Montaigne’s Reception of Seneca

Montaigne: “Exclaim to our people about a passer-by ‘Oh, what a learned man!’ and about another ‘Oh, what a good man!’ They will not fail to turn their eyes and their respect toward the first.”

Letter 88 (“On Liberal and Vocational Studies”): Magno inpendio temporum, magna alienarum aurium molestia laudatio haec constat: ’o hominem litteratum!’ Simus hoc titulo rusticiore contenti: ’o virum bonum’!

(“It is at the cost of a vast outlay of time and of vast discomfort to the ears of others that we win such praise as this: ‘What a learned man you are!’ Let us be content with this recommendation, less citified though it be: ‘What a good man you are!’”)

- In truth, the care and expense of our fathers aims only at furnishing our heads with knowledge; of judgment and virtue, little news.” -Montaigne
- “It is the study of wisdom, and that is lofty, brave, and great-souled.” “Pronouncing syllables, investigating words, memorizing plays, or making rules for the scansion of poetry, what is there in all this that rids one of fear, roots out desire, or bridles the passions?” -Seneca

Montaigne: “Non loquendum sed gubernandum.”

Letter 108 (“On the Approaches to Philosophy”): Non est loquendum sed gubernandum.

(“One must steer, not talk.”)

- Montaigne lamented learning as a means for gaining office, Seneca when for making money

Story in Letter 27 (“On the Good which Abides”)

- In Montaigne: an observation that his generation can parrot the ancients but have nothing sound of their own
- In Seneca: Seemingly fruitless literary studies are permissible when not employed in the quest for virtue

Montaigne: “Non vitae sed scholae discimus.”

Letter 106 (“On the Corporeality of Virtue”): Quemadmodum omnium rerum, sic litterarum quoque intemperantia laboramus: non vitae sed scholae discimus

(“Just as we suffer from excess in all things, so we suffer from excess in literature; thus we learn our lessons, not for life, but for the lecture-room.”)

- In Montaigne: School must produce capable leaders, avoiding pompous pretense
- In Seneca: School is a hoop to jump through
Montaigne: “Postquam docti prodierunt, boni desunt.”

Letter 95, On the Usefulness of Basic Principles: 

*postquam docti prodierunt, boni desunt*

(“After savants have appeared, sages become rare.”)

- In Montaigne: Used to conclude that learning is dangerous to those ignorant of good
- In Seneca: Used to conclude that the learned are necessary as wickedness has grown complex

Bibliography


