

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 35

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On Three Good Women

They are not by the dozen, as every one knows, and especially in the duties of marriage, for that is a bargain full of so many nice circumstances that 'tis hard a woman's will should long endure such a restraint; men, though their condition be something better under that tie, have yet enough to do. The true touch and test of a happy marriage have respect to the time of the companionship, if it has been constantly gentle, loyal, and agreeable. In our age, women commonly reserve the publication of their good offices, and their vehement affection toward their husbands, until they have lost them, or at least, till then defer the testimonies of their good will; a too slow testimony and unseasonable. By it they rather manifest that they never loved them till dead: their life is nothing but trouble; their death full of love and courtesies. As fathers conceal their affection from their children, women, likewise, conceal theirs from their husbands, to maintain a modest respect. This mystery is not for my palate; 'tis to much purpose that they scratch themselves and tear their hair. I whisper in a waiting-woman's or secretary's ear: "How were they, how did they live together?" I always have that good saying in my head: *iactantius mœrent, quæ minus dolent*. Their whimpering is offensive to the living and vain to the dead. We should willingly give them leave to laugh after we are dead, provided they will smile upon us whilst we are alive. Is it not enough to make a man revive in pure spite, that she, who spat in my face whilst I was in being, shall come to kiss my feet when I am no more? If there be any honor in lamenting a husband, it only appertains to those who smiled upon them whilst they had them; let those who wept during their lives laugh at their deaths, as well outwardly as within. Therefore, never regard those blubbered eyes and that pitiful voice; consider her deportment, her complexion, the plumpness of her cheeks under all those formal veils; 'tis there she talks plain French. There are few who do not mend upon it, and health is a quality that cannot lie. That starched and ceremonious countenance looks not so much back as forward, and is rather intended to get a new husband than to lament the old. When I was a boy, a very beautiful and virtuous lady, who is yet living, the widow of a prince, wore somewhat more ornament in her dress than our laws of widowhood allow, and being reproached with it, she made answer that it was because she was resolved to have no more love affairs, and would never marry again.

They mourn the more
ostentatiously, the less they grieve.
• TAC., ANN., 2.77

I have here, not at all dissenting from our customs, made choice of three women, who have also expressed the utmost of their goodness and affection about their husbands' deaths; yet are they examples of another kind than are now in use, and so austere that they will hardly be drawn into imitation.

The younger Pliny had near a house of his in Italy a neighbor who was exceedingly tormented with certain ulcers in his private parts. His wife seeing him so long to languish, entreated that he would give her leave to see and at leisure to consider of the condition of his disease, and that she would freely tell him what she thought. This permission being obtained, and she having curiously examined the business, found it impossible he could ever be cured, and that all he had to hope for or expect was a great while to linger out a painful and miserable life, and therefore, as the most sure and sovereign remedy, resolutely advised him to kill himself. But finding him a little tender and backward in so rude an attempt: "Do not think, my friend," said she, "that the torments I see thee endure are not as sensible to me as to thyself, and that to deliver myself from them, I will not myself make use of the same remedy I have prescribed to thee. I will accompany thee in the cure as I have done in the disease; fear nothing, but believe that we shall have pleasure in this passage that is to free us from so many miseries, and we will go happily together."

Which having said, and roused up her husband's courage, she resolved that they should throw themselves headlong into the sea out of a window that overlooked it, and that she might maintain to the last the loyal and vehement affection wherewith she had embraced him during his life, she would also have him die in her arms; but lest they should fail, and should quit their hold in the fall through fear, she tied herself fast to him by the waist, and so gave up her own life to procure her husband's repose.

This was a woman of mean condition; and, among that class of people, 'tis no very new thing to see some examples of rare virtue.

*extrema per illos
iustitia excedens terris vestigia fecit.*

Justice, when she left the earth,
took her last steps among them. •
VERG., G., 2.473

The other two were noble and rich, where examples of virtue are rarely lodged.

Arria, the wife of Caecina Paetus, a consular person, was the mother of another Arria, the wife of Thrasea Paetus, he whose virtue was so renowned in the time of Nero, and by this son-in-law, the grandmother of Fannia: for the resemblance of the names of these men and women, and their fortunes, have led to several mistakes. This first Arria, her husband Caecina Paetus, having been taken prisoner by some of the Emperor Claudius's people, after Scribonianus's defeat, whose party he had embraced in the war, begged of those who were to carry him prisoner to Rome, that they would take her into their ship, where she would be of much less charge and trouble to them than a great many persons they must otherwise have to attend her husband, and that she alone would undertake to serve him in his chamber, his kitchen, and all other offices. They refused, whereupon she put herself into a fisher-boat she hired on the spot, and in that manner followed him from Sclavonia. When she had

come to Rome, Junia, the widow of Scribonianus, having one day, from the resemblance of their fortune, accosted her in the Emperor's presence; she rudely repulsed her with these words, "I," said she, "speak to thee, or give ear to any thing thou sayest! to thee in whose lap Scribonianus was slain, and thou art yet alive!" These words, with several other signs, gave her friends to understand that she would undoubtedly despatch herself, impatient of supporting her husband's misfortune. And Thræsea, her son-in-law, beseeching her not to throw away herself, and saying to her, "What! if I should run the same fortune that Caecina has done, would you that your daughter, my wife, should do the same?" — "Would I?" replied she, "yes, yes, I would: if she had lived as long, and in as good understanding with thee as I have done, with my husband." These answers made them more careful of her, and to have a more watchful eye to her proceedings. One day, having said to those who looked to her: "'Tis to much purpose that you take all this pains to prevent me; you may indeed make me die an ill death, but to keep me from dying is not in your power"; she in a sudden frenzy started from a chair whereon she sat, and with all her force dashed her head against the wall, by which blow being laid flat in a swoon, and very much wounded, after they had again with great ado brought her to herself: "I told you," said she, "that if you refused me some easy way of dying, I should find out another, how painful soever."

The conclusion of so admirable a virtue was this: her husband Paetus, not having resolution enough of his own to despatch himself, as he was by the emperor's cruelty enjoined, one day, among others, after having first employed all the reasons and exhortations which she thought most prevalent to persuade him to it, she snatched the dagger he wore from his side, and holding it ready in her hand, for the conclusion of her admonitions; "Do thus, Paetus," said she, and in the same instant giving herself a mortal stab in the breast, and then drawing it out of the wound, presented it to him, ending her life with this noble, generous, and immortal saying, *Pæte, non dolet* — having time to pronounce no more but those three never-to-be-forgotten words: "Paetus, it is not painful."

*Casta suo gladium cum traderet Arria Pæto,
Quem de visceribus traxerat ipsa suis:
Si qua fides, vulnus quod feci non dolet, inquit;
Sed quod tu facies, id mihi, Pæte, dolet.*

The action was much more noble in itself, and of a braver sense than the poet expressed it: for she was so far from being deterred by the thought of her husband's wound and death and her own, that she had been their promotress and adviser: but having performed this high and courageous enterprise for her husband's only convenience, she had even in the last gasp of her life no other concern but for him, and of dispossessing him of the fear of dying with her. Paetus presently struck himself to the heart with the same weapon, ashamed, I suppose, to have stood in need of so dear and precious an example.

Pompeia Paulina, a young and very noble Roman lady, had married Seneca in his extreme old age. Nero, his fine pupil, sent his guards to him to denounce the sentence of death, which was performed after this manner: When the Roman emperors of those times had condemned any man of quality, they sent to him by their officers to choose what death

When the chaste Arria gave to
Poetus the reeking sword she had
drawn from her breast, 'If you
believe me,' she said, 'Paetus, the
wound I have made hurts not, but
'tis that which thou wilt make that
hurts me.' • MART., 1.14

he would, and to execute it within such or such a time, which was limited, according to the degree of their indignation, to a shorter or a longer respite, that they might therein have better leisure to dispose their affairs, and sometimes depriving them of the means of doing it by the shortness of the time; and if the condemned seemed unwilling to submit to the order, they had people ready at hand to execute it either by cutting the veins of the arms and legs, or by compelling them by force to swallow a draught of poison. But persons of honor would not abide this necessity, but made use of their own physicians and surgeons for this purpose. Seneca, with a calm and steady countenance, heard their charge, and presently called for paper to write his will, which being by the captain refused, he turned himself toward his friends, saying to them, "Since I cannot leave you any other acknowledgment of the obligation I have to you, I leave you at least the best thing I have, namely, the image of my life and manners, which I entreat you to keep in memory of me, that by so doing you may acquire the glory of sincere and real friends." And there withal, one while appeasing the sorrow he saw in them with gentle words, and presently raising his voice to reprove them: "What," said he, "are become of all our brave philosophical precepts? What are become of all the provisions we have so many years laid up against the accidents of fortune? Is Nero's cruelty unknown to us? What could we expect from him who had murdered his mother and his brother, but that he should put his tutor to death who had brought him up?" After having spoken these words in general, he turned himself toward his wife, and embracing her fast in his arms, as, her heart and strength failing her, she was ready to sink down with grief, he begged of her, for his sake, to bear this accident with a little more patience, telling her, that now the hour was come wherein he was to show, not by argument and discourse, but effect, the fruit he had acquired by his studies, and that he really embraced his death, not only without grief, but moreover with joy. "Wherefore, my dearest," said he, "do not dishonor it with thy tears, that it may not seem as if thou lovest thyself more than my reputation. Moderate thy grief, and comfort thyself in the knowledge thou hast had of me and my actions, leading the remainder of thy life in the same virtuous manner thou hast hitherto done." To which Paulina, having a little recovered her spirits, and warmed the magnanimity of her courage with a most generous affection, replied,—"No, Seneca," said she, "I am not a woman to suffer you to go alone in such a necessity: I will not have you think that the virtuous examples of your life have not taught me how to die; and when can I ever better or more fittingly do it, or more to my own desire, than with you? and therefore assure yourself I will go along with you."

Then Seneca, taking this noble and generous resolution of his wife in good part, and also willing to free himself from the fear of leaving her exposed to the cruelty of his enemies after his death: "I have, Paulina," said he, "instructed thee in what would serve thee happily to live; but thou more covetest, I see, the honor of dying: in truth, I will not grudge it thee; the constancy and resolution in our common end are the same, but the beauty and glory of thy part are much greater."

Which being said, the surgeons, at the same time, opened the veins of both their arms, but as those of Seneca were more shrunk up, as well with age as abstinence, made his blood flow too slowly, he moreover

commanded them to open the veins of his thighs; and lest the torments he endured might pierce his wife's heart, and also to free himself from the affliction of seeing her in so sad a condition, after having taken a very affectionate leave of her, he entreated she would suffer them to carry her into her chamber, which they accordingly did. But all these incisions being not yet enough to make him die, he commanded Statius Anneus, his physician, to give him a draught of poison, which had not much better effect; for by reason of the weakness and coldness of his limbs, it could not arrive at his heart. Wherefore they were forced to superadd a very hot bath, and then, feeling his end approach, whilst he had breath he continued excellent discourses upon the subject of his present condition, which the secretaries wrote down so long as they could hear his voice, and his last words were long after in high honor and esteem among men, and it is a great loss to us that they have not come down to our times. Then, feeling the last pangs of death, with the bloody water of the bath he bathed his head, saying: "This water I dedicate to Jupiter the deliverer."

Nero, being presently informed of all this, fearing lest the death of Paulina, who was one of the best-born ladies of Rome, and against whom he had no particular unkindness, should turn to his reproach, sent orders in all haste to bind up her wounds, which her attendants did without her knowledge, she being already half dead, and without all manner of sense. Thus, though she lived contrary to her own design, it was very honorably, and befitting her own virtue, her pale complexion ever after manifesting how much life had run from her veins.

These are my three very true stories, which I find as entertaining and as tragic as any of those we make out of our own heads wherewith to amuse the common people; and I wonder that they who are addicted to such relations, do not rather cull out ten thousand very fine stories, which are to be found in books, that would save them the trouble of invention, and be more useful and diverting; and he who would make a whole and connected body of them would need to add nothing of his own, but the connection only, as it were the solder of another metal; and might by this means embody a great many true events of all sorts, disposing and diversifying them according as the beauty of the work should require, after the same manner, almost, as Ovid has made up his *Metamorphoses* of the infinite number of various fables.

In the last couple, this is, moreover, worthy of consideration, that Paulina voluntarily offered to lose her life for the love of her husband, and that her husband had formerly also forborne to die for the love of her. We may think there is no just counterpoise in this exchange; but, according to his stoical humor, I fancy he thought he had done as much for her, in prolonging his life upon her account, as if he had died for her. In one of his letters to Lucilius, after he has given him to understand that, being seized with an ague in Rome, he presently took coach to go to a house he had in the country, contrary to his wife's opinion, who would have him stay, and that he had told her that the ague he was seized with was not a fever of the body but of the place, it follows thus: "She let me go," says he, "giving me a strict charge of my health. Now I, who know that her life is involved in mine, begin to make much of myself, that I may preserve her. And I lose the privilege my age has given me, of being more constant and resolute in many things, when I call to mind that in this old fellow there

is a young girl who is interested in his health. And since I cannot persuade her to love me more courageously, she makes me more solicitously love myself: for we must allow something to honest affections, and, sometimes, though occasions importune us to the contrary, we must call back life, even though it be with torment: we must hold the soul fast in our teeth, since the rule of living, among good men, is not so long as they please, but as long as they ought. He that loves not his wife nor his friend so well as to prolong his life for them, but will obstinately die, is too delicate and too effeminate: the soul must impose this upon itself, when the utility of our friends so requires; we must sometimes lend ourselves to our friends, and when we would die for ourselves must break that resolution for them. 'Tis a testimony of grandeur of courage to return to life for the consideration of another, as many excellent persons have done: and 'tis a mark of singular good nature to preserve old age (of which the greatest convenience is the indifference as to its duration, and a more stout and disdainful use of life), when a man perceives that this office is pleasing, agreeable, and useful to some person by whom he is very much beloved. And a man reaps by it a very pleasing reward; for what can be more delightful than to be so dear to his wife, as upon her account he shall become dearer to himself? Thus has my Paulina loaded me not only with her fears, but my own; it has not been sufficient to consider how resolutely I could die, but I have also considered how irresolutely she would bear my death. I am enforced to live, and sometimes to live in magnanimity."

These are his own words, as excellent as they everywhere are.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Mart.	Martial, <i>Epigrams</i>
Tac., Ann.	Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>
Verg., G.	Virgil, <i>Georgics</i>