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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. 32. Defence of Seneca and Plutarch.

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C H A P. XXXII.

Defence of Seneca and Plutarch.

THE Familiarity I have had with these two *Authors*, and the Assistance they have lent to my Age, and Book, wholly compil'd of what I have borrow'd from them, oblig'd me to espouse their Quarrel, and to stand up for their Honour. As to *Seneca*, amongst a Million of little Pamphlets that those of the *Reformed Religion* disperse Abroad for the Defence of their *Cause* (and which sometimes proceed from so good a Hand, that 'tis Pity his Pen is not employ'd in a better Subject) I have formerly seen one, that, to make up the Parallel he would fain find out betwixt the Government of our late poor King *Charles the Ninth*, and that of *Nero*, compares the late Cardinal of *Lorrain* with *Seneca*, their Fortunes to have both of them been the prime Ministers in the Government of their Princes, and their Manners, Conditions and Deportments to have been very near alike: Wherein, in my Opinion, he does the said Cardinal a great Honour; for tho' I am one of those who have a very great Esteem for his *Wit*, *Eloquence*, and *Zeal to Religion*, and the Service of his King, and think it was a Happiness in an Age wherein he was so new, so rare, and also so necessary for the Publick, to have an Ecclesiastical Person, of so high Birth and Dignity, and so sufficient and capable of his Place; yet to confess the Truth, I do not think his Capacity by many Degrees near to the other, nor his Virtue either so clean, entire, or steady, as that of *Seneca*. Now the Book whereof I speak, to bring about his Design, gives a very injurious Description of *Seneca*, having borrowed his Reproaches from *Dion the Historian*, whose Testimony I do not at all believe. For besides this, he is inconsistent, who after having call'd *Seneca* one while very wise, and again, a mortal Enemy to *Nero's Vices*, makes him elsewhere Avaricious, an Usurer, Ambitious, Effeminate, Voluptuous, and a False Pretender to Philosophy; his own Virtue does appear so lively and vigorous in his Writings, and his Vindication



dication is so clear from any of these Imputations of *Riches*, and any extraordinary expensive Way of living, that I cannot believe any Testimony to the contrary. And besides, it is much more reasonable to believe the *Roman Historians* in such things, than *Greeks* and Strangers. Now *Tacitus* and the rest speak very honourably both of his Life and Death; and represent him to us a very excellent and virtuous Person in all Things; and I will alledge no other Reproach against *Dion's* Report but this, which I cannot avoid, namely, that he has so sickly a Judgment in the *Roman Affairs*, that he dares to maintain *Julius Cæsar's* Cause against *Pompey*, and that of *Anthony* against *Cicero*. Let us now come to *Plu-*

*tarch*; *John Bodinus* is a good Author of our Time, and a *Writer* of much greater good Author. Judgment than the rout of *Scriblers* of his Age, and that deserves to be carefully read and consider'd. I find him tho' a little bold in this Passage of his *Method of History*, where he accuses *Plutarch*, not only of *Ignorance* (wherein I would let him alone, for that is above my Reprehension) but that he oft writes Things incredible, and absolutely *Fabulous*, which are his own Words. If he had simply said, That he had deliver'd Things otherwise than they really are, it had been no great Reproach; for what we have not seen, we are forc'd to receive from other Hands, and take upon Trust; and I see he purposely sometimes variously relates the same Story, as the Judgment of the three best Captains that ever were, given by *Hannibal*; 'tis one way in the Life of *Flaminius*, and another in that of *Pyrrhus*. But to charge him with having taken *incredible* and *impossible* Things for current pay, is to accuse the most judicious Author in the World of want of Judgment. And

The Bowels of a *Lacedæmonian* Boy torn out by a *Fox-cub*.

this is his Example; as, says he, when he relates that a *Lacedæmonian* Boy suffer'd his Bowels to be torn out by a *Fox-cub*, he had stoln, and kept it still conceal'd under his Coat till he fell down dead, rather than he would discover his Theft. I find in the first Place this Example ill chosen, forasmuch as it is very hard to limit the Power of the Faculties of the Soul, whereas we have better Authority to limit, and know the Force of the Bodily Limbs; and therefore, if I had been as he, I should rather have chosen an Example of this second sort; and



and there are that are less credible: And amongst others, that which he relates of *Pyrrhus*, that all wounded as he was, he struck one of his Enemies who was arm'd from Head to Foot, so great a Blow with his Sword, that he clave him down from his Crown to his Seat, so that the Body was divided into two Parts. In this Example I find no great Miracle, nor do not admit of the *Salvo* with which he excuses *Plutarch*, to have added this Word (*as 'tis said*) to suspend our Belief; for unless it be in things received by Authority, and the Reverence to *Antiquity* or *Religion*, he would never have himself admitted, or enjoined us Things incredible in themselves to believe; and that this Word (*as 'tis said*) is not put into this Place to that effect, is easy to be seen, because he elsewhere relates to us, upon this Subject,

of the Patience of the *Lacedæmonian* Children, Examples happening in his Time, more unlikely to prevail upon our Faith; as what *Cicero* has testified before him, as having, as he says, been upon the Place:

*The Patience of the Lacedæmonian Children.*

That even to their Times there were Children found, who, in the Trial of Patience they were put to before the Altar of *Diana*, suffered themselves to be there whipp'd till the Blood ran down all over their Bodies, not only without crying out, but without so much as a Groan, and some till they there voluntary lost their Lives: And that which *Plutarch* also, amongst an hundred other Witnesses, relates, That at a Sacrifice, a burning Coal being fall'n into the Sleeve of a *Lacedæmonian* Boy, as he was censuring, he suffered his whole Arm to be burn'd, till the Smell of the broiling Flesh was perceiv'd by the Assistants. There was nothing according to their Custom, wherein their Reputation was more concerned, nor for which they were to undergo more Blame and Disgrace,

*Thievery odious to the Spartans.*

than in being taken in Theft. I am so fully satisfied of the Greatness of those People's Courage, that his Story does not only not appear to me, as to *Bodinus*, incredible; but I do not find it so much as rare and strange. History is full of a Thousand more cruel and rare Examples; and is indeed all Miracles in Comparison of this. *Marcellinus*, concerning Theft reports, That in his Time there was no sort of Torments which could

*The Spartan Thievery much practised by the Egyptians.*



compel the Egyptians, when taken in the Manner, tho' a People very much addicted to it, so much as to tell their Name. A Spanish Peasant, being put to the Wrack about the Accomplices of the Murder of the Pretor *Lucius Piso*, cried out in the height of the Torment, That his Friends

should not leave him, but look on in all Assurance, and that no Pain had Power to force from him one Word of Confession: Which was all they could get the first Day: The next Day, as they were leading him a second Time to another Trial, strongly disengaging himself from the Hands of his Guards, he furiously ran his Head against a Wall, and beat out his

Brains. *Epicharis*, having tir'd and glutted the Cruelty of *Nero's* Yeomen of the Guard, and undergone their Fire, their Beating, and their Engines a whole Day together, without one Syllable of Confession of her Conspiracy; being the next Day brought again to the *Wrack*, with her Limbs almost torn to Pieces, conveying the Lace of her Robe with a running Noose over one of the Arms of her Chair, and suddenly slipping her Head into it, with the Weight of her own Body hang'd herself: Who having the Courage to die after that manner, is not to be presum'd that she purposely lent her Life to the Trial of her Fortitude the Day before, to mock the Tyrant, and encourage others to the like Attempt? And whoever

Or Light- will enquire of our *Argoulets*, of the Experiences they have had in our *Civil Wars*, *Horse*. will find Effects of Patience and Obstinacy in this miserable Age of ours, and amongst the soft and effeminate Rabble, worthy to be compar'd with those we have now related of the *Spartan* Virtue. I know there have been simple Peasants amongst us, who have endur'd the Soles of their Feet to be broil'd upon a *Gridiron*, their Fingers-ends to be writen off with the Cock of a Pistol, and their bloody Eyes squeez'd out of their Heads by the Force of a Cord twisted about their Brows, before they would so much as consent to Ransom. I have seen one left stark-naked for dead in a Ditch, his Neck black and swell'd, with a Halter yet about it, with which they had dragg'd him all Night at a Horse's Tail, his Body wounded in a hundred Places, with Stabs of Daggers had been given him, not to kill him, but to put him to Pain, and to affright him: Who had endur'd all



all this, and even to being Speechless and Insensible, *resolv'd*, as he himself told me, *rather to die a Thousand Deaths* (as indeed, as to matter of Suffering, he had already had) *before he would pay a Penny*; and yet he was one of the richest Husbandmen of all the Country. How many have been seen patiently to suffer themselves to be burnt and roasted, for Opinions taken upon Trust from others, and by them not at all understood? I have known a Hundred and a Hundred Women (for *Gascony* has a certain Prerogative for Obstinate. *Women obstinate.*) whom you might sooner have made eat Fire, than forsake an Opinion they had conceiv'd in Anger. They are more exasperated by Blows and Constraint. And he that made the Story of the Woman, who in defiance of all Correction, Threats and Bastinadoes, ceas'd not to call her Husband *lousy Knave*; and that being plunged over Head and Ears in Water, could yet lift her Hands above her Head, and make a Sign of *cracking Lice*, feign'd a Tale, of which in Truth we every Day see a manifest Image in the *Obstinacy* of Women. And *Obstinacy* is the Sister of *Constancy*, at least in Vigour and Stability. We are not to judge what is possible, and what is not, according to what is credible and incredible to our Apprehension, as I have said elsewhere: And it is a great Fault, and yet a Fault that most Men are guilty of (which nevertheless I do not mention with any Reflection upon *Bodinus*) to make a Difficulty of believing that in another, which they could not, or would not do themselves. Every one thinks that the sovereign Stamp of human Nature is imprinted in him, and that from it all others must take their Rule, and that all Proceedings which are not like his, are feigned and false. Is any thing of another's Actions or Faculties propos'd to him? The first Thing he calls to the Consultation of his Judgment, is his own Example; and as Matters go with him, so they must of necessity do with all the World besides. O dangerous and intolerable Folly! For my part, I consider some Men as infinitely beyond me, especially amongst the *Ancients*; and yet, tho' I clearly discern my Inability to come near them by a thousand Paces, I do not forbear to keep them in Sight, and to judge of what does elevate them so, of which I also perceive some Seeds of myself; as I also do of the extreme Meanness of some other Minds, which I



neither am astonish'd at, nor yet misbelieve. I very well perceive the Turns those great Souls take to raise themselves to such a Pitch, and admire their Grandeur; and those Flights that I think the bravest, I could be glad to imitate, where, tho' I want Wing, yet my Judgment goes along with them.

The other Example he introduces of Things incredible and wholly fabulous, deliver'd by *Plutarch*, is, *That Agefilaus was fin'd by the Ephori, for having wholly engrossed the Hearts and Affections of the Citizens to himself alone.* And herein I do not see what Sign of Falsity is to be found: But so it is, that *Plutarch* speaks of Things that must needs be better known to him than to us; and it was no new Thing in *Greece*, to see Men punish'd and exil'd for this very Thing of being too acceptable to the People; witness the *Ostracism* and *Petalism*. There is yet in this Place another Accusation laid against *Plutarch*, which I cannot well digest; where he says, *That he has sincerely coupled the Romans and the Greeks amongst themselves: But not the Romans with the Greeks; witness, says he, Demosthenes and Cicero, Cato and Aristides, Sylla and Lyfander, Marcellus and Pelopidas, and Pompey and Agefilaus; supposing that he has favour'd the Greeks in giving them so unequal Companions, which is really to attack what in Plutarch is most excellent, and most to be commended.* For in his *Parallels* (which is the most admirable Part of all his Works, and with which, in my Opinion, he is himself the most pleas'd) the Fidelity and Sincerity of his Judgments equal their Depth and Weight. He is a *Philosopher* that teaches us Virtue. Let us see whether we cannot defend him from this Reproach of Falsity and Prevarication. All that I can imagine could give occasion to this Censure, is, the great and shining Lustre of the *Roman* Names which we have still before us; it does not seem likely to us, that *Demosthenes* could rival the Glory of a *Consul*, *Proconsul*, and *Questor* of that great *Republick*: But if a Man considers the Truth of the Thing, and the Men in themselves, which is *Plutarch's* chiefest Aim, and more to balance their Manners, their Natures and Parts, than their Fortunes; I think contrary to *Bodinus*, that

*Cicero,*



*Cicero*, and the elder *Cato*, come very far short of the Men with whom they are compar'd. I should sooner for his Purpose have chosen the Example of the younger *Cato* compar'd with *Phocian*, for in this Couple there would have been a more likely Disparity to the Roman's Advantage. As to *Marcellus*, *Sylla*, and *Pompey*, I very well discern that their Exploits of War are greater, and more full of Pomp and Glory, than those of the *Greeks*, which *Plutarch* compares with them: But the bravest and most virtuous Actions, no more in War than elsewhere, are not always the most renown'd. I often see the Names of Captains obscur'd by the Splendor of other Names of less Desert; witness *Labienus*, *Ventidius*, *Telesinus*, and several others. And to take it by that, were I to complain on the Behalf of the *Greeks*, could I not say, that *Camillus* was much less comparable to *Themistocles*, the *Gracchi* to *Agis*, and *Cleones* and *Numa* to *Lycurgus*? But 'tis Folly to judge of Things that have so many Aspects at one View. When *Plutarch* compares them, he does not for all that make them equal. Who could more learnedly and sincerely have mark'd their Distinction? Does he parallel the Victories, Feats of Arms, the Force of their Armies conducted by *Pompey*, and his Triumphs, with those of *Agessilaus*? I do not believe, says he, that *Xenophon* himself, if he were now living, tho' he was allowed to write whatever pleased him to the Advantage of *Agessilaus*, would dare to bring them into Comparison. Does he speak of paralleling *Lysander* to *Sylla*? There is, says he, no Comparison, either in the Number of Victories, or in the Hazard of Naval Engagements, &c. This is not to derogate from the *Romans*; for having only simply nam'd them with the *Greeks*, he can have done them no Injury, what Disparity soever there may be betwixt them: And *Plutarch* does not entirely oppose them to one another, there is no Preference in general, he only compares the Pieces and Circumstances one after another, and gives of every one a particular and separate Judgment; wherefore if any one would convince him of Partiality, he ought to pick out some one of those particular Judgments, or say in general that he was mistaken in comparing such a *Greek* to such a *Roman*, when there were others more fit and better resembling to parallel him to.