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### Montaigne's Essays

In Three Books. With Notes and Quotations. And an Account of The Author's Life ; With a short Character of the Author and Translator, by the late Marquis of Halifax; With the Addition of A Complete Table to each Volume

**Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de**

**London, 1743**

Chap. 57. Of Age.

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## C H A P. LVII.

*Of Age.*

I Cannot approve of the Proportion we settle upon ourselves, and the Space we allot to the Duration of Life. I see that the wise contract it very much, in Comparison of the common Opinion. What (said the younger *Cato* to those who would stay his Hand from killing himself,) am I now of an Age to be reproach'd, that I go out of the World too soon? And yet he was but eight and forty Years old. He thought that to be a mature and competent Age, considering how few arrive to it, and such as soothing their Thoughts with I know not what Course of Nature, promise to themselves some Years beyond it, could they be privileg'd from the infinite Number of Accidents to which they are by natural Subjection expos'd, might have some Reason to do so. What an idle Conceit it is, to expect to die of a Decay of Strength, which is the last Effects of the extremest Age, and to propose to ourselves no shorter Lease of Life than that, considering it is a kind of Death of all others the most rare, and very hardly seen? We call that only a natural Death, as if it were contrary to Nature, to see a Man break his Neck with a Fall, be drown'd in Shipwreck, or snatch'd away with a Pleurisy, or the Plague, and, as if our ordinary Condition of Life did not expose us to these Inconveniencies. Let us no more flatter ourselves with these fine sounding Words: We ought rather at a Venture, to call that natural, which is common and universal. To die of old Age, is a Death rare, extraordinary and singular, and therefore so much less natural than the others: 'Tis the last and extremest sort of dying: And the more remote, the less to be hop'd for. It is indeed the Boundary of Life, beyond which we are not to pass: Which the Law of Nature has pitch'd for a Limit, not to be exceeded: But to last till then, is  
withal



withal a Privilege she is rarely seen to give us. 'Tis a Lease she only signs by particular Favour, and it may be, to one only, in the Space of two or three Ages; and then with a Pass to boot, to carry him through all the Traverses and Difficulties, she has strewed in the Way of this long Career. And therefore my Opinion is, that when once forty Years old, we should consider it as an Age to which very few arrive: For seeing that Men do not usually proceed so far, it is a Sign that we are pretty well advanced, and since we have exceeded the ordinary Bounds, which make the just Measure of Life, we ought not to expect to go much farther; having escaped so many Precipices of Death, whereinto we have seen so many other Men fall, we should acknowledge, that so extraordinary a Fortune, as that which has hitherto rescued us from those imminent Perils, and kept us alive beyond the ordinary Term of Living, is not likely to continue long. 'Tis a Fault in our very Laws, to maintain this Error, That a Man is not capable of managing his own Estate 'till he be five and twenty Years old, whereas he will have much ado to manage his Life so long. *Augustus* cut off five Years from the ancient *Roman* Standard, and declared that thirty Years old was sufficient for a Judge. *Servius Tullius* superseded the Knights of above seven and forty Years of Age, from the Fatigues of War: *Augustus* dismissed them at forty-five: Though methinks it seems a little unlikely, that Men should be sent to the Fire-side till five and fifty, or sixty Years of Age. I should be of Opinion, that both our Vacancy and Employment should be as far as possible extended for the publick Good: But I find the Fault on the other Side, that they do not employ us early enough. This Emperor was Arbitrator of the whole World at nineteen, and yet would have a Man to be thirty, before he could be fit to bear Office in the Commonwealth: For my Part I believe our Souls are adult at twenty, such as they are ever like to be, and as capable then as ever. A Soul that has not by that time given evident Earnest of it's Force and Virtue, will never after come to Proof. Natural Parts and Excellencies produce, what they have of vigorous and fine, within that Term or never.

Of all the great human Actions I ever heard, or read of, of what Sort soever, I have observed, both in former



Ages, and our own, more performed before the Age of thirty, than after : And oft-times in the very Lives of the same Men. May I not confidently instance in those of *Hannibal*, and his great Competitor *Scipio*? The better Half of their Lives, they lived upon the Glory they had acquired in their Youth ; great Men after, 'tis true, in Comparison of others ; but by no Means in Comparison of themselves. As to my own Particular, I do certainly believe, that since that Age, both my Understanding, and my Constitution, have rather decay'd, than improv'd, and retir'd, rather than advanc'd. 'Tis possible, that with those who make the best Use of their Time, Knowledge and Experience may grow up and increase with their Years ; but the Vivacity, Quickness and Steadiness, and other Pieces of us, of much greater Importance, and much more essentially our own, languish and decay,

— *Ubi jam validis quassatum est viribus ævi  
Corpus, & obtusis ceciderunt viribus artus,  
Claudicat ingenium, delirat linguaque mensque* \*.

When once the Body's shaken by Time's Rage,  
The Blood and Vigour ebbing into Age,  
The Judgment then halts upon either Hip,  
The Mind does doat, Tongue into Nonsense trip.

Sometimes the Body first submits to Age, sometimes the Soul, and I have seen Men enough who had got a Weakness in their Brains, before either in their Hams or Stomach : And by how much the more, it is a Disease of no great Pain to the infected Party, and of obscure Symptoms, so much greater the Danger is. And for this Reason it is, that I complain of our Laws, not that they keep us too long to our Work, but that they set us to work too late. For the Frailty of Life and the many natural and accidental Rubs to which it is obnoxious and daily exposed : Birth, though noble, ought not to share so large a Vacancy, and so tedious a Course of Education.

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\* *Lucret. l. 3.*