

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 44

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On Sleep

Reason directs that we should always go the same way, but not always at the same pace. And, consequently, though a wise man ought not so much to give the reins to human passions as to let him deviate from the right path, he may, notwithstanding, without prejudice to his duty, leave it to them to hasten or to slacken his speed, and not fix himself like a motionless and insensible Colossus. Could virtue itself put on flesh and blood, I believe the pulse would beat faster going on to assault than in going to dinner: that is to say, there is a necessity she should heat and be moved upon this account. I have taken notice, as of an extraordinary thing, of some great men, who in the highest enterprises and most important affairs have kept themselves in so settled and serene a calm, as not at all to break their sleep.

Alexander the Great, on the day assigned for that furious battle betwixt him and Darius, slept so profoundly and so long in the morning, that Parmenio was forced to enter his chamber, and coming to his bedside, to call him several times by his name, the time to go to fight compelling him so to do.

The Emperor Otho, having put on a resolution to kill himself that night, after having settled his domestic affairs, divided his money among his servants, and set a good edge upon a sword he had made choice of for the purpose, and now staying only to be satisfied whether all his friends had retired in safety, he fell into so sound a sleep that the gentlemen of his chamber heard him snore.

The death of this emperor has in its circumstances paralleling that of the great Cato, and particularly this just related for Cato being ready to despatch himself, whilst he only stayed his hand in expectation of the return of a messenger he had sent to bring him news whether the senators he had sent away were put out from the Port of Utica, he fell into so sound a sleep, that they heard him snore in the next room; and the man, whom he had sent to the port, having awakened him to let him know that the tempestuous weather had hindered the senators from putting to sea, he despatched away another messenger, and composing again himself in the

bed, settled to sleep, and slept till by the return of the last messenger he had certain intelligence they were gone. We may here further compare him with Alexander in the great and dangerous storm that threatened him by the sedition of the tribune Metellus, who, attempting to publish a decree for the calling in of Pompey with his army into the city at the time of Catiline's conspiracy, was only and that stoutly opposed by Cato, so that very sharp language and bitter menaces passed betwixt them in the senate about that affair; but it was the next day, in the forenoon, that the controversy was to be decided, where Metellus, besides the favor of the people and of Caesar — at that time of Pompey's faction — was to appear accompanied with a rabble of slaves and gladiators; and Cato only fortified with his own courage and constancy; so that his relations, domestics, and many virtuous people of his friends were in great apprehensions for him; and to that degree, that some there were who passed over the whole night without sleep, eating, or drinking, for the danger they saw him running into; his wife and sisters did nothing but weep and torment themselves in his house; whereas, he, on the contrary, comforted every one, and after having supped after his usual manner, went to bed, and slept profoundly till morning, when one of his fellow-tribunes roused him to go to the encounter. The knowledge we have of the greatness of this man's courage by the rest of his life, may warrant us certainly to judge that his indifference proceeded from a soul so much elevated above such accidents, that he disdained to let it take any more hold of his fancy than any ordinary incident.

In the naval engagement that Augustus won of Sextus Pompeius in Sicily, just as they were to begin the fight, he was so fast asleep that his friends were compelled to wake him to give the signal of battle: and this was it that gave Mark Antony afterward occasion to reproach him that he had not the courage so much as with open eyes to behold the order of his own squadrons, and not to have dared to present himself before the soldiers, till first Agrippa had brought him news of the victory obtained. But as to the young Marius, who did much worse (for the day of his last battle against Sylla, after he had marshalled his army and given the word and signal of battle, he laid him down under the shade of a tree to repose himself, and fell so fast asleep that the rout and flight of his men could hardly waken him, he having seen nothing of the fight), he is said to have been at that time so extremely spent and worn out with labor and want of sleep, that nature could hold out no longer. Now, upon what has been said, the physicians may determine whether sleep be so necessary that our lives depend upon it: for we read that King Perseus of Macedon, being prisoner at Rome, was killed by being kept from sleep; but Pliny instances such as have lived long without sleep.

Herodotus speaks of nations where the men sleep and wake by half-years.

And they who write the life of the sage Epimenides affirm that he slept seven-and-fifty years together.