

DIALOGUES OF  
FONTENELLE

TRANSLATED BY EZRA POUND

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## CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. ALEXANDER AND PHRINÉ	9
II. DIDO AND STRATONICE	12
III. ANACREON AND ARISTOTLE	15
IV. HOMER AND ÆSOP	19
V. SOCRATES AND MONTAIGNE	22
VI. CHARLES V AND ERASMUS	26
VII. AGNES SOREL--ROXELANE	30
VIII. BRUTUS AND FAUSTINA	34
IX. HELEN AND FULVIA	37
X. SENECA AND SCARRON	40
XI. STRATO, RAPHAEL OF URBINO	45
XII. BOMBASTES PARACELSUS AND MOLIÈRE	50

## Alexander and Phriné

*PHRINÉ.* You could learn it from all the Thebans who lived in my time. They will tell you that I offered to restore at my own expense the walls of Thebes which you had ruined, provided that they inscribe them as follows: Alexander the Great had cast down these walls, the courtesan Phriné rebuilt them.

*Alexander.* Were you so afraid that future ages would forget what profession you followed?

*Phriné.* I excelled in it, and all extraordinary people, of whatever profession, have been mad about monuments and inscriptions.

*Alexander.* It is true that Rhodope preceded you. The use she made of her beauty enabled her to build a famous pyramid still standing in Egypt, and I remember that when she was speaking of it the other day to the shades of certain French women who supposed themselves well worth loving, they began to weep, saying that in the country and ages wherein they had so recently lived, pretty women could not make enough to build pyramids.

*Phriné.* Yet I had the advantage over Rhodope, for by restoring the Theban walls I brought myself

into comparison with you who had been the greatest conqueror in the world; I made it apparent that my beauty had sufficed to repair the ravages caused by your valour.

*Alexander.* A new comparison. Were you then so proud of your gallantries?

*Phriné.* And you? Were you so well content with having laid waste a good half of the universe? Had there been but a Phriné in each of the ruined cities, there would remain no trace of your ravages.

*Alexander.* If I should ever live again I would wish to be an illustrious conqueror.

*Phriné.* And I a lovable conqueress. Beauty has a natural right to command men, valour has nothing but a right acquired by force. A beautiful woman is of all countries, yet kings themselves and even conquerors are not. For better argument, your father Philip was valiant enough and you also; neither of you could rouse the slightest fear in Demosthenes, who during the whole course of his life did nothing but make violent speeches against you; yet when another Phriné (for the name is a lucky name) was about to lose a case of considerable importance, her lawyer, having used his eloquence all in vain, snatched aside the great veil which half covered her, and the judges who were ready to condemn her, put aside their intention at the sight of her beauties. The reputation of your arms, having a great space of years to accomplish the object, could not keep one orator quiet, yet a fair body corrupted the whole severe Areopagus on the instant.

*Alexander.* Though you have called another Phriné to your aid, I do not think you have weakened the case for Alexander. It would be a great pity if—

*Phriné.* I know what you are going to say : Greece, Asia, Persia, the Indes, they are a very fine shopful. However, if I cut away from your glory all that does not belong to you ; if I give your soldiers, your captains, and even chance what is due to them, do you think your loss would be slight ? But a fair woman shares the honour of her conquests with no one, she owes nothing save to herself. Believe me, the rank of a pretty woman is no mean one.

*Alexander.* So you seem to have thought. But do you think the rôle is really all that you made it ?

*Phriné.* No. I will be perfectly frank with you. I exaggerated the rôle of a pretty woman, you strained overhard against yours. We both made too many conquests. Had I had but two or three affairs of gallantry, it would have been all quite in order, there would have been nothing to complain of ; but to have had enough such affairs to rebuild the Theban wall was excessive, wholly excessive. On the other hand, had you but conquered Greece, and the neighbouring islands, and perhaps even part of lesser Asia, and made a kingdom of them, nothing would have been more intelligent nor in reason ; but always to rush about without knowing whither, to take cities without knowing why, to act always without any design, was a course that would not have pleased many right-minded people.

*Alexander.* Let right-minded people say what they like. If I had used my bravery and fortune as prudently as all that, I should scarcely ever be mentioned.

*Phriné.* Nor I either, had I used my beauty so prudently. But if one wishes merely to make a commotion, one may be better equipped than by possessing a very reasonable character.

## Dido and Stratonice

*DIDO.* Alas, my poor Stratonice, I am unhappy. You know what my life was. I maintained so precise a fidelity to my first husband, that I burned myself alive to prevent my receiving another. For all that I have not escaped evil rumour. It has pleased a poet, a certain Virgil, to transform so strict a prude as I was into a young flirt, charmed by a stranger's nice face the first day she sees him. My whole story turned upside down. The funeral pyre is left me, I admit, but my reason is no more the fear of being forced into a second marriage ; I am supposed to be in despair lest the stranger abandon me.

*Stratonice.* And the consequences might be most dangerous. Very few women will care to immolate themselves for wifely fidelity, if a poet, after their deaths, is to be left free to say what he likes of them. But, perhaps, your Virgil was not so very far wrong ; perhaps he has unravelled some intrigue of your life which you had hoped to keep hidden. Who knows ? I should not care to take oath about your pyre.

*Dido.* If there was the slightest likelihood in Virgil's suggestion, I should not mind being sus-

pected; but he makes my lover Æneas, a man dead three centuries before I came into the world.

*Stratonice.* There's something in what you say. And yet you and Æneas seem to have been expressly made for each other. You were both forced to leave your native countries; you sought your fortunes with strangers—he a widower, you a widow: all this is in harmony. It is true you were born three hundred years after his death; but Virgil saw so many good reasons for bringing you together that he has counted time for a trifle.

*Dido.* Is that sensible? Good heavens, are not three hundred years always three hundred? Can two people meet and fall in love, despite such an obstacle?

*Stratonice.* Oh, Virgil was very clever in that. Assuredly he was a man of the world, he wished to show that we must not judge other people's love affairs by appearance, and that those which show least are often the truest.

*Dido.* I am not at all pleased that he should attack my reputation for the sake of this pretty fable.

*Stratonice.* But he has not turned you into ridicule, has he? He has not filled your mouth with silliness?

*Dido.* Not in the least. He has recited me his poem. The whole part that concerns me is divine, almost to the slander itself. In it I am beautiful, I say very fine things about my fictitious passion; and if Virgil had been obliged in the *Æneid* to show me as a respectable woman, the *Æneid* would be greatly impoverished.

*Stratonice.* Well, then, what do you complain of? They ascribe to you a romance which does not belong

to you: what a misfortune! And in recompense they ascribe to you a beauty and wit which may not have been yours either.

*Dido.* A fine consolation!

*Stratonice.* I am not sufficiently your intimate to be sure how you will feel this, but most women, I think, would rather that people spoke ill of their character than of their wit or their beauty. Such was my temperament. A painter at the court of my husband, the Syrian king, was discontented with me, and to avenge himself he painted me in the arms of a soldier. He showed the picture and fled. My subjects, zealous for my glory, wished to burn the picture in public, but as I was painted admirably well and with a great deal of beauty—although the attitude was scarcely creditable to my virtue—I forbade them the burning, had the painter recalled and pardoned him. If you will take my advice, you will do likewise with Virgil.

*Dido.* That would be all very well if a woman's first merit were to be beautiful or to be full of wit.

*Stratonice.* I cannot decide about this thing you call the first merit, but in ordinary life the first question about a woman one does not know is: Is she pretty? The second: Is she intelligent? People very rarely ask a third question.

## Anacreon and Aristotle

*ARISTOTLE.* I should never have thought that a maker of ditties would have dared compare himself to a philosopher with so great a reputation as mine.

*Anacreon.* You did very well for the name of philosopher, yet I, with my "ditties," did not escape being called the wise Anacreon; and I think the title "philosopher" scarcely worth that of "the wise."

*Aristotle.* Those who gave you that title took no great care what they said. What had you done, at any time, to deserve it?

*Anacreon.* I had done nothing but drink, sing, and wax amorous; and the wonder is that people called me "the Wise" at this price, while they have called you merely "philosopher" and this has cost you infinite trouble: for how many nights have you passed picking over the thorny questions of dialectic? How many plump books have you written on obscure matters, which perhaps even you yourself do not understand very well?

*Aristotle.* I confess that you have taken an easier road to wisdom, and you must have been very

clever to get more glory with a lute and a bottle than the greatest of men have achieved with vigils and labour.

*Anacreon.* You pretend to laugh at it, but I maintain that it is more difficult to drink and to sing as I have, than to philosophize as you have philosophized. To sing and to drink, as I did, required that one should have disentangled one's soul from violent passions; that we should not aspire to things not dependent upon us, that we be ready always to take time as we find it. In short, to begin with, one must arrange a number of little affairs in oneself; and although this needs small dialectic, it is, for all that, not so very easy to manage. But one may at smaller expense philosophize as you have philosophized. One need not cure oneself of either ambition or avarice; one has an agreeable welcome at the court of Alexander the Great; one draws half a million crowns' worth of presents, and they are not all used in physical experiments though such was the donor's intention, in a word, this sort of philosophy drags in things rather opposed to philosophy.

*Aristotle.* You have heard much scandal about me down here, but, after all, man is man solely on account of his reason, and nothing is finer than to teach men how they ought to use it in studying nature and in unveiling all these enigmas which she sets before us.

*Anacreon.* That is just how men destroy custom in all things! Philosophy is, in itself, an admirable thing, and might be very useful to men, but because she would incommode them if they employed her in daily affairs, or if she dwelt near them to keep some rein on their passions, they have sent her to

heaven to look after the planets and put a span on their movements; or if men walk out with her upon earth it is to have her scrutinize all that they see there; they always keep her busy as far as may be from themselves. However, as they wish to be philosophers cheaply they have stretched the sense of the term, and they give it now for the most part to such as seek natural causes.

*Aristotle.* What more fitting name could one give them?

*Anacreon.* A philosopher is concerned only with men and by no means with the rest of the universe. An astronomer considers the stars, a physicist nature, a philosopher considers himself. But who would choose this last rôle on so hard a condition? Alas, hardly any one. So we do not insist on philosophers being philosophers, we are content to find them physicists or astronomers. For myself, I was by no means inclined to speculation, but I am sure that there is less philosophy in a great many books which pretend to treat of it, than in some of these little songs which you so greatly despise, in this one, for example:

Would gold prolong my life  
I'd have no other care  
Than gathering gold,  
And when death came  
I'd pay the same  
To rid me of his presence.  
But since harsh fate  
Permits not this  
And gold is no more needful,  
Love and good cheer

Shall share my care—  
*Ah-ah-ah-ah—*  
Shall share  
My care.

*Aristotle.* If you wish to limit philosophy to the questions of ethics you will find things in my moral works worth quite as much as your verses: the obscurity for which I am blamed, and which is present perhaps in certain parts of my work, is not to be found in what I have said on this subject, and every one has admitted that there is nothing in them more clear or more beautiful than what I have said of the passions.

*Anacreon.* What an error! It is not a matter of defining the passions by rule, as I hear you have done, but of keeping them under. Men give philosophy their troubles to contemplate not to cure, and they have found a method of morals which touches them almost as little as does astronomy. Can one hold in one's laughter at the sight of people who preach the contempt of riches, for money, and of chicken-hearted wastrels brought even to fisticuffs over a definition of the magnanimous?

## IV

## Homer and Æsop

*HOMER.* These fables which you have just told me cannot be too greatly admired. You must have needed great art to disguise the most important moral instruction in little stories like these, and to hide your thoughts in metaphor so precise and familiar.

*Æsop.* It is very pleasant to be praised for such art by you who understood it so deeply.

*Homer.* Me? I never attempted it.

*Æsop.* What, did you not intend to conceal profound *arcana* in your great poems?

*Homer.* Unfortunately, never at all.

*Æsop.* But in my time all the connoisseurs said so; there was nothing in the *Iliad* or in the *Odyssey* to which they did not give the prettiest allegorical meanings. They claimed that all the secrets of theology and of physics, of ethics, and even of mathematics were wound into what you had written. Assuredly there was difficulty in getting them unwrapped: where one found a moral sense, another hit on a physical, but in the end they agreed that you had known everything and that you had said everything, if only one could well understand it.

*Homer.* Lying aside, I suspected that people would be found to understand subtleties where I had intended none. There is nothing like prophesying far distant matters and waiting the event, or like telling fables and awaiting the allegory.

*Æsop.* You must have been very daring to leave your readers to put the allegories into your poems! Where would you have been had they taken them in a flat literal sense?

*Homer.* If they had! It would have incommoded me little.

*Æsop.* What! The gods mangling each other, thundering Zeus in an assembly of divinities threatens Hera, the august, with a pummelling; Mars, wounded by Diomed, howls, as you say, like nine or ten thousand men, and acts like none (for instead of tearing the Greeks asunder, he amuses himself complaining to Zeus of his wound), would all this have been good without allegory?

*Homer.* Why not? You think the human mind seeks only the truth: undeceive yourself. Human intelligence has great sympathy with the false. If you intend telling the truth, you do excellently well to veil it in fables, you render it far more pleasing. If you wish to tell fables they will please well enough without containing any truth whatsoever. Truth must borrow the face of falsehood to win good reception in the mind, but the false goes in quite well with its own face, for it so enters its birthplace and its habitual dwelling, the truth comes there as a stranger. I will tell you much more: if I had killed myself imagining allegorical fables, it might well have happened that most folk would have found the fables too probable, and so dispensed with the



allegory; as a matter of fact, and one which you ought to know, my gods, such as they are, without mysteries, have not been considered ridiculous.

*Æsop.* You shake me, I am terribly afraid that people will believe that beasts really talked as they do in my fables.

*Homer.* A not disagreeable fear!

*Æsop.* What! if people believe that the gods held such conversations as you have ascribed to them, why shouldn't they believe that animals talked as I make them?

*Homer.* That is different. Men would like to think the gods as foolish as themselves, but never the beasts as wise.

*Æsop*

V

## Socrates and Montaigne

*MONTAIGNE.* Is it really you, divine Socrates? How glad I am of this meeting! I am quite newly come to this country, and I have been seeking you since my arrival. Finally, after having filled my book with your name and your praises, I can talk with you, and learn how you possessed that so *naïve* \* virtue, whereof the *allures* \* were so natural, and which was without parallel in even your happy age.

*Socrates.* I am very glad to see a ghost who appears to have been a philosopher; but since you are newly descended, and seeing that it is a long time since I have seen any one here (for they leave me pretty much alone, and there is no great crowding to investigate my conversation), let me ask you for news. How goes the world? Has it not altered?

*Montaigne.* Immensely. You would not know it.

*Socrates.* I am delighted. I always suspected that it would have to become better and wiser than I had found it in my time.

*Montaigne.* What do you mean? It is madder and more corrupt than ever before. That is the

\* Termes de Montaigne.

*XV*  
*Flourens*  
*Julie*

change I was wishing to speak of, and I expected you to tell me of an age as you had seen it, an age ruled by justice and probity.

*Socrates.* And I on the other hand was expecting to learn the marvels of the age wherein you have but ceased to exist. But, men at present, do you say, have not corrected their classic follies?

*Montaigne.* I think it is because you yourself are a classic that you speak so disrespectfully of antiquity; but you must know that our habits are lamentable, things deteriorate day in and day out.

*Socrates.* Is it possible? It seemed to me in my time that things were already in a very bad way. I thought they must finally work into a more reasonable course, and that mankind would profit by so many years of experiment.

*Montaigne.* Do men ever experiment? They are like birds, caught always in the very same snares wherein have been taken a hundred thousand more of their species. There is no one who does not enter life wholly new, the stupidities of the fathers are not the least use to their children.

*Socrates.* What! no experiments? I thought the world might have an old age less foolish and unruled than its youth.

*Montaigne.* Men of all time are moved by the same inclinations, over which reason is powerless. Where there are men there are follies, the same ones.

*Socrates.* In that case why do you think that antiquity was better than to-day?

*Montaigne.* Ah, Socrates, I knew you had a peculiar manner of reasoning and of catching your collocutors in arguments whereof they did not foresee the conclusion, and that you led them whither you

would, and that you called yourself the midwife of their thoughts conducting accouchement. I confess that I am brought to bed of a proposition contrary to what I proposed, but still I will not give in. Certain it is that we no longer find the firm and vigorous souls of antiquity, of Aristides, of Phocion, of Pericles, or, indeed, of Socrates.

*Socrates.* Why not? Is nature exhausted that she should have no longer the power of producing great souls? And why should she be exhausted of nothing save reasonable men? Not one of her works has degenerated; why should there be nothing save mankind which degenerates?

*Montaigne.* It's flat fact: man degenerates. It seems that in old time nature showed us certain great patterns of men in order to persuade us that she could have made more had she wished, and that she had been negligent making the rest.

*Socrates.* Be on your guard in one thing. Antiquity is very peculiar, it is the sole thing of its species: distance enlarges it. Had you known Aristides, Phocion, Pericles and me, since you wish to add me to the number, you would have found men of your time to resemble us. We are predisposed to antiquity because we dislike our own age, thus antiquity profits. Man elevates the men of old time to abase his contemporaries. When we lived we overestimated our forebears, and now our posterity esteems us more than our due, and quite rightly. I think the world would be very tedious if one saw it with perfect precision, for it is always the same.

*Montaigne.* I should have thought that it was all in movement, that everything changed; that different

ages had different characteristics, like men. Surely one sees learned ages, and ignorant, simple ages and ages greatly refined? One sees ages serious, and trifling ages, ages polite, ages boorish?

*Socrates.* True.

*Montaigne.* Why then are not some ages more virtuous, others more evil?

*Socrates.* That does not follow. Clothes change, but that does not mean a change in the shape of the body. Politeness or grossness, knowledge or ignorance, a higher or lower degree of simplicity, a spirit serious or of roguery, these are but the outside of a man, all this changes, but the heart does not change, and man is all in the heart. One is ignorant in one age, but a fashion of knowledge may come; one is anxious for one's own advantage, but a fashion for being unselfish will not come to replace this. Out of the prodigious number of unreasonable men born in each era, nature makes two or three dozen with reason, she must scatter them wide over the earth, and you can well guess that there are never enough of them found in one spot to set up a fashion of virtue and rightness.

*Montaigne.* But is this scattering evenly done? Some ages might fare better than others.

*Socrates.* At most an imperceptible inequality. The general order of nature would seem to be rather constant.

## VI

## Charles V and Erasmus

*ERASMUS.* Be in no uncertainty, if there are ranks among the dead, I shall not cede you precedence.

*Charles.* A grammarian! A mere savant, or to push your claims to extremes, a man of wit, who would carry it off over a prince who has been master of the best half of Europe!

*Erasmus.* Add also America, and I am not the least more alarmed. Your greatness was a mere conglomeration of chances, as one who should sort out all its parts would make you see clearly. If your grandfather Ferdinand had been a man of his word, you would have had next to nothing in Italy; if other princes had had sense enough to believe in antipodes, Columbus would not have come to him, and America would not have been beneath your dominion; if, after the death of the last Duke of Burgundy, Louis XI had well considered his actions, the heiress of Burgundy would not have married Maximilian, or the Low Countries descended to you; if Henry of Castile, the brother of your grandmother Isabel, had not had a bad name among women, or if his wife had been of an unsuspectable virtue, Henry's

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daughter would have passed for his daughter and the kingdom of Castile have escaped you.

*Charles.* You alarm me. At this late hour I am to lose Castile, or the Low Lands, or America, or Italy, one or the other.

*Erasmus.* You need not laugh. There could not have been a little good sense in one place, or a little good faith in another without its costing you dearly. There was nothing—to your great-uncle's impotence; to the inconstancy of your great-aunt—that you could have done without. How delicate is that edifice whose foundation is such a collection of hazards.

*Charles.* There is no means of bearing so strict an examination as yours. I confess that you sweep away all my greatness and all my titles.

*Erasmus.* They were the adornments whereof you boasted, and I have swept them away without trouble. Do you remember having heard said that the Athenian Cimon, having taken prisoner a great number of Persians, put up their clothing and their naked bodies for sale, and since the clothes were greatly magnificent there was great concourse to buy them, but no one would bid for the men? Faith, I think what befell the Persians would happen to a good number of others if one detached their personal merit from that which fortune has given them.

*Charles.* What is personal merit?

*Erasmus.* Need one ask that? Everything that is in us, our mind, for example, our knowledge.

*Charles.* And can one reasonably boast of these things?

*Erasmus.* Certainly. These are not gifts of chance like high birth and riches.

*Charles.* You surprise me. Does not knowledge

come to the savant as wealth comes to most who have it? Is it not by way of inheritance? You receive from the ancients, as we receive from our fathers. If we have been left all we possess, you have been left all that you know, and on this account many scholars regard what they have from the ancients with such respect as certain men regard their ancestral lands and houses, wherein they would hate to have anything changed.

*Erasmus.* The great are born heirs of their father's greatness, but the learned are not born inheritors of the ancient learning. Knowledge is not an entail received, it is an wholly new acquisition made by personal effort, or if it is an entail it is so difficult to receive as to be worthy of honour.

*Charles.* Very well. Set the trouble of acquiring mental possessions against that of preserving the goods of fortune, the two things are quite equal; for if difficulty is all that you prize, there is as much in worldly affairs as in the philosopher's study.

*Erasmus.* Then set knowledge aside and confine ourselves to the mind, that at least does not depend upon fortune.

*Charles.* Does not depend? The mind consists of a certain formation of cerebrum, is there less luck in being born with a respectable cerebrum than being born son to a king? You were a man of great genius; but ask all the philosophers why you weren't stupid and log-headed; it depended on next to nothing, on a mere disposition of fibres so fine that the most delicate operation of anatomy cannot find it. And after knowing all this the fine wits still dare to tell us that they alone are free from the dominion

of chance, and think themselves at liberty to despise the rest of mankind.

*Erasmus.* Your argument is that it is as creditable to be rich as to show fine intelligence.

*Charles.* To have fine intelligence is merely a luckier chance, but chance it all is at the bottom.

*Erasmus.* You mean that all is chance?

*Charles.* Yes, provided we give that name to an order we do not understand. I leave you to decide whether I have not plucked men cleaner than you have; you merely strip from them certain advantages of birth, I take even those of their understanding. If before being vain of a thing they should try to assure themselves that it really belonged to them, there would be little vanity left in the world.

## VII

## Agnes Sorel—Roxelane

*AGNES.* To tell you the truth, I don't understand your Turkish gallantry. The beauties of the seraglio have a lover who has only to say: I want it. They never enjoy the pleasures of resistance, and they cannot provide the pleasures of victory, all the delights of love are thus lost to sultans and sultanas.

*Roxelane.* How would you arrange it? The Turkish emperors being extremely jealous of their authority have set aside these refinements of dalliance. They are afraid that pretty women, not wholly dependent upon them, would usurp too great a sway over their minds, and meddle too greatly in public affairs.

*Agnes.* Very well! How do they know whether that would be a misfortune? Love has a number of uses, and I who speak to you, had I not been mistress to a French King, and if I had not had great power over him, I do not know where France would be at this hour. Have you heard tell how desperate were our affairs under Charles VII, to what state the kingdom was reduced, with the English masters of nearly the whole of it?

*Roxelane.* Yes, as the affair made a great stir, I know that a certain virgin saved France, and you were then this girl, La Pucelle? But how in that case were you at the same time the king's mistress?

*Agnes.* You are wrong. I have nothing in common with the virgin of whom you speak. The king by whom I was loved wished to abandon his kingdom to foreign usurpers, he went to hide in a mountainous region, where it would have been by no means too comfortable for me to have followed him. I contrived to upset this plan. I called an astrologer with whom I had a private agreement, and after he had pretended to scan my nativity, he told me one day in Charles's presence that if all the stars were not liars I should be a king's mistress, and loved with a long-lasting passion. I said at once: "You will not mind, Sire, if I leave for the English Court, for you do not wish to be king, and have not yet loved me long enough for my destiny to be fulfilled." The fear which he had of losing me made him resolve to be king, and he began from that time to strengthen his kingdom. You see what France owes to love, and how gallant she should be, if only from recognition.

*Roxelane.* It is true, but returning to La Pucelle. What was her part? Was history wrong in attributing to a young peasant girl what truly belonged to a court lady and a king's mistress?

*Agnes.* Were history wrong on this point, it were no great wonder. However, it is true that La Pucelle greatly stirred up the soldiers, but I before that had animated the king. She was a great aid to this monarch, whom she found armed against the English, but without me she would not have found him so armed. And you will no longer doubt my part in

this great affair when you hear the witness which one of Charles VII's successors has borne to me in this quatrain:

Agnes Sorel, more honour have you won in  
the good cause, our France, her restoration,  
than e'er was got by prayer and close cloistral  
of pious eremite or devout nun.

What do you say to it, Roxelane? Will you confess that if I had been a sultana like you, and had I not had the right to threaten Charles VII as I did, he would have lost his all?

*Roxelane.* I am surprised that you should be so vain of so slight an action. You had no difficulty in gaining great power over the mind of your lover, you who were free and mistress of yourself, but I, slave as I was, subjugated the sultan. You made Charles VII king, almost in spite of himself, but I made Soliman my husband despite his position.

*Agnes.* What! They say the sultans never marry.

*Roxelane.* I agree, and still I made up my mind to marry Soliman, although I could not lead him into marriage by the hope of anything he did not already possess. You shall hear a finer scheme than your own. I began to build temples, and to do many deeds of piety, then I appeared very sorrowful. The sultan asked me the reason over and over again, and after the necessary preliminaries and crotchets, I told him that I was melancholy because my good deeds, as I heard from our learned men, would bring me no reward, seeing that I was merely a slave, and worked only for Soliman, my master. Soliman thereupon freed me, in order that I might reap the reward of my virtuous actions, then when he wished to cohabit

with me and to treat me like a bride of the harem, I appeared greatly surprised. I told him with great gravity that he had no rights over the body of a free woman. Soliman had a delicate conscience: he went to consult a doctor of laws with whom I had a certain agreement. His reply was that the sultan should abstain, as I was no longer his slave, and that unless he espoused me, he could not rightly take me for his. He fell deeper in love than ever. He had only one course to follow, but it was a very extraordinary course, and even dangerous, because of its novelty; however, he took it and married me.

*Agnes.* I confess that it is fine to subject those who stand so on their guard 'gainst our empery.

*Roxelane.* Men strive in vain, when we lay hold of them by their passions, we lead them whither we will. If they would let me live again, and give me the most imperious man in the world, I would make of him whatever I chose, provided only that I had of wit much, of beauty sufficient, and of love only a little.

## VIII

## Brutus and Faustina

*BRUTUS.* What! Is it possible that you took pleasure in your thousand infidelities to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the most affable husband, and without doubt the best man in Roman dominions?

*Faustina.* And is it possible that you assassinated Julius Cæsar, that so mild and moderate emperor?

*Brutus.* I wished to terrify all usurpers by the example of Cæsar, whose very mildness and moderation were no guarantee of security.

*Faustina.* And if I should tell you that I wished to terrify likewise all husbands, so that no man should dare to be a husband after the example I made of Aurelius, whose indulgence was so ill requited?

*Brutus.* A fine scheme! We must, however, have husbands or who would govern the women? But Rome had no need to be governed by Cæsar.

*Faustina.* Who told you that? Rome had begun to have madcap crotchets as humorous and fantastical as those which are laid to most women's credit, she could no longer dispense with a master, and yet she was ill-pleased to find one. Women are of the



identical character, and we may equally agree that men are too jealous of their domination, they exercise it in marriage and that is a great beginning, but they wish to extend it to love. When they ask that a mistress be faithful, by faithful they mean submissive. The rule should be equally shared between lover and mistress, however it always shifts to one side or the other, almost always to that of the lover.

*Brutus.* You are in a strange revolt against men.

*Faustina.* I am a Roman, and I have a Roman feeling for liberty.

*Brutus.* The world is quite full of such Romans, but Romans of my type are, you will confess, much more rare.

*Faustina.* It is a very good thing that they are. I do not think that any honest man would behave as you did, or assassinate his benefactor.

*Brutus.* I think there are equally few honest women who would have copied your conduct, as for mine, you must admit it showed firmness. It needed a deal of courage not to be affected by Cæsar's feeling of friendship.

*Faustina.* Do you think it needed less vigour to hold out against the gentleness and patience of Marcus Aurelius? He looked on all my infidelities with indifference; he would not do me honour by jealousy, he took away from me the joys of deceiving him. I was so greatly enraged at it, that I sometimes wished to turn pious. However, I did not sink to that weakness, and after my death even, did not Marcus Aurelius do me the despite of building me temples, of giving me priests, and of setting up in my honour what is called the Faustinian festival? Would it not drive one to fury? To have given me

a gorgeous apotheosis!—to have exalted me as a goddess!

*Brutus.* I confess I no longer understand women. These are the oddest complaints in the world.

*Faustina.* Would you not rather have plotted against Sylla than Cæsar? Sylla would have stirred your indignation and hate by his excess of cruelty. I should greatly have preferred to hoodwink a jealous man, even Cæsar, for example, of whom we are speaking. He had insupportable vanity, he wished to have the empire of the world all to himself, and his wife all to himself, and because he saw Clodius sharing one and Pompey the other, he could bear neither Pompey nor Clodius. I should have been happy with Cæsar!

*Brutus.* One moment and you wish to do away with all husbands, in the next you sigh for the worst.

*Faustina.* I could wish there were none in order that women might ever be free, but if there are to be husbands the most crabbed would please me most, for the sheer pleasure of gaining my liberty.

*Brutus.* I think for women of your temperament it is much better that there should be husbands. The more keen the desire for liberty, the more malignity there is in it.

## IX

## Helen and Fulvia

**H**ELLEN. I must hear your side of a story which Augustus told me a little while ago. Is it true, Fulvia, that you looked upon him with some favour, but that, when he did not respond, you stirred up your husband, Mark Antony, to make war upon him?

*Fulvia.* Very true, my dear Helen, and now that we are all ghosts there can be no harm in confessing it. Mark Antony was daft over the comedienne Citherida, I would have been glad to avenge myself by a love affair with Augustus; but Augustus was fussy about his mistresses, he found me neither young enough nor sufficiently pretty, and though I showed him quite clearly that he was undertaking a civil war through default of a few attentions to me, it was impossible to make him agreeable. I will even recite to you, if you like, some verses which he made of the matter, although they are not the least complimentary:

*Because Mark Antony is charmed with the Glaphira,*

[It was by that name that he called Citherida.]

*Fulvia wants to break me with her eyes,*

*Her Antony is faithless, what? Who cries:  
Augustus pays Mark's debts, or he must fear her.  
Must I, Augustus, come when Fulvia calls  
Merely because she wants me?  
At that rate, I'd have on my back  
A thousand wives unsatisfied.  
Love me, she says, or fight. The fates declare:  
She is too ugly. Let the trumpets blare.*

*Helen.* You and I, then, between us have caused the two greatest wars on record?

*Fulvia.* With this difference: you caused the Trojan War by your beauty, I that of Antony and Augustus by the opposite quality.

*Helen.* But still you have an advantage, your war was much more enjoyable. My husband avenged himself for an insult done him by loving me, which is quite common, yours avenged himself because a certain man had not loved you, and this is not ordinary at all.

*Fulvia.* Yes, but Antony didn't know that he was making his war on my account, while Menelaus knew quite well that his was on your account. That is what no one can pardon him. For Menelaus with all the Greeks behind him besieged Troy for ten years to tear you from Paris' arms, yet if Paris had insisted on giving you up, would not Menelaus, instead of all this, have had to stand ten years' siege in Sparta to keep from taking you back? Frankly I think your Trojans and Greeks deficient in humour, half of them silly to want you returned, the other half still more silly to keep you. Why should so many honest folk be immolated to the pleasures of one young man who was ignorant of what he was

doing? I cannot help smiling at that passage in Homer where after nine years of war wherein one had just lost so many people, he assembles a council before Priam's palace. Antenor thinks they should surrender you, I should have thought there was scant cause for hesitation, save that one might have regretted not having thought of this expedient long before. However, Paris bears witness that he mislikes the proposal, and Priam, who was, as Homer tells us, peer to the gods in wisdom, being embarrassed to see his Cabinet divided on such a delicate matter, not knowing which side to choose, orders every one to go home to supper.

*Helen.* The Trojan War has at least this in its favour, its ridiculous features are quite apparent, but the war between Augustus and Anthony did not show its reality. When one saw so great a number of Imperial eagles surging about the laud, no one thought of supposing that the cause of their mutual animosity was Augustus' refusal to you of his favours.

*Fulvia.* So it goes, we see men in great commotions, but the sources and springs are for the most part quite trivial and ridiculous. It is important for the glory of great events that their causes be hidden.

## X

## Seneca and Scarron

*SENECA.* You fill full my cup of joy, telling me that the stoics endure to this day and that in these latter ages you professedly held their doctrine.

*Scarron.* I was, without vanity, more of a stoic than you were, or than was Chrysippus, or Zeno, your founder. You were all in a position to philosophize at your ease. You yourself had immense possessions. The rest were either men of property or endowed with excellent health, or at least they had all their limbs. They came and went in the ordinary manner of men. But I was the shuttle of ill-fortune; misshapen, in a form scarcely human, immobile, bound in one spot like a tree, I suffered continually, and I showed that these evils are bounded by the body but can never reach the soul of a sage. Grief suffered always the shame of not being able to enter my house save by a limited number of doors.

*Seneca.* I am delighted to hear you speak thus. By your words alone I recognize you for a great stoic. Were you not your age's admiration?

*Scarron.* I was. I was not content to suffer my pangs with patience, I insulted them by my mockery.

Steadiness would have honoured another, but I attained gaiety.

*Seneca.* O stoic wisdom! You are, then, no chimera, as is the common opinion! You are in truth among men, and here is a wise man whom you have made no less happy than Zeus. Come, sir, I must lead you to Zeno and the rest of our stoics; I want them to see the fruit of their admirable lessons to men.

*Scarron.* You will greatly oblige me by introducing me to such illustrious shades.

*Seneca.* By what name must they know you?

*Scarron.* Scarron is the name.

*Seneca.* Scarron? The name is known to me. Have I not heard several moderns, who are here, speak of you?

*Scarron.* Possibly.

*Seneca.* Did you not write a great mass of humorous and ridiculous verses?

*Scarron.* Yes. I even invented a sort of poetry which they call the burlesque. It goes to the limit in merriment.

*Seneca.* But you were not then a philosopher?

*Scarron.* Why not?

*Seneca.* It is not a stoic's business to write ludicrous books and to try to be mirth-provoking.

*Scarron.* Oh! I see that you do not understand the perfections of humour. All wisdom is in it. One can draw ridicule out of anything; I could even get it out of your books, if I wished to, and without any trouble at all: yet all things will not give birth to the serious, and I defy you to put my works to any purpose save that for which they were made. Would not this tend to show that mirth rules over

all things, and that the world's affairs are not made for serious treatment? I have turned your Virgil's sacred *Æneid* into burlesque, and there is no better way to show that the magnificent and the ludicrous are near neighbours, with hardly a fence between them. All things are like these *tours de force* of perspective where a number of separate faces make, for example, an emperor if viewed from a particular angle; change the view-point and the figure formed is a scoundrel's.

*Seneca.* I am sorry that people did not understand that your frivolous verses were made to induce such profound reflections. Men would have respected you more than they did had they known you for so great a philosopher; but it was impossible to guess this from the plays you gave to the public.

*Scarron.* If I had written fat books to prove that poverty and sickness should have no effect on the gaiety of the sage, they would have been perhaps worthy of a stoic?

*Seneca.* Most assuredly.

*Scarron.* And I wrote heaven knows how many books which prove that in spite of poverty, in spite of infirmity, I was possessed of this gaiety; is not this better? Your treatises upon morals are but speculations on wisdom, my verses a continual practice.

*Seneca.* I am sure that your pretended wisdom was not a result of your reason, but merely of temperament.

*Scarron.* That is the best sort of wisdom in the world.

*Seneca.* They are droll wiseacres indeed who are temperamentally wise. Is it the least to their credit

that they are not stark raving? The happiness of being virtuous may come sometimes from nature, but the merit of being wise can never come but from reason.

*Scarron.* People scarcely pay any attention to what you call a merit, for if we see that some man has a virtue, and we can make out that it is not his by nature, we rate it at next to nothing. It would seem, however, that being acquired by so much trouble, we should the more esteem it: no matter, it is a mere result of the reason and inspires no confidence.

*Seneca.* One should rely even less on the inequality of temperament in your wise men, who are wise only as their blood pleases. One must know how the interiors of their bodies are disposed ere one can gauge the reach of their virtue. Is it not incomparably finer to be led only by reason; to make oneself independent of nature, so that one need fear no surprises?

*Scarron.* That were better if it were possible but, unfortunately, nature keeps perpetual guard on her rights. Her rights are initial movements, and no one can wrest them from her. Men are often well under way ere reason is warned or awakened, and when she is ready to act she finds things in great disorder, and it is even then doubtful if she can do aught to help matters. No, I am by no means surprised to see so many folk resting but incomplete faith upon reason.

*Seneca.* Hers alone is the government of men and the ruling of all this universe.

*Scarron.* Yet she seldom manages to maintain her authority. I have heard that some hundred

years after your death a platonic philosopher asked the reigning emperor for a little town in Calabria. It was wholly ruined. He wished to rebuild it and to police it according to the rules of Plato's *Republic* and to rename it Platonopolis. But the emperor refused the philosopher, having so little trust in divine Plato's reason that he was unwilling to risk to it the rule of a dump-heap. You see thereby how reason has ruined her credit. If she were in any way estimable, men would be the only creatures who could esteem her, and men do not esteem her at all.

Strato, Raphael of Urbino

*STRATO.* I did not expect that the advice I gave to my slave would have such happy effects, yet in the world above it saved me my life and my kingdom altogether, and here it has won me the admiration of all the sages.

*Raphael.* What advice did you give?

*Strato.* I was at Tyre. All the slaves revolted and butchered their masters, yet one of mine was humane enough to spare me, and to hide me from the fury of the rest. They agreed to choose for their king the man who, upon a set day, should see the sun rise before any one else. They gathered in the plain, the whole multitude gluing their eyes to the eastern heaven, where the sun is wont to arise; my slave alone, in accordance with my instructions, kept his eyes toward the west. You may well believe that the others thought him a fool. However, by turning his back on them he saw the first rays of the sun which caught on a lofty tower, while his fellows still sought the sun's body in the east. They admired the subtlety of his mind, but he confessed that it was my due and that I was still among the living. They elected me king as a man descended of gods.

*Raphael.* I see that your advice was quite useful yet do not find it a subject for wonder.

*Strato.* All our philosophers here will explain to you that I taught my slave that the wise should ever turn their backs on the mob, and that the general opinion is usually sound if you take it to mean its own opposite.

*Raphael.* These philosophers talk like philosophers. It is their business to scoff at common opinion and prejudice; yet there is nothing more convenient or useful than are these latter.

*Strato.* From the manner in which you speak, one sees that you had no difficulty in complying with them.

*Raphael.* I assure you that my defence of prejudice is disinterested, and that by taking prejudice's part I laid myself open to no small ridicule. They were searching the Roman ruins for statues and as I was a good sculptor and painter they chose me to judge which were antique. Michael Angelo, my competitor, made in secret a perfect statue of Bacchus. He broke off one of the fingers, then hid the statue in a place where he knew we would dig. I declared it antique when we found it. He said it was modern. I based my opinion chiefly on the beauty of the work which, according to our rules, was well worthy of Grecian carvers. Irritated at contradiction I carried the matter further, and said it had been done in the time of Polycletus or Phidias. Then Michael Angelo brought out the broken irrefutable finger. I was greatly mocked for my prejudice, but what would I have done without prejudice? I was judge, and as judge one must make decisions.

*Strato.* You would have decided according to reason.

*Raphael.* Does reason ever decide? I should never have known by any process of reason to what age the statue belonged, I should have seen only its excellent beauty, then prejudice came to my aid, saying that a beautiful statue was ancient, or should be. With such a decision I judged.

*Strato.* It may well be that reason has no incontestable formulae for things of such slight importance; but upon all questions of human conduct she has decisions quite sure. Unfortunately men do not consult them.

*Raphael.* Let us then consult her on some point and see if she will decide it. Ask her if we should weep or laugh at the death of our friends and relations. On one side she will say, "they are lost to you, therefore weep." On the other, "they are delivered from the miseries of this life, you should therefore be joyful." In the face of such answers from reason, we act as local custom decrees. We weep at her bidding, and we weep so thoroughly that we cannot conceive laughter as possible; or we laugh so thoroughly that tears seem out of the question.

*Strato.* Reason is not always so undecided. She allows custom to decide such matters as are not worth her attention, but think how many very considerable things there are upon which she has clear-cut ideas, and from which she draws consequences equally clear.

*Raphael.* Unless I am much mistaken there are very few of these clear ideas.

*Strato.* No matter, they alone are worthy of absolute trust.

*Raphael.* That cannot be, for reason offers us a very small number of set maxims, and our mind is so

made as to believe in many more. The overplus of one's inclination to believe in something or other all counts on the side of prejudice, and false opinions fill up the void.

*Strato.* But what need to cast oneself into error? Cannot one keep one's judgment suspended, in these unprovable matters? Reason stops when she knows not which way to turn.

*Raphael.* Very true, she has no other secret means of keeping herself from mistakes, save that of standing stock-still; but such a condition does violence to man's mind, the human mind is in movement, and it must continue to move. It is not every man who can doubt; we have need of illumination to attain this faculty, we have need of strength to continue it. Moreover doubt is without action and among mankind we must act.

*Strato.* Thus one should preserve the prejudices of custom in order to act like the next man but destroy the habits of thought in order to think like the sage.

*Raphael.* Better preserve them all. You seem to forget the old Samnite's answer when his compatriots sent to ask him what should be done with the Roman army which they had caught in the Caudine forks. The old man replied that they should put them all to the sword. The Samnites thought this too cruel; he then said they should let them go free and unscathed, and in the end they did neither, and reaped the evil result. It is the same with prejudices, we must either keep the whole lot or crush them out altogether, otherwise those you have eliminated will make you mistrust those which remain. The unhappiness of being deceived in many things will not be balanced by the pleasure of its being an unconscious deceit,

and you will have neither the illumination of truth nor yet the comfort of error.

*Strato.* If there were no means of escaping your alternative, one should not long hesitate about taking a side. We should root out all prejudice.

*Raphael.* But reason would hunt out all our old notions and leave nothing else in their place. She would create a species of vacuum. And how could one bear this? No, no, considering how slight an amount of reason inheres in all men, we must leave them the prejudices to which they are so well acclimatized. These prejudices are reason's supplement. All that is lacking on one side can be got out of the other.

XII

Bombastes Paracelsus and  
Molière

*MOLIERE.* I should be delighted with you, if only because of your name, Paracelsus. One would have thought you some Greek or Roman, and never have suspected that Paracelsus was an Helvetian philosopher.

*Paracelsus.* I have made my name as illustrious as it is lovely. My works are a great aid to those who would pierce nature's secrets, and more especially to those who launch out into the knowledge of genii and elementals.

*Molière.* I can readily believe that such is the true realm of science. To know men, whom one sees every day, is nothing; but to know the invisible genii is quite another affair.

*Paracelsus.* Doubtless. I have given precise information as to their nature, employments, and inclinations, as to their different orders, and their potencies throughout the cosmos.

*Molière.* How happy you were to be possessed of this knowledge, for before this you must have known



man so precisely, yet many men have not attained even this.

*Paracelsus.* Oh, there is no philosopher so inconsiderable as not to have done so.

*Molière.* I suppose so. And you yourself have no indecisions regarding the nature of the soul, or its functions, or the nature of its bonds with the body?

*Paracelsus.* Frankly, it's impossible that there should not always remain some uncertainties on these subjects, but we know as much of them as philosophy is able to learn.

*Molière.* And you yourself know no more?

*Paracelsus.* No. Isn't that quite enough?

*Molière.* Enough? It is nothing at all. You mean that you have leapt over men whom you do not understand, in order to come upon genii?

*Paracelsus.* Genii are much more stimulatory to our natural curiosity.

*Molière.* Yes, but it is unpardonable to speculate about them before one has completed one's knowledge of men. One would think the human mind wholly exhausted, when one sees men taking as objects of knowledge things which have perhaps no reality, and when one sees how gaily they do this. However, it is certain that there are enough very real objects to keep one wholly employed.

*Paracelsus.* The human mind naturally neglects the sciences which are too simple, and runs after those more mysterious. It is only upon these last that it can expend all its activity.

*Molière.* So much the worse for the mind; what you say is not at all to its credit. The truth presents itself, but being too simple it passes unrecognized, and ridiculous mysteries are received only because of

their mystery. I believe that if most men saw the universe as it is, seeing there neither *virtues* nor numbers, nor properties of the planets, nor fatalities tied to certain times and revolutions, they could not help saying of its admirable arrangement: "What, is that all there is to it?"

*Paracelsus.* You call these mysteries ridiculous, because you have not been able to reach into them, they are truly reserved for the great.

*Molière.* I esteem those who do not understand these mysteries quite as much as those who do understand; unfortunately nature has not made every one incapable of such understanding.

*Paracelsus.* But you who seem so didactic, what profession did you follow on earth?

*Molière.* A profession quite different from yours. You studied the powers of genii, I studied the follies of men.

*Paracelsus.* A fine subject. Do we not know well enough that men are subject to plenty of follies?

*Molière.* We know it in the gross, and confusedly; but we must come to details, and then we can understand the scope and extent of this science.

*Paracelsus.* Well, what use did you make of it?

*Molière.* I gathered in a particular place the greatest possible number of people and then showed them that they were all fools.

*Paracelsus.* It must have needed a terrible speech to get that plain fact into their heads.

*Molière.* Nothing is easier. One proves them their silliness without using much eloquence, or much premeditated reasoning. Their acts are so ludicrous that if you but show like acts before them, you overwhelm them with their own laughter.

*Paracelsus.* I understand you, you were a comedian. For myself I cannot conceive how one can get any pleasure from comedy; one goes to laugh at a representation of customs, why should one not laugh at the customs themselves?

*Molière.* In order to laugh at the world's affairs one must in some fashion stand apart, or outside them. Comedy takes you outside them, she shows them to you as a pageant in which you yourself have no part.

*Paracelsus.* But does not a man go straight back to that which he has so recently mocked, and take his wonted place in it?

*Molière.* No doubt. The other day, to amuse myself, I made a fable on this same subject. A young gosling flew with the usual clumsiness of his species, and during his momentary flight, which scarcely lifted him from the earth, he insulted the rest of the barnyard: "Unfortunate animals, I see you beneath me, you cannot thus cleave the æther." It was a very short mockery, the gosling fell with the words.

*Paracelsus.* What use then are the reflections of comedy, since they are like the flight of your gosling, and since one falls back at once into the communal silliness?

*Molière.* It is much to have laughed at oneself; nature has given us that marvellous faculty lest we make dupes of ourselves. How often, when half of our being is doing something with enthusiasm, does the other half stand aside laughing? And if need were we might find a third part to make mock of both of the others. You might say that man was made of inlays.

*Paracelsus.* I cannot see that there is much in all

this to occupy one's attention. A few banal reflections, a few jests of scanty foundation deserve but little esteem, but what efforts of meditation may we not need to treat of more lofty matters?

*Molière.* You are coming back to your genii, but I recognize only fools. However, although I have never worked upon subjects save those which lie before all men's eyes, I can predict that my comedies will outlast your exalted productions. Everything is subject to the changes of fashion, the labours of the mind are not exempt from this destiny of doublets and breeches. I have seen, Lord knows how many books and fashions of writing interred with their authors, very much in the manner that certain races bury a man with his most valued belongings. I know perfectly well that there may be revolutions in the kingdom of letters, and with all that I guarantee that my writings will endure. And I know why, for he who would paint for immortality must paint fools.