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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. 13. Of judging of the Death of another.

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and tedious Discourse, which would furnish me with endless Matter. *What a vile and abject Thing, says he, is Man, if he do not raise himself above Humanity?* 'Tis a good Word and a profitable Desire, but withal absurd; for to make the Handle bigger than the Hand, and the Cubit longer than the Arm, and to hope to stride further than our Legs can reach, is both impossible and monstrous; or that Man should rise above himself and Humanity: For he cannot see but with his Eyes, nor seize but with his Power. He shall be exalted, if *God* will lend him his extraordinary Hand; he shall exalt himself, by abandoning and renouncing his own proper Means, and by suffering himself to be raised and elevated by Means purely cœlestial; it belongs to our Christian Faith, and not to the Stoical Virtue, to pretend to that divine and miraculous *Metamorphosis*.



C H A P. XIII.

*Of judging of the Death of another.*

WHEN we judge of another's Constancy and Courage in Dying, which, without Doubt, is the most remarkable Action of human Life, we are to take notice of one Thing, which is, that Men very hardly believe themselves to be arriv'd to that Period. Few Men die in an Opinion that it is their last Hour, and there is nothing wherein the Flattery of Hopes does more delude us. It never ceases to whisper in our Ears, others have been much sicker without dying; my Condition is not so desperate as 'tis thought, and at the worst, *God* has done other Miracles. Which happens by reason that we set too much Value upon ourselves. It seems as if the Universality of Things were in some measure to suffer by our Dissolution, and that it did commiserate our Condition. Forasmuch as our deprav'd Sight represents Things to itself after the same Manner, and that we are of Opinion they stand in as much need of us as we do of them? Like

*No very resolute Assurance at the Article of Death.*

People at Sea, to whom Mountains, Fields, Cities, Heaven and Earth are tossed at the same rate they are:

*Provehimur portu, terræque, urbisque recedunt* \*.

Out of the Port with a brisk Gale we speed,  
And making Way, Cities and Lands recede.

Whoever saw old Age that did not applaud the past, and condemn the present Time, laying the Fault of his Misery and Discontent upon the World, and the Manners of Men?

*Jamque caput quassans grandis suspirat arator,  
Et cum tempora, temporibus præsentia confert  
Præteritis, laudat fortunas sepe parentis,  
Et crepat antiquum genus ut pietate repletum* †.

Now the old Ploughman sighs and shakes his Head,  
And present Times comparing with those fled,  
His Predecessors Happiness does praise,  
And the great Piety of that old Race.

We will make all Things to go along with us; whence it follows, that we consider our *Death* as a very great Thing, and that does not so easily pass, nor without the solemn Consultation of the Stars: *Tot circa unum Caput tumultuantes Deos*, and so much the more think it, as we more value ourselves. *What! shall so much Knowledge be lost, with so much Damage to the World, without a particular Concern of the Destinies? Does so rare and exemplary a Soul cost no more the killing than one that is mean, and of no Use to the Publick? This Life that protects so many others, upon which so many other Lives depend, that employs so vast a Number of Men in his Service, and that fills so many Places, shall it drop off like one that hangs but by its own single Thread? None of us lays it enough to Heart, that we are but one.* Thence proceeded these Words of *Cæsar* to his Pilot, more tumid then the Sea that threatned him.

——— *Italiam si cælo authore recusas,  
Me pete: Sola tibi causa hæc est justa timoris,  
Victorem non nosce tuum, per rumpe procellas  
Tutela secure mei* ——— †.

\* *En. l. 3.*

† *Lucret. l. 1.*

‡ *Ibid.*

If thou to fail to *Italy* decline  
Under the Gods Protection, trust to mine ;  
The only just Cause that thou hast to fear,  
Is that thou dost not know thy Passenger ;  
But I being now aboard, flight *Neptune's* Braves,  
And fearleisly cut thro' the swelling Waves.

And these,

—— credit jam digna pericula *Cæsar*  
*Fatis esse suis, tantusque evertere (dixit)*  
*Me superis labor est, parva quam puppe sedentem,*  
*Tam magno petiere mari*——

These Dangers worthy of his Destiny,  
*Cæsar* did now believe, and then did cry,  
What, is it for the *Gods* a Task so great  
To overthrow me, that to do the Feat,  
In a poor little Bark they must be fain  
Here to surprize me on the swelling Main ?

And that Idle Fancy of the Publick, that *The Sun's Mourning*  
the Sun carry'd in his Face the Mourning for the Death  
ing for his Death a whole Year, of *Cæsar*.

*Ille etiam extincto miseratus Cæsare Romam,*  
*Cum caput obscura nitidum ferrugine texit* \*.

And pitying *Rome*, Great *Cæsar* being dead,  
In mourning Clouds *Sol* veil'd his shining Head.

and a Thousand of the like ; wherewith the World suffers  
itself to be so easily imposed upon, believing that our In-  
terests alter the Heavens, and that they are concern'd at our  
ordinary Actions. *Non tanta Cælo societas nobiscum est, ut*  
*nostro fato mortalis sit illi quoque siderum fulgor †.* There is  
no such Alliance betwixt us and Heaven, that the Brightness  
of the Stars should be made mortal by our Death. Now to  
judge of the Constancy and Resolution in a Man that does  
not yet believe himself to be certainly in Danger, tho' he  
really is, is no Reason ; and 'tis not enough that he dies in  
this Posture, unless he did purposely put himself into it for  
this Effect. It most commonly falls out in most Men, that

\* *Virg. Geor. l. 1.*

† *Plin. Nat. Hist. l. 2. cap. 8.*

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they

they set a good Face upon the Matter, and speak with great Indifferency to acquire Reputation, which they hope afterward living to enjoy. Of all that I have seen die, Fortune has disposed their Countenances, and no Design of theirs; and even of those who in ancient Times have made away themselves, there is much to be consider'd, whether it was a sudden, or a lingring Death. That cruel Roman Emperor would say of his Prisoners, *That he would make them feel Death*, and if any one kill'd himself in Prison, *That Fellow has made an Escape from me*: He would say he would spin out Death, and make it felt by Torments.

*Vidimus & toto quamvis in Corpore caeso,  
Nil animæ lethale datum moremque nefandæ  
Durum sævitæ percunctis parcere morti* \*.

And in tormented Bodies we have seen  
Amongst those Wounds none that have mortal been,  
Inhuman Method of dire Cruelty,  
That means to kill; yet will not let Men die.

In plain Truth, it is no such great Matter for a Man in Health and in a temperate State of Mind, to resolve to kill himself; it is very easy to give ill Signs before one comes to the Push; Insomuch that *Heliogabalus*, the most effeminate Man in the World, amongst his most sensual Pleasures, could forecast to make himself die delicately, when he should be forc'd thereto. And *that his Death might not give the Lye to the rest of his Life*, had purposely built a sumptuous Tower, the Front and Base whereof was cover'd and laid with Planks enrich'd with Gold and precious Stones, thence to precipitate himself; and also caused Cords, twisted with Gold and Crimson Silk, to be made, wherewith to strangle himself; and a Sword, with the Blade of Gold, to be hammer'd out to fall upon: And kept Poison in Vessels of Emerald and Topaz, wherewith to poison himself, according as he should like to choose one of these Ways of dying.

*Impiger, & fortis virtute coacta* †.

By a forc'd Valour, resolute and brave.

Yet, for so much as concerns this Person, the Effeminacy of his Preparations make it more likely that he would have

\* *Lucan. l. 2.*

† *Id. l. 4.*

thought

thought better on't, had he been put to the Test. But in those who with great Resolution have determined to dispatch themselves, we must examine, whether it were with one Blow which took away the Leisure of feeling the Effect: For it is to be questioned, whether perceiving Life by little and little to steal away, the Sentiment of the Body mixing itself with that of the Soul, and the Means of repenting being offered, whether, I say, Constancy and Obstinacy in so dangerous a Will is to be found. In the Civil Wars of *Cæsar*, *Lucius Domitius* being taken in *Prussia*, and thereupon poisoning himself, afterward repented. It has happened in our Time, that a certain Person being resolved to die, and not having gone deep enough at the first Thrust, the Sensibility of the Flesh opposing his Arm, gave himself three or four Wounds more, but could never prevail upon himself to thrust home. Whilst *Plantius Sylvanus* was upon his Trial, *Virgulantia*, his Grand-mother, sent him a Poinard, with which, not being able to kill himself, he made his Servants to cut his Veins. *Albucilla*, in *Tiberius's* Time, having, to kill himself, struck with too much Tenderness, gave his Adversaries Opportunity to imprison and put him to Death their own Way: And that great Leader, *Demosthenes*, after his Rout in *Sicily*, did the same; and *C. Pimbria*, having struck himself too weakly, intreated his Servant to dispatch and to kill him outright. On the contrary, *Ostorius*, who could not make use of his own Arm, disdain'd to employ that of his Servant to any other Use, but only to hold the Poinard straight and firm; and running his Breast full drive against it, thrust him thro'. 'Tis, in Truth, a Morfel that is to be swallow'd without chewing, unless a Man be thoroughly resolv'd; and yet *Adrian*, the Emperor, made his *Physician* mark and encircle in his Pap the Mortal Place wherein he was to stab, to him he had given Order to kill him. For this Reason it was, that *Cæsar* being ask'd what Death he thought to be the most desir'd? made answer, *The least premeditated, and the shortest*. If *Cæsar* dar'd to say it, it is no Cowardize in me to believe it. *A short Death*, says *Pliny*, is the Sovereign good Hap of Human Life. They do not much care to discover it. No one can say, that he is resolv'd for Death, who fears to trifle with it, and that cannot undergo it with his Eyes open. They that we see in exemplary Punishments

ments run to their Death, hasten and press their Execution, do it not out of Resolution, but they will not give themselves Leisure to consider it; it does not trouble them to be dead, but to die.

*Emori nolo, sed me esse mortuum nibili aestimo* \*.

I would not die, but care not to be dead.

'Tis a Degree of Constancy, which I have experimented, that I can arrive to do like those who plunge themselves into Dangers, as into the Sea, with their Eyes shut. There is

*The constant and resolute Death of Socrates.* nothing, in my Opinion, more illustrious in the Life of *Socrates*, than that he had Thirty whole Days wherein to ruminate upon the Sentence of his Death; to have digested it all that Time with a most assured Hope, without Care, and without Alteration, and with Words and Actions, rather careless and indifferent, than any way stirr'd or discomposed by the Weight of such a Thought.

That *Pomponius Atticus*, to whom *Cicero* writes so oft, being sick, caused *Agrippa*, his Son-in-Law, and two or three more of his Friends, to be called to him, and told them, *That having found all Means practis'd upon him for his Recovery to be in vain, and that all he did to prolong his Life did also prolong and augment his Pain; he was resolv'd to put an End both to the one and the other, desiring them to approve of his Deliberation, or at least, not to lose their Labour in endeavouring to dissuade him.* Now, having chosen to destroy himself by Abstinence, his Disease was thereby accidentally cured, and the Remedy he made use of wherewith to kill himself, restored him to his perfect Health.

*The Death of Pomponius Atticus by Fasting.* His *Physicians* and Friends rejoicing at so happy an Event, and coming to congratulate him, found themselves very much deceiv'd, it being impossible for them to make him alter his Purpose; he telling them, *that he must one Day die, and that being now so far on his Way, he would save himself the Labour of beginning again another time.* This Man having discover'd Death at Leisure, was not only not discouraged at the Approach of it, but provok'd it: For being fa-

\* *Cicero Tusc. lib. 1.*

tified that he had engaged in the Combat, he consider'd it as a Piece of Bravery, and that he was oblig'd in Honour to see the End. 'Tis far beyond not fearing Death, to taste and relish it. The Story of the Philosopher *Cleanthes* is very like this. He had his Gums swell'd and rotten; his Physicians advised him to great Abstinence: Having fasted Two Days, he was so much better, that they pronounced him cured, and permitted him to his ordinary Course of Diet: He, on the contrary, already tasting some Sweetness in this Faintness of his, would not be persuaded to go back, but resolv'd to proceed, and to finish what he had so far advanc'd. *Tullius Marcellinus*, a young Man of Rome, having a Mind to anticipate the Hour of his Destiny, to be rid of a Disease that was more Trouble to him than he was willing to endure; tho' his Physicians assur'd him of a certain, tho' not sudden Cure, called a Council of his Friends to consult about it; of which, some, says *Seneca*, gave him the Counsel, which out of Unmanliness they would have taken themselves; others, out of Flattery, such as they thought he would best like: But a Stoick said thus to him; Do not concern thyself, *Marcellinus*, as if thou didst deliberate of a Thing of Importance; 'tis no great Matter to live; thy Servants and Beasts live; but it is a great Thing to die handsomely, wisely, and constantly: Do but think how long thou hast done the same Thing, eat, drink and sleep, drink, sleep and eat. We incessantly wheel in the same Circle: Not only ill and insupportable Accidents, but even the Satiety of Living, inclines a Man to desire to die. *Marcellinus* did not stand in need of a Man to advise, but of a Man to assist him; his Servants were afraid to meddle in the Business: But this Philosopher gave them to understand, that *Domesticks* are suspected, even when it is in doubt, whether the Death of the Master were voluntary, or no; otherwise, that it would be of as ill Example to hinder him, as to kill him forasmuch as,

*In vitum qui servat, idem facit occidenti* \*.

Who makes a Man to live against his Will,  
As cruel is, as if he did him kill.

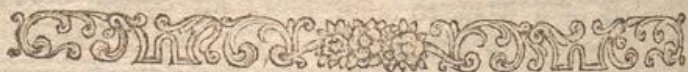
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\* *Horat. in Art. Poet.*



He afterwards told *Marcellinus*, that it would not be indecent, as the Remainder of Tables, when we have done, is given to the Assistants; so Life being ended, to distribute something to those who have been our Servants. Now *Marcellinus* was of a free and liberal Spirit; he therefore divided a certain Sum of Money amongst his Attendants, and comforted them. As to the rest, he had no Need of Steel, nor of Blood. He was resolv'd to go out of this Life, and not to run out of it; not to escape from Death, but to essay it. And to give himself Leisure to trifle with it, having forsaken all Manner of Nourishment, the third Day following, after having caused himself to be sprinkled with warm Water, he fainted by Degrees, and not without some Kind of Pleasure, as he himself declar'd. In earnest, such as have been acquainted with these Faintings, proceeding from Weakness, do say, that they are therein sensible of no Manner of Pain, but rather feel a Kind of Delight, as in a Passage to Sleep and Rest. These are study'd and digested Deaths. But to

the End that *Cato* only may furnish out the whole Example of Virtue, it seems as if his good Destiny had put his ill one into his Hand, with which he gave himself the Blow; seeing he had the Leisure to confront and struggle with Death, reinforcing his Courage in the greatest Danger, instead of letting it go less. And if I had been to represent him in his Supreme Station, I should have done it in the Posture of tearing out his bloody Bowels, rather than with his Sword in his Hand, as did the Statuaries of his Time: For this second Murther was much more furious than the First.



## C H A P. XIV.

*That the Mind hinders itself.*

'T IS a pleasant Imagination to fancy a Mind exactly balanced betwixt two equal Desires: For doubtless it can never pitch upon either, forasmuch as the Choice and Application would manifest an Inequality of Esteem; and were we set betwixt the Bottle and the Ham with an equal Appetite