

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 18

Translation by Charles Cotton (1685, Public domain) · Last updated on October 25, 2023

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COTTON-1-18-20250106-191448



That Men Are Not to Judge of Our Happiness till after Death

*scilicet ultima semper
Expectanda dies homini est, dicitur beatus,
Ante obitum nemo supremaque funera debet.*

*Mens last days still to be expected are,
E're we of them our Judgments do declare;
Nor can't of any one be rightly said,
That he is happy, till he first be dead.*

EVERY one is acquainted with the Story of King Cræsus to this purpose who being taken Prisoner by Cyrus, and by him condemn'd to die, as he was going to Execution, cry'd out, O Solon, Solon! which being presently reported to Cyrus, and he sending to enquire of him what it meant, Cræsus gave him to understand, that he now found the Advertisement Solon had formerly given him true to his Cost, which was, That men, however Fortune may smile upon them, could never be said to be happy, till they had been seen to pass over the last day of their Lives, by reason of the uncertainty and mutability of Humane things, which upon very light and trivial occasions, are subject to be totally chang'd into a quite contrary condition. And therefore it was, that Agesilaus made answer to one that was saying, what a happy young man the King of Persia was, to come so young to so mighty a Kingdom; 'Tis true, (said he) but neither was Priam unhappy at his years. In a short time, of Kings of Macedon, Successors to that mighty Alexander, were made Joyners and Scriveners at Rome, of a Tyrant of Sicily, a Pedant at Corinth, of a Conquerour of one half of the World, and General of so many Armies, a miserable Suppliant to the rascally Officers of a King of Ægypt. So much the prolongation of five or six Months of Life cost the Great and Noble Pompey, and no longer since than our Fathers days, Ludovico Forza, the tenth Duke of Millan, whom all Italy had so long truckled under, was seen to die a wretched Prisoner at Loches, but not till he had liv'd ten Years in Captivity, which was the worst part of his Fortune. The fairest of all Queens, Widow to the greatest King in Europe, did she not come to die by the hand of an Executioner? Unworthy and barbarous Cruelty! and a thousand more Examples there are of the same kind; for, it

seems, that as Storms and Tempests have a Malice to the proud, and overtow'ring heights of our lofty Buildings, there are also Spirits above that are envious of the Grandsieurs here below.

*Usque adeo res humanas vis abdita quædam
Obterit, & pulcros Fasces, sævasque secures
Proculcare ac ludibrio sibi habere videtur.*

*By which it does appear, a Power unseen
Rome's awful Fasces, and her Axes keen
Spurns under foot, and plainly does despise,
Of humane Power the vain Formalities.*

And it should seem also that Fortune sometimes lies in wait to surprize the last Hour of our Lives, to shew the Power she has in a Moment to overthrow what she was so many Years in building, making us cry out with *Laberius, Nimirum hac die una plus uixi, mihi quàm uiuendum fuit*, I have liv'd longer by this one day than I ought to have done. And in this Sence, this good Advice of *Solon* may reasonably be taken; but he being a Philosopher, with which sort of Men the Favours and Disgraces of Fortune stand for nothing, either to the making a Man happy or unhappy, and with home Grandsieurs and Powers, Accidents of Quality, are upon the Matter indifferent: I am apt to think that he had some farther Aim, and that his meaning was, that the very Felicity of Life it self, which depends upon the Tranquility and Contentment of a well-descended Spirit, and the Resolution and Assurance of a well-order'd Soul, ought never to be attributed to any Man, till he has first been seen to play the last, and doubtless the hardest act of his Part, because there may be Disguise and Dissimulation in all the rest, where these fine Philosophical Discourses are only put on; and where Accidents do not touch us to the Quick, they give us leasure to maintain the same sober Gravity; but in this last Scene of Death, there is no more counterfeiting, we must speak plain, and must discover what there is of pure and clean in the bottom.

*Nam uera uoces tum demum pectore ab imo
Ejiciuntur, & eripitur persona, manet res.*

*Then then at last Truth issues from the Heart,
The Vizor's gone, we act our own true part.*

Wherefore at this last all the other Actions of our Life ought to be tryed and sifted. 'Tis the Masterday, 'tis the day that is judge of all the rest, 'Tis the Day (says one of the Ancients) *that ought to be judge of all my foregoing Years*. To Death do I refer the Essay of the Fruit of all my Studies. We shall then see whether my Discourses came only from my Mouth, or from my Heart. I have seen many by their Death give a good or an ill Repute to their whole Life. *Scipio*, the Father-in-law of *Pompey* the great, in dying well, wip'd away the ill Opinion, that till then every one had conceiv'd of him. *Epaminondas* being ask'd which of the three he had in greatest esteem, *Chabrias*, *Iphicrates*, or himself; *You must first see us die* (said he) *before that Question can be resolv'd*: and in truth, he would infinitely wrong that great Man, who would weigh him without the Honour and Grandeur of his End.

God Almighty has order'd all things as it has best pleas'd him: But I have in my time seen three of the most execrable Persons that ever I knew in all manner of abominable living, and the most infamous to boot, who all dyed a very regular Death, and in all Circumstances compos'd even to Perfection. There are brave, and fortunate Deaths. I have seen Death cut the Thread of the Progress of a prodigious Advancement, and in the height and Flower of its encrease of a certain Person, with so glorious an end, that in my Opinion his Ambitious, and generous Designs had nothing in them so high and great as their Interruption; and he arriv'd, without compleating his course, at the Place to which his Ambition pretended, with greater Glory, than he could himself either hope or desire, and anticipated by his Fall the Name and power to which he aspir'd, by perfecting his Career. In the Judgment I make of another Man's Life, I always observe how he carried himself at his Death; and the principal Concern I have for my own, is, that I may die handsomly, that is, patiently, and without noise.