**Background information and notes**

The source of the English text of the essays is *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, translated by Donald M. Frame (Stanford University Press, 1958)

The source of the French text is Michel de Montaigne, Essais, Traduction en français moderne par Guy de Pernon d’après le texte de l’édition de 1595 (available on various websites)

The French and English texts do not always match, because they are taken from different editions.

**Life of Montaigne**

Source: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/montaigne/#Lif)

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533–1592) came from a rich bourgeois family that acquired nobility after his father fought in Italy in the army of King Francis I of France; he came back with the firm intention of bringing refined Italian culture to France. He decorated his Périgord castle in the style of an ancient Roman villa. He also decided that his son would not learn Latin in school. He arranged instead for a German preceptor and the household to speak to him exclusively in Latin at home. So the young Montaigne grew up speaking Latin and reading Vergil, Ovid, and Horace on his own.

At the age of six, he was sent to board at the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux, which he later praised as the best humanist college in France, though he found fault with humanist colleges in general. Where Montaigne later studied law, or, indeed, whether he ever studied law at all is not clear. The only thing we know with certainty is that his father bought him an office in the Court of Périgueux. He then met Etienne de La Boëtie with whom he formed an intimate friendship and whose death some years later, in 1563, left him deeply distraught.

Tired of active life, he retired at the age of only 37 to his father’s castle. In the same year, 1571, he was nominated Gentleman of King Charles IX’s Ordinary Chamber, and soon thereafter, also of Henri de Navarre’s Chamber. He received the decoration of the Order of Saint-Michel, a distinction all the more exceptional as Montaigne’s lineage was from recent nobility. On the title page of the first edition (1580) of the Essays, we read: “Essais de Messire Michel Seigneur de Montaigne, Chevalier de l’ordre du Roy, & Gentilhomme ordinaire de sa chambre.” Initially keen to show off his titles and, thus, his social standing, Montaigne had the honorifics removed in the second edition (1582).

Replicating Petrarca’s choice in De vita solitaria, Montaigne chose to dedicate himself to the Muses. In his library, which was quite large for the period, he had wisdom formulas carved on the wooden beams. They were drawn from, amongst others, Ecclesiastes, Sextus Empiricus, Lucretius, and other classical authors, whom he read intensively. To escape fits of melancholy, he began to commit his thoughts to paper. In 1580, he undertook a journey to Italy, whose main goal was to cure the pain of his kidney stones at thermal resorts. The journey is related in part by a secretary, in part by Montaigne himself, in a manuscript that was only discovered during the XVIIIth century, given the title The Journal of the Journey to Italy, and forgotten soon after.

While Montaigne was taking the baths near Pisa, he learnt of his election as Mayor of Bordeaux. He was first tempted to refuse out of modesty, but eventually accepted (he even received a letter from the King urging him to take the post) and was later re-elected. In his second term he came under criticism for having abandoned the town during the great plague in an attempt to protect himself and his family. His time in office was dimmed by the wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants. Several members of his family converted to Protestantism, but Montaigne himself remained a Catholic.

**The Essays**

Source: Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel\_de\_Montaigne#Essais)

His humanism finds expression in his *Essais*, a collection of a large number of short subjective essays on various topics published in 1580 that were inspired by his studies in the classics, especially by the works of Plutarch and Lucretius. Montaigne's stated goal was to describe humans, and especially himself, with utter frankness. Montaigne's writings are studied as literature and philosophy around the world.

Inspired by his consideration of the lives and ideals of the leading figures of his age, he finds the great variety and volatility of human nature to be its most basic features. He describes his own poor memory, his ability to solve problems and mediate conflicts without truly getting emotionally involved, his disdain for the human pursuit of lasting fame, and his attempts to detach himself from worldly things to prepare for his timely death. He writes about his disgust with the religious conflicts of his time. He believed that humans are not able to attain true certainty. The longest of his essays, *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, marking his adoption of Pyrrhonism, contains his famous motto, "What do I know?"

Montaigne considered marriage necessary for the raising of children, but disliked strong feelings of passionate love because he saw them as detrimental to freedom. In education, he favored concrete examples and experience over the teaching of abstract knowledge intended to be accepted uncritically. His essay "On the Education of Children" is dedicated to Diana of Foix.

The *Essais* exercised an important influence on both French and English literature, in thought and style. Francis Bacon's Essays, published over a decade later, in 1596, usually are presumed to be directly influenced by Montaigne's collection, and Montaigne is cited by Bacon alongside other classical sources in later essays.

**Chapitre 28 — Chaque chose en son temps**

1. Ceux qui comparent Caton le Censeur à Caton le Jeune, meurtrier de lui-même, comparent deux belles natures de formes voisines. Le premier offrit de la sienne de plus nombreux visages, et l’emporte en ce qui concerne les exploits militaires et l’utilité de son action publique. Mais la vertu du jeune, au-delà du fait que ce serait blasphémer que de lui en comparer une autre pour sa vigueur, ne présente pas, elle, de taches. Car qui pourrait en effet absoudre de toute envie et ambition celle du « Censeur », qui a osé s’en prendre à l’honneur de Scipion, qui était de loin bien plus grand que lui et tout autre en son siècle, en ce qui concerne la bonté naturelle et toutes les vertus essentielles ?

2. On dit de lui, entre autres choses, qu’en son extrême vieillesse, il se mit à apprendre le Grec, avec une grande ardeur, comme pour assouvir une soif de longue date. Cela ne me semble pas être un grand argument en sa faveur, car c’est proprement ce que nous appelons

« retomber en enfance ». Il y a un temps pour tout, les bonnes choses et les autres. Et je peux réciter mon « Pater noster » à un moment mal venu, comme dans le cas de T. Quintinius Flaminius qui, étant général d’armée, fut accusé parce qu’on l’avait vu à l’heure du combat perdre son temps à prier Dieu, lors d’une bataille que pourtant il remporta.

3. Eudomidas voyant Xénocrates très âgé s’empresser de venir aux leçons qu’il donnait dans son école, s’exclama : « Quand saura-t-il enfin quelque chose, lui qui apprend encore ? » Et Philopœmen dit à ceux qui portaient très haut le roi Ptolémée pour la façon dont il s’endurcissait en s’exerçant tous les jours à la pratique des armes : « Ce n’est pas louable pour un roi de son âge de s’y exercer : il devrait maintenant réellement les employer. »

4. Le jeune homme doit se préparer à la vie et le vieillard en profiter, disent les sages; et le plus grand défaut qu’ils remarquent en nous, c’est que nos désirs rajeunissent sans cesse. Nous recommençons sans cesse à vivre. Notre goût et nos désirs devraient bien un jour tenir compte de la vieillesse. Nous avons déjà un pied dans la tombe, et nos appétits et nos besoins ne font que renaître.

*Tu fais tailler le marbre au moment de mourir,*

*Et au lieu de songer au tombeau,*

*Tu bâtis des maisons.* Horace [36] II, XVIII, 17.

5. Le plus lointain de mes projets ne s’étend même pas sur un an : je ne pense plus désormais qu’à ma fin[[1]](#footnote-1). Je me détache de toutes nouvelles espérances et entreprises, je dis adieux à tous les lieux que je quitte, et je me sépare chaque jour un peu de ce que je possède. *« Il y a longtemps que je ne perds ni n’acquiers rien. Il me reste plus de provisions que de route à faire. »* Sénèque [96] LXXVII. *« J’ai vécu et j’ai parcouru la carrière que le destin m’avait fixée. »* Virgile [112] IV, v. 653.

Le soulagement que je trouve enfin en ma vieillesse, c’est qu’elle amortit en moi bien des désirs et des soucis dont la vie est agitée : souci de la marche du monde, des richesses, de la grandeur, de la connaissance, de la santé, de moi-même. On en voit apprendre à parler quand il serait temps pour eux de se taire à jamais !

6. On peut étudier à tout âge, mais pas aller à l’école : rien de plus sot qu’un vieillard apprenant l’alphabet !

*Diverses choses conviennent à diverses personnes ;*

*Toute chose ne convient pas à tout âge.* Pseudo-Gallus [51] I, 104.

S’il faut étudier, que ce soit quelque chose qui convient à l’état dans lequel nous sommes, afin que nous puissions répondre, comme celui à qui l’on demandait à quoi servaient ses études faites dans la décrépitude : « A m’en aller meilleur, et plus facilement. » Ce fut une étude de ce genre que fit Caton le Jeune quand, sentant venir sa fin, il rencontra le dialogue de Platon concernant l’éternité de l’âme. Il était pourtant depuis longtemps fourni en provisions pour un départ de ce genre : il avait plus d’assurance, de ferme volonté et d’instruction que Platon n’en montre dans ses écrits; son savoir et son courage étaient, de ce point de vue, au-dessus de la philosophie. Il ne s’y consacra pas pour préparer sa mort : de même que l’importance de la décision à prendre ne le priva pas de sommeil, il entreprit cette étude en l’associant à ses occupations habituelles sans opérer de choix ni de changements particuliers. La nuit qui suivit son échec à la Préture, il la passa à jouer. Et celle au cours de laquelle il devait mourir, il la passa à lire. Perdre la vie ou une charge publique lui était tout aussi indifférent.

**Book II, Chapter 28 — All things have their season**

Those who compare Cato the Censor with the younger Cato, who was his own murderer, compare two beautiful natures that are akin in form. The former displayed his in more aspects and excelled the other in military exploits and in the usefulness of his public services. 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 excellent qualities far greater than he or any other man of his time?

What they tell of him among other things, that in his extreme old age he set himself to learn Greek with an ardent appetite, as if to quench a long thirst, 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. And I may say my Lord's Prayer at the wrong time; as T. Quintius Flamininus, a general of the army, was denounced because he had been seen standing apart in the hour of conflict, spending his time praying God in a battle that he won.

The sage sets bounds even to virtuous things.

JUVENAL

Eudemonidas, seeing Xenocrates when he was very old busied about his school lessons, said: "When will this man know, if he is still learning?" And Philopoemen said to those who were highly praising King Ptolemy for hardening his body every day in the exercise of arms: "It is not a praiseworthy thing in a king of his age to practice them: he should henceforth really employ them."

The young man should make his preparations, the old man enjoy their fruits, say the sages. And the greatest defect they observe in our nature is that our desires incessantly renew their youth. We are always beginning to live over again. Our study and our desire should sometimes savor of old age. We have one foot in the grave, and our appetites and pursuits are just being born:

You plan, right at the brink of doom,

On carving marbles; heedless of your tomb,

You play at building houses.

HORACE

The longest of my plans has not a year in extent. Henceforth I think of nothing but making an end; I rid myself of all new hopes and enterprises; I take my last leave of every place I go away from, and dispossess myself every day of what I have: *For a long time I have had neither losses nor gains. I have more provisions for the road than I have road left* [Seneca].

I have lived, and run out the course that fortune gave.

VIRGIL

In short, this is all the comfort that I find in my old age, that it deadens in me many desires and cares by which life is troubled—care for how the world goes, care for riches, for greatness, for knowledge, for health, for myself. That man [Cato the Censor, learning Greek in his old age] is learning to speak when he needs to learn to be silent forever.

We may continue our studies at all times, but not our schooling: what a foolish thing is an old man learning his ABC!

Different men, different tastes; nor are all things

Fit for all ages.

MAXIMIANUS

If we must study, let us study something suitable to our condition, so that we may answer like the man who, when he was asked what was the purpose of these studies in his decrepitude, replied: "To depart a better man and more content."

Such a study was that of the younger Cato when, feeling his end approaching, he came upon Plato's discussion of the eternity of the soul. Not, obviously, that he had not been long furnished with every sort of equipment for such a departure. Of assurance, firm will, and learning, he had more than Plato has in his writings; his knowledge and his courage were in this regard above philosophy. It was not to ease his death that he took up this occupation; 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.

The night when he had just been rejected for the praetorship, he spent in play; the one in which he was to die, he spent reading. Loss of life and loss of office were equally indifferent to him.

**Questions for discussion**

**Book II, Chapter 28 — All things have their season**

1. Is it foolish, as Montaigne suggests in the opening paragraphs, to continue learning in old age when one should dwell on what is already known ("When will this man know, if he is still learning?"), or put it to practical use ("It is not a praiseworthy thing in a king of his age to practice them: he should henceforth really employ them")?

2. “We are always beginning to live over again. Our study and our desire should sometimes savor of old age.” If Montaigne could see us taking courses at OLLI, would he moderate his view?

3. Montaigne finds that age diminishes many desires, ambitions and concerns. Is that your experience of ageing?

4. Montaigne suggests that the point of learning in old age is to prepare for death by becoming a better person. Then he tells of how the younger Cato continued to study and live as usual when he saw death approaching, indifferent to his demise. Does that story confirm or contradict the first point?

1. Formule rhétorique, certes; mais Montaigne écrit cela en 1588 et mourra effectivement peu après, en 1592. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)