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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. 2. Of Drunkenness.

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C H A P. II.

Of Drunkenness.

THE World is nothing but Variety and Disproportion, Vices are all alike, as they are Vices, and perhaps the *Stoicks* understand them so; but tho' they are equally Vices, yet they are not all equal Vices: And that he who has transgressed the ordinary Bounds by a hundred Paces, should not be in a worse Condition than he who had transgressed them but ten, is not to be believed; or that Sacrilege is not worse than stealing a Cabbage,

*Nec vincit ratio hoc, tantundem ut peccet idemque
Qui teneros caules alieni fregerit horto,
Et qui nocturnus divum sacra legerit †.*

Nor seems it Reason, he as much should sin
That steals a Cabbage Plant, as he who in
The Dead of Night, a Temple breaks and brings
Away from thence the consecrated Things.

There is in this as great Diversity as in any Thing whatever: The confounding of the Order and Measure of Sins is dangerous: Murderers, Traytors and Tyrants are therein so deeply concerned, that it is not reasonable they should flatter their Consciences, because another Man is idle, lascivious or less assiduous at his Devotion: Every one lays Weight upon the Sins of his Companions, but lightens his own. In my Opinion, our very Instructors themselves rank them sometimes very ill. As *Socrates* said, That the principal Office of Wisdom was, to distinguish Good from Evil. We, whose best Faculties are always vicious, ought also to say of Knowledge, that it is to distinguish betwixt Vice and Vice, without which, and that very exactly performed too, Virtuous and Wicked will remain confounded and unknown. Now, among the rest, Drunkenness seems

† *Hor. lib. 1. Sat. 3.*

to me to be a gross and brutish Vice. The Soul has the greatest Interest in all the rest, and there are some Vices that have something, if a Man may say so, of generous in them. There are Vices, wherein there is a Mixture of Knowledge, Diligence, Valour, Prudence, Dexterity and Cunning: This is totally corporeal and earthly, and the thickest skulled Nation this Day in *Europe*, is that where it is the most in Fashion: Other Vices discompose the Understanding, this totally overthrows it, and renders the Body stupid.

—————*cum vini vis penetravit,
Consequitur gravitas membrorum, præpediuntur,
Crura vacillanti, tardescit lingua, madet mens,
Nam oculi clamor; singultus, jurgia gliscunt †.*

When Fumes of Wine do once the Brain possess,
Then follows strait an Indisposedness
Throughout, the Legs so fetter'd in that Case
They cannot with their reeling Trunk keep pace.
The Tongue trips, Mind droops, Eyes stand full of Water,
Noise, Hiccough, Brawls and Quarrels follow after.

The worst Condition of Man, is that wherein he loses the Knowledge and Government of himself. And 'tis said, amongst other things upon that Subject, that, as the Must fermenting in a Vessel, works up to the Top whatever it has in the Bottom, so Wine, in those who have drank beyond the Measure, vents the most inward Secrets.

—————*tu sapientum
Curas, & arcanum jocosum
Consilium retegis Lyæo.*

Thou in thy Cups, and wild Debaucheries,
Blabb'st out the secret Counsel of the Wife.

Josephus tells us, that, by giving an Embassador, whom the Enemy had sent to him, his full Dose of Liquor, he wormed out his Secrets. And yet *Augustus*, committing the most inward Secrets of his Affairs to *Lucius Piso*, who conquered *Thrace*, never found him guilty of Blabbing in the least, no more than *Tiberius* did *Cassius*, with whom

† *Lucret. lib. 3.*

he intrusted his whole Counsels, tho' we know they were both so given to drink, that they have often been carried home, both one and the other, drunk out of the Senate-House.

Hesterno inflatum venas de more Lyæo *.

Their Head being full of the Day before.

And the Design of killing *Cæsar* was as safely communicated to *Cimber*, tho' he would sometimes be drunk, as to *Cassius*, who drank nothing but Water. We see our *Germans*, tho' never so drunk, can know their Post, remember the Word, and perform their Duty.

—*nec facilis victoria de madidis, & Blæsis, atque mero titubantibus.* †.

Nor is a Vict'ry easily obtain'd
O'er Men so drunk they scarce can 'speak or stand.

I could not have believed there had been so profound, senseless, and dead a Degree of Drunkenness, had I not read in History, that *Attalus*, designing to put a notable Affront upon *Pausanias*, invited him to Supper; and made him drink to such a Pitch, that he could dispose of his Body, as that of a common Prostitute; to the Grooms and meanest Servants of the House: And yet that very *Pausanias* afterwards, upon the like Occasion, killed *Philip*, King of *Macedon*, who, by his excellent Qualities, gave sufficient Testimony of his Education in the House and Company of *Epimanondas*. And I have been further told, by a Lady whom I highly honour and esteem, that near *Bordeaux*, and about *Castres*, where she lives, a Country-woman, a Widow, who had the Character of a Woman of Virtue, perceiving in herself the first Symptoms of Breeding, innocently told her Neighbours, that if she had a Husband, she should think herself with Child: But the Causes of Suspicion every Day more and more increasing, and at last growing up to a manifest Proof, the poor Woman was reduced to the Necessity of causing it to be proclaimed at the Profne of her Parish-Church, that whoever had done that Deed, and would frankly confess it, she did not only pro-

* *Virg. Eclog. 6.*

† *Juven. Sat. 13.*

wife to forgive, but moreover to marry him, if he liked the Offer: upon which a young Fellow that served in the Quality of a Labourer, encouraged by this Proclamation, declared; that one Holy-day he found her, having taken too much of the Bottle, so fast asleep in the Chimney-Corner, and in so indecent a Posture, that he might conveniently come to do this Business without waking her; and they yet live together Man and Wife. It is true, that Antiquity has not much decry'd this Vice: The Writings of several Philosophers speak very tenderly of it; and even amongst the *Stoicks*, there are some who advise to give themselves sometimes the Liberty to drink to a Debauch, to recreate and refresh the Soul.

*Hoc quoque virtutum quondam certamine magnum
Socratem palmam promeruisse ferunt †.*

And *Socrates* the Wise, they say of Yore,
Amongst Boon-blades the Palm of Drinking bore.

That Censor and Reprover of others, *Cato*, was reproached with being a Good-fellow.

*Narratur & prisca Catonis
Sæpe mero caluisse virtus ||.*

And of the Elder *Cato* it is said,
He often went with a hot Pate to Bed.

Cyrus that worthy renowned King, among his other Qualities, by which he pretended to be preferred before his Brother *Artaxerxes*, urged this Excellency, that he could drink a great deal more than he. And in the best

*Drinking to a
Debauch in
Use amongst
the best go-
verned Nati-
ons.*

governed Nations, this Tryal of Skill in Drinking is very much in Use. I have heard *Silvius*, an excellent Physician of *Paris*, say, that lest the digestive Faculties of the Stomach should grow idle, it were not amiss once a Month to rouze and spur them on by this Excess, lest they should grow dull and resty; and a noted Author tells us, that when the *Persians* were to consult upon any important Affair, they first warm'd themselves well with Wine. My Taste and Constitution are greater Enemies to

† *Cornel. Gall. Epig. 1.*

|| *Horace, lib. 3. Ode 21.*
this

this Vice than I am ; for besides that, I easily submit my Belief to the Authority of ancient Opinions : I look upon it, indeed, as a stupid and ungraceful Vice, but less malicious and hurtful than the others, almost every one of which more directly jostles Publick Society. And if we cannot please ourselves, but it must cost us something, as they hold, I find this Vice costs a Man's Conscience less than any of the rest ; besides, it is of no difficult Preparation, nor is what we look for hard to be found : A Consideration not altogether to be despised. A Man well advanced both in Dignity and Age, among three principal Conveniences, which he said still remained to him of Life, told me this of Drinking was one ; and where would a Man more justly find it, than among the natural Conveniences ? But he did not take it right ; for Delicacy, and the curious Choice of Wines is therein to be avoided. If you ground your Pleasure upon drinking the Best, you condemn yourself to the Penance of drinking the Worst : Your Taste must be more indifferent and free : So delicate a Palate is not required to make a good Toper. The *Germans* drink almost indifferently of all Wines and Liquors with Delight, their Business is to pour down and not to taste ; and 'tis so much the better for them, their Pleasure is so much the more constant, and nearer at hand. Now on the other Side, not to drink (after the *French* Fashion) but at Meals, and then very moderately too, is to be ungrateful to this bountiful God of Wine : There is more Time and Constancy required than so. The Ancients spent whole Nights in this Exercise, and oft-times added the Day following to piece it out ; are we therefore to take greater Liberty than we do, and stick closer to our Work. I have seen a great Lord of my Time, a Man of high Enterprize and famous Success, who without setting himself to't, and after his ordinary Rate of drinking at Meals, swallowed down not much less than five Quarts of Wine, and at his going away appeared but too wise and discreet, to the Detriment of our Affairs. The Pleasure we design the greatest Esteem for, during the whole Course of our Lives, ought to have a great Share of our Time dedicated to it. We should, like Journeymen and Labourers, refuse no Occasion, and omit no opportunity of Drinking, and always have

Delicacy to be avoided in Wine.

have it in our Minds. But methinks, we every Day abridge and curtail the Use of Wine; and the Breakfast, Drinking and Collations I used to see in my Father's House when I was a Boy, were in those Days more usual and frequent, than at present.

Is it that we pretend to a Reformation? Truly no: But it may be we are more addicted to *Venus*, than our Fathers were. They are two Exercises that thwart and hinder one another in their Vigour. Lechery has weakned our Stomach on the one Side, and on the other, Sobriety renders us more amorous and vigorous for the Exercise of Love. 'Tis not to be imagined what strange Stories I have heard my Father tell of the Chastity of that Age wherein he lived. He might very well talk so, being both by Art and Nature cut out and finished for the Service of Ladies. He spoke well and little, ever mixing his Language with some Illustration

*A Character
of the Au-
thor's Father.*

out of modern Authors, especially *Spanish*; and amongst them, *Marcus Aurelius* was very frequent in his Mouth. His Behaviour was grave, humble and modest; he was very solicitous of Neatness and Decency both in his Person and Cloaths, whether on Horseback, or a Foot. He was exceeding punctual of his Word; and of a Conscience and Religion generally tending rather towards Superstition than otherwise. For a Man of little Stature, very strong, well proportioned, and well knit, of a pleasing Countenance, inclining to brown, and very adroit in all noble Exercises. I have yet in the House to be seen Canes poured full of Lead, with which, they say, he exercised his Arms for throwing the Bar, or the Stone; and Shoes with leaden Soles, to make him afterwards lighter for Running, or Leaping. Of his Vaulting he has left little Miracles behind him; and I have seen him, when past Threescore, laugh at our Exercises, and throw himself in his furred Gown into the Saddle, make the Tour of a Table upon his Thumbs, and scarce ever mount the Stairs up to his Chamber, without taking three or four of the Steps at a Time. But as to what I was speaking of before, he said, there was scarce one Woman of Quality of ill Fame in a whole Province: Would tell of strange Privacies, and some of them his own, with virtuous Women,

*Marvellous
Chastity of the
Age wherein
the Author's
Father lived.*

without

without any Manner of Suspicion: And, for his own Part, solemnly swore, he was a Virgin at his Marriage; and yet it was, after a long Practice of Arms, beyond the Mountains; of which War he has left us a written Journal under his own Hand, wherein he has given a precise Account, from Point to Point, of all Passages, both relating to the Publick and to himself. And was also married at a well advanced Maturity, in the Year 1528, the three and thirteenth Year of his Age, upon his Way home from *Italy*. But let us return to our Bottle.

The Incommodities of old Age, which stands in need of some Refreshment and Support, might with Reason beget in me a Desire of this Faculty, it being, as it were, the last Pleasure which the Course of Years deprives us of. The natural Heat (say the Good-fellows) first seats itself in the Feet, that concerns Infancy; from thence it mounts to the middle Region, where it makes a long abode, and produces, in my Opinion, the sole true Pleasure of human Life, all other Pleasures, in Comparison, Sleep. Towards the End, like a Vapour that still mounts upwards, it arrives at the Throat, where it makes its final Residence, and concludes the Progress. I cannot nevertheless understand how a Man can extend the Pleasure of drinking beyond Thirst, and to forgive, in his Imagination, an Appetite artificial, and against Nature. My Stomach would not proceed so far, it has enough to do to deal with what it takes for Necessity. My Constitution is, not to care to drink, but as it follows Eating, and to wash down my Meat, and for that Reason my last Draught is always the greatest: And seeing, that in old Age we have our Palates furred with Phlegms, or depraved by some other ill Constitution, the Wine tastes better to us, as the Pores are cleaner, washed, and laid more open. At least, I seldom taste the first Glass well. *Anacharsis* wondered that the *Greeks* drank in greater *Glasses* towards the End of a Meal, than at the Beginning; which was, I suppose, for the same Reason; the *Dutch* do the same, who then begin the Battle. *Plato* forbids Children Wine 'till Eighteen Years of Age, and being drunk till Forty; but after Forty gives them Leave to please themselves, and to mix a little liberally in their Feasts; the Influence of *Dionysius*, that good Deity, who restores Young Men their

One of the
Names of
Bacchus.

Eighteen Years of Age, and being drunk till Forty; but after Forty gives them Leave to please themselves, and to mix a little liberally in their Feasts; the Influence of *Dionysius*, that good Deity, who restores Young Men their

their good Humour, and Old Men their Youth, who mollifies the Passions of the Soul, as Iron is softened by Fire; and in his Laws allows such merry Meetings (provided they have a discreet Chief to govern, and keep them in Order) as good and very useful; Drunkenness being a true and certain Tryal of every one's Nature, and withal, fit to inspire Old Men with Metal to divert themselves in Dancing and Musick; Things of great Use, but which they dare not attempt when sober. He moreover says, that Wine is able to supply the Soul with Temperance, and the Body with Health; nevertheless these Restrictions, in Part borrowed from the *Carthaginians*, please him: That they forbear Excesses in the Expeditions of War; that every Judge and Magistrate abstain from it, when engaged in the Duties of his Post, or the Consultations of the Publick Affairs: That the Day is not to be embezled with it, as being a Time due to other Employments; nor that Night in which he intends to get Children. 'Tis said, that the Philosopher *Stilpo*, when oppressed with Age, purposely hasten'd his End, by drinking pure Wine: The same Thing, but not designed by him, dispatch'd also the Philosopher *Arcefilaus*. But 'tis an old and pleasant Question, Whether the Soul of a wife Man can be overcome by the Strength of Wine?

*Si munitæ adhibet vim sapientiæ * ?*

If it a Head, with its besotting Fume,
With Wisdom fortified, t'assault presume?

To what Vanity does the good Opinion we have of ourselves push us? The most regular and most perfect Soul in the World has but too much to do to keep itself upright, from being overthrown by its own Weakness. There is not one of a Thousand that is right and settled so much as one Minute in a whole Life, and that may not very well doubt, whether according, to her natural Condition she can ever be. But to join Constancy to it, is her utmost Perfection; I mean, tho' nothing should jostle and discompose her, which a thousand Accidents may do. 'Tis to much Purpose, indeed, that the great Poet *Lucretius* keeps such a Clutter with his Philosophy, when behold he is ruined with

* *Hor. lib. 3. Ode 23.*

a Philtre, one poor Draught of Love. Is it to be imagined, that an Apoplexy will not make an Ass of *Socrates*, as well as of a Porter. Some have forgot their own Names by the Violence of a Disease, and a slight Wound has turned the Judgment of others topsy-turvey. Let a Man be as wise as he will, he is still a Man; and than that, what is there more miserable, or a more meer Nothing? Wisdom does not force our natural Dispositions.

*Sudores itaque & pallorem existere toto
Corpore, & infringi linguam, vocemque aboriri,
Caligare oculos, sonare aures, succidere artus,
Denique considerare ex animi terrore videmus **.

Paleness and Sweat the Countenance confounds,
The Tongue's deliver'd of abortive Sounds;
'The Eyes grow dim, Ears deaf, the Knees grow lame,
And do refuse to prop the trembling Frame;
And lastly, out of Fear of Mind we all
Things see into a Dissolution fall.

He must shut his Eyes against the Blow that threatens him; he must tremble upon the Brink of a Precipice like a Child: Nature having reserved these light Works of her Authority, not to be forced by our Reason and Stoical Virtue, to teach Man his Mortality and little Power. He turns pale with Fear, red with Shame, and groans with the Cholic, if not very loud, at least so as to confess his Frailty.

Humani à se nihil alienum putet †.

To any other Man what may befall,
Let him not think strange to himself at all.

The Poets, that feign all things at Pleasure, dare not acquit their greatest Heroes of Tears.

Sic fatur lacrymans, classique immittit habenas ‡.

Thus did he weeping say, and then his Fleet
Did to the Mercy of the Sea commit.

'Tis sufficient for a Man to curb and moderate his Inclinations; for totally to suppress them is not in him to do. Even our Great *Plutarch*, that excellent and perfect Judge

* *Lucret. lib. 3.*

† *Terence.*

‡ *Virg.*

Of human Actions, when he sees *Brutus* and *Torquatus* murder their own Children, begins to doubt, whether Virtue could proceed so far; and to question, whether these Persons had not rather been stimulated by some other Passion. All Actions exceeding the ordinary Bounds, are liable to sinister Interpretation: Forasmuch as our liking does no more proceed from what is above, than from what is below it.

Let us leave this other Sect, and make a downright Profession of Fierceness. But when even in that Sect, reputed the most quiet and gentle, we hear these Rhodomontades of *Metrodorus*, *Occupavi te, Fortuna, atque cepi: Omnesque aditus tuos interclusi, ut ad me aspirare non posses.* Fortune, thou art mine, I have thee fast, and have made all the Avenues so sure, thou canst not come at me. When *Anaxarchus*, by the Command of *Nicrocreon*, the Tyrant of *Cyprus*, was put into a Stone Mortar, and laid upon with Mauls of Iron, ceases not to say, *Strike, Batter, Break, 'tis not Anaxarchus, 'tis but his Sheath that you pound and bray so.* When we hear our Martyrs cry out to the Tyrant in the Middle of the Flame. *This Side is roasted enough, fall to and eat; it is enough, fall to work with the other.* When we hear the Child in *Josephus*, torn Peace-Meat with biting Pincers, defying *Antiochus*, and crying out with a constant and assured Voice, *Tyrant, thou lovest thy Labour, I am still at Ease; where is the Pain? Where are the Torments with which thou didst so threaten me? Is this all thou canst do? My Constancy torments thee more than thy Cruelty does me: O pitiful Coward, thou faintest, and I grow stronger; make me complain, make me bend, make me yield if thou canst; encourage thy Guards, cheer up thy Executioners; see, see they faint, and can do no more; arm them, flesh them anew, spur them up: Really a Man must confess, that there is some Alteration and Fury, how Holy soever, that does, at that Time, possess those Souls. When we come to these Stoical Sallies: *I had rather be furious than voluptuous*, a Saying of *Antisthenes*: When *Sextius* tells us, *He had rather be fettered with Affliction than Pleasure*: When *Epicurus* takes upon him to play with his Gout, and that refusing Health and Ease, he desires all Torments, and despising the lesser Pains, as disdaining to contend with them, he covets*

and calls out for sharper, more violent, and more worthy of him :

*Spumantemque dari pecora inter inertia votis
Optat aprum, aut fubvum descendere monte leonem **.

And for ignoble Chaces, wishes some
Lion or Boar, would from the Mountain come.

Who can but conclude, that they are push'd on by a Courage that has broke loose from its Place? Our Soul cannot from her own Seat reach so high, 'tis necessary she must leave it, raise herself up, and take her Bridle in her Teeth, transport her Man so far, that he shall after himself be astonish'd at what he has done. As in War, the Heat of Battle sometimes pushes the generous Soldiers to perform Things of so infinite Danger, as after having recollected themselves, they themselves are the first to wonder at. It is much the same with the Poets, who are often wrapt with Admiration of their own Writings, and know not where again to find the Track, thro' which they performed so happy a Career: This is in them called Rage and Rapture: And as *Plato* says, 'Tis to no purpose for a sober Man to knock at the Door of the *Muses*. *Aristotle* says to the same Effect, That no excellent Soul is exempt from the Mixture of Folly; and he has Reason to call all Transports, how commendable soever, Folly, when they surpass our own Judgment and Understanding: Because Wisdom is a regular Government of the Soul, which is carry'd on with Measure and Proportion, and for which she is answerable to herself; *Plato* argues thus, That the Faculty of Prophecy is so far above us, that we must be out of ourselves when we meddle with it, and our Prudence must either be obstructed by Sleep or Sickness, or lifted from her Place by some Celestial Rapture.

* *Æneid* l. 4.