

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 35



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Of three good Women

THEY ARE NOT to be had by dozens, as each one knowes, namely in rights and duties of marriage; For, it is a bargaine full of so many thornie circumstances, that it is hard the will of a woman should long keepe hir selfe whole and perfect therein. And although men have somewhat a better condition in the same, yet have they much to do. The touchstone and perfect triall of a good mariage, respects the time that the societie continueth; whether it have constantly beene milde, loyall and commodious. In our age, they more commonly reserve to enstall their good offices, and set foorth the vehemence of their affections toward their lost husbands: And then seeke they at least to yeeld some testimonie of their good wil. Oh late testimony and out of season, whereby they rather shew, they never love them but when they are dead. Life is full of combustion, the decay of love and of curtesie.¹ As fathers conceale affection toward their children; so they, to maintaine an honest respect, cloake their love toward their husbands. This misterie answereth not my taste. They may long enough scratch and dishevell themselves; let me enquire of a chamber-maide or of a secretarie, how they were, how they did, and how they have lived together: I can never forget this good saying, *Iactantius mærent, quæ minus dolent, They keepe a howling with most ostentation, who are lesse sorrowfull at heart.* Hir lowring and puling is hatefull to the living, and vaine to the dead. *We shall easily dispence with them to laugh at us when we are dead, upon condition they smile upon us while we live.* Is not this the way to revive a man with spite; that he who hath spitten in my face when I was living, shall come and clawe my feete when I am dead? If there be any honor for a woman to weepe for hir husband, it belongs to hir that hath smiled upon him when she had him. Such as have wept when they lived, let them laugh when they are dead, as well outwardly as inwardly. Moreover, regard not those blubred eyes, nor that pittie-mooving voyce; but view that demeanor, that colour and cheerefull good plight of those cheekes, under their great vailles, thence it is she speakes plaine French. There are few whose health doth not daily growe better and better; a qualitie that cannot lie. This cerimonious countenance looketh not so much backward, as foreward: It is rather a purchase then a payment. In mine infancie, an honest and most faire Ladie (who yet liveth, the widdowe of a Prince) had somewhat more I wot not what in hir attires, then the lawes of

widowhood would well permit. To such as blamed hir for it: It is (said she) because I frequent no more new acquaintances, and have no mind at all to marry againe. Because I will not altogether dissent from out custome, I have here made choise of three women, who have also employed the utmost endeavor of their goodnes and affection, about their husbands deathes. Yet are they examples somewhat different and so urging that they hardly drawe life into consequence. *Plinie* the yonger, had dwelling neere unto a house of his in *Italie*, a neighbour wonderfully tormented with certaine ulcers, which much troubled him in his secret parts. His wife perceiving him to droope and languish away, entreated him she might leasurely search and neerely view the qualitie of his disease, and she would more freely then any other tell him what he was to hope for: Which having obtained, and curiously considered the same, she found it impossible ever to be cured, and all he might expect, was but to lead a long, dolorous, and languishing life; and therefore for his more safetie and soveraigne remedie, perswaded him to kill himselfe. And finding him somewhat nice and backward to effect so rude an enterprise: Thinke not my deare friend (quoth shee) but that the sorrowes and griefes, I see thee feele, touch me as neere and more, if more may be, as thy selfe, and that to be rid of them, I will applie the same remedie to my selfe, which I prescribe to thee. I will accompanie thee in thy cure, as I have done in thy sicknesse: remoove all feare, and assure thy selfe, we shall have pleasure in this passage, which shall deliver us from all torments, for we will happily goe together: That said, and having cheared up her husbands courage, she determined they should both headlong throw themselves into the sea from out a window of their house, that overlooked the same: and to maintaine this loyall, vehement and never to be severed affection to the end, wherewith she had during his life embraced him, shee would also have him die in her armes; and fearing they might faile her, and through the fall, or feare or apprehension her holde-fast might be loosed, she caused herselfe to be fast bound unto him by the middle: And thus for the ease of her husbands life she was contented to forgoe her owne. She was but of meane place and low fortune: and amide such condition of people, it is not so strange to see some parts of rare vertue and exemplare goodnesse.

*extrema per illos
Iustitia excedens terris vestigia fecit.*

*Justice departing from the earth did take
Of them her leave, through them last passage make.*

The other two are noble and rich; where examples of vertue are rarely lodged. *Arria* wife unto *Cecinna Pætus*, a Consular man, was mother of another *Arria*, and wife to *Thrasea Pætus*; he whose vertue was so highly renowned during the time of *Nero*; and by meane of this sonne-in-law, grandmother to *Fannia*: For, the resemblance of these mens and womens names and fortunes, hath made diverse to mistake them. This first *Arria*, her husband *Cecinna Pætus*, having beene taken prisoner by the Souldiers of *Claudius* the Emperour, after the overthrow of *Scribonianus*, whose faction hee had followed, entreated those who led him prisoner to *Rome*, to take her into their ship; where for the service of her husband, she should be of the lesse charge and incommoditie to them, then a number of other

persons, which they must necessarily have; and that she alone might supply and steade him in his chamber, in his kitchin and all other offices; which they utterly refused, and so hoised sailes, but shee leaping into a Fishers boate, that she immediately hired, followed him aloofe from the further shoare of *Sclavonia*. Being come to *Rome*, one day, in the Emperours presence, *Junia* the widdow of *Scribonianus*, by reason of the neerenesse and societie of their fortunes, familiarly accosted her, but she rudely, with these wordes, thrust her away. What (quoth shee) shall I speake to thee, or shall I listen what thou saiest: Thou, in whose lappe *Scribonianus* thy husband was slaine, and thou yet livest? and thou yet breathest? These words with divers other signes, made her kinsfolkes and friendes perceive, that shee purposed to make herselfe away, as impatient to abide her husbands fortune. And *Thrasea* her sonne in law, taking hold of her speeches, beseeching her, that she wold not so unheedily spoile her selfe, he thus bespake her. What? If I were in *Cecinnaes* Fortune or the like, would you have my wife your daughter to doe so? What else? make you a question of it? (answered she) Yes mary would I, had she lived so long and in so good-agreeing sort with thee, as I have done with my husband. These and such-like answers, encreased the care they had of her; and made them more heedfully to watch, and neerely to looke unto her. One day, after she had uttered these wordes to her keepers; you may looke long enough to mee, well may you make me die worse, but you shall never be able to keepe me from dying: and therewith furiously flinging her selfe out of a chaire (wherein she fate) with all the strength shee had, she fiercely ranne her head against the next wall; with which blowe having sore hurt her selfe, and falling into a dead swowne, after they had with much adoe brought her to her selfe againe: Did I not tell you (quoth she) that if you kept me from an easie death, I would choose another, how hard and difficult soever? The end of so admirable a vertue was this. Her husband *Pætus* wanting the courage to doe himselfe to death, unto which the Emperors crueltie reserved him; one day, having first employed discourses and exhortations, befitting the counsell she gave him to make himselfe away, shee tooke a Dagger that her Husband wore, and holding it outright in her hand, for the period of her exhortation: Doe thus *Pætus* (said she) and at that instant, stabbing herselfe mortally to the heart, and presently pulling the Dagger out againe, she reached the same unto her husband, and so yeilded up the ghost, uttering this noble, generous and immortall speech, *Pæte non dolet*, she had not the leasure to pronounce other than these three wordes, in substance materiall and worthy her selfe, *Holde Paetus, it hath done me no hurt*.

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

*Chaste Arria when she gave her Pætus that sharpe sword,
 Which from her bowells she had drawne forth bleeding new.
 The wound I gave and have, if you will trust my word,
 Griev's not, said she, but that which will be made by you.*

It is much more lively in his owne naturall, and of a richer Sense; for both her husbands wound and death, and her owne hurts, shee was so farre from grieving to have beene the counselor and motive of them, that she

rejoiced to have performed so haughtie and couragious an act, onely for the behoofe of her deare husband, and at the last gaspe of her life, she onely regarded him; and to remove all feare from him, to follow her in death; which *Pætus* beholding, he immediatly wounded himselfe with the same dagger, ashamed (as I suppose) to have had need of so deare an instruction, and precious a teaching. *Pompea Paulina*, an high and noble-borne yong Roman Lady, had wedded *Seneca*, being very aged. *Nero* (his faire disciple) having sent his Satelites or officers toward him, to denounce the decree of his death to him: which in those dayes was done after this maner. When the Roman Emperors had condemned any man of qualitie to death, they were wont to send their officers unto him, to chuse what death he pleased, and to take it within such and such a time, which according to the temper of their choller, they prescribed unto him, sometimes shorter, and sometimes longer, giving him that time to dispose of his affaires, which also by reason of some short warning they divers times tooke from him: And if the condemned partie seemed in any sort to strive against their will, they would often send men of purpose to execute him, either cutting the veins of his armes and legs, they compelled him to take and swallow poison. But men of honour stayed not that pinch, but to that effect used their own Phisitions or Surgeons. *Seneca*, with a reposed and undanted countenance listned attentively to their charge, and presently demaunded for paper and inke to make his last will and testament, which the Captaine refusing him, hee turned toward his friends, and thus bespake them. Sith (my loving friends) I cannot bequeath you any other thing in remembrance or acknowledgement of what I owe you, I leave you at least the richest and best portion I have, that is, the image of my maners and my life, which I beseech you to keepe in memory; which doing, you may acquire the glory and purchase the name of truly-sincere, and absolutely-true friends. And therewithall somtimes appeasing the sharpnes of the sorow he saw them endure for his sake, with mild and gentle speaches, somtimes raising his voyce to chide them; Where are (said he) those memorable precepts of Philosophy? What is becom of those provisions, which for so many yeares together we have laid up, against the brunts, and accidents of Fortune? Was *Neroes* innated cruelty unknowen unto us? What might we expect or hope-for at his hands, who hath murderd his Mother, and massacred his Brother, but that he would also do his Tutor and Governor to death, that hath fostred and brought him up? Having uttered these words to all the by-standers, he turned him to his wife, as she was ready to sincke downe, and with the burthen of hir grieffe to faint in heart and strength; hee colled and embraced her about the necke, and heartily entreated hir, for the love of him, somewhat more patiently to beare this accident; and that his houre was come, wherin he must shew no longer by discourse and disputation, but in earnest effect, declare the fruite he had reaped by his studie; and that undoubtedly he embraced death, not onely without grieffe, but with exceeding joy; Wherefore my deere-deere heart, doe not dishonour it by thy teares, lest thou seeme to love thy selfe more than my reputation. Asswage thy sorrowes, and comfort thy selfe in the knowledge thou hast had of mee and of my actions; leading the rest of thy life by the honest occupations to which thou art addicted. To whom *Paulina*, having somewhat rouzed hir drooping spirites, and by a thrice-noble affection awakened the magnanimitie of her high-setled courage, answered thus: No *Seneca*, thinke not that in this necessitie I will leave you without my companie.

I would not have you imagin that the vertuous examples of your life have not also taught me to die: And when shall I be able to doe or better, or more honestly, or more pleasing me, then with your selfe? And be resolved I will goe with you, and be partaker of your fortune. *Seneca* taking so generous a resolve, and glorious a determination of his wife in good part, and to free himselfe from the feare he had to leave her after his death, to his enemies mercie and crueltie: Oh my deare *Paulina!* I had (quoth hee) perswaded thee what I thought was convenient, to leade thy life more happily, and doost thou then rather choose the honour of a glorious death? Assuredly I will not envy thee: Be the constancie and resolution answerable to our common end; but be the beautie and glory greater on thy side. That saide, the veines of both their armes were cut, to the end they might bleede to death; but because *Senecaes* were somewhat shrunk up through age and abstinence, and his bloud could have no speedy course, he commaunded the veines of his thighes to be launced: And fearing lest the torments he felt, might in some sort entender his wifes heart; as also to deliver himselfe from the affliction, which greatly yearned him to see her in so pitteous plight: after he had most lovingly taken leave of her, he besought her to be pleased he might be caried into the next chamber, which was accordingly performed. But all those incisions being unable to make him die, he willed *Staius Anneus* his Phisition to give him some poysoned potion, which wrought but small effect in him; for through the weaknesse and coldnesse of his members, it could not come unto his heart. And therefore they caused a warme bath to be prepared, wherein they layde him; then perceiving his end to approach, so long as he had breath, he continued his excellent discourses, concerning the subject of the estate, wherein he found himselfe, which his Secretaries, so long as they could heare his voyce, collected very diligently; whose last words continued long time after in high esteeme and honour amongst the better sort of men, as Oracles; but they were afterward lost, and great pittie it is they never came unto our handes. But when he once beganne to feele the last pangs of death, taking some of the water, wherein he lay bathing, all bloody, he therewith washed his head, saying, I vow this water unto *Jupiter* the Deliver. *Nero* being advertized of all this, fearing lest *Paulinaes* death (who was one of the best alied Ladies in *Rome*, and to whome he bare no particular grudge) might cause him some reproach, sent in all poste-haste to have her incisions closed up againe, and if possibly it could be, to save her life; which her servantes, unwitting to her, performed, she being more than halfe dead and voyde of any sence. And that afterward, contrary to her intent, she lived, it was very honourable, and as befitted her vertue, shewing by the pale hew and wanne colour of her face, how much of her life she had wasted by her incisions. Loe heere my three true Stories, which in my conceite are as pleasant and as tragicall, as any wee devise at our pleasures, to please the vulgare sort withall: and I wonder, that those who invent so many fabulous tales, do not rather make choise of infinite excellent, and quaint Stories, that are found in Books, wherein they should have lesse trouble to write them, and might doubtlesse proove more pleasing to the hearer, and profitable to the Reader. And whosoever would undertake to frame a compleate and well-joynted bodie of them, neede neyther employ nor adde any thing of his owne unto it, except the ligaments, as the soldring of an other mettall, and by this meanes might compact sundry events of all kindes, disposing and diversifying them, according as the beauty and lustre of the worke should require: And very

neere, as *Ovid* hath sowed and contrived his *Metamorphosis*, with that strange number of divers fables. In the last couple, this is also worthy consideration, that *Paulina* offreth willingly to leave hir life for hir husbands sake, and that hir husband had also other times quit death for the love of hir. There is no great counterpoyze in this exchange for us: but according to his Stoicke humor, I suppose hee perswaded himselfe to have done as much for hir prolonging his life for hir availe, as if he had died for hir. In one of his letters, he writeth to *Lucilius*, after he hath given him to understand, how an ague having surprised him in *Rome*, contrary to his wives opinion, who would needs have stayed him, he sodainely tooke his Coach, to goe unto a house of his into the Country; and how he told hir that the ague he had, was no bodily fever, but of the place: and followeth thus: *At last she let me goe, earnestly recommending my health unto me. Now I who knowe, how her life lodgeth in mine, beginne to provide for my selfe, that consequently I may provide for hir: The priviledge my age hath bestowed on me, in making me more constant, and more resolute in many things, I loose it, when-ever I call to minde, that in this aged corps there harboureth a yoong woman, to whome I bring some profite. Since I cannot induce her to love me more courageously, she induceth me to love my selfe more curiously; for something must be lent to honest affections, and sometimes, although occasions urge us to the contrary, life must be revoked againe, yea with torment. The soule must bee held fast with ones teeth, since the lawe to live in honest men, is not to live as long as they please, but so long as they ought. He who esteemeth not his wife or a friend so much, as that hee will not lengthen his life for them, and will obstinately die, that man is over-nice, and too effeminate: The soule must commaund that unto her selfe, when the utilitie of our friends requireth it: we must sometimes lend our selves unto our friends, and when we would die for us, we ought for their sakes to interrupt our selves. It is a testimony of high courage, to returne to life for the respect of others, as diverse notable men have done: and to preserve age is a parte of singular integritie (the chiefest commoditie whereof, is the carelesnesse of her continuance, and a more couragious and disdainfull use of life) if a man perceiveth such an office to be pleasing, acceptable and profitable to any well-affected friend. And who dooth it, receiveth thereby a gratefull meede and pleasing recompence: for, what can be sweeter, than to be so deere unto his wife, that in respect of her a man become more deere unto himselfe; So my *Paulina*, hath not onely charged me with her feare, but also with mine. It hath not bene sufficient for mee to consider, how resolutely I might die, but I have also considered, how irresolutely shee might endure it. I have enforced my selfe to live: And to live is sometimes magnanimitie: Reade heere his owne wordes, as excellent as is his usage.*

NOTES

- 1 Later editions have *Our life is full of combustion and scolding, but our disease full of love and of curtesie.*