

Montaigne and Cicero on the Case of Gaius Blossius

The French essayist Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) revered the classical tradition. He had received the best available classical education when he was young, during which his father insisted that the boy be spoken to only in Latin. Later in life, while serving in the parliament of Bordeaux, he became acquainted with a fellow jurist, Étienne de La Boétie (1530-1563); the relationship quickly blossomed into an intense, all-consuming friendship that Montaigne described in one of his most famous essays, *De l'Amitié* (1.28 in the Pléiade edition). The relationship was cut short by the early death of La Boétie in 1563; writing seven years later, memorialized his friendship with La Boétie and at the same time revealed his continuing anguish over his friend's death.

Montaigne is aware, in the essay, that his display of grief, so many years after the passing of his friend, may seem excessive to some. He defends himself by asking the reader to delay judgment until the reader has lost someone as close to him as La Boétie was to Montaigne. In the course of this defense, Montaigne adduces the example of Gaius Blossius, from Cicero's *De Amicitia* (§37-38). In this section of his treatise, Cicero explains the limits of true friendship by citing the case of Blossius, a close friend of the tribune Tiberius Gracchus, who had recently been assassinated by an enraged senatorial mob. Under harsh interrogation, Blossius incriminated himself by confessing to his friendship with Gracchus and admitting that he would have done pretty much anything Gracchus had asked him to. He even admitted that he would have set fire to Rome's temples, had Gracchus asked him. In Cicero's mind this is taking friendship too far; most moderns agree. Blossius hangs over the *de Amicitia* as a constant reminder of the need to exercise ethical vigilance in the choice and cultivation of friends.

Montaigne's use of this *exemplum* therefore seems frankly odd to most modern readers. In this section of the essay Montaigne explores the ramifications of the mutual pouring of the selves into each other that characterizes a close, passionate friendship. In this context Montaigne says Cicero erred in his judgment, and that Blossius' friendship with Gracchus met the criteria for true friendship; it is not impeached in any respect by Blossius' answers to his interrogators. Rather, Montaigne's interpretation of Cicero shows that the interrogators (and Cicero himself) missed an important aspect of friendship. This demonstrates Montaigne's ability to disagree with his classical sources, as well as his independence of mind. Whether this independence is compelling to the modern reader is another matter. Many moderns would find Montaigne's faith in reason naïve. But Montaigne is not talking here of human behavior, broadly considered; he is speaking only of friendship, and friendship of a narrow, intensely focused kind. Such a relationship may have begun in a reasonable fashion, but it has progressed beyond reason—the foundation of reason is still there, but much more has been built upon it. In this case, reason is a proxy for faith; this faith is what allows such a confident, wholehearted outpouring of one's soul into the soul of the other. It is not a faith in the divine, but rather a deep, knowledgeable faith in the integrity of the friend. Cicero's failure to understand this, according to Montaigne, renders his judgment of Blossius wrong and misleading; ironically, Cicero, the great guide to aristocratic friendship for centuries of Latin readers, is blind to perhaps the deepest sort of friendship that a human being is capable of.