1. Sorting Out the Pieces

"De l'inconstance de nos actions" [Of the inconstancy of our actions] (II: 1) and "De la ressemblance des enfans aux peres" [Of the resemblance of children to fathers] (II: 37)

"De la ressemblance des enfans aux peres" was the Essays' concluding chapter in the original 1580 edition. So it was appropriate that it should begin with a reflection, though brief, on the Essays themselves: "Ce fagotage de tant de diverses pieces se fait en cete condition, que je n'y metz la main que lors qu'une trop lache oysiveté me presse, & non ailleurs que chez moi" [This bundle of so many disparate pieces is being composed in this manner: I set my hand to it only when pressed by too lax an idleness, and nowhere but at home] (II: 37, 758a, DM 599; 574*). Barbara Bowen remarks that "there is no reason why" the term "fagotage" should be taken as pejorative, for it is "the art of stacking lengths of wood in a wood-pile, which requires skill and practice." But even if we do take it as pejorative we know that elsewhere such self-deprecating remarks are not what they seem. In "De l'oisiveté"

(I: 8), the chapter of which the dominant role Montaigne here gives to his “oysiveté” should remind us, we recall that the “pleine oysiveté” [full idleness] he allowed to engulf him brought forth chimera and monsters “les uns sur les autres, sans ordre, & sans propos” [one after another, without order and without purpose] (I: 8, 33a; DM 32; 21*). We recall as well that this self-deprecating aside is echoed but ultimately contradicted by the way he describes his writing practice in “De Democritus et Heraclitus”: “sans desssein et sans promesse” [without design and without promise] (I: 50, 302c; 219*)—contradicted, that is, by the evident order and design that led to those parallel descriptions appearing in symmetrically matching chapters. The metafiction (the order and design that the work as a whole reveals, particularly the part I: 8 and I: 50 play in it) contradicts the fiction (expressed separately in I: 8 and I: 50) that there is no order.

“De l’inconstance de nos actions” and “De la ressemblance des enfans aux peres” speak together in a metafictional way of the “pieces” of which this “fagotage” is composed. In both chapters, “pieces” is an almost obsessively repeated term. In II: 1 it chiefly refers to the various and usually contradictory aspects of a man’s life, as seen by a potential biographer or by that man himself as he attempts to live his life in accord with certain consistent principles. In II: 37, the context is medical (the principal resemblance between Montaigne and his father being their antipathy to doctors), and “pieces” refer both to patients’ symptoms and their appropriate remedies. The doctor “a besoin de trop de pieces” [needs too many pieces] to properly calculate “son dessein” [his plan]. These “pieces” include the patient’s constitution, his temperature, his humors, his symptoms, his actions, even his thoughts, such external circumstances as the weather and the position of the planets, and the properties of the drug to be administered. “Et faut que toutes ces pieces, il les sçache proportionner & rapporter l’une à l’autre, pour en engendrer une parfaicte symmetrie” [and he must know how to proportion all these pieces and relate them to one another to engender a perfect symmetry] (II: 37, 773a, DM 626–27; 587*).

It is an impossible task, as in the corresponding chapter is the task of “Ceux qui s’exercitent à contreroller les actions humaines” [Those who strive to account for human actions], for they “ne se trouvent en nulle partie si empeschez qu’à les rappiesser & mettre à mesme lustre. Car elles se contredisent quelque fois de si estrange façon, qu’il semble impossible qu’elles

2. As André Tournon remarks, “the same behavioral trait is presented now as an indication of moral weakness, now as an obstacle to understanding.” André Tournon, La Glose et l’essai (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1983), 76.
soient parties de mesma boutique” [are never more perplexed than when they
try to piece them together and show them in the same light. For they contra-
dict each other sometimes so strangely that it seems impossible that they have
come from the same shop] (II: 1, 331a, DM 1; 239*). Young Marius is at
one moment a son of Mars, at another a son of Venus. Nero, famous for his
cruelty, was nevertheless sick at heart when he had to sign a death warrant.
There are so many examples of this “que je trouve estrange de voir quelque
fois des gens d’entendement se mettre en peine d’assortir ces pieces” [that I
find it strange to see sometimes men of understanding taking pains to match
these pieces together] (II: 1, 332a, DM 2; 239). “Nostre faict ce ne sont que
pieces rapportees” [Our actions are nothing but a pieced-together patchwork]
(II: I, 336a, DM 8; 243)—but we can “rapporter” [relate] these “pieces rap-
portées” with what Montaigne says in the passage just quoted about the
doctor’s task: “Et faut que toutes ces pieces, il les sçache proportionner &
rapporter l’une à l’autre, pour en engendrer une parfaicte symmetrie” [and he
must know how to proportion all these pieces and relate them to one another
in order to create a perfect symmetry]. The astonishing thing is that what
is engendered when we do this is indeed a “symmetrie,” for these echoing
passages appear in the first and last chapters of the Essays’ second volume.
Another passage in II: 1 likewise symmetrically anticipates the doctor’s task:
“It est impossible de renger les pieces, à qui n’a une forme du tout en sa teste:
à quoy faire la provision des couleurs, à qui ne sçait ce qu’il a à peindre” [A
man who does not have in his head a picture of the whole cannot possibly
arrange the pieces. What good does it do a man to lay in a supply of paints if
he does not know what he is to paint?] (II: 1, 337a, DM 9; 243*). That it is
impossible to arrange the pieces without a form of the whole in mind implies
the converse, that with a mental image of the whole it might be possible to
arrange them. We recall that in describing the way he arranged his Essays in
“De l’amitié” (I: 28)—as “grotesques”—he said he was imitating a painter.
Hence, perhaps, the relevance of laying in a supply of colors.

2. Slipping It In

“The prongnerie” [Of drunkenness] (II: 2) and “Des plus excel-
lens hommes” [Of the most excellent men] (II: 36)

In II: 36 Montaigne justifies choosing Homer, Alexander, and Epaminondas
as the three highest examples of human excellence, distinguishing each from
his competitors for the title—Homer from Virgil, Alexander from Caesar,
Epaminondas from Scipio Aemilianus. In II: 2 he begins by making distinctions too, not among paragons of virtue but varieties of vice: “Les vices sont tous pareilz en ce qu’ilz sont tous vices . . . mais . . . ilz ne sont pas egaus vices” [Vices are all alike in that they are all vices . . . but . . . they are not equal vices] (II: 2, 339a, DM 11; 244). From then on he concentrates on one vice in particular, drunkenness.

But apart from their being devoted, respectively, to a consideration of virtue and of vice, II: 2 and II: 36 are exactly opposed with regard to the matter of deviating from the norm of the human condition. II: 36 is entirely devoted to praising men famous for having done exactly that: “trois excellans au dessus de tous les autres” [three who excel above all the rest] (II: 36, 751a, DM 591; 569*); Homer was “quasi au dessus de l’humaine condition” [almost above the human condition] (II: 36, 752a, DM 592; 569*), and Alexander, Montaigne would add in 1588, had he lived to a normal age would have become “quelque chose au dessus de l’homme” [something superhuman] (II: 36, 754b; 571). But in II: 2 Montaigne finds that going above (or below) the norm is far from a good thing: “Toutes actions hors les bornes ordinaires sont sujettes à sinistre interpretation, d’autant que nostre goust n’advient non plus à ce qui est au dessus de lui qu’à ce qui est au dessous” [All actions outside the ordinary limits are subject to sinister interpretation, inasmuch as our taste responds no more to what is above it than to what is below] (II: 2, 346a, DM 16–17; 250).

Montaigne counts Epaminondas among his three most “excellens hommes” because “quant à ses meurs & conscience il a de bien loing surpassé tous ceux, qui se sont jamais meslés de manier affaires” [as for his character and conscience, he very far surpassed all those who have ever undertaken to manage affairs] (II: 36, 756a, DM 598; 573). In the companion chapter the excellent surpass the human norm as well:

Platon dit que pour neant hurte à la porte de la poesie un homme rassis. Aussi dict Aristote que null’amie excellent n’est exempte de quelque meslange de folie. Et a quelque raison d’appeller fureur tout eslancement tant louable soit il, qui surpassed notre propre jugement & discours: d’autant que la sagesse c’est un maniemant reglé de nostre ame, & qu’elle conduit avec mesure & proportion.

[Plato says that a sedate man knocks in vain on the door of poetry. Likewise Aristotle says that no excellent soul is free from an admixture of madness. And he is right to call madness any transport, however, laudable, that surpasses our own judgment and reason; inasmuch as wisdom is an orderly
management of our soul, which she conducts with measure and proportion.] (II: 2, 347–48a, DM 19; 251*)

In a post-1588 addition to II: 2, Montaigne writes at length of his father, to whom he had not alluded in previous versions of this chapter. It seems strange that he should do so, for his father is not, after all, here portrayed as greatly given to drink. Montaigne eases into this paternal reminiscence by remarking that the previous generation seemed to drink more, and that the reason the present one does not is that “nous nous sommes beaucoup plus jettez à la paillardise que noz peres. Ce sont deux occupations qui s’entrempeschant en leur vigueur” [we are much more addicted to lechery than were our fathers. These two occupations interfere with each other in their vigor] (II: 2, 343c; 247). His father could attest to his generation’s lack of interest in erotic pursuits—“C’est merveille des comptes que j’ay ouy faire à mon pere de la chasteté de son siecle” [It is marvelous what stories I have heard my father tell of the chastity of his day] (II: 2, 343c; 247)—yet he personally was not at all typical of his times: “C’estoit à luy d’en dire, estant tresadvenant, et par art et par nature, à l’usage des dames” [He was the man to tell them, being very well suited to the service of the ladies, both by nature and by art] and “recitoit des estranges privautez, nommeement siennes, aveq des honnestes femmes sans soupçon quelconque” [would tell of remarkable intimacies, especially of his own, with respectable women, free from any suspicion] (II: 2, 344c; 248).

But there may be another reason for the insertion of this page about his father into this chapter: to provide more opportunity for echoes with II: 36—or perhaps even to pay homage to that father by showing (though in a somewhat indirect and veiled way) that he shared some of the excellence of those men, particularly of Epaminondas and Alexander. For of Epaminondas Montaigne writes that “jamais homme ne sçeut tant, et parla si peu que luy” [never did a man know so much, and speak so little, as he] (II: 36, 756a; 573), while his father too “parloit peu et bien” [spoke little and well] (II: 2, 343c; 247). In a post-1588 addition to the discussion of Epaminondas immediately after “parla si peu que luy,” Montaigne inserts an echo to the other quality he at the same moment (that is, in his post-1588 revisions) attributes to his father, that he spoke not only little but well: “Car il estoit Pythagorique de secte. Et ce qu’il parla nul ne parla jamais mieux” [For he was a Pythagorean in sect. And what he did say, no man ever said better] (II: 36, 756c; 573).3 As for Alexander, among his excellent virtues was the

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3. The Pythagoreans were known for their vow of silence.
“foy en ses parolles” [fidelity to his word] (II: 36, 754b; 571). This was true of Montaigne’s father as well: “Monstrueuse foy en ses parolles” [Prodigious fidelity to his word] (II: 2, 343c; 248*). Nowhere else does the phrase “foy en ses parolles” appear, nor do the expressions “parloit peu” (Montaigne’s father, in II: 2) or “parla . . . peu” (Epaminondas, in II: 36) find an echo in any form of parler with peu.

Alexander was known for having “à l’aage de trente trois ans, passé victorieux toute la terre habitable” [at the age of thirty-three, passed victoriously over all the habitable earth] (II: 36, 754a; 571), wherein thirty-three is notable for being remarkably young—as Montaigne goes on to emphasize in a 1588 addition at this point, calling Alexander’s span of years “une demye vie” [half a lifetime] and wondering what he might have accomplished had he lived “un juste terme d’aage” [a normal life span] (II: 36, 754b; 571). Montaigne’s father, on the other hand, is noteworthy for having done something for which thirty-three is remarkably old: he “avoit eu fort longue part aux guerres delà les monts. . . . Aussi se maria-il bien avant en aage, l’an 1528—qui estoit son trente-troisiesme—retournant d’Italie” [he had taken a very long part in the Italian wars. . . . Consequently he married well along in age, in the year 1528, which was his thirty-third, on his return from Italy] (II: 2, 344c; 248). Not only does his age match Alexander’s, and not only is there a symmetrical opposition in that for one the age is remarkably young yet for the other remarkably old, but for both that age marks the end of their military career.

Another post-1588 addition testifies to Montaigne’s continuing desire to forge links between these chapters, for it is an interestingly roundabout way of inserting Epaminondas’ name into “De l’yvrongnerie”:

Je n’eusse pas creu d’yvresse si profonde, estoufée et ensevelie, si je n’eusse leu cecy dans les histoires; qu’Attalus ayant convié à souper, pour luy faire une notable insignificant ce Pausanias qui, sur ce mesme subject, tua depuis Philippus, Roy de Macedoine—Roy portant par ses belles qualitez tesmoignage de la nourriture qu’il avoit prinse en la maison et compagnie d’Epaminondas,—il le fit tant boire qu’il peut abandonner sa beauté, insensiblement, comme le corps d’une putain buissonnière, aux muletiers et nombre d’abjects serviteurs de sa maison.

[I should not have believed in a drunkenness so deep, so dead and buried, if I had not read of this instance of it in the histories. Attalus, having invited Pausanias to supper in order to do him some notable indignity—that same Pausanias who for this same reason later killed Philip, king of Macedon, a
king who by his fine qualities bore witness to the education he had received in the house and company of Epaminondas—made him drink so much that he could abandon his body insensibly, like the body of some whore under a hedge, to the muleteers and a number of vile slaves of Attalus’ household.]

(II: 2, 341c; 246)

Montaigne’s ability to slip in this allusion to the chapter to which this one is symmetrically linked—for Epaminondas has nothing to do with this story, being only tangentially related to another story involving a participant in this one—is only matched by the prowess of just such a low servant as the ones who took advantage of the situation here, for in the very next anecdote he tells (still in this post-1588 addition) how a young farmhand was able to insert himself unnoticed into a chaste but inebriated and hence unsuspecting young widow, leaving her to be greatly puzzled over her subsequent pregnancy (II: 2, 341–42c; 246). Perhaps Montaigne as well has taken advantage of the cover of drunkenness—as a topic of discourse, if not a condition—to slip in “la semence d’une matiere plus riche et plus hardie” [the seeds of a richer and bolder material] (I: 40, 251c; 185). It would be one way of imitating the prowess of that father who had been so adept at conducting “estranges privautez . . . aveq des honnestes femmes sans soupçon quelconque” [remarkable intimacies . . . with respectable women, free from any suspicion] (II: 2, 344c; 248).

3. Suicide is Painless

“Coustume de l’île de Cea” [A custom of the island of Cea] (II: 3) and “De trois bonnes femmes” [Of three good wives] (II: 35)

What is done surreptitiously in II: 2 could not be carried out more openly than it is in II: 3 and II: 35. For a more obvious case of two symmetrically placed chapters linked by a common subject could hardly be imagined than that of these two treatises on suicide (unless it be the “cruauté” [cruelty] linking II: 11 and II: 27 in their titles). The custom in question in II: 3 is that of voluntarily ending one’s life when one has lived enough, though the instance recounted of a ninety-year-old woman on Cea (and hence the resolution of the mystery of the title) is saved until the end; her relatively happy

4. A mystery not entirely resolved, for Montaigne presents no other examples of inhabitants of Cea doing away with themselves. One instance hardly justifies calling it a custom. André Tournon points out that although the woman tells her fellow citizens why she has decided to take her life
self-inflicted exit is preceded by a veritable holocaust of less happy ones: a Lacedaemonian boy, Servius the grammarian, Speusippus, Cato, the virgins of Miletus, Therycion, Cleomenes, Cassius, Brutus, Damocritus, Antinous, Theodotus, the Sicilian of Gozo, the Jewish women besieged by Antiochus, Libo, Razis, Pelagia, Sophronia, Lucius Aruntius, Granius Silvanus, Statius Proximus, plus at least thirty-seven more together with the inhabitants of entire cities.

The three good wives in II: 35 are good precisely because they commit suicide, showing their love for their husband by accompanying them in death. The first two encourage their husbands to do this difficult thing by doing it themselves. The wife of a man who suffered from genital ulcers and who told him, upon examining them, that he had better kill himself, lashed her body to his and together they leapt into the sea. In doing so she and her husband, having resolved that they “se precipiteroient en la mer” [would throw themselves into the sea] (II: 35, 745a, DM 577; 564*) involuntarily (on their part, but perhaps not Montaigne’s) echo two sets of suicides in the matching chapter: Cleombrotus of Ambracia, who was inspired by Plato’s Phaedo to taste of the life to come, and consequently “s’allá precipiter en la mer” [went and threw himself in the sea] (II: 3, 360a, DM 32; 260), and the inhabitants of the Hyperborean region who, tired of life, decided to “se precipiter en la mer” [throw themselves into the sea] (II: 3, 362a, DM 35; 262). In the 1580 edition of the Essays these strikingly similar expressions would make their only appearances in these two chapters.

In the second case, Arria, the wife of Cecinna Paetus, who had taken part in an unsuccessful rebellion against the emperor Claudius but was reluctant to carry out his suicide, took her husband’s dagger, plunged it into her stomach, then drew it back out and handed it to him, saying “tien Paetus il ne m’a point fait de mal” [See, Paetus, I felt no pain] (II: 35, 747a, DM 580; 565*). Shamed by her example, he followed suit. The third good wife was Seneca’s young spouse, who did not need to encourage her husband but wanted to accompany him in death; Nero, however, had her wounds closed.

A 1588 addition to II: 3 counters the three good wives of II: 35 with three self-sacrificing wives of its own, of which the first two offer a clear and straightforward parallel to those in II: 35: “Sextilia, femme de Scaurus, et

“nothing tells us that she asked their permission” (Route par ailleurs, 93). Montaigne goes on to cite a genuine instance of suicide as a community custom: “Plinie recite de certaine nation hyperborée . . . qu’estans las et sous de vivre ils ont en coutume . . . se precipiter en la mer” [Pliny tells of a certain Hyperborean nation in which . . . when they are weary and satiated with living it is their custom . . . to throw themselves into the sea] (II: 3, 361–62a, DM 34–35; 262). The chapter could have been more appropriately entitled “Coustume hyperborée” [A Hyperborean Custom].
Paxea, femme de Labeo, pour encourager leurs maris à éviter les dangers qui les pressoyent, ausquels elles n’avoyent part que par l’interest de l’affection conjugale, engagerent volontairement la vie pour leur servir, en cette extreme necessité, d’exemple et de compagnie” [Sextilia, wife of Scaurus, and Paxea, wife of Labeo, to encourage their husbands to avoid the dangers that pressed them, in which they themselves had no share except by virtue of conjugal affection, voluntarily sacrificed their own lives so as to serve in this extremity as example and company to their husbands] (II: 3, 358b; 258). The third, however, while duplicating the feat of killing herself in front of her husband to join him in his suicide, turns out to have been a bad wife:

Il ne se peut rien adjoyster à la delicatesse de la mort de la femme de Fulvius, familier d’Auguste. Auguste, ayant descouvert qu’il avertit un secret important qu’il luy avoit fê, un matin qu’il le vint voir, luy en fit une maigre mine. Il s’en retourna au logis, plain de desesperir; et dict tout piteusement à sa femme qu’estant tombé en ce malheur il estoit resolu de se tuer. Elle tout franchement: Tu ne feras que raison, veu qu’ayant assez souvent experimenté l’incontinence de ma langue, tu ne t’en es point donne de garde. Mais laisse, que je me tue la premiere. Et, sans autrement marchander, se donna d’une espée dans le corps.

[Nothing can be added to the delicacy of the death of the wife of Fulvius, a close friend of Augustus. Augustus, having discovered that Fulvius had aired an important secret he had confided to him, treated him bleakly one morning when he came to see him. Fulvius went back to his house full of despair, and said most piteously to his wife that because of this misfortune he was resolved to kill himself. She said very frankly: “You will only be doing the right thing, seeing that for all your experience of the incontinence of my tongue you did not guard against it. But here, let me kill myself first.” And without further ado she ran a sword through her body.] (II: 3, 358b; 259)

She is bad enough as Montaigne tells it, having an incontinent tongue; but she is much worse in the story as Plutarch tells and which Montaigne quotes here almost word for word but leaves out what she is alluding to: it was she who had told Caesar’s secret, which she had heard from her husband, to Livia, who then berated Augustus.

Fulvius, the friend of Caesar Augustus, heard the emperor, now an old man, lamenting the desolation of his house: two of his grandsons were dead, and Postumius, the only one surviving, was in exile because of some false accu-
sation, and thus he was forced to import his wife’s son into the imperial succession; yet he pitied his grandson and was planning to recall him from abroad. Fulvius divulged what he had heard to his own wife, and she to Livia; and Livia bitterly rebuked Caesar: if he had formed this design long ago, why did he not send for his grandson, instead of making her an object of enmity and strife to the successor to the empire. Accordingly, when Fulvius came to him in the morning, as was his custom, and said, “Hail, Caesar,” Caesar replied, “Farewell, Fulvius.” And Fulvius took his meaning and went away; going home at once, he sent for his wife, “Caesar has found out,” he said, “that I have not kept his secret, and therefore I intend to kill myself.” “It is right that you should,” said his wife, “since, after living with me for so long a time, you have not learned to guard against my incontinent tongue. But let me die first.” And, taking the sword, she dispatched herself before her husband.\textsuperscript{5}

Thus the last of this 1588 insertion’s three wives is both the same as (as a wife encouraging her husband to suicide) and yet the exact opposite of (not a good wife but a bad one, and not a comfort to her husband in his misfortune but the cause of it) the three good wives in the companion chapter.

No wonder Montaigne comments that all he had to do was to choose his stories and then arrange them according to what the beauty of the larger work they form requires, for that is clearly what he is doing here, in the interplay between chapters II: 3 and II: 35. He wonders why other writers do not assemble stories from books, from which they could “bastir un corps entier & s’entretenant” [construct and entire body that held together] for which the only thing of their own they need supply would be “la liaison” [the connection]. They could arrange and diversify the stories (“les disposant & diversifiant”) as the beauty of the larger work would require, as Ovid sewed and pieced together his \textit{Metamorphoses} (II: 35, 749a, DM 587–88; 567–68*).

It now appears even less likely that Montaigne’s characterization of his book as a “fagotage de tant de diverses pieces” [bundle of so many diverse pieces] (II: 37, 758a, DM 599; 574) meant that it has no structure, for here he both likens it to the \textit{Metamorphoses} and asserts that Ovid arranged and diversified his stories in such a way as to enhance the beauty of the whole. That beauty in the case of the \textit{Essays} comes from his ability to “proportionner & rapporter l’une à l’autre” “toutes ces pieces . . . pour en engendrer une parfaicte symmetrie” [proportion and relate one to the other all those pieces to engender a perfect symmetry] (II: 37, 773a, DM 626–27; 587*).

Another such symmetry is engendered when this statement near the beginning of II: 3—

C’est ce que qu’on dit, que le sage vit tant qu’il doit, non pas tant qu’il peut.

[That is what they say, that the wise man lives as long as he should, not as long as he can] (II: 3, 350a, DM 20; 252*)

—is echoed by this one near the end of II: 35:

la loy de vivre aus gens de bien ce n’est pas autant qu’il leur plait, mais autant qu’ils doivent.

[the law of living, for good men, is not as long as they please but as long as they ought] (II: 35, 750a, DM 589; 568)

They are not only parallel but also symmetrically opposed, for the first statement approves of suicide while the second counsels against it. The first appears in the midst of instances of voluntary suicides, seconding their resolution, as the words that follow it make clear: “& que le present que nature nous ait faict le plus favorable & qui nous oste tout moien de nous plaindre de nostre condition c’est de nous avoir laissé la clef des champs” [and that the most beneficent present Nature has given us, a present which takes from us any reason for complaining about our condition, is the gift of a way out] (II: 3, 350a, DM 20–21; 252*). The second appears in a letter of Seneca’s in which he speaks of his realization that he has to live for his beloved wife and not just for himself. The sentences immediately following the one just quoted continue in that sense:

Celuy qui n’estime pas tant sa femme ou un sien amy que d’en allonger sa vie & qui s’opiniastre à mourir, il est trop delicat & trop mol: . . . il faut par fois nous prester à nos amis: & quand nous voudrions mourir pour nous interrompre nostre dessein pour autruy.

[The man who does not value his wife or a friend of his so much as to prolong his life for them, and who stubbornly insists on dying, is too delicate and soft; . . . we must sometimes lend ourselves to our friends, even when for our sake we would like to die, break off our plan for the sake of others.] (II: 35, 750a, DM 589; 568*)
Montaigne here simply translates Seneca’s words, at considerable length.\textsuperscript{6} Hence the whole passage is essentially another one of those “histoires, qui se rencontrent dans les livres” [stories that are found in books] that he had just said he likes to choose and arrange for the sake of the beauty of his book as a whole. Part of that beauty is the way one particular sentence of it echoes yet opposes a sentence in the companion chapter. Here we can get a glimpse of how Montaigne went about writing these two chapters: he must have started with the sentence from Seneca, and then fashioned the other sentence to match it.

\section*{4. Caesar the Procrastinator}

“À demain les affaires” [Let business wait till tomorrow] (II: 4) and “Observations sur les moyens de faire la guerre de Julius Caesar” [Observations on Julius Caesar’s methods of making war] (II: 34)

Montaigne begins both chapters by heaping praise on a book, praise that culminates in his calling that book a breviary, and among the qualities he praises is the purity of its language, which in his estimation surpasses that of its competitors. In “À demain les affaires” it is Amyot’s translation of Plutarch, among other qualities “pour la naifveté & pureté du langage, en quoy il surpasse tous autres” [for the naturalness and purity of his language, in which he surpasses all others]. Thanks to it we know how to speak and write, “c’est nostre breviaire” [it is our breviary] (II: 4, 363–64a; DM 35–36; 262). In the other chapter, the book called out for praise is Julius Caesar’s Commentaries on the Gallic and Civil Wars. “Car à la verité ce devroit estre le breviaire de tout homme de guerre” [it should be the breviary of every warrior], characterized by “une façon de dire si pure . . . que à mon goust il n’y a nuls escrits au monde, qui puissent être comparables aux siens en cète partie” [that to my taste there are no writings in the world comparable to his in this respect] (II: 34, 736a; DM 558–59; 556*). These two assertions, though they refer to each other in the way that the \textit{Essays’} other symmetrically placed echoes do, are mutually contradictory, for it cannot both be true that Amyot’s linguistic purity is unsurpassed and Caesar’s incomparable.

The chapters are symmetrically opposed in that II: 4 focuses on delay in receiving messages while II: 34 features delay in sending them. In II: 4,

\footnote{6. As the editors of the new Pléiade edition of the \textit{Essais} point out (Balsamo et al., 1694n).}
Montaigne cites Plutarch (in Amyot’s translation) recounting how a certain Rusticus, in the audience at a lecture Plutarch himself was giving, was handed a letter from the Emperor but put off opening it until the lecture was over. Very courteous to Plutarch, Montaigne comments, but imprudent with regard to the Emperor. Montaigne cites several other addressees who delayed to a dangerous or fatal extent opening their messages. A fatal instance was Julius Caesar himself, according to (Amyot’s) Plutarch: “ce same Plutarque m’a appris que Julius Caesar se fut sauvé, si, allant au senat, le jour qu’il y fut tué par les conjurez, il eut leu un memoire qu’on luy presenta contentant le fait de l’entreprise” [this same Plutarch has taught me that Julius Caesar would have saved his life if, in going to the Senate on the day when he was killed there by the conspirators, he had read a memorandum that was handed to him] (II: 4, 364a, DM 38; 263).

In II: 34, Julius Caesar delays sending three different kinds of messages:

1. His orders to his soldiers: “Il accoustumoit sur tout ses soldats à obeir simplement sans se mesler de contreroller ou parler des desseins de leur capitaine, lesquels il ne leur communiquoit que sur le point de l’exécution” [He accustomed his soldiers above all simply to obey, without meddling with criticizing or talking about their captain’s plans, which he communicated to them only when he was about to put them into execution] (II: 34, 736a, DM 556; 556).

2. His pep talks to his soldiers before they engaged the enemy: “il fait grand cas de ses exhortations aux soldatz avant le combat. Car là où il veut montrer avoir esté surpris ou pressé, il allegue toujours cela qu’il n’eust pas seulement loysir de haranguer son armée” [he sets great store by his exhortations to the soldiers before combat. For where he wants to show that he was surprised or hard pressed, he always mentions the fact that he had not even the leisure to harangue his army] (II: 34, 738a, DM 563; 557–58*). This kept happening, apparently, as Montaigne tells it (“il allegue toujours” [he always mentions]). He tells of one instance in particular, when “il n’eust loisir de leur dire, sinon qu’ilz eussent souvenance de leur vertu acoustumée, qu’ils ne s’estonnassent point, & soutinssent hardiment l’effort des adversaires” [he had only time to tell them to remember their accustomed valor, not to be taken aback, and to sustain boldly the adversaries’ attack] (II: 34, 738a, DM 563; 558*). But if he had had the time, he evidently would have said more than these platitudes, for his “eloquence militaire” was so highly regarded that “plusieurs en son armée recueilloit ses haren-gues. Et par ce moyen il en fut assemblé des volumes, qui ont duré


long temps apres luy” [several in his army took down his harangues; and that means there were volumes of them collected that lasted a long time after him] (II: 34, 738a, DM 564; 558). And what he said in his speeches to the troops when he had enough time to say it was evidently more interesting and specific than the commonplaces that were all he had time to say on that particular occasion to which Montaigne alludes: “Son parler avoit des graces particulieres, si que ses familiers & entre autres Auguste oyant reciter ce qui en avoit esté recueilli, reconnoissoit jusques aus phrases & aus mots ce qui n’estoit pas du sien” [His speech had particular graces, so that his intimates, and among them Augustus, hearing anyone recite what had been collected of them, could recognize what was not his, even to phrases and words] (II: 34, 738a, DM 564; 558).

(3) And his reply to a request for safe passage: when the Swiss asked him permission to travel through Roman territory but he decided to prevent them by force, he “print quelques jours de delay à leur faire response pour se servir de ce loisir à assembler son armée” [took a few days’ delay in answering them, so as to use this leisure in assembling his army] (II: 34, 737a, DM 560; 557). This instance differs from the other two in that he profited from his delay; nevertheless, it is yet another case of his delay in sending a message, the symmetrical response to his delay in receiving a message on the Ides of March, recounted in II: 4. Montaigne shows that he thinks that (2) and (3) are related by calling Caesar’s delay in both cases—and twice in (2)—“loisir.”

5. Suffering Innocence

“De la conscience” [Of conscience] (II: 5) and “L’histoire de Spurina” [The story of Spurina] (II: 33)

In “De la conscience” Montaigne argues that our innermost thoughts, especially our guilty ones, will show through on our face, despite our best efforts to conceal them. He tells of traveling during the religious civil wars and meeting a man who wore the outward marks of a Catholic, but whom he deduced must be a Protestant. He could see from the fear the man showed every time they passed through a town loyal to the king “que c’estoient alarmes que sa conscience luy donnoit” [that his alarms were caused by his conscience] (II: 5, 366a, DM 40; 262). “L’histoire de Spurina” is likewise about “alarmes,” a word that appears in the plural nowhere else in Book Two save in this chapter
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and “De la conscience,” and about how hard it is to prevent one’s body from responding to an inner impulse: “Plusieurs ayans voulu delivrer leurs ames des alarmes continuelles que leur donnoit cet appetit, se sont servis d’incision & détranchement des parties esmeues & alterées” [Many, having wished to deliver their soul from the continual alarms that this appetite gave them, have resorted to the incision and amputation of the parts that were stirred and altered] (II: 33, 728a, DM 546; 550). The appetite in question is the sexual one, and Montaigne goes on in this passage to write of those who have fought it with, heat, cold, hair shirts and “des ceintures à geiner leurs reins” [girdles to torture their loins] (II: 33, 728a, DM 40; 550).

Torture, applied to the loins to kill desire in II: 33, is also central to the discussion of conscience in II: 5: “c’est une dangereuse invention que celle des gehenes & semble que ce soit plustost un essay de patience que de verité” [tortures are a dangerous invention, and seem to be a test of endurance rather than of truth] (II: 5, 368a, DM 43; 266). For pain is as likely to make the sufferer lie as tell the truth. There is, however, an effect on the conscience: torture makes the guilty weaken and confess, but fortifies the innocent. A 1588 and a post-1588 addition continue the discussion: “[B] Que ne diroit on, que ne feroit on pour fuyr à si griefves douleurs? . . . [C] D’où il advient que celuy que le juge a geiné, pour ne le faire mourir innocent, il le face mourir et innocent et geiné” [What would a man not say, what would a man not do, to escape such grievous pains? . . . Whence it happens that the man whom the judge has tortured so as not to make him die innocent, is made to die both innocent and tortured] (II: 5, 369bc; 266).

Pain and mutilation inflicted on innocence are what the story to which the title of II: 33 alludes is all about, though with the difference that they are self-inflicted. Spurina was a Tuscan youth so beautiful that he made virtuous women lust after him. Not content to refrain from abetting their desire, he “entra en furieux despit contre soy mesmes & contre ces riches presens, que nature luy avoit faits, comme si on se devoit prendre à eux de la faute d’autrui” [entered into furious spite against himself and against these rich presents that nature had made to him, as if these should be blamed for the fault of others] (II: 33, 734a, DM 558; 555) and cut his face, leaving such scars that he destroyed his beauty. His face, though innocent, was, like the innocent victim of torture, made to suffer for misdeeds for which others were responsible.

This intentionally self-inflicted destruction in II: 33 is the symmetrical opposite of a case of unintentionally self-inflicted destruction recounted in II: 5: the wasp who “picque & offence autrui, mais plus soi mesme, car elle y perd son eguillon & sa force pour jamais. Vitásque in vulnere ponunt” [stings
and hurts others, but itself most, for there it loses its sting and its strength forever, “In the wound they make they leave their lives”] (II: 5, 367a; DM 41; 264).

Montaigne immediately follows this up with another insect analogy: “Les Cantarides ont en elles quelque partie qui sert contre leur poison de contre-poison, par une contrariété de nature. Aussi à mesme qu’on prend le plaisir au vice, il s’engendre un desplaisir contraire en la conscience qui nous tourmente” [The Spanish fly has in itself something that serves as a counter poison to its own poison, by a contrariety of nature. So, even while we take pleasure in vice, there is engendered in our conscience a contrary displeasure which torments us] (II: 5, 367a, DM 41; 265). Balsamo et al. note Montaigne’s source as Amyot’s translation of Plutarch’s “On the delays of divine justice” (1518), which is accurate (he nearly quotes it word for word), but their footnote gloss on the word “partie” as “qualité” (385n) is in error, revealing an ignorance of a passage from another essay of Plutarch’s, also translated by Amyot, where he explains where the counter poison comes from: “les medecins disent que la mousche Cantharide est bien un mortel poison, et toutefois que les ailes et les pieds ont force d’aider au contraire, et de dissoudre sa mortelle puissance” [doctors say that the Spanish fly is indeed a fatal poison, and yet that its wings and feet have the power to counteract it, and to dissolve its fatal power]. So it is not a quality in the poison itself but another substance, made from other parts of the fly’s body.

Unlike the wasp, the Spanish fly does not poison itself, so it forms no parallel with the self-harming Spurina. However, it will join with the wasp to find a counterpart poison in a post-1588 addition to “L’histoire de Spurina,” the one that the father of a girl forced to become the mistress of Ladislas of Naples put on a handkerchief that she brought to the encounter:

Elle estoit fille d’un medecin fameux de son temps, lequel, se trouvant engagé en si villaine necessité, se resolut à une haute entreprinse. Comme chacun paroit sa fille et l’attournoit d’ornements et joyaux qui la peussent rendre agreable à ce nouvel amant, luy aussi luy donna un mouchoir exquis en senteur et en ouvrage, duquel elle eust à se servir en leurs premières aproches, meuble qu’elles n’y oublient guere en ces quartiers là. Ce mouchoir, empoisonné selon la capacité de son art, venant à se frotter à ces chairs esmeues et pores ouverts, inspira son venin si promptement, qu’ayant soudain changé leur sueur chaude en froide, ils expirerent entre les bras l’un de l’autre.

7. “Comment il faut que les jeunes gens lisent les poètes” [How young men should read the poets], available on the web at http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~wulfric/rentexte/amyot/am_txt.htm.
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[She was the daughter of a doctor famous in his time, who, finding himself entangled in so foul a necessity, resolved on a lofty attempt. As all were arraying his daughter and bedecking her with ornaments and jewels to make her pleasing to this novel lover, he too gave her a handkerchief, exquisite in fragrance and workmanship, which she was to use in their first embraces—an article they rarely forget in those parts. This handkerchief, poisoned according to the full capacity of his craft, coming to rub against the aroused flesh and open pores of both, infused its venom so promptly that, their warm sweat suddenly changing to cold, they expired in each other’s arms.] (II: 33, 730c; 552)

M. A. Screech points out that this anecdote comes from Laonicus Chalcondylas’ *De la décadence de l’Empire Grec.* Montaigne made some telling departures from that source. In Chalcondylas’ version, the father

resolved to carry out a very strange thing that required no small courage. For with hemlock juice and other fatal drugs he soaked a kerchief [un couvrechef] richly worked with golden thread and crimson silk, which he gave to his daughter for her to put on when the King was with her, which she did. Now he no sooner cast his eye on this beauty, of which the renown, he said, had been too miserly in its praise, than all boiling and enflamed with love, without standing on ceremony, he immediately threw himself upon her. But he was no sooner touched by the kerchief, as heated as he was, than suddenly the poison went up to his heart, with such speed and force, that after having shed a few drops of a cold sweat, as if it were nature’s last effort, he gave up the ghost in the arms of the girl, who also expired soon afterward.⁹

Montaigne’s alterations allow the poison to recall more strongly II: 5’s cantharides, known since antiquity for their alleged aphrodisiac powers. For in the original, it was not a handkerchief but a kerchief; it was not perfumed; the father had not instructed his daughter to use it in their first embraces; and it was not applied to the aroused flesh of both in the act of making love (though the daughter did succumb from contact with it; after all, it was on her head). Note as well that Montaigne’s remark that a perfumed handkerchief was a “meuble qu’elles n’y oublient guere en ces quartiers là” [an article they rarely forget in those parts] has no basis in the source. It is not an apt

⁸ In his translation of the *Essais,* 827n.
remark to make about a couvre-chef, which was not an item Italian (or Florentine) women wore with more frequency than French women in 1414 (the date of Ladislaus’ death). To use a scented handkerchief in lovemaking is something one could reasonably assert that women in certain parts do more often than women elsewhere. Yet “ces quartiers là” may more likely connote not a geographical region but the bedroom. Montaigne’s two insect examples in the other chapter, the wasp and the Spanish fly, together anticipate what will happen here, for like the latter, the daughter’s seductive handkerchief was meant (in Montaigne’s version of the story) to arouse her victim; but like the wasp, she would not survive the encounter.

6. Parallel Deaths

“De l’exercitation” [Of practice] (II: 6) and “Defence de Seneque et de Plutarque” [In defense of Seneca and Plutarch] (II: 32)

One can “s’exercer” [practice] for misfortune by voluntary poverty and other self-induced austerities, Montaigne writes, but practicing in advance is of no help as far as death is concerned. Yet we can try it out (“l’essayer”) through sleep, which resembles death. But the closest we can come is through some violent accident that makes us lose consciousness. Those that have experienced such an event “ont esté bien pres de voir son vray & naturel visage” [have been very close to seeing death’s true and natural face] (II: 6, 372a, DM 47; 268). Being knocked off his horse by another horseman and losing consciousness gave Montaigne such an opportunity, and he devotes “De l’exercitation” to recounting the event and its aftermath.

[M’estant alé un jour promener à une lieüe de chez moi, qui suis assis dans le moiau de tout le trouble des guerres civiles de France . . . j’avoys pris un cheval bien aisé mais non guiere ferme: à mon retour une occasion soudaine s’estant presentée de m’aider de ce cheval à un service qui n’estoit pas bien de son usage, un de mes gens grand & fort, monté sur un puissant rous-sin, qui avoit une bouche desesperée, frais au demeurant & vigoureus, pour faire le hardy & devancer ses compagnons, vint à le pousser à toute bride droit dans ma route, & fondre comme un colosse sur le petit homme & petit cheval, & le foudroier de sa roideur & de la pesanteur, nous envoyant l’un & l’autre les piedz contre-mont: si que voila le cheval abatu & couché tout étourdi, moy dis ou douze pas au dela mort estendu à la renverse, le
visage tout meurtry & tout escorched . . . n’ayant ny mouvement ny senti-
ment non plus qu’une souche.

[Having gone riding one day about a league from my house, which is situ-
ated at the very hub of all the turmoil of the civil wars of France . . . I had
taken a very easy but not very strong horse. On my return, when a sudden
occasion came up for me to use this horse for a service to which it was not
accustomed, one of my men, big and strong, riding a powerful work horse
who had a desperately hard mouth and was moreover fresh and vigorous—
this man, in order to show his daring and get ahead of his companions,
spurred his horse at full speed up the path behind me, came down like a
colossus on the little man and little horse, and hit us like a thunderbolt with
all his strength and weight, sending us both head over heels. So that there
lay the horse bowled over and stunned, and I ten or twelve paces beyond,
dead, stretched on my back, my face all bruised and skinned . . . having no
more motion or sensation than a log.] (II: 6, 373a, DM 49–50; 268–69*)

His companions, unable to revive him, thought he was dead. They picked
him up and carried him home. After two hours, he began to regain con-
sciousness, but “mes premiers sentimens estoint beaucoup plus aprochans de
la mort que de la vie. Cête recordation que j’en ay fort empreinte en mon
ame me representant son visage & son idée si prez du naturel, me concilie
aucunement à elle” [my first feelings were much closer to death than to life.
This recollection, which is strongly implanted on my soul, showing me the
face and idea of death so true to nature, reconciles me to it somewhat] (II: 6,
373–74a, DM 51; 269).

This encounter with death, singular as it was, finds a curious counterpart
in “Defence de Seneque et de Plutarque” (II: 32). It emerges from a true
story Montaigne tells to defend Plutarch from Jean Bodin’s accusation that
the instances he cited of stoic resistance to pain, such as the Spartan boy who
continued to hide a stolen fox under his cloak even though he was biting him,
were not to be believed. “Et qui s’enquerrre à nos Argolets, des experiences
qu’ils ont eues en ces guerres civiles, il se trouvera des effets de patience,
d’obstination & d’opiniatreté parmi nos miserables siecles . . . dignes d’estre
comparez à ceus que nous venons de reciter de la vertu Spartaine” [If any-
one would ask our soldiers about the experiences they have had in these civil
wars, there will be found acts of endurance, obstinacy, and stubbornness in
this miserable age of ours . . . worthy to be compared to those we have just
related of Spartan virtue] (II: 32, 724a, DM 539; 547*). Montaigne knows
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of peasants who have undergone excruciating tortures at the hands of their captors. He says he saw one left for dead naked in a ditch,

ayant le col tout meurtry & enflé d’un licol qui y pendoit encore, avec lequel on l’avoit tirassé toute la nuict à la queüe d’un cheval, le corps percé en cent lieux à coups de dague qu’on luy avoit donné, non pas pour le tuer, mais pour luy faire de la doleur & de la crainte: qui avoit souffert tout cela & jusques à y avoir perdu parolle & sentiment, resolu, à ce qu’il me dit, de mourir plus tost de mille morts que de rien promettre, & si estoit un des plus riches laboureurs de toute la contrée.

The farmer was found in an unconscious state, “jusques à y avoir perdu parolle & sentiment” [to the point of having lost speech and sensation]; so too was Montaigne, being one of “ceus qui sont tombez par quelque violent accident . . . & qui y ont perdu tous sentimens” [those who by some violent accident . . . have lost all sensation] (II: 6, 372a, DM 47; 268), and in his own particular case “n’ayant ny mouvement ny sentiment non plus qu’une souche” [having no more motion or sensation than a log]. Consequently the farmer was “laissé pour mort” [left for dead]; so too was Montaigne: “Ceus qui estoint avec moy . . . me tenans pour mort” [Those who were with me . . . taking me for dead] (II: 6, 373a, DM 50; 269). He repeats the expression a few pages later, when he remembers seeing the other horse “à mes talons & me tins pour mort” [at my heels and took myself for dead] (II: 6, 377a, DM 55; 272*). That Montaigne is setting up, little by little and detail by detail, a double for himself in the man left for dead in this matching chapter becomes all the more apparent when we realize that the phrase “pour mort” appears nowhere else in the Essays.

The farmer was “tirassé”; so too was Montaigne. For the former, it was intentional torture by his enemies; for the latter, pain unintentionally inflicted by his friends. The farmer was “tirassé toute la nuict” [pulled all night] by a halter his tormentors had tied around his neck and attached to a horse’s tail. As for Montaigne, “j’avois esté vilainement tirassé par ces pouvres
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gens qui avoient pris la peine de me porter entre leurs bras par un long & tresmauvais chemain & s'y estoint lassés deux ou trois fois les uns apres les autres” [I had been villainously pulled about by those poor fellows, who had taken the pains to carry me in their arms over a long and very bad road, and had tired themselves out two or three times in relays] (II: 6, 376–77a, DM 56; 272*). The situation is hardly the same, but that's not the point: the word is the same, giving rise to some irony. No one else is “tirassé” in Book Two.

The same precision is evident in words describing their respective injuries. The farmer’s neck was “tout meurtry” [all bruised] (II: 32, 724a, DM 540; 548) from the halter, while Montaigne’s face was “tout meurtry” [all bruised] (II: 6, 373a, DM 50; 269). Only in this pair of chapters does that expression appear.

Perhaps the most important connection between Montaigne’s story of his own brush with death and the farmer left for dead in the ditch is that the very thing that makes his own story so worth telling, that the event allowed him to experience death without actually dying, is actually part of the other man’s experience too. For the suffering the latter endured, as Montaigne makes clear in a 1588 addition, gave him the opportunity to die without dying: he was “resolu, à ce qu’il me dict, de mourir plustost de mille morts (comme de vray, quand à sa souffrance, il en avoit passé une toute entiere) avant que rien promettre” [resolved, so he told me, to die a thousand deaths (as in truth, so far as suffering goes, he had died one whole death) rather than promise anything] (II: 32, 724ab; 548).10

But there are still more pieces to the puzzle. Like Montaigne, the man was injured by a horse—the one he was tied to and by which he was “tirassé” all night. But the way he was tied, the “licol” [halter] around his neck,11 almost turned him into a horse—though not so much in the context of his own story as in the larger one of how Montaigne sets up this encounter of echoing stories. It is in that larger metafiction that the halter can acquire some significance. Another detail about him meaningful in the metafiction in which these two stories converge is that he was a “laboureur,” defined by Littré as “Celui qui laboure, soit l’ouvrier qui trace le sillon, soit le propriétaire ou le fermier qui cultive une terre” [He who plows, whether it be the worker who traces the furrow or the landowner or the farmer who cultivates a field].

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10. The part in parentheses was added in 1588, as noted in DM 540, although neither of the Pléiade editions nor the Villey indicate it.

By strange coincidence, a “rousse,” the kind of big horse that collided with Montaigne’s smaller horse is a “cheval de labour,” according to Balsamo et al. (391n), a *plow* horse. So the “laboureur” is both a horse (by virtue of the horse’s halter he is made to wear) and one who plows, making him a distant double of the plow horse that unhorsed Montaigne. If the *Essays* were a poem such a recombination of elements would be in no way surprising. But in fact they *are* a poem. And in that poem, Montaigne’s run-in with the rousse is an allegory of the collision in the larger text between these stories. In the collision, the story in II: 6 may not escape unscathed. We can no longer think it unique, for example: both events take place during the “guerres civiles” [civil wars]; each man had “perdu . . . sentiment” [lost consciousness], was taken “pour mort” [for dead], was “tirassé” [pulled about] and “tout meurtry” [all bruised], each suffered from an encounter with a horse and experienced death without actually dying. But is Montaigne even telling the truth about what happened to him? How could so many details be true of both stories? Was one a true story and the other a fiction concocted to match so many details of the first?

If that is the case, Montaigne seems to want us to consider whether the story in II: 32 might not be the true one, for he appears to confirm the reality of the event by providing another source for it in “De l’expérience”: “Des paysans viennent de m’advertir en haste qu’ils ont laissé présentement en une forest qui est à moy un homme meurtry de cent coups, qui respire encore, et qui leur a demandé de l’eau par pitié et du secours pour le soubslever” [Some peasants have just informed me hastily that a moment ago they left in a wood that belongs to me a man stabbed in a hundred places, who is still breathing, and who begged them for pity’s sake to bring him some water and help him to get up] (III: 13, 1070b; 819). The plowman in II: 32 had been stabbed a hundred times too: “le corps percé en cent lieux à coups de dague” [his body pierced in a *hundred* places with *stabs* from daggers]. There are sixty-four other appearances of “cent” in the *Essays* but these are the only two where it is combined with “coups” [blows]. Moreover, while the expression “tout meurtry” appears only twice, applied to Montaigne in II: 6 and to the plowman in II: 32, the word “meurtry” makes only one other appearance in the *Essays* at all, and this is it. As we have already seen in reading chapter pairs before now, Montaigne knows where he is putting certain words and he plants them where he does for a reason. In this instance, “meurtry” links the three passages. The only persons to whom it applies in the *Essays* are Mon-

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12. Villey defines it similarly: “Fort cheval employé au labour ou aux charrois” [a strong horse employed in plowing or pulling carts] (373n5).
13. Both Frame and Screech (1214) translate these “coups” as stab-wounds.
taigne in II: 6, the plowman in II: 32, and the wounded man in III: 13—and the hundred blows connect the latter two.

Could then these two crime victims be the same? The peasants, Montaigne goes on to say, left the man where he lay because they were fearful of being accused of having attacked him themselves. Surely Montaigne would not have left him there too, but would have gone out and rescued the man, finding him in the ditch, left for dead yet still alive and able to tell his story. So that if we put the two stories together, as the unique repetition of “cent coups” and “meurtry” encourage us to do, this is where we pick up the story in II: 32. But if he wants us to believe that it could be the same man, he nevertheless wants us to believe it could not be the same man, for also he tells us in III: 13—a chapter first published in 1588—that the event had only just happened (“Des paysans viennent de m’advertir” [Some peasants have just informed me])—whereas the story in II: 32 was published eight years before. The metafictional plot thickens.

7. Rewards and Punishments

“Des recompenses d’honneur” [Of honorary awards] (II: 7) and “De la colere” [Of anger] (II: 31)

Montaigne begins “De la colere” by saying that it is not good to let a father bring up his own children. “Qui ne voit qu’en un estat tout dépend de l’éducation & nourriture des enfants? & ce pendant sans nulle discretion on les laisse à la merci de leurs parens tant fols & meschans qu’ils soient” [Who does not see that in a state everything depends on the education and nurture of the children? And yet, without any discernment, they are left to the mercy of their parents, however foolish and wicked these may be] (II: 31, 714a, DM 525; 539–40*). But in “Des recompenses d’honneur” he seems to express the opposite opinion, maintaining that for a father to be involved in his children’s upbringing is appropriate, even if it is commonplace and thus not worth singling out for praise: “On ne remarque pas pour la recommandation d’un homme, qu’il ait soin de la nourriture de ses enfants, d’autant que c’est une action commune, quelque juste qu’elle soit” [We do not note in commendation of a man that he takes trouble over the nurture of his children, since this is a common action, however just] (II: 7, 382a, DM 61; 276*). The contradiction is made particularly apparent by the parallel expressions “nourriture de ses enfants” (in II: 7) and “nourriture des enfants” (in II: 31). In a post-1588 alteration to II: 31 that echo will disappear but the
meaning remain as “tout dépend de l’éducation & nourriture des enfans” becomes “tout dépend de son education et nourriture” [everything depends on its education and nurture], the possessive adjective “son” [its] finding its antecedent in “enfance” [childhood] in a sentence inserted after 1588 just before this point. In it Montaigne reports that Sparta and Crete were the only states which “ont commis aux loix la discipline de l’enfance” [committed the education of children to the laws] (II: 31, 714c; 539). As I will show, however, in 1588 Montaigne added such significant new connections between these two chapters that he may have decided at the moment he made the later change that he no longer needed the verbal echo.

II: 7 is about how best to reward; II: 31, how best to punish. Specifically, the one doing the punishing should not be angry. Montaigne is revolted by the sight of an irate father or mother beating their child. “Il n’est passion qui esbranle tant la sincerité des jugemens, que la colere. Nul ne ferait doute de punir de mort le juge, qui par colere aurait comnamné son criminel” [There is no passion that so shakes the clarity of our judgment as anger. No one would hesitate to punish with death a judge who had condemned his criminal through anger] (II: 31, 715a, DM 526; 540). Consequently, neither parents nor schoolmasters should chastise children in anger, nor masters their servants.

In the other chapter Montaigne focuses on honorary rewards, as opposed to monetary ones, and on one in particular, the Order of Saint Michel, debased in recent years because too many have received it. Not only can rewards become too common to convey the meaning they should, but certain kinds of virtuous behavior can be so common as not to deserve a reward. It is this point in the discussion that he brings in the example of fathers’ taking pains for the education of their children being so common a good trait as not to be worth commendation.

In 1588 Montaigne added a new dimension to his chapter on anger that enabled it to echo more strongly the central point of the other chapter, that honorary awards can lose their efficacy if they are given indiscriminately and too often, for precisely the same is true, he will argue in these new pages, of anger. “J’advertis ceux qui ont loy de se pouvoir courroucer en ma famille : premierement, qu’ils mesnagent leur cholere et ne l’espandent pas à tout pris, car cela en empesche l’effect et le poix : la criaillerie temeraire et ordinaire passe en usage et fait que chacun la mesprise” [I admonish those in my family who have the right to get angry, first to be thrifty with their anger and not spread it about at random, for that impedes its effect and its weight. Heedless and continual scolding becomes a habit and makes everyone discount it] (II: 31, 719b; 543–44*). The three terms I have italicized had been part of the
discussion when he was making the same point in the other chapter about honorary awards: “Auguste avoit raison d’estre beaucoup plus mesnagier & espargnant” [Augustus was right to be much more thrifty and sparing] (II: 7, 382a, DM 61; 276) of an honorary award than monetary ones. It is unfortunate that the powers that be decided to award the Order of Saint Michel in so spendthrift a manner, to “espandre indignement & avilir cet honneur [post-1588: cete marque]” [unworthily spread and debase this honor (post-1588: this distinction)] (II: 7, 383a, DM 63; 277*). If the new honorary award (the Order of the Holy Spirit) intended to regain the prestige the Saint Michel lost is to succeed, people will have to lose their memory of the first and the “mespris auquel il est cheu” [contempt into which it has fallen] (II: 7, 383a, DM 64; 277).

By contrast with honorary rewards, monetary ones are not as dignified because “on les employe à toute autre sorte d’ocasions” [they are used for all other sorts of occasions] (II: 7, 382a, DM 60; 276)—to reward valets, couriers, dancers, acrobats. Those words reappear in the 1588 addition too: when Montaigne gets angry with his servants, he does not have recourse to violence, but “je n’y employe communément que la langue. Mes valets en ont meilleur marché aux grandes occasions qu’aux petites” [I ordinarily use nothing but my tongue. My servants get off better on big occasions than small] (II: 31, 720b; 544*) because the small ones take him by surprise, and his anger flares, whereas on the big occasions he is prepared in advance not to give in to rage.

This is a good example of how Montaigne polished his chapter pairs in subsequent editions to make them even more mutually reflective.

8. Hidden Monsters

“De l’affection des peres aux enfans” [Of fathers’ affection for their children] (II: 8) and “D’un enfant monstrueux” [Of a monstrous child] (II: 30)

These two chapters advertise some sort of connection by their titles, the beloved “enfants” of one anticipating the monstrous “enfant” of the other. That every monstrosity has its hidden twin is the astonishingly self-referential revelation Montaigne will make in a post-1588 addition to II: 30’s conclusion: “cette figure qui nous estonne, se rapporte et tient à quelque autre figure de mesme genre inconnu à l’homme . . . mais nous n’en voyons pas l’assortiment et la relation” [this figure that astonishes us is related and linked
to some other figure of the same kind unknown to man . . . but we do not see their arrangement and relation] (II: 30, 713c; 539*). On the immediate level—the fictive one in which he pretends in any given chapter to be talking about some particular subject—he is speaking of God and His creation; but on the metafictional level, he is talking about his own creation, the Essays’ “assortiment” [arrangement] and “relation.”

The monstrous child was profitable because of its strangeness: “Je vis avant hier un enfant que deux hommes & une nourrisse . . . conduisoient, pour tirer quelque liard pour le monstrer à cause de son estrangeté” [The day before yesterday I saw a child that two men and a nurse . . . were leading about to get a penny or so from showing him, because of his strangeness] (II: 30, 712a, DM 523; 538). So too, Montaigne hopes, are the Essays: “si l’estrangeté ne me sauve & la nouveleté, qui ont accoustumé de donner pris aus choses, je ne sors jamais à mon honneur de côte sote entreprise: mais elle est si fantastique, & a un visage si esloigné de l’usage commun que cela luy pourra donner passage” [if strangeness and novelty, which customarily give value to things, do not save me, I shall never get out of this stupid enterprise with honor; but it is so fantastic and has a face so remote from common usage that that may enable it to pass] (II: 8, 385a, DM 66; 278*). The “stupid enterprise” is the Essays, which will turn out to have a lot more in common with the monstrous child than just strangeness.

For one thing, Montaigne’s assertion that his book has “un visage si esloigné de l’usage commun” [a face so remote from common usage] finds its mirror-reversed image in what he says about the monstrous child: “Il estoit en tout le reste d’une forme commune” [In all other respects he was of a common shape] (II: 30, 712a, DM 523; 538*). That is, the two passages have “commun[e]” in common, though the uses made of that word are opposite, Montaigne in II: 8 insisting on the uncommonness of the Essays, while saying in II: 30 that in all respects other than what he is about to describe—the headless trunk, and the arms and legs of its conjoined twin—the child’s appearance was not uncommon. Indeed to the “visage” [face] of the Essays corresponds the face of the child, which is evidently one of the few things about him that have a normal aspect.

To make the connection between his book and the monstrous child even more explicit, Montaigne goes on to say in “De l’affection des peres aux enfans” that the Essays have “un dessin farouche et monstrueux” [a wild and monstrous plan] (II: 8, 385a, DM 67; 278*). That’s how the passages read in 1580 and 1588; subsequently he changed “monstreux” to “extravagant.” But the monstrosity of his chapters was already evident, and would remain so, in the passage at the beginning of “De l’amitié” where he characterized them as
The monstrous child was composed of a “double corps . . . se rapports à une seule teste” [double body . . . connected with a single head] (II: 30, 713a, DM 524; 539). In the post-1588 addition to which I alluded at the outset the same verb relates such natural monsters to their undiscovered counterparts:

Ce que nous appelons monstres, ne le sont pas à Dieu, qui voit en l’immensité de son ouvrage l’infinité des formes qu’il y a comprises; et est à croire que cette figure qui nous estonne, se rapporte et tient à quelque autre figure de même genre inconnu à l’homme. De sa toute sagesse il ne part rien que bon et commun et réglé; mais nous n’en voyons pas l’assortiment et la relation.

[What we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his work the infinity of forms that he has comprised in it; and it is for us to believe that this figure that astonishes us is related and linked to some other figure of the same kind unknown to man. From his infinite wisdom there proceeds nothing but that is good and common and regular; but we do not see their arrangement and relationship.] (II: 30, 713c; 539*)

One instance of the verb “se rapporter” self-namingly “se rapporte” [is related] to the other, for the two conjoined bodies are related to each other (and to the single head) as one monstrous event in God’s creation is related to its unnoticed double, and as one chapter is related to its symmetrical counterpart.

Those relations are multiple. Three times the headless child attached to the other is called imperfect: “cet enfant imparfait . . . l’imparfait . . . cet imparfait” [this imperfect child . . . the imperfect one . . . this imperfect

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14. Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani (Montaigne: L’écriture de l’essai [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988]) reads “D’un enfant monstrueux” in light of Montaigne’s comments in “De l’amitié” (I: 28) about the monstrosity of the Essays, and finds, as I do, that II: 30 is a “mise en abîme” of his book, but for quite different reasons. In her view, the Essays are “monstrous” in that they have no order other than a fortuitous one. But when he said that in I: 28 he was in my estimation referring to their sequence (from monster to monster), not their symmetry. Chapter II: 30 “emblematizes in the figure of the monster . . . the disproportional and irregular structure of the essays, pieced together of divers members like the body of the child, and whose order is something other than ‘normal’” (222). She also argues that the text itself of II: 30, with its 1588 and 1595 accretions, comes increasingly to assume the doubleness of the monstrous child (228). But then so would any of dozens of chapters that grew enormously through their own accretions.
one] (II: 30, 713a, DM 524; 539*). Three times in the companion chapter does Montaigne speak of producing, by contrast, a perfect child. In the first instance, the “perfect child” would be something like the Essays, a literary production proceeding from Montaigne himself and the muses:

Ce seroit à l’aventure impieté en Saint Augustin (pour exemple) si d’un costé on luy proposoit d’enterrer ses escrits, dequoy nostre religion reçoit un si grand fruit, ou d’enterrer ses enfans, au cas qu’il en eut, s’il n’aimoit mieux enterrer ses enfans. Et je ne sçay si je n’aimerois pas mieux beaucoup en avoir produit ung, parfaitement bien formé, de l’acoittance des muses, que de l’acoittance de ma femme.

[It would perhaps be impiety in Saint Augustine, for example—if it were proposed to him on the one hand to bury his writings, from which our religion receives such great fruit, or else to bury his children, in case he had any—if he did not prefer to bury his children. And I do not know whether I would not like much better to have produced one perfectly formed one by intercourse with the muses than by intercourse with my wife.] (II: 8, 401ab; 292–93*)

The second and third instances occur in the same passage. In the former, the imagined perfect child would be a real one, though to which deeds of valor might be preferred; in the latter, the child is once more an artistic production:

Il est malaisé à croire . . . que Alexandre et Caesar ayent jamais souhaité d’estre privez de la grandeur de leurs glorieux faicts de guerre, pour la commodité d’avoir des enfans heritiers, quelques parfaits et accompliz qu’ils puissent estre; voire je fay grand doute que Phidias, ou autre excellent statuere, ayment autant la conservation et la durée de ses enfans naturels, comme il feroit d’une image excellente qu’avec long travail et estude il auroit parfaite selon l’art.

[It is hard to believe . . . that Alexander and Caesar ever wanted to be deprived of the grandeur of their glorious deeds of war for the satisfaction of having children and heirs, however perfect and accomplished they might be. Indeed I very much doubt that Phidias or any other excellent sculptor would be so pleased with the preservation and long life of his natural children as with that of an excellent statue that his long labor and study had perfected according to the rules of his art.] (II: 8, 402a; 293*)
Although perfection and imperfection make other appearances in the *Essays*, nowhere but in these two chapters do they refer to a child. So the imperfect child in II: 30, one of the monsters that Montaigne in that chapter declares has a counterpart somewhere else which we would perceive if we could only see “l’assortiment et la relation,” finds its symmetrical (that is, opposite) counterpart in the perfect children in the symmetrically paired chapter.

The fathers of those perfect children would in each instance have willingly given them up for more prestigious progeny of a different sort—writings, deeds of war, a statue. Indeed, father-child relations are sometimes problematic in II: 8, despite the chapter’s title, not only in those three instances but also when the son and the father are competing for the same shot at success:

> Voulons nous estre aimés de nos enfans, leur voulons nous oster l’occasion de souhaitez nostre mort? . . . Pour cela il ne nous faudroit pas marier si jeunes que nostre age vienne quasi à se confondre avec le leur. . . . Un gentil’homme qui a trante cinq ans, il n’est pas temps qu’il face place à son fils qui en a vint. Il est luy mesme au train de paroitre & aux voyages des guerres & en la court de son prince; il a besoin de ses pieces: il en doit certainment faire part, mais telle part, qu’il ne s’oublie pas pour autruy.

[Do we want to be loved by our children? Do we want to take away from them the occasion for desiring our death? . . . For that purpose, we should not marry so young that our age comes to be almost confounded with theirs. . . . When a gentleman is thirty-five, it is not time for him to give place to his son who is twenty: he is himself in the midst of appearing on military expeditions and in the court of his prince; he needs his resources, and should certainly share them, but not so as to forget himself for others.] (II: 8, 389–90a, DM 74–75; 282–83)

That unwise proximity of years, in which the age of one is likely to be confused with (“quasi à se confondre avec”) that of the other, makes father and son uncomfortably alike in their abilities and needs. They look more like brothers, strangely paralleling the monstrous child who was in fact a pair of brothers, conjoined twins linked at the chest (the smaller one headless but having arms), “comme si un plus petit enfant en vouloit *accoler* un plus grandet. . . . Voilà comme ce qui n’étoit pas attaché, comme bras, fessier, cuisses & jambes de cet imparfait demouroient *pendans* & branslans sur l’autre, & luy pouvoit aller sa longueur jusques à my jambe” [as if a smaller child were trying to *embrace* a bigger one *around the neck*]. . . . In this way all of this imperfect child that was not attached, as the arms, buttocks, thighs, and legs,
remained hanging and dangling on the other and might reach halfway down his legs] (II: 30, 713a, DM 524; 538). As if he were hanging onto the neck of his brother, he resembles the kind of imperfect child Montaigne accuses mothers of unjustly favoring and who consequently pose a problem for a father’s intention: it is dangerous to leave our wives in charge of our succession and of which children to award it to, for “Communement on les void s’adonner aux plus foibles & malotrus, ou à ceux, si elles en ont, qui leur pendent encore au col” [We commonly see them devote themselves to the weakest and most ill-favored, or those, if they have any, who are still hanging about their necks] (II: 8, 399a, DM 83; 290). The weaker, headless, brother is at the same time weaker and more ill-favored by nature and hanging onto the other and giving the illusion of embracing him around the neck. The son of a father too close to him in age can only succeed at the latter’s expense; likewise the weaker brother may ultimately drain the fully formed one of his strength. As it is, the latter, though already fourteen months old, cannot ingest solid food.

Montaigne suggests that “Ce double corps & ces membres divers se rapportans à une seule teste” [This double body and these several limbs, connected with a single head] (II: 30, 713a, DM 524; 539) might be a favorable omen for the king’s holding the diverse factions of his kingdom together, but that it would be better to let events take their course, “car il n’est que de deviner en choses faictes” [for there is nothing like divining about things past] (II: 30, 713a, DM 525; 539). In 1588 he would add this: “Comme on dict d’Epimenides qu’il devinoit à reculons” [As they said of Epimenides that he prophesied backward] (II: 30, 713b; 539). This could be a wink at the reader who has a good enough memory to recall (or rather who, having caught on Montaigne’s game of writing his chapters in symmetrical pairs, can go back and discover) that in “De l’affection des peres aux enfans” he wrote that although the care every animal takes for the conservation of its progeny is the second law of nature (the first being the instinct for self-preservation), “parce que nature semble nous l’avoir recommandée, regardant à estandre et faire aller avant les pieces successives de cette sienne machine, ce n’est pas merveille si, à reculons, des enfants aux peres, elle n’est pas si grande” [because Nature seems to have recommended it to us with a view to extending and advancing the successive parts of this machine of hers, it is no wonder if, looking backward, the affection of children for their fathers is not so great] (II: 8, 386a, DM 69; 279*). Montaigne is inviting us in 1588, in other words, to prophesy backwards, to look back to find what was already there in 1580 (and backwards in the nominal order of the chapters), to find that other à reculons.
II. Book Two

9. Only When You Need It

“Des armes des Parthes” [Of the armor of the Parthians] (II: 9) and “De la vertu” [Of virtue] (II: 29)

In “Des armes des Parthes” Montaigne remarks that “Plusieurs nations vont encore & alloient anciennement à la guerre sans armes” [Several nations still go, and used to go, to war without wearing armor] (II: 9, 404a, DM 94; 294). In “De la vertu” he gives an example of just such a nation: the “Bedouins nation meslée aux Sarasins . . . alloient à la guerre nudz, sauf un glaive à la Turquesque & le corps seulement couvert d’un linge blanc” [Bedouins, a nation mingled with the Saracens . . . used to go to war unarmed except for a Turkish-style sword, their body covered only with a white linen cloth] (II: 29, 709a, DM 521–22; 536*). In 1588, Montaigne added to the II: 9 passage (after “sans armes”) “sans se couvrir, d’autres se couvroient de vaines armes” [without covering themselves; others covered themselves with useless armor].

In a post-1588 revision, he changed that to “sans se couvrir; ou se couvroient d’inutiles defances” [without covering themselves; or covered themselves with useless armor]. The latter alteration did not change what the 1588 insertion added: the couvrir and couvroient that set up more echoes with the II: 29 passage, in addition to the echoes already present between nations and nation, alloient . . . à la guerre and alloient à la guerre, and of course the notion itself of going to war without armor.

II: 9 is about armor—the armor of Montaigne’s own time, the armor of the Romans, and that of the Parthians. But II: 29 is about virtue. So how does it happen that Montaigne finds himself talking about armor—specifically, the lack thereof—in a chapter on virtue? And why does the statement in II: 9 about how some nations go to war without it find its only specific illustration in II: 29?

What Montaigne appears to mean by “vertu” in II: 29 is impassibility, the ability to withstand pain. There is a big difference, he writes, between leaps of the soul and a resolute and constant habit. It is a greater thing “de se rendre impassible de soy, que d’estre tel de sa condition originelle” [to make oneself impassible by one’s own efforts than to be so by one’s natural condition] (II: 29, 705a, DM 514; 532–33*). He cites as paragons of impassibility: Pyrrho, indifferent not only to what was around him (a disappearing interlocutor, carts crossing his path in the street) but also to the pain of surgery;

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two men who cut off their genitals to make a point; Indian widows who perform suttee; Indian Gymnosophists who perform similar self-immolation; and the Bedouins whose belief that fate has already determined when they will die is so strong that they go into battle without armor.

That “resolute & constant habit” is hard to come by. Pyrrho in fact did not always have it (he quarreled with his sister and took defensive measures against menacing dogs). But the Indian widows did, as it was “leur coutume” [their custom] (II: 29, 707a, DM 519; 534) to throw themselves like that on their husband’s funeral pyre. And unlike most of us, the Gymnosophists proved their virtue (in burning themselves up without moving a muscle) “non par l’impétuosité d’un’humeur soudeine mais par expresse profession de leur regle” [not by the impetuosity of a sudden impulse, but by the express profession of their order] (II: 29, 708a, DM 519; 535). We, on the other hand, can only attain such heights on special occasions, “par secousse” [fitfully], only in the form of “les boutées & saillies de l’ame” [the leaps and sallies of the soul] (II: 29, 705a, DM 514; 533*).

Il nous advient à nous mesmes qui ne sommes qu’avortons d’hommes, d’eslancer par fois nostre ame esveillée par les discours ou exemples d’autruy, bien loing au dela de son ordinaire : mais c’est une espece de passion, qui la pousse & agite, & qui la ravit aucunement hors de soy : car franchi ce tourbillon, nous voyons que sans y penser elle se débande & relâche d’elle mesme, sinon jusques à la derniere touche, au moins jusques à n’être plus cele-la. De façon que lors, à toute occasion, pour un oiseau perdu, ou un verre cassé, nous nous sentons esmouvoir à plus pres comme l’un du vulgar.

[It happens to us, who are but abortions of men, sometimes to launch out our soul, arouse by the ideas or examples of others, very far beyond her ordinary range; but it is a kind of passion that impels and drives her, and which to some extent tears her out of herself. For when this whirlwind is over, we see that without thinking about it she unbends and relaxes herself, if not down to the lowest key, at least until she is no longer the same; so that then, for any occasion, for a lost bird or a broken glass, we let ourselves be moved just about like one of the vulgar.] (II: 29, 705a, DM 515; 533*)

In contrast to extraordinary cases like the Indians and the Bedouins, virtue defined as impassibility is something we put on only at certain critical moments, and cast off when we no longer think we need it. We treat it like some sort of protective armor that would be too heavy to wear day in and
day out—and this is precisely the parallel Montaigne has set up between this chapter and its symmetrical double, which begins: “C’est une façon vitieuse de la noblesse de nostre temps, & pleine de mollesse, de ne prendre les armes que sur le point d’une extreme necessité & s’en descharger aussi tost qu’il y a tant soit peu d’apparance que le danger soit esloigné” [It is a vicious practice of the nobility of our time, and full of softness, to put on armor only on the point of extreme need and to take it off as soon as there is the slightest appearance that the danger has gone] (II: 9, 403a, DM 93; 293). The Romans wore heavy armor, typically sixty pounds as Montaigne points out, but “ils estoient si acoustumés à les porter, qu’elles ne les empeschoient non plus que leurs membres” [they were so accustomed to wearing it that it impeded them no more than their limbs] (II: 9, 405a, DM 96; 295*). But just as it was “leur coustume” that made it possible for Indian widows to die with their husbands, so too with armor: “Or il n’est que la coutume qui nous rende insupportable la charge de nos armes” [Now it is only custom that makes the burden of our armor insupportable to us] (II: 9, 404a, DM 95; 294*).

10. Act Your Age

“Des livres” [Of books] (II: 10) and “Toutes choses ont leur saison” [There is a season for everything] (II: 28)

In “Des livres” Montaigne tells us that at his advanced age he is in no mood to read for much more than pleasure:

Mon dessein est de passer doucement non laborieusement ce qui me reste de vie. Il n’est rien pourquoi je me vuelve rompre la teste, non pas pour la science mesme, de quelque grand pris qu’elle soit. Je ne cherche aux livres qu’a m’y donner du plaisir par un honneste amusement: ou si j’estudie je ny cerche que la science, qui traicte de la connoissance de moy mesmes, & qui m’instruise à bien mourir & à bien vivre.

[My intention is to pass pleasantly, and not laboriously, what life I have left. There is nothing for which I want to rack my brain, not even knowledge, however great its value. I seek in books only to give myself pleasure by honest amusement; or if I study, I seek only the learning that treats of the knowledge of myself and instructs me in how to die well and live well.] (II: 10, 409a, DM 101; 297)
This is just what the companion chapter, “Toutes choses ont leur saison,” is all about, that there is a time for everything, and old age is the time to take one’s pleasure: “Le jeune doit faire ses apprets, le vieil en jouir” [Youth should make preparations, Old Age should enjoy them] (II: 28, 702a, DM 512; 531*). It is not the time for hard work or for learning something new, as Eudemonidas implied in his jab at the aged Xenocrates, who was still going to school: “quand sçaura cetui cy, ce dit il, s’il apprend encore?” [When will this man know, he said, if he is still learning?] (II: 28, 702a, DM 512; 531*).

In II: 28 Montaigne criticizes Cato the Elder for taking up the study of Greek in his declining years: “qu’en son extreme vieillees, il se mit à apprendre la langue Grecque . . . ne me semble pas luy estre fort honnorable. C’est proprement ce que nous disons, retomber en enfantillage. Toutes choses ont leur saison, les bonnes & tout” [That in his extreme old age he set himself to learn Greek . . . does not seem to me to be much in his honor. It is exactly what we call falling back into childhood. All things have their season, good ones and all] (II: 28, 702a, DM 512; 531). In II: 10 he says that trying to read Greek in old age is not an appropriate activity for himself either. Concerning his own taste in books, he writes, “Je ne me prends guier e . . . aus Grecs, par ce que mon jugement ne se satisfait pas d’une moyenne intelligence” [I do not much take . . . to those in Greek, because my judgment is not satisfied with a mediocre understanding] (II: 10, 409–10a, DM 102; 297*). In a post-1588 rewording of this passage, he would enhance the parallel by changing “une moyenne intelligence” to “une puerile et apprantisse intelligence” [a childish and apprentice understanding] (II: 10, 410ac; 297), now closely matching the remark that Cato’s taking up Greek in his old age was to “retomber en enfantillage.” There would now be something childish about reading Greek both for the aged Cato and for the aging Montaigne, but for different reasons. Learning to read Greek was infantile for Cato because only the young should learn new things; reading Greek for Montaigne was to have to put up with only a childlike understanding of a text whose language he had not learned well enough.

Before taking Cato the Elder to task for learning Greek in his dotage, Montaigne compares him unfavorably to his great-grandson and namesake, Cato the Younger. In the 1580–1588 editions, he had written “Ceux qui apparent Caton le censeur au jeune Caton meurtrier de soy-mesme, font à mon opinion grand honneur au premier. Car je les trouve eslongnés d’une extreme distance” [Those who liken Cato the Censor with the younger Cato, who was his own murderer, do great honor to the former; for I find them separated by an extreme distance] (II: 28, 702a and 702n, DM 512; 531). On the Bordeaux copy he replaced this assertion with one that says just the
II. Book Two

opposite: that those who compare the two “apparient deux belles natures et de formes voisines” [are comparing two beautiful natures of neighboring (that is, similar) forms] (II: 28, 702c; 531*). But after initially elevating Cato the Elder to near-equal status with his grandson (and in fact saying that he exceeded the Younger in military and public service), he again stresses their difference, saying that the Elder could hardly be compared to the Younger in terms of virtue: “Mais la vertu du jeune, outre ce que c’est blasphème de luy en apparier nulle autre en vigueur, fut bien plus nette. Car qui deschargeroit d’envie et d’ambition celle du censeur, ayant osé chocquer l’honneur de Scipion, en bonté et en toutes parties d’excellence de bien loin plus grand et que luy et que tout homme de son siecle?” [But the virtue of the Younger, besides the fact that it is blasphemy to compare any other with it in vigor, was much more spotless. For who can acquit the Censor of envy and ambition, when he dared to attack the honor of Scipio, a man in goodness and all aspects of excellence far greater than he or any other man of his time?] (II: 28, 702c; 531*).

I bring this up because the contrast between an elder and younger Cato finds a suggestive parallel in the contrast in “Des livres” between the elder and younger Cicero (a name that likewise begins with C and ends with o): Cicero the orator and “Le jeune Cicero, qui n’a ressemblé son pere que de nom” [The younger Cicero, who resembled his father only in name] (II: 10, 415a, DM 114; 302). Montaigne tells an unflattering anecdote about the son, who once had a dinner guest flogged when reminded that the latter had once bragged that his own eloquence was greater than the elder Cicero’s. “Voilà un mal courtois hoste” [That was a discourteous host!] (II: 10, 415a, DM 114; 302). To say that the two Ciceros resembled each other in name only is pretty close to saying (from 1580 to 1588) that the two Catos were separated by a great distance or (post-1588) that they could not be compared in virtue, given the elder Cato’s attack on a man (Scipio) whose excellence far excelled his own. In fact, the post-1588 addition restates the notion of distance originally present in “je les trouve eslongnés d’une extreme distance” when it replaces it with the distance between Cato the Elder and the man he dishonorably attacked, who was “en toutes parties d’excellence de bien loin plus grand . . . que luy.” And the excellence that Cato the Elder so greatly lacked was lacking as well in the elder Cicero: “Quant à Cicero, je suis du jugement commun, que hors la science, il n’y avoit pas beaucoup d’excellence en luy” [As for Cicero, I am of the common opinion, that except for learning there was not much excellence in him] (II: 10, 415a, DM 113; 302*).

There wasn’t much excellence in Cicero’s writings, either: “sa façon d’escrire me semble lasche & ennuyeuse” [his writing style seems to me flaccid
and boring] (II: 10, 413a, DM 110; 301*). The only good thing about them is that they won’t interrupt your sleep: “Ils sont bons pour l’escole, pour le barreau, & pour le sermon, où nous avons loisir de sommeiller: & sommes encore un quart d’heure après assés à temps pour rencontrer le fil du propos” [They are good for the school, for the bar, and for the sermon, where we have leisure to nap and are still in time a quarter of an hour later to pick up the thread of the discourse] (II: 10, 414a, DM 111; 301).

The funny thing is, this sets up yet another connection to one of the Catos. Cato the Younger spent the last evening of his life reading a dialogue of Plato’s on the immortality of the soul (the Phaedo). Montaigne stresses that he did not read it to buck up his courage before committing suicide but rather that “comme celuy qui n’interrompit pas seulement son sommeil pour l’importance d’une telle deliberation, il continua aussi sans chois & sans changement ses estudes avec les autres actions acoustumées de sa vie” [but like a man who would not even interrupt his sleep out of concern over such a resolve, he also continued, without choice and without change, his studies together with the other customary actions of his life] (II: 28, 703–704a, DM 513–14; 532). So reading Plato is like sleeping in that both are activities that Cato refused to interrupt. But reading or listening to Cicero’s orations is an activity that sleep itself can interrupt with no damage done! Nothing is lost by dozing off; you can always pick up the thread because Cicero takes so long to get to the point anyway. Although “sommeil” and “sommeiller” appear forty-one times in the Essays, and an entire chapter (“Du dormir,” I: 44) is devoted to sleep, nowhere else is sleeping ever associated with texts.

When Montaigne gives us in II: 10 a sample of Cicero’s words, they turn out to address the very topic that takes up so much of II: 28, the issue of acting one’s age: “Ego vero me minus diu senem esse mallem, quam esse senem, antequam esse senem” [For my part, in truth, I would rather be old less long than be old before I am old] (II: 10, 416a, DM 115; 303). It is not surprising that the two chapters should not agree, but it is worth noting that they are talking about the same thing. Wise men, Montaigne writes, find that the greatest vice among the old, in whose company he counts himself, is that “nos desseins rajeunissent sans cesse: nous recommencons toujours à vivre: nostre estude & nostre desir devroient quelque fois sentir la vieillesse” [our desires incessantly renew their youth. We are always beginning to live over again. Our study and our desire should sometimes reek of old age] (II: 28, 702a, DM 512–13; 531*). It would appear that Cato the Elder and the elder Cicero agree with each other (Cato living according to the Ciceronian dictum Montaigne quotes) while disagreeing with Montaigne, who would rather be old when he is old than young when no longer young.
In writing in “Des livres” about what he likes and doesn’t like to read, Montaigne provides an additional parallel to his assertion in the matching chapter that for every activity there is an appropriate time and an inappropriate one, and that old age is often a determinant: “cête vieille ame poisante ne se laisse plus chatouiller, non seulement à l’Arioste, mais encore au bon Ovide: sa facilité & ses inventions qui m’ont ravy autres-fois, à peine m’entre- tiennent elles à cête heure” [this heavy old soul of mine no longer lets itself be tickled, not merely by Ariosto, but even by the good Ovid: his facility and inventions, which once enchanted me, hardly entertain me at all now] (II: 10, 410a, DM 102; 298). His taste in reading changes with age, in other words, as the title of the matching chapter asserts: “Toutes choses ont leur saison.”

11. Doubly Cruel

“De la cruauté” [Of cruelty] (II: 11) and “Couardise mere de la cruauté” [Cowardice, the mother of cruelty] (II: 27)

Beyond displaying the same key word in their titles, these chapters feature a pair of nearly identical sentences: “Quant à moy en la justice mesme tout ce qui est au dela de la mort simple me semble pure cruauté” [As for me, even in justice, all that is beyond plain death seems to me pure cruelty] (II: 11, 431a, DM 144; 314) and “Tout ce qui est au dela de la mort simple, me semble pure cruauté” [All that is beyond plain death seems to me pure cruelty] (II: 27, 700a, DM 511; 530).16 In both passages (that is, in both chapters) Montaigne goes on to express concern for the state of the souls of those subjected to an execution that goes beyond plain death, and who should not be driven to despair: “nous . . . devrions avoir respect d’en envoyer les ames en bon estat, ce qui ne se peut, les ayant agitées & desesperées par tourmens insoportables” [we ought to have some concern about sending souls away in a good state; which cannot happen when we have agitated them and made them desperate by unbearable tortures] (II: 11, 431a, DM 145; 314*); “je ne sçay ce pendant si nous les jetton au desespoir. Car en quel estat peut estre l’ame d’un homme attendant vintquatre heures la mort brisé sur une rouë . . . ?” [I do not know but that we meanwhile drive them to despair. For what can be the state of a man’s soul

16. Pierre Villey notes the resemblance in a note on the second passage: “Characteristic sentence that we have read already in essay II: 11” (700n). But he doesn’t say what it is characteristic of—the insistent doubling of words and phrases in symmetrically connected chapters.
who is waiting twenty-four hours for death broken on a wheel . . . ?] (II: 27, 701a, DM 511; 530).

In looking for common ground as we have with previous chapter pairs, this time it might seem we find no resistance to overcome, no opportunity to exercise what Montaigne at the outset of one of these chapters calls “La vaillance (de qui c’est l’effet de s’exercer seulement contre la resistance)” [Valor (which acts only to exert itself against resistance)] (II: 27, 693a, DM 507; 524*) and near the beginning of the other he calls virtue: “il semble que le nom de la vertu presupose de la difficulté du combat & du contraste: & qu’elle ne peut estre sans partie” [it seems that the name of virtue presupposes difficulty and contrast, and that it cannot be without an opponent] (II: 11, 422a, DM 127; 306–7*). In a telling post-1588 alteration, Montaigne changed “estre” to “s’exercer,” so that those last words would become “et qu’elle ne peut s’exercer sans partie” [and that it cannot exert itself without opposition]. It seems more than likely that he made this change to complete the parallel with the equivalent passage in the companion chapter: “La vaillance (de qui c’est l’effect de s’exercer seulement contre la resistence).” Nowhere else does the infinitive s’exercer appear in a context in which something is potentially exerted against anything. In the passage from II: 11, there is no “partie” for it to exert itself against; in II: 27, it can only exert itself if there is “resistance.”

Furthermore, nowhere else does “exercer” (as either pronominal or non-pronominal infinitive) appear with “contre” [against] than in this passage from II: 27—and in another passage from II: 11: “Il faut exercer ces inhumains excez contre l’escorce, non contre le vif” [These inhuman excesses should be exercised against the skin, not against the living core] (II: 11, 432b; 315). These instances of [s’]exercer (whether we consider II: 11’s “s’exercer sans partie” in conjunction with II: 27’s “s’exercer . . . contre” or the latter with II: 11’s “exercer . . . contre”) “exert themselves” [s’exercerent], self-referentially, “against” [contre] each other alone, for they have no counterparts but themselves.

Although Montaigne talks about cruelty in both chapters, he arrives at the topic in different ways. In II: 27 it is announced in the very first sentence: “J’ay souvent oui dire, que la coüardise est mere de cruauté” [I have often heard it said that cowardice is the mother of cruelty] (II: 27, 693a, DM 507; 523). But in II: 11 it is not until past the mid-point (on the eighth of fourteen pages in the Villé edition, the sixteenth of twenty-five in 1580) that cruelty makes its first appearance apart from the title: “Je hay entre autres vices cruellement la cruauté, & par nature & par jugement, comme l’extreme de tous les vices” [Among other vices, I cruelly hate cruelty, both by
nature and by judgment, as the extreme of all vices] (II: 11, 429a, DM 141; 313). Up until this point in II: 11 Montaigne had been consistently speaking about how souls like his give only the semblance of virtue, since they are not subject to temptations that must be mastered. “Je ne me suis mis en grand effort pour brider les desirs dequoy je me suis trouvé pressé. Ma vertu c’est une vertu, ou innocence, pour mieux dire, accidentale & fortuite” [I have not put myself to great effort to curb the desires by which I have found myself pressed. My virtue is a virtue, or I should say an innocence, that is accidental and fortuitous] (II: 11, 427a, DM 137–38; 311). Because he comes by it naturally, his aversion to cruelty, for example, is no virtue.

In a strange and striking opposition, while Montaigne in II: 11 has an aversion to cruelty because of his own “mollesse” [softness]—“Je hay cruellement la cruauté . . . jusques à telle mollesse que je ne voy pas égorger un poulet sans desplaisir, & ois impatiemment gemir un lievre sous les dens des chiens: quoy que ce soit un plaisir violent que la chasse” [I hate cruelly . . . to such a point of softness that I cannot see a chicken’s neck cut without distress and I cannot bear to hear a dying hare groan beneath the dogs’ teeth, although the chase is a violent pleasure] (II: 11, 429a, DM 141; 313*)—in a 1588 addition to II: 27 he says that men characterized by “mollesse” have a propensity to cruelty!

Et ay par experience apperçeu que cette aigreur et aspreté de courage mali-
tieux et inhumain s’accompaigne coustumierement de mollesse feminine.
J’en ay veu des plus cruel, sujets à pleurer aisément et pour des causes frivoles. Alexandre, tyran de Phéres, ne pouvoit souffrir d’ouyr au theatre le jeu des tragedies, de peur que ses citoyens ne le vissent gemir aus malheurs de Hecuba et d’Andromache, luy qui, sans pitié faisoit cruellement meurttrir tant de gens tous les jours.

[And I have found by experience that the bitterness and hardness of a malicious and inhuman heart are usually accompanied by feminine softness. I have observed that some of the most cruel are subject to weeping easily and for frivolous reasons. Alexander, tyrant of Phéres, could not bear to hear tragedies played in the theater for fear that his citizens might see him groaning at the misfortunes of Hecuba and Andromache, he who, without pity, had so many people cruelly murdered every day.] (II: 27, 693b; 523–24*)

Just as Montaigne cannot stand to see a chicken slaughtered nor to hear the groan (“& ois impatiemment gemir”) of the dying hare, the tyrant Alexander could not bear to see and hear (“ne pouvoit souffrir d’ouyr”) the suffer-
ings of fictional characters on the stage, for fear his subjects would see him groan [gemir]. Montaigne hates cruelty cruelly [cruellement]; the tyrant cruelly [cruellement] put people to death every day. These lexemes (cruauté / cruel / cruellement, ouîr, gémir) appear together in no other chapter.

It is cowardly camp-followers who are cruel, not the brave. Valor acts only to overcome resistance and therefore

s’arreste à voir l’ennemi à sa merci: mais la lascheté pour dire qu’elle est aussi de la feste, n’ayant peu se meslier à ce premier rolle prend pour sa part le second, du massacre & du sang. Les meurtres des victoires se font ordinairement par le peuple & par les officiers du bagage: & ce qui fait voir tant de cruautés inouies aux guerres populaires, c’est que cete canaille de vulgaire s’aguerit & se gendarme à s’ensanglanter jusques aus coudes & à deschiqueter un corps à ses piedz, n’ayant ressentiment de null’autre vaillance. Comme les chiens coûards, qui deschirent en la maison & mordent les peaus des bestes sauvages, qu’ilz n’ont osé attaquer aux champs.

[stops when it sees the enemy at its mercy. But cowardice, in order to say that it is also in the game, having been unable to take part in this first act, takes as its part the second, that of massacre and bloodshed. The murders in victories are usually done by the mob and the baggage officers. And what causes so many unheard-of cruelties in wars in which the people take part is that that beastly rabble tries to be warlike and brave by ripping up a body at their feet and bloodying themselves up to their elbows, having no sense of any other kind of valor. Like cowardly dogs, that in the house tear and bite the skins of wild beasts that they did not dare attack in the fields.] (II: 27, 693–94a, DM 507–8; 524*)

In a 1588 addition to the matching chapter, Montaigne inserted a counterpart to what those dogs do: Artaxerxes softened the harshness of Persia’s ancient laws by ordaining that the lords who had failed in their charge, “au lieu qu’on les souloit foîter, fussent despouillés, et leurs vestements foîtes pour eux” [instead of being whipped, as was the custom, should be stripped, and their clothes whipped in their place] (II: 11, 432b; 315). As dogs took out their aggressions on the animals’ skins (skins that could be turned into clothing), Artaxerxes whipped clothes instead of their owners. In a post-1588 addition to II: 27, Montaigne found an equivalent to match this painless whipping: Aristotle, upon hearing that someone had spoken ill of him, said “Qu’il face plus . . . qu’il me fouêtte, pourveu que je n’y soy pas” [Let him do more . . . let him whip me, provided I am not there] (II: 27, 695c; 525).
In another late addition, he inserts into II: 11 a subtle allusion to the baggage officers and rabble in II: 27 who display “la lascheté pour dire qu’elle est aussi de la feste” [the cowardice that wants to say it is also in the game] and consequently behave like dogs (the dogs who attack the skins of beasts they were afraid of confronting when alive), and that do so at an inappropriate time (when the battle is over): “Je ne creins point à dire la tendresse de ma nature si puerile que ne je puis pas bien refuser à mon chien la feste qu’il m’offre hors de saison ou qu’il me demande” [I am not afraid to admit that my nature is so tender, so childish, that I cannot well refuse my dog the play he offers me or asks of me outside the proper time] (II: 11, 435c; 318).

There is softness in both instances (the mollesse of the cruel, whether they be tyrants like Alexander of Pheres or the post-battle crowd in one passage, and Montaigne’s childishly tender nature in the other), as well as the untimely (after the battle is already decided in one case, “hors de saison” in the other) demand for “la feste.” Here as in so many other instances Montaigne takes elements from a story or a discussion on one chapter and rearranges them in the matching one, often with a reversal: all of these dogs demand a “feste,” those in II: 27 because of their softness, the one in II: 11 because of Montaigne’s, whose softness is elsewhere in that chapter called by the same name as that of the rabble and the dogs in II: 27, “mollesse.”

12. Opposable Thumbs

“Apoloie de Raimond Sebond” [Apology for Raymond Sebond] (II: 12) and “Des pouces” [Of thumbs] (II: 26)

Of all the chapter pairings, this seems the most unlikely. Eventually running to more than 60,000 words, “Apoloie de Raimond Sebond” is a book-length disquisition on the limits of human reason; “Des pouces” focuses its fewer than 300 words on thumbs. Yet that very disparity brings them together, for as II: 12 is the longest chapter in the Book Two, II: 26 is the shortest—extremes that, as we will see, touch.

We can rest assured Montaigne has something up his sleeve when we discover that in all editions published in his lifetime the only other thumbs to be found in all the Essays show up—you guessed it—in the “Apoloie”: “Il ne faut que sçavoir que le lieu de Mars loge au milieu du triangle de la main, celuy de Venus au pouce & de Mercure au petit doigt” [A man need only know that the seat of Mars is located in the middle of the triangle of the hand, that of Venus on the thumb, that of Mercury on the little finger]
The context for this is palm reading influenced by astrology, which Montaigne dismisses as yet another instance of human folly. But that the thumb is the seat of Venus is not so easily dismissed, for he shows how sexy it can be in “Des pouces”: “Les Grecz l’appellent αντι-χειρ, comme qui dirait une autre main. Et il semble que parfois les Latins les prennent aussi en ce sens de main entiere. Sed nec vocibus excitata blandis / Molli pollice nec rogata surgit” [The Greeks call it αντιχειρ, as though to say “another hand.” And it seems that sometimes the Latins also take it in the sense of the entire hand: “Neither sweet words of persuasion nor the help of her voluptuous thumb can get it erect”] (II: 26, 691a, DM 507–8; 523*). These two erotic thumbs (one of which may be a metonym for a hand) were spotted by Fausta Garavini, though without reference to the structural connection that secretly links these chapters. She calls the chapter on thumbs “perhaps the most disconcerting” of all the chapters, “an absolutely opaque text, that seems to reveal no reason for why Montaigne decided to discuss this topic” (105). Garavini notes as well that it disproves Villey’s theory that the 1580 edition was imperfect but perfectible as Montaigne added more revealing comments about himself in subsequent editions, for he adds none to this chapter. For her, “this text seems to enclose the knot of something unsaid” (108), some unspeakable psychic phantasm, because thumbs for Montaigne are a stand-in for the penis. After quoting the following passage—

Tacitus recite que parmy certains rois barbares, pour faire une obligation asseurée, leur maniere estoit de joindre estroitement leurs mains droites l’une à l’autre & s’entrelasser les pouces: & quand à force de les presser le sang en estoit monté au bout, ils les blessoient de quelque legiere pointe & puis se les entresucçoint.

[Tacitus reports that among certain barbarian kings, to make an obligation binding, the custom was to join their right hands tightly together and to interlace their thumbs; and when by dint of pressing them the blood had risen to the tips, they pricked them lightly and then sucked each other’s blood.] (II: 26, 691a, DM 505; 523*)

—she comments: “The pierced thumb and the blood that comes out of it are here metaphors for the engorged member and ejaculation” (107). I would
go even farther, and say that the whole scene suggests mutual fellatio—not in Tacitus’ text, but in Montaigne’s quoting it just before quoting Martial’s epigram about the thumb’s (or hand’s) failure to bring about an erection.

But there is something else going on in “Des pouces.” As in other chapter pairs, here too there emerge a number of allusions passing from one chapter to the other and they are not all sexual. The passage about thumb-sucking kings includes two: (1) The only other instance of sucking in the Essays (apart from a post-1588 substitution of “sucert” [suck] for “espuisent” [exhaust] in Book Three) appears in the “Apologie”: “L’humeur que succe la racine d’un arbre, elle se fait tronc, feuille et fruit” [The moisture that the root of a tree sucks up becomes trunk, leaf, and fruit] (II: 12, 599a, DM 388; 453). (2) What barbarian kings did to their thumbs before they pierced and sucked them—“s’entrelisser les pouces” [to interlace their thumbs]—happens to fingers in the “Apologie”: “À manier une balle d’arquebuse soub le second doigt, celuy du milieu estant entrelasé par dessus, il faut extrémement se contraindre, pour advouer qu’il n’y en ait qu’une, tant le sens nous en represente deux” [When rolling a harquebus bullet under the forefinger, the middle finger being entwined above it, we have to force ourselves hard to admit that there is only one, so strongly does our sense represent two to us] (II: 12, 592a, DM 376; 448*). Entwined fingers, entwined thumbs: this only happens in II: 12 and II: 26, where enough other entrelassements occur that it seems to be a running theme:

Aux spectacles de Rome il se voyoit ordinairement des elephans dressez à se mouvoir & dancer au son de la voix des dances à plusieurs entrelasseures, coupures & diverses cadances tres-difficiles à apprendre. Il s’en est veu, qui en leur privé rememoroient leur leçon & s’exerçoient par soin & par estude pour n’estre tancez & batus de leurs maistres.

[In the spectacles in Rome it was quite usual to see elephants trained to move and dance, to the sound of the human voice, dances with many interlacing movements, changes of step and cadenzas, all very hard to learn. Some of them have been seen in private going over their lesson and practicing with care and study, so as not to be scolded and beaten by their masters.] (II: 12, 465a, DM 195; 341*)

19. In “De la vanité”: “s’il advenoit, comme disent aucuns jardiniers, que les roses et violettes naissent plus odoriferantes pres des aulx et des oignons, d’autant qu’ils espuisent et tirent à eux ce qu’il y a de mauvaise odeur en la terre” [if it happened to be true, as some gardeners say, that roses and violets spring up more fragrant near garlic and onions, because these exhaust and draw to themselves whatever there is that smells bad in the ground] (III: 9, 972b, DM 418; 742*).
These entrelasseures were evidence of the surprising intelligence of animals; so too are those from which halcyons build their floating nests (and even more so, since the elephants were taught their dances but the birds construct their nests without human help):

Mais nulle suffisance n’a encore peu attaindre à la connaissance de cete merveilleuse fabrique, de quoy l’halcyon compose le nid pour ses petitz & en deviner la matiere. Plutarque qui en a veu & manié plusieurs, pense que ce soit des arestes de quelque poisson qu’elle conjoint et lie ensemble, les entrelassant les unes de long, les autres de travers, & adjoissant des courbes & des arrondissemens, tellement qu’en fin elle en forme un vaisseau rond prest à voguer.

[But no cleverness has yet been able to attain the knowledge of the marvelous workmanship by which the halcyon builds the nest for her young, and to guess the material of it. Plutarch, who saw and handled several of them, thinks that they are the bones of some fish that she joins and binds together, interlacing them, some lengthwise, the others crosswise, and adding ribs and hoops so that at last it forms a round vessel ready to float.] (II: 12, 480–81a, DM 228–29; 354*)

Montaigne added yet another to the series at some point after 1588, the “entrelasemens des corps celestes” [interlacings of the heavenly bodies] (II: 12, 536c; 400), bringing the number to four.

There are entrelasseures elsewhere in the Essays. Curiously, none of them involve material objects (the elephants themselves in their dances, fish bones in halcyons’ nests, heavenly bodies, fingers—and thumbs, in “Des pouces”), but instead are composed entirely of words: “l’imposture des mots captieusement entrelassez” [the imposture of words captiously interlaced] (I: 25, 143a; 105); “On tient quatre ou cinq ans à entendre les mots et les coudre en clauses . . . et autres cinq . . . à les scavor brefvement mesler et entrelasser de quelque subtile façon” [Schoolmasters keep us for four or five years learning to understand words and stitch them into sentences . . . another five . . . learning how to mix and interweave them briefly in some subtle way] (I: 26, 168a; 124–25*); “cette implication et entrelasse de language” [this complication and interlacing of language] (III: 8, 927b; 707); “sans l’entrelasser de paroles” [without interlacing it with words] (III: 9, 995b; 761*). Montaigne’s consistency in making the interlacings outside of II: 12 / II: 26 consist of words, by contrast to those within that intratext, suggests he knew what he was doing, which has the effect of tightening the link between the entrelasse-
ment going on in “Des pouces” and those taking place in the “Apologie.” Of these the most striking is the entwining of fingers that not only matches that other entwining of digits in II: 26 but by creating the illusion of two from one uncannily replicates its own duplication.

It is yet more evidence that Montaigne distributes certain words and expressions with extreme care, so that they create a hidden network of allusions; those of particular interest to us appear in symmetrically-related chapters. Here is another instance: “Les medecins disent que les pouces sont les maîtres doig[t]s de la main, & que leur etymologie Latine vient de pollere, qui signifie exceller sur les autres” [The doctors say that the thumbs are the master fingers of the hand and that their etymology in Latin is from pollere, which means to excel over the others] (II: 26, 691a, DM 505–06; 523*). The last six words disappeared in a post-1588 alteration, but until then—which is to say in all editions published in Montaigne’s lifetime—they found a unique echo in a passage in the “Apologie” where Montaigne makes fun of the philosophers who said that Ulysses on Circe’s island would have done better to drink the cup of folly than to allow himself to be changed into a beast: “Ce n’est donc plus par la raison, par le discours & par l’ame que nous excollons sur les bestes? c’est par nostre beauté” [Then it is no longer by our reason, our intelligence, and our soul that we excel over the beasts? It is by our beauty] (II: 12, 486a, DM 236; 358*). The echoing expression composed of the verb exceller + “sur les” appears nowhere else. It suggests that the superiority of thumbs to fingers parallels the superiority of man over the other animals, although in a typical Montaignian reversal man’s alleged superiority is undercut throughout the “Apologie” while the thumb’s is stoutly maintained in “Des pouces.”

The same passage in “Des pouces” is the site of another unique echo, the one formed by “pollere” with its only other appearance in the Essays, in the “Apologie”:

Voilà de nostre siecle une grandeur infinie de terre ferme, . . . une partie esgale à peu prez en grandeur à celle que nous cognoissons, qui vient d’estre descouverte. Les Geographes d’à cete heure ne faillent pas d’asseurer que meshuy tout est trouvé & que tout est veu, Nam quod adest praesto placet, & pollere videtur.

[Behold in our century an infinite extent of terra firma, . . . a portion nearly equal in size to the one we know, which has just been discovered. The geographers of the present time do not fail to assure us that now all is discovered and all is seen, “For what is at hand pleases, and seems to be best.”] (II: 12, 572a, DM 351; 430*)
It was perhaps not by chance that Montaigne chose to plant the “pollere” that points to the other “pollere” (in II: 26) here, in an evocation of what in “Des cannibales” he calls “cet autre monde qui a esté descouvert” [that other world which has been discovered] (I: 31, 203a; 150), for in “Des pouces” we have seen him characterize the thumb as “une autre main” [another hand]. As one “pollere” points to the other, the other world points to the other hand. The new world is “esgale à peu prez en grandeur” [nearly equal in size] to the one we know, which isn’t true of the chapters when we count their pages, but is true of them when we recognize that each occupies an equal place in the collection of symmetrical pairs, as well as in the list of chapters without regard to their symmetry. The discoveries we are making about them help assuage the dismay we might feel that as puny and seemingly silly a chapter as “Des pouces” should be set up to counterbalance as important and imposing a chapter as the “Apologie.”

Montaigne was fully aware of the scandalous inequality of their length. He was in on the joke (he should have been, since it was his). That’s why he calls the thumb “une autre main,” and claims its etymology means to excel over the others (over the other fingers, apparently). Thumbs have the power of life and death, as he goes on in “Des pouces” to show when he alludes to audiences at gladiatorial contests using their thumbs to decide the fate of the combatants. In the only other appearance of a thumb in the *Essays*, in a post-1588 addition to “De l’yvronnerie,” he brags about his father’s ability to “faire le tour de la table sur son pouce” [to do a turn over the table on his thumb] (II: 2, 344c; 248)—a paternal thumb strong enough to take the place of a hand. In balancing “Des pouces” against the “Apologie” (itself a defense, ostensibly, of the theological treatise by Sebond his father had set him the task of translating), Montaigne duplicates in letters the feat his father performed in reality, showing the unexpected power of a thumb to bear weight.

More than that, the “Apologie” is in fact about a hand, God’s:

Aussi n’est il pas croyable que toute cête machine n’ayt quelques marques empreintes de la main de ce grand architecte. . . . Il a laissé en ces haults ouvrages le caractere de sa divinité: & ne tient qu’à nostre imbecillité que

20. Contrary to popular opinion today, Montaigne reports that thumbs up meant death and thumbs down life. Anthony Corbeill in a recent survey of Latin and other texts on the subject (“Thumbs in Ancient Rome: ‘Pollex’ as Index,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 42 [1997]: 1–21), says that “Des pouces” is “The only discussion I have found that corresponds with my own conclusions” (1n2).
 nous ne le puissions descouvrir. . . . Sebond s’est travaillé à ce digne estude
& nous monstre comment il n’est nulle piece du monde, qui desmante son
facteur.

[It is not credible that this whole machine should not have on it some
marks imprinted by the hand of this great architect. . . . He has left the
stamp of his divinity on these lofty works, and it is only because of our
imbecility that we cannot discover it. . . . Sebond has labored at this worthy
study, and shows us how there is no part of the world that belies its maker.]
(II: 12, 446–47a, DM 163–64; 326)

“Des pouces” opposes itself to the “Apologie” as the thumb to the hand, an
equal contest, if we can believe Montaigne. But at the same time the Essays
are Montaigne’s creation, as the world is God’s, and just as we can see God’s
handprint in the latter we can see Montaigne’s thumbprint in the former,
particularly in the intratext these two chapters form. We have seen that when
he wrote one he was thinking of, and was writing or rewriting, the other.
We have seen that in the beginning—in 1580, and up until some point
after 1588—the only thumbs in French to be found in the Essays were in II:
12 and II: 26, prominently displayed in the latter, tucked away almost out
of sight in the huge mass of out of the former but we would have only our
imbecility to blame if we could not discover it. Not only that, but at first
(from 1580 to 1588) the only other Latin thumb besides those in II: 26
(“Molli pollice nec rogata,” “laudabit pollice ludum,” “converso pollice vulgi”)
was this one in II: 12:

Ce que ma force ne peut descouvrir, je ne laisse pas de le sonder & essayer:
& en retastant & pestrissant cete nouvelle materie, la remuant & l’eschau-
fant j’ouvre à celuy, qui me suit, quelque facilite pour en jouir plus à son
ayse, & la luy rendz plus souple, & plus maniable. Ut hymettia sole / Cera
remollescit, tractataque pollice, / multas / Vertitur in facies, ipsoque fit uti-
lis usu.

[I do not leave off sounding and testing what my powers cannot discover;
and by handling again and kneading this new material, stirring it and heat-
ing it, I open up to whoever follows me some facility to enjoy it more at his
ease, and make it more supple and manageable for him: “As Hymettian wax
grows softer in the sun, / Takes many shapes when molded by the thumb,
/ And thus by usage useful does become.”] (II: 12, 560a, DM 330; 421)
In a self-naming way, this *pollice* bears Montaigne’s thumbprint, as he worked and reworked the “Apologie” to make it a worthy partner for “Des pouces,” handling and kneading the text so that some future reader—“qui me suit” [who follows me]—could find that *pollice*, and discern its importance. Significantly, this passage does not occur in isolation but is part of the same discussion in which the other thumb, the one in French (the seat “de Venus au pouce” [of Venus on the thumb]), appeared—on the same page in the Villey edition (560a). The argument goes thus: palmistry is bunk; human knowledge has certain defined limits, but progress is possible as one seeker may succeed where another has failed; the arts and sciences do not come out fully formed from a mold but are worked and reworked as a bear licks her cubs into shape, as in my own case I handle and knead material in such a way that someone coming after me (who follows me in both senses: comes after and understands what I am up to) will find it more useful, like Hymettan wax molded by the thumb.

But as Mary McKinley reminds us,21 the passage he quotes (“Ut hymet-tia . . .”) comes from Ovid’s version of the story of Pygmalion, from which Montaigne had quoted lines that immediately precede this passage at the conclusion to “De l’affection des peres aux enfans” in the context of an author’s paternal affection for the book that is his child:

Pygmalion, qui, ayant basty une statue de femme de beauté singuliere, il devint si éperdument espris de l’amour forcené de ce sien ouvrage, qu’il falut qu’en faveur de sa rage les dieux la luy vivifiassent, Tentatum mollescit ebur, positóque rigore / Subsedit digitis.

[Pygmalion, who after building a statue of a woman of singular beauty, became so madly and frantically smitten with love of his work that the gods, for the sake of his passion, had to bring it to life for him: “Its hardness gone, the ivory softens, yields / Beneath his fingers.”] (II: 8, 402a; 293)

Thus the material he molds with his thumb really is the book itself, the text in which thumbs self-referentially appear in symmetrically placed chapters. He invites “celuy, qui me suit” to imitate Pygmalion and to place his own thumbs on the mold that he has softened for us. But part of his softening is to have left for his reader to find and apply to this passage in II: 12 the literal

thumbs he has placed in the matching chapter, II: 26. Even here, when he
seems particularly open to letting his readers bring his text to completion, he
is already there before us; he has already done that completing work. It just
remains for his readers to discover it.

13. Eyes Wide Shut

“De juger de la mort d’autrui” [Of judging someone else’s
death] (II: 13) and “De ne contrefaire le malade” [Of not pre-
tending to be sick] (II: 25)

It is hard to tell if someone is really being courageous when confronted by
his imminent demise, according to Montaigne, because so many in that situ-
ation lull themselves into a false sense of security. Few with a terminal illness
really believe they will die. We think of others who have been just as sick but
haven’t died, and imagine that God can always pull off a miracle. We think
of everything in relation to ourselves, and that the universe would be affected
by our demise and has compassion for us.

D’autant que nostre veüe alterée se represente les choses de mesmes, & nous
est advis qu’elles luy faillent à mesure qu’elle leur faut: comme ceux qui
voyagent en mer, ausquels il semble que les montaignes, les campagnes, les
villes, le ciel & la terre aille mesme bransle, & quant & quant eus. D’ou il
s’ensuit que nous estimons grande chose nostre mort, & qui ne se passe pas
si aisément ny sans solenne consultation des astres.

[because our altered vision represents things to itself as being likewise altered
and we think they are failing it in proportion as it is failing them, like trav-
velers at sea, for whom mountains, countryside, cities, heaven, and earth
move right along with them and at the same pace. And so it follows that
we reckon our death to be a great event, something which does not happen
lightly nor without solemn consultations among the heavenly bodies.]22 (II:
13, 605–6a, DM 398–99; 458*)

22. I adopt Screech’s translation of the last sentence (685). Unlike Frame, who renders the last
words as “not without solemn consultation of the stars,” Screech understands “des” in “consultation des
astres” to be a subjective, not an objective, genitive. Montaigne’s post-1588 addition at this point of
Seneca’s words “tot circa unum caput tumultuantes deos” [so many gods in an uproar about one single
head] makes it all the more likely that he meant the stars consulting among themselves, as the gods were
themselves in tumult.
Such people are unaware of the danger they are in. Pretending to be healthier than they are, they find their counterpart in the counterpart chapter in people who pretend to be sick. Those in II: 13 counterfeit health; those in II: 25 counterfeit illness. Not only do the terminally ill in II: 13 have false hopes of survival, but they also have an altered vision of the universe that leads them to think that unless the stars are concerned by their demise they aren’t going to die. It is a question of seeing clearly or not, a theme to which Montaigne will return a little later in II: 13 when he writes of those facing a violent death:

Nul ne se peut dire être resolu à la mort . . . qui ne peut la soutenir les yeux ouvers. Ceux qu’on voit aux supplices courir à leur fin . . . ne le font pas de vraie resolution, ils se veulent oster le temps de la considerer . . . comme ceux qui se jetent dans les dangiers, comme dans la mer à yeux clos.

[No man can be said to be resolute in death . . . who cannot sustain it with open eyes. Those whom we see at executions running to meet their end . . . do not do so out of resolution; they want to deprive themselves of the time to consider it . . . like those who plunge into dangers, as into the sea, with their eyes closed.] (II: 13, 608a, DM 403; 460–61*)

This “veüe alterée,” these “yeux ouvers” and these “yeux clos”—these variations on impaired vision find their counterpart in II: 25, for there Montaigne gives us six instances of impaired vision (four of which are voluntary and two involuntary), and four out of the six examples he provides of counterfeiting illness involve the eyes. Here they all are in the order in which they appear:

1. Martial tells of a man who in order to avoid court functions pretended to suffer from gout. To be more convincing, he oiled and wrapped his legs, and completely imitated the behavior and countenance of a gouty man. In the end, fortune did him the favor of giving him the condition for real.
2. Appian tells of a man fleeing the Roman triumvirs who to disguise himself put a patch on one eye, but when it was safe to remove it discovered he had become blind in that eye.
3. Reading in Froissart about the vow some young Englishmen made to keep their left eye covered until they had accomplished some feat of arms against the French, Montaigne amuses himself with the thought that they might have found themselves “tous éborgnés” [all
one-eyed] (II: 25, 689a, DM 502–3; 521) when they got back home to the sweethearts to whom they had made that vow.

4.–6. “Les meres ont raison de tancer leurs enfans, quand ilz contrefont les borgnes, les boiteux & les bicles & tels autres defautz de la personne” [Mothers are right to scold their children when they imitate one-eyed, lame, and cross-eyed people, and other such personal defects] (II: 25, 689a, DM 503; 521). For young bodies can acquire a bad twist by such behavior; besides, fortune loves to take us at our word and I have heard tell of many who have become sick after faking an illness.

The “tels autres defautz” being too vague to put into either category, this amounts to two counterfeit leg ailments (the “gouteux” and the “boiteux”) vs. four counterfeit eye ailments (three “borgnes” and one allusion to “bicles”). But so intent is Montaigne on focusing on instances of altered vision that he introduces two more instances of blindness that have nothing to do with counterfeiting a malady, even though that is what the chapter is supposed to be about. Here is the first:

Mais alongeons ce chapitre & le bigarrons d’une autre piece à propos de la cecité. Pline conte d’un qui songeant estre aveugle en dormant s’en trouva l’endemain sans aucune maladie precedente. La force de l’imagination peut bien ayder à cela, comme j’ay dit ailleurs, & semble que Pline soit de cet advis. Mais il est plus vray-ssemblable, que les mouvemens que le corps sen-toit au dedens, desquels les medecins trouveront s’il veulent la cause, qui luy ostoient la veüe, furent occasion du songe.

[But let us lengthen this chapter and variegate it with another piece apropos of blindness. Pliny tells of a man who, dreaming in his sleep that he was blind, found himself so the next day, without any previous illness. The power of imagination can indeed contribute to such results, as I have said elsewhere, and Pliny seems to be of this opinion. But it is more likely that the movements which the body felt within, of which the doctors may find out the cause, if they will, and which deprived him of his sight, were the occasion of the dream.] (II: 25, 689a, DM 503)

So it is not even a case of involuntarily counterfeiting blindness, nor of the thought (the dream) bringing about the change in the body, but of the ailment creating the thought.

The other instance of blindness that he tacks on to the chapter, unlike this one, has no connection at all to the relation between imagination and
illness, mind and body (a relation that does have some relevance to faking illness: one is aware of the malady one is counterfeiting). But it has a very strong connection to what he says in II: 13 about how “nostre veüe alterée se represente les choses de mesmes, & nous est avis qu’elles luy faillent à mesure qu’elle leur faut” [our altered vision represents things to itself as being likewise altered and we think they are failing it in proportion as it is failing them]:

Adjoutons encore un’histoire voisine de ce propos, que Seneque recite en l’une de ses lettres. Tu sçais, dit il, . . . que Harpaste la folle de ma femme est demeurée chez moy pour charge hereditaire. . . . Ceste folle a subitement perdu la veüe. Je te recite chose estrange, mais veritable. Elle ne sent point qu’elle soit aveugle, & presse incessamment son gouverneur de l’en emmener, par ce qu’elle dict que ma maison est obscure.

[Let us add one more story close to this subject, which Seneca tells in one of his letters. “You know,” he says, . . . ”that Harpaste, my wife’s fool, has stayed at my house as a hereditary charge. . . . This fool has suddenly lost her sight. I am telling you something strange, but true. She does not realize that she is blind, and constantly urges her keeper to take her out, because she says my house is dark.”] (II: 25, 689a, DM 504; 522)

Harpaste’s attitude toward her blindness is about as good an illustration one could imagine of how our “veüe alterée” makes us think the things around us are failing our sight, as in her case they are making themselves invisible to her eyes (making her think there is not enough light in the house), and do so in proportion to our altered vision failing in its duty to represent those things around us. Our vision, like hers, is failing. We project our own failing onto our surroundings, as boat passengers project their own movement onto the shore. Seneca draws a moral from Harpaste’s behavior: “Ce que nous rions en elle, je te prie croire qu’il advient à chacun de nous: nul ne connoit estre avarice, nul convoiteux. Encore les aveugles demandent un guide, nous nous fourvoions de nous mesme” [What we laugh at in her, I pray you to believe happens to each one of us: no one knows that he is avaricious or covetous. The blind at least ask for a guide; we go astray of our own accord] (II: 25, 689a, DM 504; 522). While Seneca, as Montaigne paraphrases him, draws from Harpaste’s unawareness of her condition a lesson about our blindness to our moral shortcomings, the essayist uses Seneca’s words for his own purposes, making them echo what he writes in the other chapter. There, he says that most who are so sick they are going to die refuse to acknowledge that
fact; here, he quotes Seneca speaking of another group of people who don't acknowledge how sick they are either:

Et cela mesme que nous ne sentons pas estre malades nous rend la gueri-
son plus malaisée. Si nous ne commençons de bonne heure à nous penser,
quand aurons nous pourveu à tant de plaies & à tant de maus. Si avons
nous une tres-douce medecine que la philosophie.

[And the very fact that we do not realize that we are sick makes our cure more difficult. If we do not soon begin to tend ourselves, when will we have provided for so many sores and so many maladies? Yet we have a very sweet medicine in philosophy.] (II: 25, 689–90a, DM 504–5; 522)

He means moral sickness, but the parallel with the physical sickness in the other chapter is striking, and surely intentional. All the more so for the fact that in both chapters the unawareness of the seriousness of one's malady (bodily illness in II: 13, moral sickness in II: 25) is due to impaired vision: the “veüe alterée” that prevents those about to die from taking cognizance of that fact, and the way Seneca likens us to “les aveugles” (except that the latter know they need a guide, while we “nous nous fourvoions de nous mesme”).

Montaigne follows his paraphrase of Seneca with these words: “Voila ce que dit Seneque, qui m’a emporté hors de mon propos: mais il y a du profit au change” [That is what Seneca says, which has carried me away from my subject, but there is profit in the change] (II: 25, 690a, DM 505; 522*). The profit is that both Seneca’s story of Harpaste and his commentary on it allow Montaigne to enhance this chapter’s connections to the other, even though it carries him away from the stated topic of the danger of pretending to be ill. Indeed, those of us to whom Seneca refers who do not realize how sick we are come close to counterfeiting health, which is just the opposite of counterfeiting illness—but is precisely what Montaigne accuses the terminally ill in II: 13 of doing.

Consequently, when Montaigne gives a scientific explanation for the blindness that can result from keeping a patch over one’s eye for too long, his words may have a self-referential dimension:

Il est possible que l’action de la veüe s’estoit hebetée, pour avoir été si long
temps sans exercice & que la force vifve s’étoit toute rejetée en l’autre oeil.
Car nous sentons evidemment que l’œil que nous tenons couvert r’envvoie à son compagnon quelque partie de son effect.
[It is possible that the power of sight had been weakened through having been so long without exercise, and that the visual power had wholly transferred itself to the other eye. For we palpably feel that an eye which we keep covered up sends some part of its activity to its companion.] (II: 25, 688a, DM 502; 521*)

In these paired chapters (as in all other paired chapters, but especially these because both focus on impaired vision) it seems that something is communicated in a strange way between them, something like the “force vive” that can pass from one eye to its symmetrical other. Put another way, we need to read the chapters stereoscopically, gazing at two chapters at once, an eye to each, and both properly aligned. As opposed to reading one at a time, as if we were one-eyed (“borgnes”), or to look in two unrelated directions at once, as if we were cross-eyed (“bicles”).

14. Equivalent Equivalents

“How our mind hinders itself” (II: 14) and “Of the greatness of Rome” (II: 24)

Of II: 14 Balsamo et al. have this to say:

This brief chapter . . . is no more than a note a few lines in length, a fragment of an argument on the limits of human knowledge and on the misery of the human condition, propped up by some mathematical paradoxes and a maxim of Pliny’s. Maybe it was a page written in preparation for the Apologie de Raimond de Sebond that Montaigne preserved, though not without modifying some details through successive editions (1629).

Similarly, II: 24 is in their opinion simply a “brief note” (1667). Such are the conclusions to which the limitations of a one-eyed reading would condemn us. Fortunately, there is another way to look at these chapters—namely, to look at them together.

“It is an amusing conception to imagine a mind exactly balanced between two equal desires], Montaigne writes as he begins II: 14.
Car il est indubitable qu’il ne prendra jamais parti, d’autant que l’inclina-
tion & le choix porte inégalité & qui nous logeroit entre la bouteille & le
jambon avec pareille envie de boire & de manger, il n’y aurait sans doute
remede que de mourir de soif & de faim.

[For it is indubitable that it will never decide, since inclination and choice
imply inequality in value; and if we were placed between the bottle and
the ham with an equal appetite for drinking and for eating, there would
doubtless be no solution but to die of thirst and of hunger.] (II: 14, 611a,
DM 407–8; 462)

In reading the previous chapter pair (II: 13 and II: 25) we saw Montaigne
warn us of the danger of being one-eyed when we don’t have to be, and in
a metafictional sense encourage us to read his chapters in twos, to look for
how each is in a hidden way the other’s double. In the current pair (II: 14
and II: 24) we see him once more talking of two things that are alike, though
more obviously so, and of focusing one’s attention simultaneously on both.
But now the danger comes from focusing one’s attention on two things that
are too much alike! Yet that danger is illusory, for there is no such thing as
absolute equality:

Pour pourvoir à cet inconvenient, les Stoiciens quand on leur demande
d’où vient en nostre ame le choix de deux choses indifferentes, & que faict
que d’un grand nombre d’escus nous en prenions plus tost l’un que l’autre
estant tous pareilz & n’y ayant nulle raison qui nous pousse au choix. Ils
repondent que ce mouvement de l’ame est extraordinaire & déreglé venant
en nous d’une impulsion estrangiere, accidentale, & fortuite. Il se pourroit
dire, ce me semble plustost, que nulle chose ne se presente à nous, où il
n’y ait quelque difference, pour legiere qu’elle soit, & que ou à la veüe, ou
à l’atouchement, il y a tousjours quelque choix, qui nous touche & attire,
quoy que ce soit imperceptiblement.

[To provide against this difficulty, the Stoics, when they are asked whence
comes the choice in our soul between two indifferent things and what
makes us take one rather than the other out of a large number of one-crown
pieces when they are all alike and there is no reason which inclines us to
a preference, answer that this movement of the soul is extraordinary and
irregular, coming from an external, accidental and fortuitous impulse in us.
It might rather be said, it seems to me, that nothing presents itself to us in
which there is not some difference, however slight; and that either to the
sight or to the touch, there is always some choice that attracts us, though it
be imperceptibly.] (II: 14, 611a, DM 408, 463*)

As a parallel to this “grand nombre d’escus” of which each coin is the equiva-

cient of every other, Montaigne in the corresponding chapter presents us with

another large number of escus that likewise provide an instance of monetary
equivalence, though in a different way:

Il n’estoit pas nouveau à un simple cytoien Romain, comme estoit lors Cesar,
de disposer des royaumes, car il osta bien au roy Dejotarus le sien pour le
donner à un gentil’homme sien amy de la ville de Pergame nommé Mithri-
dates. Et ceux qui escrivent sa vie enregistrent plusieurs autres royaumes par
luy vendus: & Suetone dit qu’il tira pour un coup du roy Ptoloméus trois
millions six cens mill’escus, qui fut bien pres de luy vendre le sien.

[It was no novelty for a simple Roman citizen, as Caesar then was, to dis-

pose of kingdoms, for indeed he deprived King Deiotarus of his to give it to

to a gentleman of the city of Pergamum, named Mithridates. And those who
write his life record several other kingdoms sold by him; and Suetonius says
that at one stroke he extracted from King Ptolemy three million six hundred
thousand crowns, which was very close to selling him his kingdom.] (II: 24,
686a, DM 500; 520)

As Villey points out, “Such exactions were almost equivalent to the sale of
the kingdom” (686n). Caesar, that is, sold Ptolemy his kingdom back to
him for this genuinely princely sum. This large sum of écus, like the one in
the other chapter, is part of a monetary equivalence, but instead of each écu
being the equivalent of every other as in II: 14, this time the whole sum is
the equivalent of something else. Yet, in an elegant way, one sum of écus in
one chapter is equivalent to the one in the other in that each is an instance
of equivalence.

Chapter II: 24 begins with another equivalence, another case of two
things seeming at first remarkably similar:

Au septiesme livre des épitres familières de Cicero. . . il y en a une qui
s’adresse à Caesar estant lors en la Gaule, en laquelle Cicero redit ces motz,
qui estoient sur la fin d’un’autre lettre, que Caesar luy avoit écrit, Quant à
Marcus Furius, que tu m’as recommandé, je le feray roy de Gaule: & si tu
veux, que j’advance quelque autre de tes amis, envoie le moy.
II. Book Two

[In the seventh book of Cicero’s *Epistulae ad Familiares* (Letters to His Friends), . . . there is one addressed to Caesar, who was then in Gaul, in which Cicero repeats these words, which were at the end of another letter that Caesar had written to him: “As for Marcus Furius, whom you have recommended to me, I will make him king of Gaul; and if you want me to advance some other friend of yours, send him to me.”] (II: 24, 686a, DM 499–500; 519)

Now here, in an intriguing parallel to the hypothetical equality (of hunger and thirst) at the beginning of II: 14, are two absolutely equal things: the words that Caesar first wrote Cicero and their reappearance, word for word, in Cicero’s letter to him. Yet, as Montaigne had predicted in II: 14, no matter how compelling the similarity between two things, there will always be some difference, “pour legiere qu’elle soit” [however slight], for Caesar’s words, when restated by Cicero, convey something rather different from what they first meant. Originally an offer, they are now a claim on that offer, Cicero’s request that Caesar perform what he promised. This instance of two correspondents writing the same words for different reasons parallels what keeps happening in the *Essays*, that the same words turn up in corresponding chapters, as in the case we have just seen of a great sum of écus exemplifying a monetary equivalence in both II: 14 and II: 24.

In a post-1588 addition to II: 24 Montaigne set up another corresponding echo, providing a reply to what he had already written in II: 14 concerning geometrical propositions that contradict common sense, in particular those “qui concluent par la certitude de leurs demonstrations, le contenu plus grand que le contenant, le centre aussi grand que sa circunference” [which conclude by the certainty of their demonstrations that the thing contained is greater than the container, the center as great as the circumference] (II: 14, 611a, DM 409; 463). In the addition to II: 24 he would tell the story of how C. Popilius came to demand of Antiochus, who ruled over Egypt, that he submit to the Roman Empire. “Popilius *circonscrit* la place où il estoit, à tout sa baguette, en luy disant: Ren moy responce que je puisse rapporter au senat, avant que tu partes de ce cercle” [Popilius *circumscribed* the place where he was with his stick, and said: “Give me an answer that I can take back to the Senate before you move out of this circle”] (II: 24, 687c; 520*). Antiochus complied, providing yet another example of a conquered monarch that the Romans left “en la possession de leurs royaumes sous leur autorité : à ce qu’ils eussent des roys mesmes, utilz de la servitude” [in possession of their kingdoms, under their authority, so that they might have even kings as instruments of slavery] (II: 24, 687a, DM 500–501; 520). While the center
of the circle in II: 14 may be as great as its circumference, such is not the case with the one in II: 24, whose circumference is clearly greater than what was inside it, so much so that the line itself of that drawn circumference was enough to prevent Antiochus from stepping out of it. And yet when he consented to become, as other conquered kings had done, Rome’s instrument by slavishly serving Rome in continuing to reign over Egypt he became an example of one of those other seemingly impossible geometrical propositions, that of the contained being greater than its container. For such vanquished but rethroned kings became the vessel of a power greater than their own, parodies of containers lesser than their content.

15. Civil War vs. Civil War

“Que nostre desir s’accroit par la malaisance” [That our desire is increased by difficulty] (II: 15) and “Des mauvais moyens employez à bonne fin” [Of evil means employed to a good end] (II: 23)

Montaigne begins II: 15 by remarking that “Il n’y a nulle raison qui n’en aye une contraire” [There is no reason that does not have its opposite] (II: 15, 612a, DM 409; 463). To provide an example of this, he first cites the ancient saying “Nul bien ne nous peut apporter plaisir, si ce n’est celuy, à la perle duquel nous sommes preparez” [No good can bring us pleasure, unless it is one for whose loss we are prepared], and then contradicts it by observing that “Il se pourroit toutes-fois dire au rebours, que nous serrons & embrassons ce bien d’autant plus ferme, & avecques plus d’affection que nous le voyons nous estre moins seur, & que nous le craignons nous estre osté” [Yet it could be said, on the contrary, that we clutch and embrace this good all the more tightly and with more affection because we see that it is less secure and fear that it may be taken from us] (II: 15, 612a, DM 410; 463*). For our will is sharpened by opposition, as fire is by cold, and there is nothing so distasteful as the satiety that comes from desires too easily met. “Nous defendre quelque chose c’est nous en donner envie: nous l’abandonner tout à faict c’est nous en engendrer mespris : la faute & l’abondance tombent en mesme inconvenient” [To forbid us something is to make us want it. To give it up to us completely is to breed in us contempt for it. Want and abundance fall into the same discomfort] (II: 15, 613–14a, DM 412; 465).

In II: 23 as well, though in a quite different context, abundance can pose problems. Doctors “disent que la perfection de santé trop allegre & vigoreuse,
Il nous la faut essimer & rabatre par art . . . : ils ordonnent pour cela aux Athletes les purgations & les saignées, pour leur soustraire cête *superabundance* de santé” [say that too blithe and vigorous a perfection of health must be artificially reduced and abated for us. . . . Therefore they order purges and bleedings for athletes to draw off this *superabundance* of health] (II: 23, 682a, DM 494; 517*). In II: 15, to have something good in abundance is as bad as not to have it at all; in II: 23, to have something good in abundance (or superabundance) is as bad as to have an abundance of its opposite. Either way, one can have too much of a good thing.

To illustrate his assertion that we value more what we are at risk of losing, he notes that “*Pour tenir l’amour en haleine*” [To keep love in trim] (II: 15, 612a, DM 410, 464*) Lycurgus ordered that married couples in Sparta have sexual relations only in secret, and that it would be as shameful for them to be found together as to be found in bed with someone else. The purpose of this edict is that the added challenge would spice up their love life.

Montaigne uses the same turn of phrase in II: 23 with regard to a similar situation but a quite different context. The Romans fostered wars with some of their enemies “*pour tenir leurs hommes en haleine*, de peur que l’oisiveté mere de corruption ne leur apportat quelque pire inconvenient” [to keep their men in trim, for fear that idleness, mother of corruption, might bring them some worse mischief] (II: 23, 683a, DM 495; 517*). Like Lycurgus, the Romans found that an added, indeed a seemingly unnecessary, challenge had its uses. In 1582 (unusually for that edition) Montaigne made a substantial addition to II: 15 that includes the following passage, in which he clearly intended to set up additional parallels with the lines from II: 23 I have just quoted:

> C’est un effect de la Providence divine de permettre sa saincte Eglise estre agitée, comme nous la voyons, de tant de troubles et d’orages, pour esveiller par ce contraste les ames pies, et les r’avoir de l’oisiveté et du sommeil ou les avoit plongez une si longue tranquillité. Si nous contrepoisons la perte que nous avons faict par le nombre de ceux qui se sont desvoyez, au gain qui nous vient *pour nous estre remis en haleine*, resuscité nostre zele et nos forces à l’occasion de ce combat, je ne sçay si l’utilité ne surmonte point le dommage.

[It is an act of God’s Providence to allow his Holy Church to be, as we can see she now is, shaken by so many disturbances and tempests, in order by this opposition to awaken the souls of the pious and to bring them back from the *idleness* and torpor in which so long a period of calm had
immersed them. If we weigh the loss we have suffered by the numbers of those who have been led into error against the gain which accrues to us from our having been brought back into fighting trim, with our zeal and our strength restored to new life for the battle, I am not sure whether the benefit does not outweigh the loss.] (II: 15, 615a; 466*)

Montaigne here not only reiterates the expression “en haleine” [in fighting trim] but also opposes it to “l’oysiveté” as he had done in II: 23 when he wrote “pour tenir leurs hommes en haleine, de peur que l’oysiveté . . . ne leur apportat quelque pire inconvenient” [to keep their men in trim, for fear that idleness . . . might bring them some worse mischief]. The 1582 insertion adds as well the idea that a civil war (for that is what the religious troubles to which he alludes in fact were) is good for the church—as in II: 23 it is good for the state.

Astonishing as this apology for civil war may be, he makes another one on different grounds in II: 23, finding it less unjust in God’s eyes to wage war against one’s fellow citizens than against an innocent foreign country, and he explicitly refers to the religious civil war to which he would allude in that 1582 insertion to II: 15:

Il y en a plusieurs en ce temps . . . souhaitans que cette emotion chalereuse, qui est parmy nous se peut deriver à quelque guerre voisine, de peur que ces humeurs peccantes, qui dominent pour cete heure nostre corps, si on ne les escoulle ailleurs, maintiennent nostre fiebvre toujours en force, & apportent en fin nostre entiere ruine. Et de vray une guerre estrangiere est un mal bien plus doux que la civile. Mais je ne croy pas que Dieu favorisat une si injuste entreprise, d’offencer & quereler autruy pour nostre commodité. Toutes-fois la foiblesse de nostre condition nous pousse souvent à cete necessité de nous servir de mauvais moiens pour une bonne fin.

[There are many at the present hour . . . wishing that this heated passion that is among us might be deflected into some war with our neighbors, for fear that these peccant humors which dominate our body at the moment, if they are not drained off elsewhere, may keep our fever still at its height and in the end bring on our total ruin. And indeed a foreign war is a much milder evil than a civil war. But I do not believe that God would favor so unjust an enterprise as to injure and pick a quarrel with others for our own convenience.] (II: 23, 683a, DM 496–97; 517–18*)

It is remarkable that Montaigne should be in such apparent contradiction with himself as to say in II: 15 that the French religious civil wars were useful
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(producing greater “utilité” than “dommage”) but in II: 23 that they may bring the country to total ruin. It is especially so where there is such irrefutable evidence that he was quite aware when writing—and rewriting—one chapter of what he was writing or had written in the other. The intensification of the echoing instances of “en haleine” (already present in 1580, intensified in 1582) testifies to that awareness. While it is true that the apparent contradiction may be resolved by pointing out that the church and the nation are not the same and that what may be good for one may not be good for the other, the important thing from our perspective is that here again we have proof that Montaigne wants us to read his chapters in pairs, and that these two, in talking about civil wars but coming to opposite conclusions, seem to be fighting their own civil war.

16. Spreading the News

“De la gloire” [Of glory] (II: 16) and “Des postes” [Of couriers23] (II: 22)

La gloire, in Montaigne’s estimation, is essentially news.24 Like the noise made by the proverbial tree falling in the forest with no one to hear, its existence is

23. This seems to me a more accurate translation than Frame’s “Of riding post” or Screech’s “On riding ‘in post.’” John Florio in his 1611 translation of the Essais (available at www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/montaigne/) renders it as “Of Running Posts, or Couriers,” reflecting the emphasis the chapter places on messengers, which is at least equal to (if not greater than) that placed on riding. In fact the only reference to riding itself apart from the riding that couriers perform is the new opening sentence added in 1588: “Je n’ay pas esté des plus foibles en cet exercice, qui est propre à gens de ma taille, ferme et courte; mais j’en quitte le mestier : il nous essaye trop pour y durer long temps” [I have been not of the weakest in this exercise, which is suited to men of my build, solid and short. But I give up the business; it is too trying to keep it up for long] (II: 22, 680b; 515). That he added this sentence at the beginning of the chapter instead of later may have led some to think that the chapter was going to be about horseback riding instead of the long-distance transmission of messages. But as Marianne S. Meijer suggests (on pp. 113–14 of “‘Des postes’ et ‘Des pouces’: Plaisanteries ou points de repère?,” in Columbia Montaigne Conference Papers, ed. Donald M. Frame and Mary B. McKinley [Lexington, KY: French Forum Publishers, 1981: 105–18]), he may have been alluding in this new first sentence to the sexual sense of “postes,” evident in “Sur des vers de Virgile” when a man suspected of impotence claimed to have made “vingt postes la nuict precedente” [love twenty times the night before] (III: 5, 867b; 659*) with his new bride. Cotgrave in his 1611 dictionary gives two separate entries for postes, of which the first is “A poste, currier, speedie messenger” and the second is “Post, posting, the riding post.” They are two different words, the first a masculine noun, the second a feminine. Montaigne, especially after 1588, may be playing on all three senses, but in any edition what is discussed in the chapter is for the most part message transmission, not all of which is done on horseback. There are also swallows, pigeons, and men carrying other men.

dependent on its being perceived, and (to employ what will prove, ultimately, a more relevant simile) like a letter consigned to the postal system, it does not always reach its destination:

Ceux qui apprenent à nos gens de guerre . . . de ne cercher en la vaillance que la reputation, que gaignent ilz par là, que de les instruire de ne se hazarde jamais, qu’ilz ne soient à la veüe de leurs compagnons, & de prendre bien garde s’il y a des tesmoins avec eux, qui puissent rapporter nouvelles de leur vaillance? là où il se presente mille occasions de bien faire sans qu’on puisse estre remarqué. Combien de belles actions particulieres s’ensevelissent dans la foule d’une bataille?

[Those who teach our men of war . . . to seek in valor only reputation, what do they gain thereby but to instruct them never to hazard themselves unless they be within sight of their companions, and to take good care that there are witnesses with them who can bring back news of their valor? Whereas a thousand occasions of well-doing present themselves without one’s being able to be noticed for it. How many fine individual actions are buried in the press of a battle!] (II: 16, 622a, DM 420; 471*; 605a)

“Des postes” (II: 22) is about sending and receiving news:

Je lisois à cet’heure, que le Roy Cyrus pour recevoir plus facilement nouvelles de tous les cotez de son empire, qui estoit d’une fort grande estandue fit regarder combien un cheval pouvoit faire de chemin en un jour tout d’une traite, & à cété distance il establit des hommes, qui avoient charge de tenir des chevaux prets pour en fournir à ceux qui viendroient vers luy.

[I was just this moment reading that King Cyrus, the more easily to receive news from all parts of his empire, which was of very great extent, ascertained how much distance a horse could do at a stretch in one day; and at that distance he stationed men whose business it was to keep horses ready to equip those who should be coming toward him.] (II: 22, 680a, DM 492–93; 515–16)

In 1588, Montaigne added another way of sending the news to the catalog this brief chapter provides:

L’invention de Cecinna à renvoyer des nouvelles à ceux de sa maison avoit bien plus de promptitude: il emporta quand et soy des arondelles, et les
relaschoit vers leurs nids quand il vouloit s’envoyer de ses nouvelles, en les
teignant de marque de couleur propre à signifier ce qu’il vouloit, selon qu’il
avoit concerté avec les siens. Au theatre, à Romme, les maistres de famille
avoient des pigeons dans leur sein, ausquels ils attacheoyent des lettres
quand ils vouloient mander quelque chose à leurs gens au logis; et estoient
dressez à en raporter responce.

[Cecinna’s invention for sending back news to his household was much swifter; he took swallows along with him, and released them toward their nests when he wanted to send back news of himself, tinting them with some mark of color to signify his meaning, according as he had pre-arranged with his people. At the theatre in Rome the heads of families kept pigeons in their bosoms, to which they attached letters when they wanted to send instructions to their people at home; and these were trained to bring back an answer.] (II: 22, 680–81b; 516*)

I have italicized invention, lettres, and marque because that constellation of words also appears in the following passage from II: 16. Montaigne is scandalized, or at least amused, by the contradiction between Epicurus’ preaching against seeking personal glory and what he actually said on his deathbed. His last words “sont grandes & dignes d’un tel philosophe, mais si ont elles quelque marque de la recommendation de son nom, et de cette humeur qu’il avoit décriée par ses preceptes. Voicy une lettre qu’il dicta un peu avant son dernier soupir” [are great and worthy of such a philosopher, and yet they bear the mark of commending his name and of that humor that in his precepts he had decried. Here is a letter that he dictated a little before his last gasp] (II: 16, 620ac; 469). In the letter Epicurus complains about the pain of his illness but says that it is compensated “par le plaisir qu’apportoit à mon ame la souvenance de mes inventions et de mes discours” [by the pleasure which the remembrance of my discoveries and my teachings brought to my soul] (II: 16, 620a; 469). Montaigne returns to this mention of inventions in a comment on the letter: “Voilà sa lettre. Et ce qui me faict interpreter que ce plaisir qu’il dit sentir en son ame, de ses inventions, regarde aucunement la reputation qu’il en esperoit acquier apres sa mort, c’est l’ordonnance de son testament” [That is his letter. And what makes me infer that this pleasure, which he says he feels in his soul over his discoveries, somewhat concerns the reputation that he hoped to acquire from them after his death, is the provision in his will] (II: 16, 620a; 469) by which he sets aside money for the annual celebration of his birthday, as well as a monthly celebration partly in his honor.
So here we have a lettre whose author takes pleasure in his inventions, a statement that Montaigne sees as the marque that negates what the writer says elsewhere, while in the companion chapter we are told of an invention for conveying lettres in which the entire text consists of a marque. The marque in II: 22 is all there is to read; the one in II: 16 is a hidden message that only Montaigne, “suffisant lecteur” par excellence, can interpret.

But in writing all this (the passages in both II: 16 and II: 22 with this repeating trio of words), Montaigne constructed a hidden text for another sufficient reader to interpret. Though he took his time about it: the passage in II: 22 didn’t appear until 1588; the telltale marque in II: 16 that tops it off didn’t appear until he crossed out “goust” [taste] (DM 417) and replaced it with marque in the margin of the Bordeaux Copy at some point after 1588. As we have seen in other instances, here too Montaigne gradually perfected his metafictional echoes over the course of successive editions. Marque(s) appears 58 times in the Essays, lettre(s) 91 times, and invention(s) 91, but the three appear together only twice, in II: 16 and II: 22. Odds are that could not have happened by chance.

17. Spitting Images

“De la praesumption” [Of presumption] (II: 17) and “Contre la faineantise” [Against do-nothingness] (II: 21)

As the title of II: 21 would suggest, Montaigne is against la fainéantise—but only sometimes. For in this chapter’s other half he is for it; he positively reveals in it:

J’ay une ame libre & toute sienne, accoustumée à se conduire à sa poste. Je n’ay eu jusques à cet’heure ny commandant ny maistre forcé. J’ay marché aussi avant & le pas qu’il m’a pleu. Cela m’a amolli & rendu inutile au service d’autrui: & ne m’a fait bon qu’à moy, estant d’ailleurs d’un naturel poisant, paresseux & fay-neant: car m’estant trouvé en tel degré de fortune des ma naissance, que j’ay eu occasion de m’y arrester je n’ay rien cherché & n’ay aussi rien pris.

[I have a soul all its own, accustomed to conducting itself in its own way. Having had neither governor nor master forced on me to this day, I have gone just so far as I pleased, and at my own pace. This has made me soft and useless for serving others, and no good to anyone but myself, being
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besides of a heavy, lazy, and do-nothing nature. For having found myself from birth in such a degree of fortune that I had reason to remain as I was, and having as much sense as I felt I had occasion for, I have sought nothing, and have also acquired nothing.] (II: 17, 643a, DM 449; 481*)

By remarkable coincidence this paradoxical quality—a character flaw in II: 21, but a virtue in II: 17—appears nowhere else in Book Two. But the paradox is resolvable. For Montaigne personally, having this quality is good because it denotes his independent spirit, his refusal to serve another. The fainéantise he opposes in II: 21 is that of monarchs who do not take an active role in governing their kingdom or in leading their armies on the battlefield. The “commandement de tant d’hommes, n’est pas une charge oisive, & qu’il n’est rien qui puisse si justement dégouster un subject de se mettre en peine & en hazard pour le service de son prince, que de le voir apoltronny ce pendant luy mesme à des occupations lasches & vaines” [commanding so many men is not an idle charge, and there is nothing that can so justly spoil a subject’s taste for putting himself at pains and in danger for the service of his prince as to see the prince himself meanwhile loafing about at paltry and frivolous occupations] (II: 21, 676a, DM 491; 512*). So it is not exactly a contradiction for him to speak approvingly of that quality in himself since he is not a king. But it is nevertheless true that Montaigne carefully planted these only two instances in Book Two in symmetrically matching chapters and that he presented their combination for the assiduous reader who would eventually discover it as an apparent opposition.

One of the monarchs Montaigne singles out for praise for not being a fainéant, for not engaging in “des occupations lasches & vaines” to the detriment of the state and the army, is Julian the Apostate.

L’empereur Julian disoit . . . qu’un philosophe & un galant homme ne devoient pas seulement respirer, c’est à dire ne donner aux nécessitez corporelles que ce qu’on ne leur peut refuser, tenant toujours l’ame & le corps embesoinés à choses belles, grandes & vertueuses. Il avoit honte si en public on le voyoit cracher ou suer . . . par ce qu’il estimoit que l’exercice, le travail continué et la sobriété devoient avoir cuit et asseché toutes ces superfluitéz.

[The Emperor Julian used to say . . . that a philosopher and a gallant man ought not even to breathe; that is to say, they should grant to bodily necessities only what cannot be refused them, ever keeping the soul and body busied in fair, great, and virtuous things. He was ashamed if he was seen to spit or sweat in public . . . because he considered that exercise, continual
This echoes in a surprising way what he has to say in the other chapter about the Greek general Philopoemen—surprising because Philopoemen's pathetic predicament forms such a contrast to Julian's grandeur. When he arrived before the rest of his company at a house where he was expected, his hostess, not realizing who he was, put him to work at menial tasks for the arrival of the distinguished guest. When his retinue got there, discovering him “embesongné à cête belle vacation” [busy at this beautiful occupation] (II: 17, 641a, DM 446; 486*), asked him why, he replied that he was paying the penalty for his ugliness.

Nowhere else does embesogner appear with à + belles. Not only do the symmetrically placed appearances of these words constitute a striking parallel, but the two situations are just as parallel, if also the opposite. In both cases, the dignity of an exalted personage—a general, an emperor—is under attack. The general does not stand on his dignity; the emperor does. The general is not ashamed to perform trivial though necessary tasks, nor to do them before his subordinates; the emperor “avoit honte” [was ashamed] to be seen by the public fulfilling trivial needs. The tasks Philopoemen performed were actually for himself, “pour le service de Philopoemen,” although the woman who ordered him to do them did not realize it. So too were the things Julian was reluctant to do: to sweat and to spit. Montaigne was being ironic when he wrote that Philopoemen’s officers were surprised at seeing him “embesongné à cête belle vacation”; now we realize that he was being even more ironic than that in applying the same words to him that he would apply to Julian. These words in the Julian anecdote, by contrast, have no immediate ironic charge, since presumably the fine and beautiful things a philosopher and a gallant man do are indeed so. But they certainly acquire one in retrospect.

The rest of the passage on Julian—

Il avoit honte si en public on le voyoit cracher ou suer . . . par ce qu’il estimoit que l’exercice, le travail continuël et la sobriëté devoient avoir cuit et asseché toutes ces superfluitiez.

[He was ashamed if he was seen to spit or sweat in public . . . because he considered that exercise, continual toil, and sobriety should have cooked and dried up all those superfluities.] (II: 21, 677a, DM 492; 513)
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—forms a parallel of its own to still another passage in “De la praesumption,” about another Roman emperor (in fact, Julian’s immediate predecessor). Montaigne writes of

la morgue de Constantius l’Empereur, qui en publicq tenoit tousjours la teste droite, sans la contournier ou flechir ni ça ny là, non pas seulement pour regarder ceux, qui le saluoient à costé, ayant le corps planté & immobile, sans se laisser aller au branle de son coche, sans oser ny cracher, ny se moucher, ny essuyer le visage devant les gens.

[the arrogance of the Emperor Constantius, who in public always held his head straight, without turning or bending it this way or that, not even to look at those who saluted him from the side; keeping his body fixed and motionless, without letting himself move with the swaying of his coach, without daring either to spit, or to blow his nose, or to wipe his face in front of the people.] (II: 17, 633a, DM 435; 480)

The infinitive cracher makes only these two appearances in Book Two. More significantly, while there is spitting going on elsewhere in the Essays (including Book Two), in no other passage does it occur together with sweating. More significantly still, in Ammianus Marcellinus’ account of Constantius, Montaigne’s source for this account, there is no mention of the emperor’s not wiping off his face to remove the sweat: “quod autem nec os tersisse umquam vel nares in publico, nec spuisse, nec transtulisse in partem alterrutam vultum aliquando est visus, nec pomorum quoad vixerat gustaverit, ut dicta saepius praetermitto” [That no one ever saw him wipe his mouth or nose in public, nor spit, nor turn his face to this side or that, or that so long as he lived he never tasted fruit, I leave unmentioned, since it has often been related]. So Montaigne added this detail to complete the parallel with Julian. But again it is a parallel based on an opposition. The very behavior he praises in Julian he criticizes in Constantius. Julian dared not spit or sweat in public because of his lofty ideal of how a philosopher and a gallant man should devote his energies, but Constantius dared not spit or sweat in public out of a defect of character: his arrogance (“morgue”). Constantius’s behavior was one of several “mouvemens . . . artificiels” [artificial gestures] (II: 17, 633a, DM 434–35; 479*) and “contenances desreglées” [extraordinary mannerisms] (II: 17, 633b; 480) to which Montaigne objects.

When Montaigne inserted the post-1588 anecdote of Muley Moloch, king of Fez, into “Contre la faineantise” he gave us the second half of yet another intratext to ponder. Moloch was a monarch who died with his boots on, a fine example of a king who was not a fainéant. Sebastian, the young king of Portugal, had invaded Morocco; in response, Moloch arose from his deathbed to command his forces.

Il dressa sa bataille en rond, assiegeant de toutes pars l’ost des Portugais: lequel rond, venant à se courber et serrer, les empescha non seulement au conflict, qui fut tres aspre par la valeur de ce jeune Roy assaillant, veu qu’ils avoient à montrer visage à tous sens, mais aussi les empescha à la fuitte après leur routte.

[He drew up his army in a circle, besieging the camp of the Portuguese from all sides, and this circle, coming to bend and tighten, not only hindered them in the fighting, which was very bitter because of the valor of the young invading king, seeing that they had to face in all directions, but also hindered their flight after their rout.] (II: 21, 678c; 515)

In “De la praesumption” Montaigne writes that of men he has known “le plus grand . . . des parties natureles de l’ame & le mieux né c estoit Estienne de la Boitie: c’étoit vrayement un’ame pleine, & qui monstroit un beau visage à tout sens” [the greatest one . . . for natural qualities of the soul, and the best endowed, was Etienne de La Boétie. He was truly a full soul, and displayed a handsome face in every sense] (II: 17, 659a, DM 470; 500*). This repeating sequence of words—montrer / monstroit visage à tout / tous sens—makes its only appearances here. The contexts and indeed the meanings of these words could hardly be more different, yet by now it should be apparent that such a repetition, especially in structurally related chapters, is likely to be meaningful. The young man in the middle of Moloch’s encircling army finds a counterpart in another young man in the middle, Etienne de La Boétie, occupying the middle chapter of Book One and surrounded by Montaigne’s “grotesques et corps monstrueux.” Curiously, Montaigne’s assertion in II: 17 that La Boétie displayed a handsome face in every sense is contradicted by what he will write in a post-1588 addition to chapter 12 of Book Three, where he will say that his young friend’s face was actually ugly:

Mais nous appelons laideur aussi une mesavenance au premier regard, qui loge principalement au visage, et souvent nous desgoute par bien legeres causes: du teint, d’une tache, d’une rude contenance, de quelque cause inex-
plicable sur des membres bien ordonnez et entiers. La laideur qui revestoit
une ame tres-belle en La Boitie estoit de ce predicament.

[But we also call ugliness an unattractiveness at first glance, which resides
chiefly in the face, and often arouses our distaste for very slight causes:
the complexion, a spot, a rough countenance, or some inexplicable cause,
when the limbs are well ordered and whole. The ugliness which clothed a
very beautiful soul in La Boëtie was of this predicament.] (III: 12, 1057c;
807–8*)

If what Montaigne says in III: 12 is accurate, then as he did with Constanti-us—adding sweating to the list of what Ammianus Marcellinus said he was
unwilling to do in public so that he could set up a better parallel with Julian
in the matching chapter—he does with La Boëtie as well, tweaking the truth
to plant a parallel. And, as we approach the middle of Book Two, to allude
to the middle of Book One and its surrounding chapters. For Book Two has
the same structure, with Julian the Apostate occupying the corresponding
place of honor.

18. Consubstantial Consobstantiality

“Du démentir” [Of giving the lie] (II: 18) and “Nous ne gous-
tons rien de pur” [We taste nothing pure] (II: 20)

Lying is so pervasive, Montaigne complains in “Du démentir,” that “Nostre
verité d’à cette heure ce n’est pas ce qui est, mais ce qui se persuade à autruy:
comme nous appelons monnoye non celle qui est loyalle seulement, mais la
fauce aussi, qui a mise” [Our truth of nowadays is not what is, but what oth-
ers can be convinced of; just as we call money not only that which is legal,
but also the false that has currency] (II: 18, 666a, DM 477; 505*). Our pub-
lic discourse, like the money supply, is impure. Nothing we taste, to borrow
from the title of the companion chapter II: 20, whether it be what passes for
truth or what passes for legal tender, is pure. As he says in the first sentence
of II: 20,

La foiblesse de nostre condition fait que les choses en leur simplicité &
pureté naturelle ne puissent pas tomber en nostre usage. Les elemens que
nous joyssons, sont alterés, & les metaus de mesme, & l’or il le faut empri-
rer par quelque autre matiere plus vile, pour l’accommoder à nostre service.
The weakness of our condition is such that we cannot make use of things in their simplicity and natural purity. The elements that we enjoy are altered, and the metals likewise; and gold must be debased by some other, more vile material to accommodate it to our service. (II: 20, 673a, DM 491; 510*)

One of the chief instances of the service to which gold is put of course is money, so that both chapters allude to the impurity of money but do so in different ways. In II: 18, the impurity results from the combination of the purity of some coins (the legal) versus the impurity of others (the counterfeit); in II: 20, the impurity is inherent in any legal coin, which of necessity (gold, for example, being too soft a metal to stand up alone to the normal wear-and-tear coins must undergo) is made up of both pure metal (e.g., gold) and some baser material.

When Montaigne says in II: 20 that gold must be debased to accommodate it to our service, he is echoing what he says in II: 18 about writing the Essays for a private audience only—a neighbor, a kinsman, a friend. His only “commerce” [contact] with the public is that he has been constrained to borrow the tools of their writing (that is, printing), and he has cast this image into a mold to save himself the trouble of making several copies by hand.

“En recompense de cete commodité, que j’en ay emprunté, j’espère luy faire ce service d’empecher Ne toga cordyllis, ne penula desit olivis” [In return for this convenience which I have borrowed from the public I hope to provide it the service of preventing “tuna fish and olives from lacking something to wrap them in”] (II: 18, 664a, DM 476–77; 504*). Montaigne replaced much of this passage after 1588, including the sentence with “commodité” and “service.” But in a section he introduced after 1588 just after this point, he added a passage that sets up a connection to the following passage in “Nous ne goustons rien de pur” that dates from 1588:

Des plaisirs et biens que nous avons, il n’en est aucun exempt de quelque meslange de mal et d’incommodité. . . . Nostre extreme volupté a quelque air de gémissement et de plainte. Diriez vous qu’elle se meurt d’angoisse? Voire quand nous en forgeons l’image en son excellence, nous la fardons d’épithètes et qualitez maladives et douloureuses: langueur, mollesse, foliblesses, defaillance, morbidezza; grand témoignage de leur consanguinité et consubstantialité.

[Of the pleasures and good things that we have, there is not one exempt from some mixture of pain and discomfort. . . . Our utmost sensual pleasure has an air of groaning and lament about it. Wouldn’t you say that it is
dying of anguish? Indeed, when we forge a picture of it at its highest point, we deck it with sickly and painful epithets and qualities: languor, softness, weakness, faintness, “morbidezza”: a great testimony to their consanguinity and consubstantiality.] (II: 20, 673b; 508*)

Pain and pleasure, particularly in sex, are consubstantial. So too, according to what Montaigne added to “Du démentir” after 1588, are he and his book: “Je n’ay pas plus faict mon livre que mon livre m’a faict, livre consubstantiel à son autheur” [I have not made my book any more than it has made me—a book consubstantial with its author] (II: 18, 665c; 504*). There is no consubstantiality anywhere else in Book Two. In adding this passage to II: 18 Montaigne made an important statement about the Essays that is justly famous. But at the same time he added yet another connection to the consubstantiality of the Essays themselves: the way each chapter has another with which it is consubstantial. In a marvelous instance of metafictional self-referentiality, here consubstantiality names itself.