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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

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Chap. 1. Of the Inconstancy of our Actions.

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ESSAYS

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Michael Seig^r. de Montaigne.

The SECOND BOOK.

CHAP. I.

Of the Inconstancy of our Actions.



THOSE who make it their Business to controul or criticize human Actions, never find themselves so much puzzled in any thing, as how to reconcile and set them before the World in a self-consistent Light and Reputation; for they are generally such strange Contradictions in themselves, that it seems almost impossible they should proceed from one and the same Person. One while we find young *Marius* a Son of *Mars*, and another time the Son of *Venus*. Pope *Boniface* the Eighth (it is said) crept into the Papal Throne like a Fox, reigned like a Lion, and died like a Dog. And who could believe it to be the same *Nero*, that perfect Image of all Cruelty, who in the beginning of

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his Reign, having the Sentence of a condemned Man brought to him to sign, cried out, *O, that I had never been taught to write.* So much it went to his Heart to condemn a Man to Death. The History of every Nation is full of such Examples, and all Men are able to produce so many to themselves, either from their own Conduct or Observation, that I often wonder to see Men of Sense give themselves the trouble of sorting these Pieces, and endeavouring to reconcile such Contradictions; especially when Irresolution appears to be, at least seems to me, the most common and manifest Vice of our Nature; Witness the famous Verse of the Comedian *Publius*.

*Irresolution
the most com-
mon Vice of
our Nature.*

*Malum Consilium est, quod mutari non potest *.*

That Counsel's ill that will admit no Change.

There is indeed some Possibility of forming a Judgment of a Man from the most usual Methods of his Life, but considering the natural Instability of our Manners and Opinions, I have often thought even the best Authors a little mistaken, in so obstinately endeavouring to mould us into any constant and solid Contexture. They chuse the general Air of a Man, and according to that interpret all his Actions, of which, if some be so stiff and stubborn, that they cannot bend or turn them to any Uniformity to the rest, they then without further Ceremony impute them to Dissimulation. *Augustus* has nevertheless escaped those Gentlemen; for there was in him so apparent, so sudden, and so continued a Variety of Actions throughout the whole Course of his Life, that he has slipt away clear from the most hardy Censurers. For my part, I am with much more Difficulty induced to believe a Man's Constancy than any other Virtue in him; nay, I believe nothing sooner than the contrary, and will venture to say that it would be a laborious Undertaking to produce a Dozen Men, even out of all Antiquity, who have form'd their Lives to one certain and constant Course, which is

*Instability of
our Manners
and Opinions.*

* *Aulus Gel. ex Pub. Min.*

the principal Design of Wisdom; for (says one of the Ancients) to comprize it all in one Word, and to contract all the Rules of human Life into One, it is to *Will*, and not to *Will* always on the same Thing: I shall not descend, continues he, to add, provided the *Will* be just, for if it be not so, it is impossible it should be always one. I have indeed formerly learnt, That Vice is nothing but Irregularity and Want of Measure, and therefore 'tis impossible to fix Constancy to it. 'Tis a Saying of *Demosthenes*, that the Beginning of all Virtue, is Consultation and Deliberation; the End and Perfection, Constancy. If we would resolve on any certain Course upon mature Advice, we should pitch upon the best, but no body has thought of it.

*Quod petiit, spernit, repetit quod nuper omisit,
Æstuat, & vitæ disconvenit ordine toto* *.

He now despises what he late did crave,
And what he last neglected, now would have:
He fluctuates, and flies from that to this,
And his whole Life a Contradiction is.

Our ordinary Practice is to follow the Inclinations of our Appetite, which way soever they guide us, whether to the Right or to the Left, upwards or downwards, just according as we are wafted by the Breath of Occasion. We never meditate what we would have, till the Instant we have a Mind to have it; and change like that little Creature, which receives its Colour from what it is laid upon. What we but just now propose to ourselves, we immediately alter, and presently return to it again; 'tis nothing but Shifting and Inconstancy:

Ducimur ut nervis alienis mobile lignum †.

Like Tops with leathern Thongs we're scourg'd about.
We do not go, we are driven; like things that float, now leisurely, then with Violence, according to the Gentleness or Rapidity of the Current.

*nonne videmus,
Quid sibi quisque velit nescire, & quærere semper,
Commutare locum quasi onus deponere possit* †?

* *Hor. l. 1. G. 1.* † *Id. lib. 2. Sat. 7.* ‡ *Lucret. l. 3.*
B 2 See

See we not up and down Men daily trot,
 For something they would have, but know not what:
 Shifting from Place to Place, as here or there,
 They could set down the Burden of their Care.

Every Day produces a new Whim, and our Humours
 keep motion with Time.

*Tales sunt hominum mentes, quali pater ipse
 Jupiter auctifero lustravit lumine terras* *.

Such are the Motions of th' Inconstant Soul,
 As are the Days and Weather fair or foul.

We fluctuate betwixt various Inclinations; we will nothing freely, nothing absolutely, nothing constantly. In any one that had prescrib'd and laid down Determinate Rules and Laws to himself for his own Conduct, we should perceive an Equality of Manners, an Order, and an infallible Relation of one Thing or Action to another, shine through his whole Life, as *Empedocles* observed in the *Agre-gentines*, who gave themselves up to Delights as if every Day was to be their Last, and built as if they were to live for ever; a Judgment would not then be hard to make. And it is very evident in the Person of the younger *Cato*, that when a Man has found out one Step, it will lead him to all the rest: 'Tis a Harmony of very agreeing Sounds, that cannot jar, nor deceive the Ear. But with us 'tis quite contrary, every particular Action requires a particular Judgment, wherein the surest way to steer, in my Opinion, would be to take our Measures from the nearest ally'd Circumstances, without engaging in a longer Inquisition, or without concluding any other Consequence. I was told in the Civil Disorders of our unhappy Kingdom, that a Maid Servant hard by the Place where I then was,

*A Maid
 threw herself
 out of a Win-
 dow for fear
 of a Rape.*

had thrown herself out of a Window to avoid being forc'd by a common Soldier that was quarter'd in the House: She was not kill'd by the Fall, and therefore redoubling her Attempt, would have cut her own Throat, had she not been hindered; but having nevertheless wounded herself to some Shew of Danger, she volun-

* *Cicero.*

ta. ily confes'd that the Soldier had not as yet importun'd her otherwise than by Courtship, earnest Solicitation, and such little Presents as he was able to procure ; but that she was afraid, that in the End he would have proceeded to Violence ; all which she deliver'd with such a Countenance and Accent, and withal embrewed in her own Blood, the highest Testimony of her Virtue, that she appeared another *Lucretia* ; and yet I have since been very well assur'd, that both before and after, she was no very difficult Piece. Wherefore according to my Host's Tale in *Ariosto*, be as handsome a Man, and as fine a Gentleman as you will, never build too much upon your Mistress's inviolable Chastity, for having been repuls'd by her ; you do not know but she may have a much better Stomach to your Groom.

Antigonus, having taken one of his Soldiers into a great degree of Favour and Esteem, for his Virtue and Valour, gave his Physicians strict Charge to cure him of a long and inward Distemper, under which he had a great while languish'd ; and observing that after his Cure, he went much more coldly to work than before, he ask'd the Fellow, Who had alter'd and cow'd him ? You, yourself (Sir) reply'd the other, by having eas'd me of the Pains that made me weary of my Life. One of *Lucullus's* Soldiers, having been rifled by his Enemy, perform'd a brave Exploit against him, by way of Revenge, by which he made himself a Saver at least : *Lucullus*, who from that Action, had conceiv'd a very advantageous Opinion of the Man, endeavour'd with all the plausible Persuasions and Promises he could think of.

Verbis quæ timido quoque possent addere mentem *.

Words which the coldest Coward would inspire,
And with brisk Metal set his Blood on Fire.

to engage him in an Enterprize of imminent Danger ; but how did the Soldier answer ? Flatly refusing to go, pray Sir, says he to his General, employ some miserable plundered Wretch in that Affair.

—*quantumvis rusticus ibit,*
Ibit eo, quo vis qui zonam perdidit, inquit †.

* *Hor. lib. 2. Ep. 2.*

† *Id. Ibid.*

Some Fool, or poor Knave knapsack'd by the Foe,
On that Design may peradventure go.

When we read, that *Mahomet* having furiously reprimanded *Chasan*, *Aga* of the *Janizaries*, who seeing the *Hungarians* break into his Batallions had behav'd himself very ill in the Business, and that *Chasan* instead of any other Answer, rush'd furiously alone, with his Cimitar in his Hand into the first Body of the Enemy, where he was presently cut to pieces: We are not to look upon that Action to have been so much a generous Design to vindicate himself from the Reproach of Cowardice, as an Effect of Recollection; nor to have proceeded so much from natural Valour as a sudden Vexation. The Man you see To-day so adventurous and brave, you must not think it strange to find him as great a Poltron To-morrow: Anger, Necessity, Company, Wine, or the Sound of the Trumpet, may have rouz'd his Spirits; this is no Valour form'd and establish'd by Meditation; but accidentally created by those Circumstances, and therefore it is no Wonder, if by contrary Circumstances it appears quite another thing.

These supple Variations and Contradictions, so manifest in us, have given some People occasion to believe, that Man has two Souls: Others two distinct Powers, which always accompany and incline us, the one towards Good, and the other towards Evil, according to their own Natures and Propensity; so sudden a Variety of Inclination not being to be imagin'd to flow from one and the same Fountain. For my part, I must ingeniously declare, that the Puff of every Accident not only carries me along with it, according to its own Proclivity, but that moreover I discompose, and trouble myself, by the Instability of my own Posture; and whoever will look narrowly into his own Breast, will hardly find himself twice in the same Condition. I give my Soul sometimes one Face and sometimes another, according to the Side I turn her to. If I speak variously of myself, it is, because I consider myself variously. All Contrarieties are there to be found, in one Corner or another, or after one Manner or another. Bashful, insolent, chaste, lustful, prating, silent, laborious, delicate, ingenious, heavy, melancholick, pleasant, lying, sincere, knowing, ignorant, liberal, covetous, and prodigal,

gal, I find all this in myself more or less, according as I turn myself about; and whoever will fit himself to the Bottom, will be conscious, even by his own Judgment, of this Volubility and Discordance. In a word, I have nothing to say of myself entirely, simply, and solidly, without Mixture and Confusion. *Distinguo* is the most universal part of my Logick. Tho' I always intend to speak well of good things, and rather to interpret such things as may fall out, in the best Sense, than otherwise; yet such is the Strangeness of our Condition, that we are sometimes push'd on to do well even by Vice itself, if well-doing were not judg'd by the Intention only. One gallant Action therefore ought not to conclude a Man valiant; if a Man was brave indeed, he would be always so, and upon all Occasions. If it were a Habit of Virtue, and not a Sally, it would render a Man equally resolute: In all Accidents, the same alone as in Company, the same in Lists as in Battles; for, let People say what they please, there is not one Valour for the Street, and another for the Field: He would bear a Sickness in his Bed as bravely as a Wound in the Trenches, and no more fear Death in his own House than at an Assault. We should not then see the same Man charge into a Breach with a brave Assurance, and afterwards torment himself, and wince like a Woman for the Loss of a Law-Suit, or the Death of a Child. When being detected Coward to Infamy, he is constant in the Necessities of Poverty and Want; when he starts at the Sight of a Barber's Razor, and rushes fearless among the Swords of the Enemy, the Action is commendable, not the Man.

Many of the *Greeks* says *Cicero* *, cannot endure the Sight of an Enemy, and yet are Courageous in Sicknes; the *Cimbrians* and *Celtiberians* quite the contrary. *Nihil enim potest esse æquabile, quod non à certa ratione proficiatur.* Nothing can be equal, that does not proceed from a certain ground of Reason. No Valour can be more extreme in its kind than that of *Alexander*: But it is but one kind; nor is that kind full enough throughout: As peerless as it is, it has yet some Blemishes; and of this, his being so often at his Wits end upon every

* *Cicero, Tusc. 2.*

light Suspicion of his Captains conspiring against his Life, and the behaving himself in that Enquiry with so much Vehemency and Injustice: and a Fear that subverted his natural Reason, is one pregnant Instance: The Superstition also with which he was so much tainted, carries along with it some Image of Pusillanimity. The Excess of his Penitency, for the Murder of *Clytus*, is likewise another Testimony of the Unevenness of his Courage. All we perform is no other than a *Cento*, as a Man may say, of several Pieces, and yet we would acquire Honour by a false Title. Virtue cannot be follow'd, but for herself, and if we sometimes borrow her Mask for some other Occasion, she presently pulls it off again. 'Tis a Stamp and lively Tincture, which, when the Soul has once thoroughly imbib'd it, will not out again but with the Piece. And therefore to make a right Judgment of a Man, we are long, and very observingly, to follow his Trace: If Constancy does not there stand firm upon her own proper Base. *Qui vivendi via considerata, atque provisata est* *; if the Variety of Occurrences makes him to alter his Pace (his Path I mean, for the Pace may be faster or slower) let him march; such a one runs before the Wind. 'Tis no Wonder, says one of the Ancients, that Chance has so great a Dominion over us, since it is by Chance we live. It is not possible for any one, who has not design'd his Life for some certain End, to dispose of his particular Actions. It is impossible for any one to fit the Pieces together, who has not the whole Form already contriv'd in his Imagination. To what Use are Colours to him, or to what End should he provide them, that knows not what it is to paint? No one lays down a certain Design for his Life, and we only deliberate by Pieces. The Archer ought first to know at what he is to aim, and then accommodate his Arm, Bow, String, Shaft, and Motion to it. Our Counsel deviates and wanders, because not leveled to any determinate End. No Wind serves him who addresses his Voyage to no certain Port. I cannot acquiesce in the Judgment given by one in the Behalf of *Sophocles*; who concluded him capable of the Management of Domestick Affairs, against the Accusation of his Son, for having seen one of his Tragedies.

* *Cicero*.

Of the Inconstancy of our Actions. 9

Neither do I allow of the Conjecture of the *Parians*, sent to regulate the *Milesians*, sufficient for such a Consequence as they drew from it. Coming to visit the Island, they took notice of such Grounds as were best cultivated, and such Country Houses as were best governed; and having taken the Names of the Owners, when they had assembled the Citizens, they appointed those Farmers for new Governors and Magistrates; concluding, that they who had been so provident in their own private Concerns, would be so of the Publick too. We are all unform'd Lumps, and of so various a Contexture, that every Moment every Piece plays its own Game, and there is as much Difference betwixt us and ourselves, as betwixt us and others. *Magnam rem puta, unum hominem agere* *. Since Ambition can teach Men Valour, Temperance and Liberality, and even Justice too; seeing that Avarice can inspire the Courage of a Shop-boy, bred and nursed up in Obscurity and Ease, with the Assurance to expose himself so far from the Fire-side, to the Mercy of the Waves in a frail Boat; as she goes farther, and can teach Discretion and Prudence; and that even *Venus* can infuse Boldness and Resolution into Boys under the Discipline of the Rod, and inflame the Hearts of tender Virgins, in their Mothers Arms, with Masculine Courage:

*Hac duce custodes furtim transgressa jacentes
Ad juvenem tenebris sola puella venit †.*

The tender Virgin, dreadless of all Harms,
Steals in the Dark to her young Lover's Arms.

The Understanding has something more to do than simply to judge us by our outward Action,; it must penetrate the very Soul, and there discover by what Springs the Motion is guided: But that being a high and hazardous Undertaking, I could wish that fewer would attempt it.

* *Sen. Epist.* 120. † *Tib. lib. 2. Eleg. 3.*