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1. Introduction: Renaissance Education in Reading and Writing

The aim of this book is to compare Montaigne's and Shakespeare's methods of using the material obtained from their reading in order to develop their own ideas and expressions. The key to understanding how both writers exploited what they read is to be found in Renaissance rhetorical training. Montaigne often expressed his hostility to classical rhetoric, especially in *De la vanité des paroles* (I, 51), but the way in which he used his reading and developed his arguments owes everything to his grammar-school training.¹

This focus on comparing the approaches of these two great writers is intended also as a way out of a critical impasse. In an article in *Montaigne Studies* I argue that the question of how much and how early Shakespeare used Montaigne's *Essais* (in Florio's English translation) is ultimately undecidable.² While some scholars argue (or assume) that Shakespeare made extensive use of Montaigne's work from the late 1590s onwards,³ others claim that the only proven example is Gonzalo's speech from *The Tempest* (II.1.139–64) and that other parallels depend on shared sources or coincidence.⁴ Faced with this apparently irreconcilable conflict I suggest that we focus on the common ground between the two positions: that on many occasions both authors used the same sources in similar ways, while in at least one Shakespeare deliberately copied Montaigne. These two procedures can then be seen to have a certain continuity; Shakespeare may even be closer to Montaigne when he reaches a similar position independently than when he copies, perhaps with parodic intent. Since reaching agreement on the question of the exact quantity and timing of Shakespeare's indebtedness has so far proved impossible and since such a resolution would make no real difference to the way we read, I suggest that we accept that the two writers are similar and that we study the nature and meaning of that similarity, which also involves appreciating the differences between the two writers. This is the task of comparison, which is the aim of this book.

In this first chapter I shall outline the rhetorical features of Renaissance grammar-school and university education, discuss Plutarch's *Moralia*, a crucial source for Montaigne, and consider Montaigne's *De l'inconstance de nos actions* (II, 1) and Claudius's soliloquy from *Hamlet* (III.3.36–72) as examples of the practical use of Renaissance rhetorical education. The second chapter will analyse Montaigne's use of his reading, in composing and revising his *Essais*. The third chapter will be concerned with the way

Montaigne develops his thinking, by applying different techniques of elaboration and invention to the stories and axioms he takes over from his reading and continually adds to his own texts. As a companion to the third chapter's discussion of Montaigne's methods of argument, the fourth chapter begins by exploring Shakespeare's logical transformation of received material and development of speeches from outlines. It then compares the ways in which Shakespeare and Montaigne connect narrative and argument. The fifth chapter compares Montaigne's use of history (and in particular of Plutarch and Tacitus) with Shakespeare's, contrasting their views of Roman liberty, honour and the arbitrariness of the historical record, and noting Shakespeare's special interest in the historical role of women, servants and rogues. The final chapter compares and contrasts views on ethical questions such as revenge, death, repentance, sexual relations, family life and justice, expressed in the works of the two authors.

Humanist grammar schools, like the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux and Stratford Grammar School, had three main aims. Pupils were meant to learn to read, write and speak Latin, to study a syllabus of the finest Latin writers and to practice Latin composition in a variety of genres.⁵ Conventional pupils began their grammar-school education by learning the Latin *accidence* by heart. Then they exercised this knowledge by varying simple Latin sentences, by learning dialogues and by reading fables. Even their later Latin reading was to some extent aimed at acquiring vocabulary and phrases for their conversation and composition. This part of the training was rather irksome to Montaigne since he was almost a native speaker of Latin as a result of his father's teaching methods.⁶ The later years of the grammar school were devoted to a course in Latin literature: Terence (partly for conversation and phrases), a selection of Cicero's *Epistolae familiares* (for imitation in the pupils' letter-writing), Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Aeneid*, Ovid, Horace, Cicero's philosophical works and some history.⁷ Montaigne's early proficiency in Latin meant that he was withdrawn from the drilling associated with the teaching of these texts and instead enticed into reading Ovid, Virgil, Terence, Plautus and the Italian comedies for pleasure.⁸ Montaigne clearly also learned some Greek at the Collège de Guyenne, as he occasionally writes in Greek and refers to Greek words, but in later life he preferred to read Greek authors in French or Latin translations.⁹

Pupils' reading was intended to feed into their writing. This could take the form of imitating one of Cicero's letters to his family or writing a letter or a speech on behalf of one of the people in the history they were reading. Often

it entailed collecting phrases and stories from all the texts read and reusing them in *progymnasmata* exercises like the *chreia* and the commonplace. Some of these exercises (such as description, comparison, speech by a character, proposal for a law) were the potential building blocks for longer compositions. In exercises like fable, maxim and confirmation, students were taught to connect narratives and arguments. The writerly approach was also evident in the way in which pupils were trained to read texts. Their teachers were expected to point out the uses of the figures of rhetoric, instances of imitation and examples of moral teaching through axiom and narrative.¹⁰

The most widely used Latin composition text produced in the Renaissance was Erasmus's *De copia rerum et verborum*. The book aims at encouraging fullness and fluency of expression by teaching ways of adapting existing texts or outlines through a sort of rhetorical supercharging. Under *copia* (plenty) of words, pupils were instructed in ways to vary and add to their language by applying the figures of rhetoric. This section of the work culminates in a playful demonstration of hundreds of ways of reformulating simple expressions, such as 'your letters pleased me greatly' and 'as long as I live I shall always remember you'.¹¹ *De copia* taught that any sentence involved a choice among many differently weighted ways of expressing an idea but also provided a technique for making one's speech more emphatic by combining several different ways of putting the same idea. Under *copia* of things, pupils were instructed in ways of expanding a simple expression through logical means, for example by breaking a single thing into parts and investigating each part in turn, relating what happened before and after, adding the causes or describing the circumstances.¹² This second book of *De copia* gave special instruction in writing descriptions and comparisons, and in ways of using examples.¹³ It also included instructions for compiling a commonplace book, a book in which pupils would collect the most impressive phrases and stories from their reading, under thematic headings (such as virtue, justice, mercy, anger, friendship, flattery) so as to be able to reuse the highlights of their reading in their own compositions.¹⁴

Erasmus's *Adagia* was written partly as a reference book to assist pupils in using the classical heritage of proverbs to add distinction to their compositions but it also serves as an example of the kind of book a humanist could write out of extensive and critical reading of ancient literature. Montaigne is generally believed to have used the work and it may also have served him as a model. The *Adagia* was first published in 1500 as a listing of 818 proverbs with examples and explanations. As Erasmus read and re-read classical

literature for the rest of his life he found new examples of proverbs he had already listed and also new proverbs, culminating in the 600 folio pages of the *Adagiorum chiliades* of 1536, containing accounts of 4,151 proverbs.¹⁵ Many people owned more than one edition of the *Adagia* and Montaigne may have known of it as a model for the writing-in-progress of his successive revisions to his own book.¹⁶

After reviewing earlier opinions and showing their shortcomings Erasmus opts for a definition flexible enough to encompass the range of his subject: 'a proverb is a saying in popular use, remarkable for some shrewd and novel turn'.¹⁷ A knowledge of proverbs is useful because proverbs encapsulate moral teaching, because they can be effective in persuasion, because the addition of proverbs can give distinction and charm to a person's style and because understanding of proverbs can help us in interpreting literature.¹⁸ So proverbs contribute to morality, reading and writing, to invention and style. Erasmus shows with examples that ignorance of proverbs can make classical texts harder to understand and can even lead to corruption of the text.¹⁹ Proverbs confer dignity on one's own writing because of their antiquity.²⁰ Erasmus embroiders on the benefits of proverbs for a writer's style.

And so to interweave adages deftly and appropriately is to make the language as a whole glitter with sparkles from antiquity, please us with the colours of the art of rhetoric, gleam with jewel-like words of wisdom, and charm us with titbits of wit and humour. Finally it will wake interest by its novelty, bring delight by its concision, convince by its decisive power.²¹

After advising intending writers not to over-use proverbs, he suggests ways in which a particular proverb can be turned to different uses, through analogy, irony and metaphor. He links the methods of varying proverbs with the instructions for amplifying thoughts and varying verbal expression in *De copia*.²²

In most of the sections on individual proverbs Erasmus names the proverb, gives some examples from classical literature, explains the meaning of the proverb and gives some advice about its use.

II, 3, 74 *A Liar should have a Good Memory*: Quintilian in book IV of his *Institutio oratoria* cites as proverbial this aphorism: a liar should have a good memory. Apuleius too in his second *Defence* against a charge of

witchcraft: 'I have often heard it said, and much to the point, that a liar should have a good memory'. St Jerome: 'Forgetting the old proverb, that liars should have a good memory'. The meaning of the adage is clear enough, that it is very difficult for a liar to be always consistent, unless he has a very good memory; for it is much more difficult to remember falsehoods than the truth. And so this is how they are usually caught out: they forget what they have said and produce a discrepant story. This is how Davus in Terence is detected and thus Psyche's invention in Apuleius is detected by her sisters.²³

In this case Erasmus is careful to document both the use of the phrase and the fact that it is called a proverb. His final examples take his readers back to their reading, first to Terence's *Andria*, a standard grammar-school text (in which Donatus's commentary cites this proverb when Davus's lies are revealed), and then to the favourite interlude of Cupid and Psyche from Apuleius's *Golden Ass*. The basic pattern of naming, examples, explanation and use responds to the main role of the *Adagia* as a reference work to help in reading and composition. Some of the more ambitious entries develop this form considerably. For example, in the first adage of all, *Amicorum communia sunt omnia*, 'Between friends all is common', Erasmus reflects on the importance of the proverb:

If only it were so fixed in men's minds as it is frequent on everybody's lips, most of the evils of our lives would promptly be removed.²⁴

Later he says that Plato's interpretation of this proverb in *The Laws* as calling for community of possessions is the most Christian thing he wrote, though it is opposed by many practising Christians. Erasmus gives examples of the different deductions which Socrates, Aristotle, Plutarch and Martial (among many others) draw from this proverb. This survey of usage has the effect of juxtaposing different philosophical and literary attitudes to life.

Sometimes Erasmus takes the opportunity which a proverb offers to retell a well-known story²⁵ or in the case of 'A Dung-beetle hunts an Eagle' (III, 7, 1) to elaborate an Aesopian fable with a contemporary allegory against war. 'Man is a bubble' (II, 3, 48) provides the occasion for a collection of quotations on the shortness and frailty of life and for a lament on the death in 1506 of Philip, Archduke of Austria. Some of the longer *Adagia* entries can be thought of as variants of school rhetorical exercises, the *chreia* and the

commonplace. The most powerful of all the *Adagia*, *Dulce bellum inexpertis*, 'War is sweet to those who have not experienced it' (IV, 1, 1),²⁶ can be analysed as an exercise in copious speech. After praising and exemplifying the adage Erasmus supports it from an argument from generality (all things seem sweet to those who have not tasted them). Then he makes a comparison between war and man, the creature who promotes war. Since in comparison with other animals the human body is unarmed and defenceless, gifted chiefly with speech which promotes collaboration, it is unnatural that man should be so addicted to war. He describes in detail the sights, sounds, occurrences and consequences of war, later contrasting this description with a commonplace in praise of peace. He collects quotations from scripture in favour of peace and examples from classical poetry of the monstrous savagery and madness of war. The deeply rhetorical combination of argument, description and figurative language creates an eloquent moral denunciation of war, which must certainly be ranked among Erasmus's finest writings. Its success derives from its exemplification of rhetorical principles, copiously elaborating a moral theme to which Erasmus felt the strongest commitment.

For an instance of a proverb prompting Erasmus to reconsider his position we may turn to a much shorter adage, *Polypae mentem obtine*, 'Adopt the outlook of the polyp' (I, 1, 93). At first Erasmus explains the meaning of the adage, describing this fish's chameleon-like ability to take on the colour of the rocks it swims near and citing examples from Lucian, St Basil, Theognis and Plutarch. He makes a comparison with Homer's praise of Ulysses. Then he draws the lesson from the adage:

This advises us to suit ourselves to every contingency in life, acting the part of Proteus, and changing ourselves into any form a situation demands.²⁷

Erasmus makes a comparison with the need to adapt oneself to the customs of different countries one travels in. But then an anxiety registers.

Let no man think that by this adage we are taught a disgusting type of flattery, which assents to everything in everybody, or an improper changeability of behaviour,²⁸

immediately citing classical and Christian authors on the evils of changeability and the benefits of constancy. Then he recalls the example of

Alcibiades, wondering whether the different ways he behaved in Athens and Sparta should be taken as a vice or a virtue: 'he certainly had a happy and enviable dexterity of mind and character which made him act the polyp'.²⁹ Later still he suggests that we *could* use this adage to criticize people who are too changeable, though his final example suggests that changeability may offer someone their only chance of survival. In this adage we see Erasmus thinking on his feet, trying to establish a position which balances the prudential benefits of changeability against its moral dangers. Perhaps he is better equipped by his rhetorical training to develop the opposing arguments for and against changeability than to resolve the question or perhaps he intends a demonstration of the very changeability which is the subject of the adage.

Neither Shakespeare nor Montaigne attended university, but many of their readers did, and the higher classes of the Collège de Guyenne studied logic, which was the staple teaching of the university arts course. Both Aphthonius's *progymnasmata* and Erasmus's *De copia* relied on (and presumably began the teaching of) the topics of invention. In the second third of the sixteenth century, the humanist approach of analysing practical argument which used the full resources of language (rather than the restricted subset of language denoted by propositions of the pattern 'All A is B') profoundly altered university teaching of logic in northern Europe. The key text in this development was Rudolph Agricola's *De inventione dialectica*, which asserted that the primary purpose of all interactions in language was to convey information and that dialectic should train pupils to teach, move and please, using the topics of invention.³⁰ The topics of invention are a list of headings (such as definition, genus, species, parts, subject, adjunct, action, cause, effect, circumstances, comparisons and contraries) through which one can explore a subject and construct arguments about it. Agricola emphasized the importance of understanding the relationships between things in the world implied by the topics. He defined each topic and showed how it could be used to find arguments, but he also analysed examples to explain the difficulties involved in constructing a definition or establishing the relationships between causes and effects. He believed that understanding the nature of the topics would enable people to construct more effective arguments and that the best way to understand the topics was to analyse the way in which great writers like Cicero and Virgil had used arguments.³¹

Agricola divided language into exposition (related to the rhetorical category of narration), in which one sets out information in a straightforward way

for an audience which follows willingly, and argumentation, in which one joins reasons together densely in order to force assent from an audience which resists. This led him to re-examine the central rhetorical perception (going back at least to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* but also enshrined in the Latin rhetorical tradition) that narrative and argument must be used together in order to convince an audience. Agricola analyses the ways in which narratives can be made to seem convincing in themselves and can be presented so as to give the strongest support to arguments.³² He also directed more explicit attention to the importance of emotional persuasion, insisting on the need for speakers to think carefully about the specific audiences, their relationships to the speaker and their views of the issue, and identifying logical relationships and textures of language which could be used to achieve emotional effects on an audience.³³ Next he reinvigorated the traditional rhetorical skill of disposition, showing that many different types of structure could effectively be employed and arguing that the format best suited to a particular writing task would need to be worked out by thinking about the subject, audience and circumstances of the work in question. Together with the grammar-school emphasis on letter-writing and the *progymnasmata*, this helped to open up a range of different possible structures in place of the near-monopoly of the four-part oration within classical rhetoric.³⁴ Finally he gave instructions for (and a model of) logical commentary on classical texts, setting out the argumentative structures underlying a speech or poem and analysing a writer's use of the topics, alongside the more familiar rhetorical analysis, which focuses on the divisions of the oration and on the use of the tropes and figures. This form of commentary was taken up and adapted by many influential sixteenth-century commentators, among them Latomus, Sturm, Melanchthon and Ramus.³⁵ It also offers a Renaissance technique for examining classical texts which modern readers can apply to passages from Montaigne and speeches from Shakespeare.

Where school provided a general grounding in classical Latin literature and a training in ways of reading, the books which Montaigne and Shakespeare used most in their writing were their own choices: recent histories, Plutarch and (for Montaigne) Seneca and Lucretius. Although Montaigne knew some Greek, the real impulse to his reading of Plutarch was given by the translations into French by Jacques Amyot of the *Parallel Lives* (1559) and *Moralia* (1572). In Amyot's French translation (which was also the basis for North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, one of Shakespeare's favourite books), Plutarch became an important source of material and the favourite author

of Montaigne's maturity. He named Plutarch as 'of all authors I know the one who has best blended art with nature and judgement with erudition'.³⁶ Plutarch is the writer he finds himself relying on the most.

[B] Mais je me puis plus malaisément deffaire de Plutarque. Il est si universel et si plain, qu'à toutes occasions, et quelque sujet extravagant que vous ayez pris, il s'ingere à vostre besongne et vous tend une main liberale et inespuisable de richesses et d'embellissemens. (III, 5, V875, P918)

[B] But I cannot free myself from Plutarch so easily. He is so universal and so full of matter that for all occasions and for whatever extraordinary subject you have undertaken, he insinuates himself into your work, offering you riches and embellishments with a liberal and inexhaustible hand. (S989)

We can learn more about what attracted Montaigne to Plutarch by considering some examples from the *Moralia*, today much less well-known than the *Parallel Lives* but important to Montaigne as models and as sources of stories and quotations.³⁷ I shall concentrate here on two of Plutarch's essays, 29 *On Restraining Anger* and 43 *The Daemon of Socrates*. *On Restraining Anger* is a dialogue which is almost entirely taken up with a long speech by Fundanus on how he has managed to restrain his bad temper. The speech consists partly of practical advice on restraining anger (e.g., that one needs command of one's reason to resist anger, that it must be resisted as soon as it appears, that one should practice restraint of anger in relation to family and slaves), partly of descriptions of the bad effect of anger, intended as a warning (because observing anger in others will make you want to avoid it), and partly of analysis of the causes of anger, to assist the reason in finding remedies. That anger disfigures the face is taken as a sign of its destructive effect. Householders are warned not to be affected by anger when they punish their servants. Anger is usually caused by a sense of being slighted, despised or ignored; this in turn also results from a sense of self-importance and discontent with one's lot. So the risk of anger can be reduced by addressing these problems.³⁸

The moral advice is often presented through similes and comparisons and illustrated with anecdotes from historical events and the behaviour of philosophers, some mentioned briefly, others related at length. In a more scholarly vein the views of Aristotle, Hieronymus and Melantius are

reviewed and found wanting.³⁹ There are short digressions to commonplace themes of ancient moral philosophy: whether anger can ever be good and whether it can assist in revenge (both denied).⁴⁰ Plutarch sometimes develops ideas by quoting and analysing passages from Homer.⁴¹ Simon Swain argues that Plutarch regarded observation and analysis of other people's behaviour as the best way to learn how to improve one's own.⁴²

Montaigne used this essay especially in *De la colère* (II, 31), mentioning Plutarch at the outset and summarizing many of his ideas (the effect of anger on the face; that it is wrong to punish when angry; the usefulness of deferring punishment) in the first two pages.⁴³ He also took material for this section directly from Seneca's *De ira*, which Plutarch had quarried as a source. But Plutarch's essay is used mainly as a starting point. As the chapter progresses Montaigne finds different arguments and stories (including stories from other works of Plutarch). In the middle he amuses himself by relating a story from Aulus Gellius in which a slave who is being whipped accuses Plutarch of transgressing his own philosophy by becoming angry and Plutarch calmly debates the point with him as the whipping continues.⁴⁴

Plutarch's *The Daemon of Socrates* has a rather complicated plan.⁴⁵ It begins with a dialogue in which Caphisias, a young Theban, is asked by his Athenian host to tell the story of the recent rising of the Thebans against their puppet government and the expulsion of the Spartan garrison. In his long speech telling the story Caphisias relates the philosophical discussion which took place on the night of the rebellion and which the conspirators used as a cover. At first a stranger Theanor tries to offer payment to Epaminondas for the kindness he showed to the exiled Pythagorean Lysis before his death.⁴⁶ Epaminondas persuades him to agree that the practice of poverty and the refusal of temptation is more important.⁴⁷ Various speakers debate the nature of Socrates's guardian spirit.⁴⁸ The most comprehensive answer is given by Simmias who follows a physical explanation of the functioning of guardian spirits with a Plato-style myth of the visionary dream of Timarchus, in which voices from a cave explain the workings of the daemones in relation to the movements of the lights he can see.⁴⁹ Theanor then gives his own complementary account of the soul and the guardian spirit, illustrated with analysis of Homer.⁵⁰ From time to time the debate is interrupted by arrivals and conspiratorial discussions, culminating in an exciting narrative of the killing of the tyrants.

Interwoven with this is a description of the character of Epaminondas, who will become the great hero of Thebes. His refusal to join the conspiracy is

first criticized and later understood as he declines to be involved in bloodshed but also explains the role which his independent position will enable him to play in the reconstruction of the state.⁵¹ His contributions to the ethical debate illustrate his education which fits him for practical politics as well as philosophy. *The Daemon of Socrates* provides an example of ways of interweaving narrative and argument. In *De la vanité* Montaigne cites this essay as a model of the delight which can come from mixing together different elements in a way which appears casual and fortuitous.⁵²

Plutarch mixes technical philosophical argument with exciting historical narrative and description of a morally exemplary character. He writes speeches and arguments suited to different personalities but he is also willing to provide straightforward practical moral instruction. His notebook provides him with anecdotes and *sententiae* for every occasion, some of them so effective that he uses them several times over.⁵³ His works mix philosophy, antiquarianism, science, Homeric scholarship and medicine. He enjoys showing off his range of knowledge but he also regards scholarly debate as one of the signs of civilized life, as important as dinner parties or moderate political engagement. Plutarch kept enough distance from his arguments to understand opposing points of view and to reach balanced judgements.

Montaigne appreciated Plutarch's mixing of materials. He liked and borrowed his stories and sayings. He is more questioning, especially self-questioning, but Plutarch's comments often provide a starting point or a position against which he can define himself. Where the arguments in a Plutarch essay are often juxtaposed quite loosely, Montaigne tends to link his points together with reasons for and against each position. These passages of logical reflection on a story or an argument are often the places where Montaigne's toughest and most original thought appears. Plutarch's essays stimulated Montaigne to admiration and enjoyment but also to the ambition to do things differently. But he kept returning to Plutarch and he used him at some of the most important moments of the *Essais*.

Having looked at some of the techniques of reading and expression which they and their audiences were taught, I shall examine one short example each of Montaigne's and Shakespeare's writing, in order to show both the contribution which their training makes to their writing and the way in which similarities of outlook and presentation could occur without direct copying.

De l'inconstance de nos actions (II, 1) begins and ends by confronting the difficulty facing those who wish to judge people by their actions.⁵⁴ Because people characteristically act inconsistently it is hard to draw a particular

person's actions together as a whole and view them under the same light (*les r'appiesser et mettre à mesme lustre*). At the beginning Montaigne immediately supports his claim that people's actions contradict each other with the historical examples of Marius, Pope Boniface VIII and Nero. These examples are so plain, Montaigne says, and each man can add to them so easily that it is surprising to see men of discernment struggling to arrange the pieces, given that vacillation is the most common and obvious defect of our nature. He supports this conclusion with an ethical axiom from Publilius Syrus which he could have taken from Aulus Gellius (XVII, 14) or from a proverb collection:

[A] *Malum consilium est quod mutari non potest.* (V332, P351)

[A] It's a bad decision which can never be changed. (S373)

Montaigne begins the chapter with a general observation which he backs up with historical examples (taken from Plutarch, a chronicle and Seneca). He uses an ethical axiom to back up his conclusion. Then, as if borrowing from a commonplace book, he collects quotations contrasting the ideal of constancy (from Demosthenes, in French) with actual human changeability (from Horace and Homer, both in Latin),⁵⁵ before exemplifying the ideal of constancy with a character description of Cato.

[A] A qui auroit prescript et establi certaines loix et certaine police en sa teste, nous verrions tout par tout en sa vie reluire une equalité de meurs, un ordre et une relation infallible des unes choses aux autres ... Le discours en seroit bien aisé à faire, comme il se voit du jeune Caton: qui en a touché une marche, a tout touché; c'est une harmonie de sons très-accordans, qui ne se peut démentir. A nous, au rebours, autant d'actions, autant faut-il de jugemens particuliers. Le plus seur, à mon opinion, seroit de les rapporter aux circonstances voisines, sans entrer en plus longue recherche et sans en conclurre autre consequence. (V333–4, P353)

[A] If a man were to prescribe settled laws for a settled government established over his own brain, then we would see, shining throughout his whole life, a calm uniformity of conduct and a faultless interrelationship between his principles and his action. It would be easy enough to explain the character of such a man; that can be seen from the younger Cato: strike

one of his keys and you have struck them all; there is in him a harmony of sounds in perfect concord such as none can deny. In our own cases on the contrary every one of our actions requires to be judged on its own; the surest way in my opinion would be to refer each of them to its context, without looking farther and without drawing any firm inference from it. (S375)

Montaigne collects quotations and stories which present different outlooks on the question. Then he uses them as a starting point for his own reasoning. Part of the richness of the chapter derives from this juxtaposition of different voices. He then illustrates the argument for the inconsistency of human actions with three stories told at greater length: a woman in the wars of religion who almost kills herself to defend her chastity, where her usual behaviour is more flexible, and two soldiers who become less courageous once their bravery has been rewarded by Antigonus and Lucullus respectively. As he tells these stories Montaigne gives possible reasons for the change in behaviour in each case (topic of causes). Then he generalizes the lessons of his stories by imagining a person who is brave one day and cowardly the next. Anger, necessity, company, wine, even the sound of a trumpet can make someone brave, but you should not expect him to remain so when circumstances change. Behaviour is dictated by circumstances, not reason, and therefore it is subject to change.

The chapter presents a great longing for the philosophical ideal of a constant pursuit of virtue, while at the same time Montaigne insists that human nature is too patched and mixed to be capable of constancy. The peroration explains that the changeability of human nature and motivation makes judgement very difficult, but still leaves a small space for the exercise of that judgement, which is, after all, one of the chief preoccupations of Montaigne's book.

[A] Nous sommes tous de lopins, et d'une contexture si informe et diverse, que chaque piece, chaque moment, faict son jeu. Et se trouve autant de difference de nous à nous mesmes, que de nous à autrui ... Puis que l'ambition peut apprendre aux hommes et la vaillance, et la temperance, et la liberalité, voire et la justice; puis que l'avarice peut planter au courage d'un garçon de boutique, nourri à l'ombre et à l'oysiveté, l'assurance de se jeter si loing du foyer domestique, à la mercy des vagues et de Neptune courroucé dans un fraile bateau, et qu'elle apprend encore la discretion et la prudence; et que Venus mesme fournit de resolution et de hardiesse la jeunesse encore soubz la discipline et la verge, et gendarme le tendre

coeur des pucelles au giron de leurs meres: ... Ce n'est pas tour de rassis entendement de nous juger simplement par nos actions de dehors; il faut sonder jusqu'au dedans, et voir par quels ressorts se donne le bransle. Mais d'autant que c'est une hazardeuse et haute entreprinse, je voudrois que moins de gens s'en meslassent. (V337–8, P357–8)

[A] We are entirely made up of bits and pieces, woven together so diversely and so shapelessly that each of them pulls its own way at every moment. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and other people. Since ambition can teach men valour, temperance and generosity – and indeed justice; since covetousness can plant in the mind of a shop boy, brought up in obscurity and idleness, enough confidence to cast himself on the mercy of the waves and angry Neptune in a frail boat, far from his hearth and home, and also teach him discernment and prudence; and since Venus herself furnishes resolution and hardiness to young men still subject to correction and the cane and puts a soldier's heart into girls still on their mothers' knees, it is not the act of a settled judgement to judge us simply by our outward deeds: we must probe right down inside and find out what principles make things move; but since this is a deep and chancy undertaking, I would that fewer people would concern themselves with it. (S380)

The sharp pithy conclusions of the first two sentences lead into the copious elaboration of the vices prompting virtuous actions. While these deliberately extended and decorated allegorical stories confirm the preceding statements and support the need for detailed internal investigation, they contrast with the humorously restricted final conclusion. Montaigne's smile tells us that he has no intention of giving up his own project of making judgements but, like the prologue of the whole book, it hints that his readers may be wasting their time in attempting to follow him. The paragraph turns on a complicated exchange between the self and others. Montaigne's conclusions about the changeability of human behaviour are based on reading, observation of others and introspection. He is happy to include his readers and humanity in general as objects of these conclusions ('we are entirely made up of bits and pieces') and as their audience, but his suggested solution to the problem of judgement seems to rely on a depth of interior knowledge that could come about only from introspection. In what other case could we hope to 'probe right down inside and find out what principles make things move'? So part of Montaigne's joke

here is to suggest that other people might not be able to perform the delicate task of self-investigation which is the subject of his book.

Later additions do not significantly change the plan or the overall meaning of the chapter, though a few of them introduce new ideas. Most of Montaigne's changes involve adding further quotations and stories to illustrate or amplify ideas already expressed. For example in 1588 he adds a quotation from Lucretius to support the depiction of changeability, a quotation from Tibullus, which may have lain behind the text of the first version, explaining how Venus makes young girls brave and a discussion of Alexander as an example of someone whose battlefield bravery was compromised by his excessive fear of people plotting against him.⁵⁶ Some of the 1595 additions, especially towards the end of the chapter, reflect further reading in Roman moral philosophy. Montaigne cites in Latin Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* (II.27.65) for the view that nothing can be constant unless it proceeds from a fixed principle, his *De officiis* (I.21.71) on pretences of moral virtue that actually reveal weakness and his *Paradoxa* (V.1.34) for the difficulty of always acting in the same way (V336–7, P356, S378–9). These quotations do not change the direction of Montaigne's thought but they show how his ideas can be supported from different classical authorities.

In the 1588 version, near the beginning, he adds a new section extending his discussion of the problem of judging others to reflect on the practice of historians. Even good authors err in trying to make people too uniform.

[B] Ils choisissent un air universel, et suyvant cette image, vont regeant et interpretant toutes les actions d'un personnage, et, s'ils ne les peuvent assez tordre, les renvoyent à la dissimulation. Auguste leur est eschappé: car il se trouve en cest homme une varieté d'actions si apparente, soudaine et continuelle, tout le cours de sa vie, qu'il s'est fait lacher entier et indecis, aux plus hardis juges. Je croy des hommes plus mal aisément la constance que toute autre chose, et rien plus aisément que l'inconstance. Qui en jugeroit en detail [C] et distinctement piece à piece [B] rencontreroit plus souvent à dire vray. (V332, P352)

[B] They select one universal character, then, following that model, they classify and interpret all the actions of a great man; if they cannot twist them the way they want they accuse the man of insincerity. Augustus did get away from them: for there is in that man throughout his life a diversity of actions so clear, so sudden and so uninterrupted that they had to let him

go in one piece, with no verdict made on him by even the boldest judges. Of Man I can believe nothing less easily than invariability; nothing more easily than variability. Whoever would judge a man in his detail, [C] piece by piece, separately, [B] would hit on the truth more often. (S374)

Reflecting on the way in which writers construct a character enables Montaigne to express a new idea about historians' accusations of insincerity. If you believe that people are bound to change you are less likely to try to set up standards of behaviour which people will inevitably fail. Also in 1588 he adds an important new section discussing the process and results of introspection.

[B] Non seulement le vent des accidens me remue selon son inclination, mais en outre je me remue et trouble moy mesme par l'instabilité de ma posture; et qui y regarde primement, ne se trouve guere deux fois en mesme estat. Je donne à mon ame tantost un visage, tantost un autre, selon le costé où je la couche. Si je parle diversement de moy, c'est que je me regarde diversement. Toutes les contrarietez s'y trouvent selon quelque tour et en quelque façon. Honteux, insolent; [C] chaste, luxurieux; [B] bavard, taciturne; laborieux, delicat; ingenieux, hebeté; chagrin, debonnaire; menteur, veritable; [C] sçavant, ignorant, et liberal, et avare, et prodigue, [B] tout cela, je le vois en moy aucunement, selon que je me vire; et quiconque s'estudie bien attentivement trouve en soy, voire et en son jugement mesme, cette volubilité et discordance. Je n'ay rien à dire de moi, entierement, simplement, et solidement, sans confusion et sans meslange, ny en un mot. *Distinguo* est la plus universel membre de ma Logique. (V335, P355)

[B] Not only does the wind of chance events shake me about as it lists, but I also shake and disturb myself by the instability of my stance: anyone who turns his prime attention on to himself will hardly ever find himself in the same state twice. I give my soul this face or that depending upon which side I lay it down on. I speak about myself in diverse ways: that is because I look at myself in diverse ways. Every sort of contradiction can be found in me, depending on some twist or attribute: timid, insolent; [C] chaste, lecherous; [B] talkative, taciturn; tough, sickly; clever, dull; brooding, affable; lying, truthful; [C] learned, ignorant; generous, miserly and then prodigal – [B] I can see something of all that in myself, depending on how I gyrate; and anyone who studies himself attentively

finds in himself and in his very judgement this whirring about and this discordancy. There is nothing I can say about myself as a whole simply and completely or in one word, without intermingling and admixture. The most universal article of my logic is *I differentiate*. (S377)

Montaigne refines his idea of inconstancy by describing in detail how he finds it within himself. Inconstancy is a matter of internal reality as well as of external pressure. But he now sees that it also reflects the act of looking at oneself. One sees different things because one looks in different ways. The grammar-school *copia* techniques of listing qualities and generating contraries here provide him with a way of presenting his experience of self-analysis. Looking at himself he finds contradictory qualities. But because self-description is not his main aim he immediately generalizes the claim: anyone else will find this too. In order to speak of oneself one must reject simple statements and make distinctions. Within the argument of *De l'inconstance de nos actions* this section describes his own experience to support the view that man is inconstant. In its own terms and for the sake of the *Essais* as a whole it provides a new and deeper portrayal of how introspection works. And, to conclude, it encapsulates the point in one of those epigrams which Montaigne's readers will always remember. We find this also in some of 1595's shorter additions.

[C] Nous flottons entre divers advis: nous ne voulons rien librement, rien absolument, rien constamment. (V333, P353)

[C] We float about between different opinions. We desire nothing freely, nothing absolutely, nothing constantly. (S375)

While Montaigne evidently relies very heavily on grammar-school staples like moral axioms, quotations from classical literature and exemplary figures (Cato, Alexander, Augustus, Marius, Nero and Boniface VIII), he also transforms that inheritance. He contrasts assertions of the importance of constancy against poetic statements of change, going on to test these opinions against his understanding of himself in order to discover his own view. He is attracted by the ideal of a virtuous plan of life, rationally chosen and strictly followed, but his own experience of life is more divided. Later he reflects that part of the difference he finds in looking at himself is the consequence of differences in his way of looking. Through the statement of positions and of

objections to them, through examination of contraries, Montaigne comes to a greater understanding of his own thinking. He uses inherited maxims as a basis for thought but he also enjoys formulating his own ideas as new epigrams, often marked by an astute employment of figures of thought and repetition. He varies conciseness with *copia*, enjoying the persuasive force of carefully amplified text but also using detailed description and topical exploration as a way of discovering the significance of an idea or a story. Amplification also makes him aware of his own voice. Just as he enjoys his peroration he knows how to deflate it and to leave both sides of the issue hanging with his impossible wish that fewer people would engage in making judgements.

Prior to Act III scene 3 spectators of *Hamlet* have been able to contrast Claudius's unctuous but effective public manner with his private sense of guilt at his unnatural murder. The soliloquy portrays him as a villain with self-knowledge, aware of his entrapment between contrary impulses, but trying to find a way of breaking out of the impasse.⁵⁷ After an exclamation which acknowledges the primal depth of his guilt, Claudius first outlines and then elaborates the dilemma he faces

Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will,
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent (III.3.38–40)

He first develops the arguments in favour of praying for forgiveness, extolling the power of divine mercy by describing the extremity of the guilt it can absolve, through a comparison ('wash it white as snow') and an investigation of the meaning of mercy and the purpose of prayer (43–50). Understanding the power of mercy and prayer makes him optimistic ('Then I'll look up', 50). But when he starts to ponder the form of words in which he will ask for forgiveness, he is struck by the impossibility of repenting what he has no intention of giving up, his crown and his Queen (51–5). He develops this dilemma by expressing it as a general question which he will explore in both its earthly and heavenly dimensions.

May one be pardon'd and retain th'offence?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law. But 'tis not so above:

There is no shuffling, there the action lies
In his true nature, and we ourselves compell'd
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
To give in evidence. (56–64)

Where earthly power can coerce justice, faced with God we are forced to incriminate ourselves. The contrasting positions he explores (the power of mercy, the subjection of human justice to earthly power and the unescapable force of divine justice) lead him back to the anguish of his entanglement between the desire to repent and the impossibility of doing so.

What then? What rests?
Try what repentance can. What can it not?
Yet what can it, when one cannot repent?
O wretched state! O bosom black as death!
O limed soul, that struggling to be free
Art more engag'd! Help, angels! Make assay.
Bow, stubborn knees; and heart with strings of steel,
Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe.
All may be well. (64–72)

Claudius amplifies his entanglement through paradox, apostrophe, imagined description and exclamation. All he can do to escape his dilemma is test the power of prayer and hope that it can work. The soliloquy depicts thought which moves by statement, response and reflection on that response, just as Montaigne's *Essais* do. Shakespeare portrays in Claudius's soliloquy something of the movement and changeability of the human mind, which Montaigne asserts as a general principle on the basis of collecting different examples and testing their implications against his introspection. Shakespeare is not following Montaigne here; rather both of them elaborate a series of ideas by applying Renaissance rhetorical techniques. Montaigne starts from quotations and examples; Shakespeare starts from Claudius's impulse to seek forgiveness which arises from the inherited story and his own conception of the character of Claudius. The idea of making Claudius consider repentance might have come to Shakespeare through analogy; one might imagine that he wished the audience to compare the expressions of conscience in Hamlet and Claudius. Certainly it is possible for the audience to think about this speech in relation to Claudius's subsequent actions and in relation to

Hamlet's inability to make a serious acknowledgement of his responsibility in the deaths of Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Thinking with Shakespeare involves comparing the views expressed by different characters at different moments in the play in the light of their actions, moral qualities and fates. Montaigne helps his readers think by questioning axioms and comparing them with different narrative exempla and with his logical reflections on his own experience. In the next two chapters we shall look in more detail at Montaigne's use of his reading and at the way his thinking develops.