

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book I · Chapter 3

Translation by John Florio (1603) · Last updated on April 23, 2021



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FLORIO-I-3-20210423-181803

Our affections are transported beyond our selves

THOSE WHICH STILL ACCUSE MEN for ever gaping after future things, and go about to teach us, to take hold of present fortunes, and settle our selves upon them, as having no hold of that which is to come; yea much lesse than we have of that which is already past, touch and are ever harping upon the commonest humane error, if they dare call that an error, to which Nature her selfe, for the service of the continuation of her worke, doth address us, imprinting (as it doth many others) this false imagination in us, as more jealous of our actions, than of our knowledge. We are never in our selves, but beyond. Feare, desire, and hope, draw us ever towards that which is to come, and remove our sense and consideration from that which is, to amuse us on that which shall be, yea when we shall be no more. *Calamitosus est animus futuri anxius. A minde in suspense what is to come, is in a pittifull case.*

This noble precept is often alleaged in *Plato, Follow thy businesse and know thy selfe*; Each of these two members, doth generally imply all our duty; and likewise enfolds his companion. He that should doe his businesse might perceive that his first lesson is, to know what he is, and what is convenient for him. And he that knoweth himselfe, takes no more anothers matters for his owne, but above all other things, loveth and correcteth himselfe, rejecteth superfluous occupations, idle imaginations, and unprofitable propositions. As if you grant follie what it desireth, it will no-whit be satisfied; so is wisdom content with that which is present, and never displeased with it selfe.

Epicurus doth dispense with his age touching the foresight and care of what shall insue.

Amongst the lawes that regard the deceased, that which ties the actions of Princes to be examined when they are dead, seemes to me verie solid. They are companions, if not masters of the lawes: That which justice could not worke on their heads, it is reason it effect upon their reputation, and goods of their successors: things wee many times preferre before our lives. It is a custome brings many singular commodities unto nations that

observe it, and to be desired of all good Princes: who have cause to complaine that the memorie of the wicked is used as theirs. Wee owe a like obedience and subjection to all Kings; for it respects their office: but estimation and affection, we owe it only to their vertue. If they be unworthy, wee are to endure them patiently, to conceale their vices, and to aid their indifferent actions with our commendations, as long as their a uthoritie hath need of our assistance, and that ought to be ascribed unto politike order. But our commerce with them being ended, there is no reason we should refuse the unfolding of our felt wrongs unto justice and our libertie. And specially to refuse good subjects, the glory to have reverently and faithfully served a master, whose imperfections were so well knowne unto them: exempting posteritie from so profitable an example. And such as for the respect of some private benefit or interest, doe wickedly embrace the memorie of an unworthy Prince, doe particular justice at the charge of publike justice. *Titus Livius* speaketh truly, where he saith, that the speech of men brought up under a royaltie is ever full of vaine ostentations, and false witness; everyman indifferently extolling the King, to the furthest straine of valour and soveraigne greatnesse.

The magnanimitie of those two Souldiers may be reproved, one of which being demanded of *Nero*, why he hated him, answered him to his teeth; I loved thee whilst thou wast worthy of love, but since thou becomest a parricide, a fire-brand, a Juglar, a Player, and a Coach-man, I hate thee, as thou deservest. The other being asked, wherefore he sought to kill him, answered, Because I finde no other course to hinder thy uncessant outrages and impious deeds. But can any man, that hath his senses about him, justly prove the publike and generall testimonies that since his death have beene given, and so shall be for ever, both against him and all such like reprobates, of his tyrannicall and wicked demeanours?

I am sorrie that in so sacred a policie as the Lacedemonian was, so fained and fond a ceremonie at the death of their Kings was ever devised and brought in use. All their confederates and neighbours, all the slave-Helotes, men and women pell-mell, for a testimonie of their grief and sorrow, did mangle and gash their foreheads, and in their out-cries and lamentations exclaimed, that their deceased King, howsoever he had lived, was and had be ene the best Prince that ever they had, ascribing in order the commendations due unto desert, and to the last and latter ranke, what belongs unto the first merit. *Aristotle* that hath an oare in every water, and medleth with all things, makes a question about *Solons* speech, who saith, that no man can truly be counted happy before his death, Whether he that lived and died according to his wish, may be named happy, whether his renowne be good or ill, and whether his posteritie be miserable or no. Whilst wee stirre and remove, wee transport ourselves by preoccupation wheresoever we list: but no sooner are wee out of being, but wee have no conunication at all with that which is. And it were better to tell *Solon*, that never man is happy then, since he never is so, but when he is no more.

Quisquam

Vix radicitus e vita se tollit, et ejicit:

Se facit esse qui quiddam super inscius ipse,

Quisquam

Vix radicitus e vita se tollit, et ejicit:

*Scarce any rids himselfe of life so cleere
But leaves unwitting some part of him heere:
Nor frees or quits himselfe sufficiently
From that his body which forlorne doth lie.*

Bertrand of Glesquin died at the siege of the castle of *Rancon*, neere unto *Puy* in *Avergne*: the besieged yeelding afterwards, were forced to carry the keies of the Castle, upon the decease of the Captaine.

Bartholomew of Alviano, Generall of the Venetian forces dying in their service and wars about *Brescia*, and his bodie being to be transported to *Venice*, through the territorie of *Verona*, which was then enemie unto them, the greatest part of the army thought it expedient to demand a safe conduct for their passage of those of *Verona*, to which *Theodore Trivulcio* stoutly opposed himselfe, and chose rather to pass it by main force and to hazard the day, saying it was not convenient that he who in his life time had never apprehended feare of his enemies should now being dead, seeme to feare them.

Verily in like matters by the lawes of *Greece*, hee that required a dead body of his enemies, with intent to bury the same, renounced the victory, and might no more erect a ny trophy of it: and he who was so required, purchased the title of honour and gaine. So did *Nicias* lose the advantage hee had clearely gained of the *Corinthians*; and contrariwise, *Agessilaus* assured that, hee doubtfully had gotten of the *Boeotians*.

These actions might bee deemed strange, if in all ages it were not a common-received opinion, not only to extend the care of our selves, beyond this life, but also to beleeeve, that heavenly favours doe often accompany us unto our grave, and continue in our posterity. Whereof there are so many examples (leaving our moderne a part that I need not wade farre into it. *Edward* the first King of *England*, in the long wars he had with *Robert* King of *Scotland*, having by triall found how greatly his presence a dvantaged the successe of his affaires, and how he was ever victorious in any enterprise he undertooke in his owne person; when hee died, bound his sonne by solemne oath, that being dead he should cause his body to be boyled, untill the flesh fell from the bones, which he should cause to be interred, and carefully keeping the bones, ever carry them about him, whenever hee should happen to have wars with the Scots: As if destiny had fatally annexed the victory unto his limmes.

John Zisca, who for the defence of *Wickliff's* opinions so much troubled the state of *Bohemia*, commanded that after his death his body should be flead, and a drum made of his skin, to be carried and sounded in all the wars against his enemies: deeming the sound of it would be a meanes to continue the advantages, which in his former warres hee had obtained of them. Certaine Indians did likewise carry the bones of one of their Captaines in the skirmishes they had with the Spaniards, in regard of the good successe hee had, whilst hee lived, against them: And other nations

of that new-found world, doe likewise carry the bodies of such worthy and fortunate men with them, as have died in their battels, to serve them in stead of good fortune and encouragement.

The first examples reserve nothing else in their tombes, but the reputation acquired by their former achievements: but these will also adjoyne unto it the power of working. The act of Captaine *Bayard* is of better composition, who perceiving himselfe deadly wound ed by a shot received in his body, being by his men perswaded to come off and retire himselfe from out the throng, answered, he would not now so neere his end begin to turne his face from his enemie: and having stoutly foughten so long as he could stand, feeling himselfe to faint and stagger from his horse, commanded his steward to lay him against a tree, but in such sort, that he might die with his face toward the enemie; as indeed hee did.

I may not omit this other example, as remarkable for this consideration, as any of the precedent. The Emperour *Maximilian*, great grand-father to *Philip* now King of *Spaine*, was a Prince highly endowed with many noble qualities, and amongst others with a well-nigh matchless comeliness of body; but with other customes of his, hee had this one much contrarie to other Princes, who to dispatch their weightiest affaires make often their close-stoole their regall Throne or Council-Chamber, which was, that hee would not permit any groome of his chamber (were he e never so neere about him) to see him in his inner chamber, who if he had occasion but to make water, would as nicely and as religiously with-draw himselfe as any maiden, and never suffer so much as a Phisition, much lesse any other whatsoever, to see t hose privie parts that all in modestie seeke to keepe secret and unseene. My selfe, that am so broad-mouthed and lavish in speeches, am notwithstanding naturally touched with that bashfulnesse. And unlesse it bee by the motion of necessity or of voluptuousnesse, I never willingly imparted those actions and parts (which custome willeth to bee concealed) to the view of any creature. I endure more compulsion, then I deeme befitting a man, especially of my profession. But hee grew to such superstition, that by expresse words in his last will and Testament, hee commanded, that being dead, hee should have linnen-flops put about them. Hee should by *Codicile* have annexed unto it, that hee who should put them on, might have his eies hood-winckt. The instruction which *Cyrus* giveth his children, that neither they nor any other should either see or touch his body, after the breath were once out of it; I ascribe it unto some motive of devotion in him. For both his historian and himselfe, amongst many other notable qualities they are endued with, have throughout all the course of their life seemed to have a singular respect and awfull reverence unto religion.

That story displeased me very much, which a nobleman told me of a kinsman of mine (a man very famous and well known both in peace and warre), which is, that dying very aged in his court, being much tormented with extreme pangs of the stone, hee with an earnest and unwearied care, employed all his last houres, to dispose the honour and ceremony of his funerals, and summoned all the nobilitie that came to visit him, to give him assured promise to be as assistants, and to convey him to his last resting place. To the very same Prince, who was with him at his last gasp,

he made very earnest suit, he would command all his household to wait upon him at his interment, inforcing many reasons, and alleaging divers examples to prove that it was a thing very convenient, and fitting a man of his qualitie: which assured promise when he had obtained, and had at his pleasure marshalled the order how they should march, he seemed quietly and contentedly to yeeld up the ghost. I have seldome seen a vanitie continue for so long.

This other curiositie meere opposite unto it (which to prove I need not labour for home examples) seemeth in my opinion cosen-german to this, that is, when one is ever ready to breathe his last, carefully and passionately to endeavour how to reduce the convoy of his obsequies unto some particular and unwonted parcimonie, to one servant and to one lanterne. I heare the humour and appointment of commended, who expressly forbade his heires to use those ceremonies about his interment, which in such cases were formerly accustomed. Is it temperance and frugalitie, to avoid charge and voluptuousnesse, the use and knowledge of which is imperceptible unto us? Loe here an easie reformation, and of small cost. Were it requisite to appoint any, I would be of opinion, that as well in that, as in all other actions of man's life, every man should referre the rule of it to the qualitie of his fortune. And the Philosopher *Lycon* did wisely appoint his friends to place his body where they should thinke it fittest and for the best: and for his obsequies, they should neither be superfluous, and over-costly, nor base and sparing. For my part, I would wholly relie on custome, which should dispose this ceremonie, and would yeeld my selfe to the discretion of the first or next into whose hands I might chance to fall. *Totus hic locus est contemnendus in nobis, non negligendus in nostris. All this matter should be despised of us, but not neglected of ours.* And religiously said a holy man; *Curatio funeris, conditio sepulturae, pompa exequiarum, magis sunt tivorum solatia, quam subsidia mortuorum. In the procuration of funerals, the maner of buriall, the pomp of obsequies, are rather comforts to the living, than helps to the dead.* Therefore *Socrates* answered *Criton*, who at the houre of his death asked him how he would be buried: *Even as you please*, said he. Were I to meddle further with this subject, I would deeme it more gallant to imitate those who yet living and breathing, undertake to enjo y the order and honour of their sepulchres, and that please themselves to behold their dead countenance in marble. Happy they that can rejoyce and gratifle their sense with insensibilitie, and live by their death!

A little thing would make me conceive an inexpiable hatred against all popular domination; although it seeme most naturall and just unto me; when I call to minde that inhumane injustice of the Athenians, who without further triall or remission, yea without suffering them so much as to reply or answer for themselves, condemned those noble and worthy Captaines, that returned victoriously from the sea-battell, which they (neere the Iles *Arginenses*) had gained of the Macedonians; the most contested, bloodie and greatest fight the Grecians ever obtained by sea with their owne forces: forsomuch as after the victory, they had rather followed those occasions, which the law of warre presented unto them, for their availe, than to their prejudice staid to gather and bury their dead men. And the successe of *Diomedon* makes their ruthlesse execution more hatefull, who being a man of notable and exemplar vertue, both military

and politike, and of them so cruelly condemned; after he had heard the bloody sentence, advancing himselfe forward to speake, having fit opportunitie and plausible audience; he, I say, in stead of excusing himselfe, or endeavouring to justifie his cause, or to exasperate the evident iniquity of so cruell a doome, expressed but a care of the Judges preservation, earnestly beseeching the Gods to turne that judgement to their good, praying that for want of not satisfying the vowes which hee and his companions had vowed in acknowledgement and thanksgiving for so famous a victory, and honourable fortune, they might not draw the wrath and revenge of the Gods upon them, declaring what their vowes were. And without more words, or any further reasons, couragiously addressed himselfe to his execution. But fortune some yeares after punished him alike, and made him taste of the verie same sauce. For *Chabrias*, Captaine Generall of their sea-fleet, having afterward obtained a famous victory of *Pollis*, Admirall of *Sparta*, in the Ile of *Naxos*, lost absolutely the benefit of it, and onely contented with the day (a matter of great consequence for their affaires) fearing to incurre the mischief of this example, and to save a few dead carcasses of his friends, that floated up and downe the sea, gave leasure to an infinite number of his living enemies, whom he might easily have surprized to sail away in safety, who afterward made them to purchase their importunate superstition, at a deere-deere rate.

*Quaeris, quo jaceas, post obitum, loco
Quo non nata jacent.*

*Where shall you lie when you are dead?
Where they lye that were never bred.*

This other restores the sense of rest unto a body without a soule,

*Neque sepulchrum, quo recipiat, habeat portum corporis.
Vbi remissa humana vita, corpus requiescat a malis?*

*To turne in as a hav'n, have he no grave,
Where life left, from all griefe he rest may have.*

Even as Nature makes us to see, that many dead things have yet certaine secret relations unto life. Wine doth alter and change in sellers, according to the changes and alterations of the seasons of its vineyard. And the flesh of wilde beasts and venison doth change qualitie and taste in the powdering-tubs, according to the nature of living flesh, as some say that have observed it.