

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 57

Translation by John Florio (1603, Public domain) · Last updated on January 5, 2024



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FLORIO-1-57-20250106-191131

Of Age

I CANNOT receive that manner, whereby we establish the continuance of our life. I see that some of the wiser sort doe greatly shorten the same, in respect of the common opinion. What saide *Cato Junior*, to those who sought to hinder him from killing him-selfe? *Doe I now live the age, wherein I may justly be reprov'd to leave my life too soone?* Yet was he but eight and fortie yeares-old. He thought that age very ripe, yea and well advanced, considering how few men come unto-it. And such as entertaine themselves with, I wot not what kinde of course, which they call naturall, promiseth some few yeares beyond, might doe-it, had they a priviledge that could exempt them from so great a number of accidents, unto which each one of us stands subject by a naturall subjection, and which may interrupt the said course, they propose unto themselves. What fondnesse is-it, for a man to thinke he shal die, for, and through, a failing and defect of strength, which extreame age draweth with-it, and to propose that terme unto our life, seeing it is the rarest kinde of all deaths, and least in use? Wee onely call it naturall, as if it were against nature to see a man breake his necke with a fall; to be drowned by shippewracke; to be surpris'd with a pestilence or pleurisie, and as if our ordinarie condition did not present these inconveniences unto us all. Let us not flatter our selves with these fond-goodly woords; a man may peradventure rather call that naturall, which is generall, common and universall. To die of age, is a rare, singular, and extraordinarie death, and so much lesse naturall then others: It is the last and extreamest kinde of dying: The further it is from us, somuch the lesse is it to be hoped-for: Indeede it is the limit, beyond which we shall not passe, and which the lawe of nature hath prescribed unto-us, as that which should not be outgon by any; but it is a rare priviledge peculiar unto hir selfe, to make us continue unto-it. It is an exemption, which through some particular favour she bestoweth on some one man, in the space of two or three ages, discharging him from the crosses, troubles and difficulties, she hath enterpos'd betweene both, in this long carriere and pilgrimage. Therefore my opinion is, to consider, that the age unto which wee are come, is an age whereto few arive: since men come not unto it by any ordinarie course, it is a signe wee are very forward. And since wee have past the accustomed boundes, which is the

true measure of our life, we must not hope, that we shall goe much further. Having escaped so many occasions of death, wherein wee see the world to fall, we must acknowledge that such an extraordinarie fortune, as that is, which maintaineth us, and is beyond the common use, is not likely to continue long. It is a fault of the very lawes, to have this false imagination: They allow not a man to bee capable and of discretion, to manage and dispose of his owne goods, untill he bee five and twentie yeares olde, yet shall hee hardly preserve the state of his life so long. *Augustus* abridged five yeares of the ancient Romane Lawes, and declared, that for any man that should take upon him the charge of judgement, it sufficed to be thirtie yeares olde. *Servius Tullius* dispensed with the Knights, who were seaven and fortie yeares of age, from all voluntarie services of warre. *Augustus* brought them to fortie and five. To send men to their place of sojourning before they be five and fiftie or three skore yeares of age, me seemeth, carrieth no great apparance with-it. My advice would be, that our vacation, and employment should bee extended as farre as might bee for the publike commoditie; but I blame some, and condemne most, that wee beginne not soone enough to employ our selves. The same *Augustus* had beene universall and supreme judge of the world, when he was but nineteene yeares olde, and would have another to bee thirtie, before he shall bee made a competent judge of a cottage or farme. As for my part, I thinke our minds are as full growne and perfectly joynted at twentie yeares, as they should be, and promise as much as they can. A minde which at that age hath not given some evident token or earnest of hir sufficiencie, shall hardly give-it afterward; put hir to what tryall you list. Naturall qualities and vertues, if they have any vigorous or beauteous thing in them, will produce and shew the same within that time, or never. They say in *Delphinate*

*Si l'espine nou picque quand nai,
A peine que picque iamai.*

*A thorne, unlesse at first it pricke,
Will hardly ever pearce to th' quicke.*

Of all humane honorable and glorious actions, that ever came unto my knowledge, of what nature soever they be, I am perswaded, I should have a harder taske, to number those, which both in ancient times, and in ours, have beene produced and atchieved before the age of thirtie yeares, then such as were performed after: yea often in the life of the same men. May not I boldely speake it of those of *Haniball*, and *Scipio* his great adversarie? They lived the better parte of their life with the glorie which they had gotten in their youth: And though afterward they were great men, in respect of all others, yet were they but meane in regard of themselves. As for my particular, I am verily perswaded, that since that age, both my spirite and my body, have more decreased then encreased, more recoyled then advanced. It may bee, that knowledge and experience shall encrease in them, together with life, that bestowe their time well: but vivacitie, promptitude, constancie and other partes much more our owne, more important and more essentiall, they droope, they languish, and they faint.

*ubi iam ualidis quassatum est uiribus æui
Corpus, & obtusis ceciderunt uiribus artus,
Claudicat ingenium, delirat linguâque mēnsque.*

*When once the bodie by shrewd strength of yeares
Is shak't, and limmes drawne-downe from strength that weares,
Wit halts, both tongue and minde
Doe dailie doate, we finde.*

It is the body, which sometimes yeeldeth first unto age; and other times the minde: and I have seene many, that have had their braines weakened before their stomake or legges. And forasmuch as it is a disease, little or nothing sensible unto him that endureth-it, and maketh no great shew, it is so much the more dangerous. Here I exclaime against our Lawes, not because they leave us so long and late in working and employment, but that they set us a worke no sooner, and it is so late before we be employed. Me thinkes that considering the weaknesse of our life, and seeing the infinite number of ordinarie rockes, and naturall dangers it is subject unto, we should not so soone as we come into the world, alotte so great a share thereof unto unprofitable wantonnesse in youth, il-breeding idlenesse, and slow-learning prentissage.