

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 44



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Of sleeping

REASON doth appoint-us ever to walke in one path, but not alwayes to keepe one pace: And that a wise-man should not permit humane passions to stray from the right carrier; hee may (without prejudice unto his dutie) also leave-it unto them either to hasten or to slow his pace, and not place himselfe as an immoveable and impassible *Colossus*. Were vertue herselfe corporeall and incarnate, I think her pulse would beate and worke stronger, marching to an assault, then going to dinner: For, it is necessarie that she heate and move herselfe. I have therefore mark't-it as a rare thing, to see great personages sometimes, even in their weightiest enterprises, and most important affaires, hold themselves so resolutely-assured in their state, that they doe not so much as breake their sleepe for them. *Alexander* the great, on the day appointed for that furious-bloodie battle against *Darius*, slept so soundly and so long that morning, that *Parmenion* was faine to enter his chamber, and approaching neere unto his bed, twice or thrice to call him by his name, to awaken him, the houre of the battle being at hand, and urging him. *Otho* the Emperour having determined to kill himselfe; the very same night, after he had given order for his domesticall affaires, shared his monie amongst his servants, and whetted the edge of a sword, wherewith he intended to wound himselfe, expecting no other thing, but to know whether all his friendes were gone to rest, fell into so sound a sleepe, that the groomes of his chamber heard him snorte in another roome. This Emperours death hath many partes semblable unto that of great *Cato*, and namely this: For, *Cato* being prepared to defeate himselfe, whilst hee expected to heare newes, whether the Senators, whom he caused to retire, were lanced out from the haven of *Utica*, fell so fast asleepe, that he was heard to snorte into the next chamber: And he whom he had sent toward the porte, having awaked him, to tell him, the storme was so rough, that the Senators could not conveniently put out to sea, he sent another, and lying downe a new, fell asleepe againe, untill the last messenger assured him, they were gone. Wee may also compare him unto *Alexander*; in that great and dangerous storme, which threatened him, by the sedition of *Metellus* the Tribune, who laboured to publish the decree of *Pompeys* re-appeale into the Cittie, together with his armie, at what time the emotion of *Catiline* was on foote: against which decree, onely *Cato* did

insist, and to that purpose had *Metellus* and he had many injurious speeches, and menaced one another in the Senate-house: And it was the next day, they were like to come to the execution in the market-place, where *Metellus*, besides the favour of the common people, and of *Cæsar*, conspiring and plotting for the advancement of *Pompey*, should come, accompanied with a multitude of strange and forraine slaves and fencers, to doe their utmost: And *Cato* strengthened with his onely constancie, and with an unmated resolve: So that his kinsmen, his familiars, and many honest men tooke great care, and were in heavie anxietie and pensiveness for him: of which many never left-him all night, but sate up together, without rest, eating, or drinking, by reason of the danger they saw prepared for him; yea his wife and sisters did nought but weep and wayle, and for his sake torment themselves in their house, whereas contrariwise he alone comforted every body, and blamed them, for their demissenesse: And after he had supped, (as he was wont) he went quietly to his bed, and slept very soundly untill the next morning, that one of his copartners in the Tribune-ship, came to call him, to goe to the skirmish. The knowledge we have of this mans unmated-haughtie heart, by the rest of his life; may make us judge with all securitie, that it onely proceeded from a spirit, so farre elevated above such accidents, that hee dained not so much as to trouble his minde with them, no more then with ordinary chances. In the sea-fight, which *Augustus* gained against *Sextus Pompeius* in *Sicilie*, even at the instant hee should goe to fight, was surprised with so heavy a sleepe, that his friends were compelled to awaken-him, to give the signall of the battell; which afterward gave occasion unto *Marcus Antonius*, to charge him with this imputation, that he had not dared with open eyes to survey the ordinance of his armie, and that his heart would not suffice him, to present himselfe unto his souldiers, untill such time that *Agrippa* brought him newes of the victory he had obtained of his enemies. But concerning yong *Marius*, who committed a greater errour (for on the day of his last battel against *Sylla*, after he had marshalled his armie, and given the word or signall of the battell, hee lay downe in the shadow under a tree, a while to rest himselfe, and fell so fast asleepe, that hee could hardly be awaked with the rowt and flight of his men, having seene no parte of the fight) they say, it was because he was so exceedingly aggravated with travell, and over-tired with wearinesse, and want of sleepe, that nature was overcome, and could no longer endure. And touching this point, Phisitians may consider, whether sleepe be so necessarie, that our life must needes depend of-it: For we finde that *Perseus* King of *Macedon*, prisoner at *Rome*, being kept from sleepe, was made to die; but *Plinie* aleadgeth, that some have lived a long time without any sleepe at all. And *Herodotus* reporteth, *There are Nations, where men sleepe and wake by halfe yeares*. And those that write the life of *Epimenides* the wise, affirme, *that he slept the continuall space of seaven and fiftie yeares*.