

Montaigne is the philosopher who Alain de Botton, in his recent successful series of films for BBC, considered to be foremost in arguing that esteem is a crucial element in happiness. Michel de Montaigne was a highly educated man, a member of the regional court in Perigord, the lord of a delightful manor in attractive country side quite close to St. Emilion, and a very modern man. He thought that there was not such a sharp distinction between man and animals, wondered how anyone could know the truth (all anyone can do is to approach it), worried about the plethora of information in the world, and thought that shame was a neglected but highly influential emotion (he gave several examples, mainly involving sexual shame). His closest friend, and some have argued the love of his life, was a man, Etienne de La Boetie. Montaigne wrote approvingly of sentimental attachments between men. Montaigne was a member of the Bordeaux regional parliament, married (some years after Etienne died) and was eventually to have 5 children, all daughters, although only one survived into adulthood. He was elected mayor of Bordeaux for two successive terms, although he was criticized for abandoning the city during a plague. He received honorary positions in the local Perigordine court. After his father died he withdrew to the small and isolated estate that he had inherited from his father, and spent the rest of his life there, except for one journey to Italy, where he went accompanied only by a male secretary. He reported on a gay marriage ceremony that he had observed there. He spent his time studying in the large library created by his father after the latter had returned from a successful army career in Italy.

Montaigne apparently used study to fight off periodic loneliness and despondency. Unlike Confucius who lamented his lack of official position in the following terms, "Am I some sort of bitter melon? Can I go on hanging here and never be eaten?" (The analects of Confucius, transl. Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, ?) or Machiavelli who began 'The Prince' by railing against his former master, one of the Medici, who had sacked him in 1513 despite the assistance that Machiavelli had given him in defeating the Florentine republic, Montaigne was offered official positions but voluntarily withdrew from them. Perhaps his sadness, and his social isolation (the chateau is well off the beaten track), was a reaction to some cause of social alienation: his sexual identity, perhaps?