

OF NATURE IN MEN

Nature is often hidden; sometimes overcome; seldom extinguished. Force, maketh nature more violent in the return; doctrine and discourse, maketh nature less importune; but custom only doth alter and subdue nature. He that seeketh victory over his nature, let him not set himself too great, nor too small tasks; for the first will make him dejected by often failings; and the second will make him a small proceder, though by often prevailings. And at the first let him practise with helps, as swimmers do with bladders or rushes; but after a time let him practise with disadvantages, as dancers do with thick shoes. For it breeds great perfection, if the practice be harder than the use. Where nature is mighty, and therefore the victory hard, the degrees had need be, first to stay and arrest nature in time; like to him that would say over the four and twenty letters when he was angry; then to go less in quantity; as if one should, in forbearing wine, come from drinking healths, to a draught at a meal; and lastly, to discontinue altogether. But if a man have the fortitude, and resolution, to enfranchise himself at once, that is the best:

Optimus ille animi vindex laedentia pectus
Vincula qui rupit, dedoluitque semel.

Neither is the ancient rule amiss, to bend nature, as a wand, to a contrary extreme, whereby to set it right, understanding it, where the contrary extreme is no vice. Let not a man force a habit upon himself, with a perpetual continuance, but with some intermission. For both the pause reinforceth the new onset; and if a man that is

not perfect, be ever in practice, he shall as well practise his errors, as his abilities, and induce one habit of both; and there is no means to help this, but by seasonable intermissions. But let not a man trust his victory over his nature, too far; for nature will lay buried a great time, and yet revive, upon the occasion or temptation. Like as it was with AEsop's damsel, turned from a cat to a woman, who sat very demurely at the board's end, till a mouse ran before her. Therefore, let a man either avoid the occasion altogether; or put himself often to it, that he may be little moved with it. A man's nature is best perceived in privateness, for there is no affectation; in passion, for that putteth a man out of his precepts; and in a new case or experiment, for there custom leaveth him. They are happy men, whose natures sort with their vocations; otherwise they may say, *multum incola fuit anima mea*; when they converse in those things, they do not affect. In studies, whatsoever a man commandeth upon himself, let him set hours for it; but whatsoever is agreeable to his nature, let him take no care for any set times; for his thoughts will fly to it, of themselves; so as the spaces of other business, or studies, will suffice. A man's nature, runs either to herbs or weeds; therefore let him seasonably water the one, and destroy the other.