

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 19



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ESSAYS-1-19-20220525-104233

Let Others Judge of Our Happiness after Our Death

*A Scilicet ultima semper
Exspectanda dies homini est, dicitque beatus
Ante obitum nemo supremaque funera debet.*

A CHILDREN know this. They know the story of King Croesus who, taken prisoner by Cyrus and condemned to die, cried “O Solon! Solon!” as he was about to be executed. After someone told Cyrus of this, and after he sought to discover what it meant, Croesus told him that he was finding, at great personal cost, that the warning Solon had once given him was true: No matter how much fortune smiled down upon people, they could not consider themselves happy until their last day had come to pass because of the uncertainty and changes in human affairs which the slightest thing can upset. And thus Agesilaus, in front of whom someone had called the king of Persia happy for becoming the ruler of so powerful a state at a young age, said: “Yes, but Priam at that age was not unhappy.” Same with the kings of Macedonia, successors of this mighty Alexander, becoming carpenters and clerks in Rome;¹ and with tyrants of Sicily lecturers in Corinth;² a conqueror of half the world, a commander of so many armies, becoming a sad figure at the mercy of an Egyptian king’s wretched officers — this is what five or six more months of life cost the great Pompey.³ And in our fathers’ time, Ludovico Sforza, the tenth duke of Milan who made all of Italy quake for so long, died a prisoner in Loches. Worse yet, he had lived there ten years by then. c Did the most beautiful queen, widow of the greatest king of Christendom, not recently die at the hand of an executioner?⁴ Indecent and savage cruelty! A And a thousand more examples like these. For as storms and hurricanes seem to lash out at our proud and lofty buildings, there seems to be spirits, up above, envious of greatness down here.

*A Usque adeo res humanas uis abdita quaedam
Obterit, et pulchros fasces, saeuasque secures
Proculcare, ac ludibrio sibi habere uidetur.*

Of course everyone must expect a final day, always. And no-one is to be called happy before they are dead and buried. • OV., MET., 3.135

Some hidden force constantly chips away at human things and seems to tread on the noble fasces and fierce axes and to make a mockery of them. • LUCR., 5.1233

A Sometimes fortune seems to wait until the very last day of our life to show what it is capable of by knocking down, in an instant, what it had been building for years. And, like Laberius,⁵ we are made to cry “*Nimirum hoc die uno plus vixi mihi, quam vivendum fuit.*”

A We would be right, then, to listen to Solon’s warning. I’m not surprised that, being a philosopher, one to whom the favors and humiliations of fortune mean nothing, neither happiness nor unhappiness, and one for whom status and power are but accidents of little significance, he looked further ahead. And that he wanted to say that this kind of happiness in life, which depends on the peace and contentment of a well-bred mind and on the resolve and confidence of a well regulated soul, could not be attributed to anyone until they had been seen in the last act of their play—likely the hardest one too. A mask might do in all others, when philosophy is but pretty lines we deliver, and when the unexpected tries us only superficially and leaves us free to always stay in character. But in the final death scene, our final scene, there is no faking it. It is time to speak plainly;⁶ time to show what is left, good and true, at the bottom of the pot.

*A Nam verae voces tum demum pectore ab imo
Eliciuntur; et eripitur persona, manet res.*

Only then are true words spoken
from the heart. The mask is torn off.
Reality remains. • LUCR., 3.57

A This is why all other actions of our life should be weighed and measured against this last moment. It is the master, the day that speaks for all others. Here is the day, says an ancient one, that must speak for all my bygone years. I leave it to death to assess what I will have made of my studies.⁷ We will see, then, if my words come from my lips or from my heart.

B I have seen many who gave their whole life a good or bad reputation when they died. Scipio, Pompey’s father-in-law, died well and so redressed the poor opinion all had of him until then.⁸ When Epaminondas was asked who he thought was the best man, Chabrias, Iphicrates, or himself, he said: “Let us see how we die before we answer.”⁹ Indeed, he would be much cheated if someone were to judge him without taking into account the honor and greatness of his death. God willed it as he wished but, in my time, three of the worse and most despicable people I had the displeasure to know in my life had the most orderly deaths, composed in every way to perfection.

C Some die an admirable and fortunate death. I saw the thread of a man’s career cut when it was making wonderful progress and blossoming, and end so magnificently that his ambitious and audacious goals could not have been as remarkable as their interruption was. He reached his destination at once, with more prestige and glory than he could have wished or hoped for. And his demise brought him influence and fame faster than he had thought his career might.¹⁰

B In judging the life of another, I always consider how it ended. And in most of my own studies, how mine can end well, which is to say calmly and quietly.

 NOTES

- 1 Perseus, king of Macedonia some 150 years after Alexander the Great, died in captivity in Italy along with two of his three sons. His youngest, Alexander, survived and became a craftsman and a clerk.
- 2 Defeated by Timoleon in 344 BCE, Dionysius the Younger, ruler of Syracuse, lived the last year of his life in exile, in Corinth, where he became a public figure of sorts.
- 3 Pompey spent the last few months of his life running from Caesar. He tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Ptolemy XIII to help him. The pharaoh had him assassinated instead.
- 4 Mary, Queen of Scots, once the wife of Francis II of France, was executed in 1587. This is clear instance of a later addition, by Montaigne, to the original text likely composed in 1572.
- 5 Decimus Laberius, a Roman knight, who was made to appear on stage and thus, according to custom, lost his knighthood. He lamented that, in a single day, 60 years of honorable living had been undone.
- 6 Literally, “we must speak French” (*il faut parler François*).
- 7 Seneca writes “I will leave Death determine what I have accomplished” (*quid profecerim morti crediturus sum*). In French, Montaigne wrote *l'essay du fruit de mes estudes* giving us a clue as to the origin and meaning of the title of his book. The theme of what is to be made of his studies is reintroduced at the very end of this chapter.
- 8 This is Metellus Scipio who fought on Pompey’s side against Caesar and killed himself to avoid capture. When enemy soldiers came looking for him and, not knowing who he was, asked him where his commander was, he replied, as he died, “The commander is fine” (*imperator bene se habet*).
- 9 In Plutarch: “Hard to say while we are alive.” (*δύσκριτον ἕως ζῶμεν*).
- 10 This paragraph is generally understood to be a reference to Étienne de la Boétie. La Boétie was a poet, a writer, and a colleague and close friend of Montaigne’s. He died, with Montaigne by his side, in 1563, about nine years after this essay is estimated to have been written.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Amyot, Plut.	Amyot, Jacques, <i>Oeuvres morales et meslees de Plutarque</i>
Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Guicciardini, SdI	Guicciardini, Francesco, <i>History of Italy</i>
Hdt.	Herodotus, <i>Histories</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Macrob., Sat.	Macrobius, <i>Saturnalia</i>
Ov., Met.	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>
Plut., Aem.	Plutarch, <i>Parallel Lives - Aemilius Paulus</i>
Plut., Apoph.	Plutarch, <i>Moralia - Sayings of Spartans</i>
Plut., Regum	Plutarch, <i>Sayings of Kings and Commanders</i>
Plut., Tim.	Plutarch, <i>Parallel Lives - Timoleon</i>
Sen., Ep.	Seneca, <i>Epistles</i>