clearly see that this is an extraordinary disturbance; for if it had always gone at this rate, or was to do so in the future, the face of the world would be turned topsy-turvy.] (I: 31, 204b; 151)

28. Of Immoderation

“De l’amitié” [Of friendship] (I: 28) and “De la moderation” [Of moderation] (I: 30)

From its first sentence—“Comme si nous avions l’attouchement infaict, nous corrompons par nostre maniement les choses, qui d’elles mesmes sont belles & bonnes” [As if our touch were infectious, by our handling them we corrupt things that of themselves are beautiful and good] (I: 30, 197a, DM 293; 146*)—chapter I: 30 enters into dialogue with chapter I: 28. For in the latter Montaigne presents La Boétie’s De la servitude volontaire as something beautiful and good that has been corrupted by contagion. He begins the chapter by saying that he thinks so highly of his friend’s text that he will put it in the middle of his own book, for lack of something good enough from his own pen to occupy that place of honor.

Considerant la conduicte de la besoingne d’un peintre que j’ay, il m’a pris envie de l’ensuivre. Il choisit le plus noble endroit & milieu de chasque paroy, pour y loger un tableau elabouré de toute sa suffisance, & le vuide tout au tour il le remplit de croteques, qui sont peintures fantasques, n’ayants grace qu’en la varieté & estrangeté. Que sont-ce icy aussi à la verité que croteques & corps monstrueux, rappiecez de divers membres, sans certaine figure, n’ayants ordre, suite ny proportion que fortuite? . . . Je vay bien jusques à ce segond point avec mon peintre, mais je demeure court en l’autre, & meilleure partie. Car ma suffisance ne va pas si avant que d’oser entreprendre un tableau riche poly & formé selon l’art: je me suis advisé d’en emprunter un d’Estienne de la Boitie qui honorera tout le reste de cete besogne. C’est un discours auquel il donna nom De la servitude volontaire. . . . Il court pieça es mains des gens d’entendement, non sans bien grande & meritee recommandation. Car il est gentil, & plein tout ce qu’il est possible.
[As I was considering the way a painter I employ went about his work, I was taken with the desire to imitate him. He chooses the noblest place, the middle of each wall, to place a picture labored over with all his skill, and the empty space all around it he fills with grotesques, which are fantastic paintings whose only charm lies in their variety and strangeness. What are these here too, in truth, but grotesques and monstrous bodies, pieced together of diverse members, with no definite shape, having no order, sequence, or proportion other than by chance? . . . I do indeed go along with my painter in this second point, but I fall short in the first and better part; for my ability does not go far enough for me to dare to undertake a rich and polished picture, formed according to art. I have decided to borrow one from Estienne de la Boitie which will do honor to all the rest of this work. It is a discourse to which he gave the name Of Voluntary Servitude. . . . It has long been circulating in the hands of men of understanding, not without great and well-merited commendation, for it is a fine thing, and as full as can be.] (I: 28, 183–84a, DM 252–54; 135*)

He goes on to write of friendship in general and of his friendship with La Boétie in particular, before concluding—or at first appearing to conclude—the chapter with these words: “Mais oions un peu parler ce garson de dix-huit ans” [But let us listen a little to this eighteen-year-old boy speak] (I: 28: 194a, DM 273; 144*). That sentence is followed in the 1580 edition by a line of three asterisks and then this surprising declaration: “Parce que j’ay trouvé que cet ouvrage a esté depuis mis en lumiere & à mauvaise fin, par ceux qui cherchent à troubler & changer l’estat de nostre police sans se soucier s’ils l’amenderont, qu’ils ont melé à d’autres escris de leur farine je me suis dedit de le loger icy” [Because I have found that this work has since been brought to light, with evil intent, by those who seek to disturb and change the state of our government without worrying whether they will improve it, and because they have mixed his work up with some of their own concoctions, I have renounced placing it here] (I: 28, 194a, DM 273; 144*). The fine and beautiful thing that was the Servitude volontaire has been spoiled by the contagion of the “autres escris” [other writings] with which it has been “melé” [mixed]. Unlike La Boétie’s essay, which, although it was an argument against tyranny, did not advocate that any current monarch be overthrown, the other writings with which the Protestants surrounded his text in Mémoires sur l’Estat de France sous Charles IX in 1576 did precisely that. In

42. Meaning the Essays.
such company, the *Servitude volontaire* risked guilt by association, as would Montaigne if he republished it in his *Essays*.

But what are we to make of the fact that what Montaigne presents as a surprising event of which he was not aware when he promised his readers that he would place the *Servitude volontaire* in the center of the first book of his *Essays*—the Protestants’ contaminating it by their infectious touch—is itself echoed in the very first words of the other chapter? The event he recounts and I: 30’s first words are not only parallel but each other’s opposite, for the Protestants contaminated La Boétie’s text with evil intent while the corrupting contagion in I: 30 is entirely innocent, or at worst comes from an excess of zeal. The “maniement” [handling] in this same first sentence of I: 30 (“Comme si nous avions l’attouchement infaict, nous corrompons par nostre maniement les choses, qui d’elles mesmes sont belles & bonnes”) finds its own echo in I: 28: La Boétie’s essay “court pieça es mains des gens d’entendement, non sans bien grande & merité recommandation” [has long been circulating in the hands of men of understanding, not without great and well-merited commendation] (I: 28, 184a, DM 253; 135). That handling with good intent is just the kind of thing the first sentence of I: 30 would at first glance appear to be talking about except that the outcome is precisely the opposite. The *Servitude volontaire* was not corrupted by that handling, though it clearly was by the infection it received at the hands of the Protestants.

Much of what Montaigne says of La Boétie’s essay turns out to function as a fiction in the metafiction I: 28 and I: 30 together form. The plot thickens when he informs us, after saying he will not include the *Servitude volontaire* after all, that he just happened to have been sent another text by La Boétie:

> Or en eschange de cet ouvrage serieux j’en substitueray un autre produit en cête mesme saison de son aage plus gaillard & plus enjoüé, ce sont vint & neuf sonnets que le sieur de Poiferré homme d’affaires & d’entendement, qui le connoissoit longtemps avant moy a retrouvé par fortune chez luy parmy quelques autres papiers, & me les vient d’envoyer.

[Now in exchange for this serious work I will substitute another product of the same season of his life, more gallant and more playful. They are 29 sonnets that the Sieur de Poiferré, a man of business and of understanding, who knew him long before I did, found by chance at his house among some other papers, and has just sent to me.] (I: 28, 195a(n), DM 274–75; not in Frame)
As Gabriel-André Pérouse remarks, there is something fishy about this:

Fate would have it that, during those same months, the good Sieur de Poiferré should send him the manuscript of Étienne’s “Twenty-Nine Sonnets.” Montaigne then begins a new chapter to put them in. . . . Can one really believe their publication was a mere stop-gap? If so, certain facts would be difficult to explain. To line up twenty-nine poems for a chapter that just happens to bear the number twenty-nine can hardly be laid to chance. What is more, the twenty-ninth chapter of a Book containing fifty-seven is not a neutral place—yet in the end these sonnets occupy it.43

Something else suggests that Montaigne is not telling the truth when he presents the twenty-nine sonnets as a last-minute stopgap. His very words “je me suis dedit de le loger icy” [I have renounced placing it here], when he announces that he will not give us the Servitude volontaire after all, are echoed in the sonnets themselves: “je me desdiray / De mes sonnetz” [I will renounce / My sonnets] (sonnet 16, lines 12–13; DM 285). Nowhere else in the 1580 edition will the first-person speaker “se dédire” [literally, to unsay oneself]. In both cases what is “unsaid,” or going to be, is the inclusion of a text within the larger text. In I: 28 Montaigne “unsays” his promise to include the Servitude volontaire in the middle of his Book (that is, Book One); the speaker in the poem says he will “unsay” the two immediately preceding sonnets, numbers 14 and 15—at the center of the sequence of twenty-nine—because in them he criticized his beloved for her duplicitous “parler double” [double speech] (sonnet 14, line 8; DM 284). In the same way that what happened to the Servitude volontaire that supposedly made Montaigne not want to publish it was inscribed in the echoing parallels uniting chapters I: 28 and I: 30, his supposed renouncement of the Servitude volontaire was already inscribed in the text that would replace it, in which its middle—the position the Servitude volontaire would have occupied in Montaigne’s first Book—is likewise to be excluded. Yet the speaker in the sonnets will not in the end have to

43. P. 78 of Gabriel-André Pérouse, “Montaigne, son lecteur et les Vingt-neuf sonnets d’Étienne de La Boétie,” Montaigne Studies11.1–2 (1999): 77–86. Raymond C. La Charité put forward the hypothesis that it was only after the 29 sonnets came into Montaigne’s possession that he decided to make it the 29th of 57 chapters. “With the pre-publication of the Servitude Volontaire, it must have seemed appropriate and symmetrical to him to place the 29 sonnets in chapter 29. Thus, the ‘plus bel endroit’ would be numerically marked as well and, as a result, in order to remain central, ‘chaque paroy’ would have to consist of 28 chapters.” But since (in La Charité’s surmise) he had not yet divided the remaining 93 chapters into books, “37 leftover chapters would simply have to spill over into a separate unit or ‘book.’” “. . . Book II as a separate entity is the product of an accident” (p. 41 of “The Coherence of Montaigne’s First Book,” in L’Esprit Créateur 20.1 [Spring 1980]: 36–45).
dislodge sonnets 14 and 15, for his beloved forgives him (in sonnet 19) for writing them and he decides to keep them in the sequence: “c’est pour vous punir” [it is to punish you], he declares, addressing the offending sonnets, “qu’ores je vous pardonne” [that I pardon you now] (sonnet 20, line 14; DM 287).  

I would like to return to the opening sentence of “De la moderation” in order to examine what immediately follows it:

Comme si nous avions l’attouchement infaict, nous corrompons par nostre maniement les choses, qui d’elles mesmes sont belles & bonnes. Nous pouvons saisir la vertu: de façon qu’elle en deviendra vicieuse. Comme il advient quand nous l’embrassons d’un desir trop aspre & trop violent.

[As if our touch were infectious, by our handling them we corrupt things that of themselves are beautiful and good. We can grasp virtue in such a way that it will become vicious. As it happens when we embrace it with a desire too sharp and too violent.] (I: 30, 197a, DM 293; 146*)

It happens that too sharp [aspre] a desire is a problem in I: 28 as well: “l’affection envers les fames” [love of women] creates a fire that is “plus actif, plus cuisant, & plus aspre” [more active, more scorching, and more sharp] than friendly affection, for “En l’amitié, c’est une chaleur generale & universelle, temperée . . . qui n’a rien d’aspre” [In friendship it is a general, universal, and temperate warmth . . . that has nothing sharp] (I: 28, 185–86a, DM 258–59; 137*). Friendship is thus more moderate than heterosexual desire. But through a post-1588 addition to I: 28, that chapter joins I: 30 in speaking of what is immoderate in love as well, and these are the only chapters in Book One where the adjective “immodéré” in any form appears. It appears when Montaigne alludes to “les insolents et passionnez efforts que peut produire une ardeur immoderée” [the insolent and passionate acts that immoderate ardor can produce] (I: 28, 187c; 138) in a homosexual lover. In I: 30 immoderation likewise can arise from love that, like homosexuality, is out of the ordinary: the marriage of blood relatives. Montaigne writes that he seems to remember reading somewhere in Thomas Aquinas that in such a case

---

44. I will have more to say about the sonnets in chapter IV, including a discussion of the words and turns of phrase they feature that appear nowhere but in the other two middle chapters, II: 19 and III: 7—further evidence that Montaigne’s promise in I: 28 to put the Servitude volontaire in that place of honor was always a fiction.
il y a danger que l’amitié qu’on porte à une telle femme soit immodérée. Car si l’affection maritale s’y trouve entière & parfaite, comme elle doit, & qu’on la surcharge encore de celle qu’on doit à la parentèle: il n’y a point de douce, que ce surcroit n’emporte un tel mary hors les barrières de la raison, soit en l’amitié, soit aux effarz de la jouissance.

[there is a danger that the affection a man bears to such a wife will be immoderate; for if conjugal love is entire and perfect, as it should be, and you add to it also that which is due to kinship, there is no doubt that this increase will carry such a husband beyond the barriers of reason, whether in friendship or in the effects of sexual enjoyment.] (I: 30, 198a; DM 294; 147*)

What Montaigne says in this passage about how conjugal love should be “entiere & parfaite” echoes, strangely, what he said in I: 28 about his friendship with La Boétie: “cette amitié que nous avons nourrie, tant que Dieu a voulu, entre nous, si entiere & si parfaite, que certainement il ne s’en lit guiere de pareilles” [this friendship which together we fostered, as long as God willed, so entire and so perfect that certainly one could hardly read of the like] (I: 28, 184a, DM 255; 136*). As Montaigne was surely aware, one can indeed read of the like in the companion chapter, though nowhere else in Book One, from which the phrase is otherwise absent. Does this mean that his friendship with La Boétie had something conjugal about it? Françoise Charpentier suggests it might. “It is impossible, having arrived at this point,” she writes, with reference to I: 28, “not to pose ourselves the problem of the homosexuality of Montaigne. All the less possible, or even more necessary, because he poses it himself, and thus invites the reader to do so.”

45. P. 184 of Françoise Charpentier, “Figure de La Boétie dans les ‘Essais’ de Montaigne,” Revue française de psychanalyse 52 (Jan.–Feb. 1988): 175–89. What counts here is the story Montaigne tells in I: 28 of their friendship and its relation to I: 30, not whether their relation was homosexual. As David Lewis Schaefer suggests, it may all be a fiction: “a moving, if somewhat mawkish (and quite possibly fictitious) account of [their] affectionate union” (The Political Philosophy of Montaigne [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990], 342). As Floyd Gray observed, “If we read the essay of 1580, and then read it as it appears in the edition of 1595, . . . then we are tempted to ask whether Montaigne wrote on friendship because of La Boétie, or if La Boétie came into the essay because he was writing an essay on friendship” (p. 205 of “Montaigne’s Friends,” French Studies 15.3 [July 1961]: 203–212). Todd W. Reese, borrowing an expression of Robert D. Cottrell’s (in the latter’s Sexuality / Textuality [Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1981], 34), writes that in I: 28 “La Boétie could be read not so much as a flesh-and-blood friend of Montaigne’s but rather as . . . ‘an operational concept,’ an absence in the life of Montaigne that sparks him to create a discursive presence. Homosexuality, like La Boétie, is employed as an operational concept that helps create an ethical boundary” (Moderating Masculinity in Early Modern Culture [Chapel Hill: North Carolina Studies in the Romances Languages and Literatures, 2006], 214). However, William J. Beck writes, “As homosexuality is defined today,
Apart from the tantalizing hints about Montaigne and La Boétie’s friendship that reading between the lines of these two chapters may give us, “De l’amitié” and “De la moderation” show, just like all the other symmetrically linked chapters in Book One, that they speak the same language to the extent of almost seeming to be having a friendly conversation. One striking instance has become invisible to most readers, ever since Montaigne in 1588 removed the words between “comme” and “richesses” in the following passage:

Quand aux mariages, outre ce que c’est un marché qui n’a que l’entrée libre, sa durée estant contrainite & forcée, dependant d’ailleurs que de nostre vouloir, & marché qui ordinairement se fait à autres fins: comme de la génération, alliances, richesses. . . .

[As for marriages, beyond the fact that it is a bargain to which only the entrance is free—its continuance being constrained and forced, depending otherwise than on our will—and a bargain ordinarily made for other ends: such as generation, alliances, riches . . . ] (I: 28, 186a, DM 260; 137*)

Here, one of marriage’s “fins” is “la génération”; the same point is made, though in a stronger way, in the companion chapter: “C’est une religieuse liaison & devote que le mariage. . . . sa principale fin c’est la génération” [Marriage is a religious and holy bond . . . its principal end is generation] (I: 30, 198–99a, DM 295; 147). In no other passage in the Essays is “generation” a “fin,” nor of course is it said to be such in marriage.

it must be admitted that the friendship between Montaigne and La Boétie, as chaste as it could have been, remains, given the depth, intensity, and vigor with which Montaigne celebrates it, a homosexual one, at least at a rudimentary level, for the mind, if not the body” (p. 44 of William J. Beck, “Montaigne face à l’homosexualité,” Bulletin de la société des amis de Montaigne, 6th series: 9–10 [1982]: 41–50).