

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 • Chapter 29

Translation by Charles Cotton (1685, Public domain) • Last updated on June 18, 2026

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ESSAYS-2-29-20260831-212241

On Virtue

I find by experience, that there is a good deal to be said betwixt the flights and emotions of the soul or a resolute and constant habit; and very well perceive that there is nothing we may not do, nay, even to the surpassing the Divinity itself, says a certain person, forasmuch as it is more to render a man's self impassible by his own study and industry, than to be so by his natural condition; and even to be able to conjoin to man's imbecility and frailty a God-like resolution and assurance; but it is by fits and starts; and in the lives of those heroes of times past there are sometimes miraculous impulses, and that seem infinitely to exceed our natural force; but they are indeed only impulses: and 'tis hard to believe, that these so elevated qualities in a man can so thoroughly tinct and imbue the soul that they should become ordinary, and, as it were, natural in him. It accidentally happens even to us, who are but abortive births of men, sometimes to launch our souls, when roused by the discourses or examples of others, much beyond their ordinary stretch; but 'tis a kind of passion which pushes and agitates them, and in some sort ravishes them from themselves: but, this perturbation once overcome, we see that they insensibly flag and slacken of themselves, if not to the lowest degree, at least so as to be no more the same; insomuch as that upon every trivial occasion, the losing of a bird, or the breaking, of a glass, we suffer ourselves to be moved little less than one of the common people.

I am of opinion, that order, moderation, and constancy excepted, all things are to be done by a man that is very imperfect and defective in general.

Therefore it is, say the Sages, that to make a right judgment of a man, you are chiefly to pry into his common actions, and surprise him in his everyday habit.

Pyrrho, he who erected so pleasant a knowledge upon ignorance, endeavored, as all the rest who were really philosophers did, to make his life correspond with his doctrine. And because he maintained the imbecility of human judgment to be so extreme as to be incapable of any choice or inclination, and would have it perpetually wavering and suspended, considering and receiving all things as indifferent, 'tis said, that he always comforted himself after the same manner and

countenance: if he had begun a discourse, he would always end what he had to say, though the person he was speaking to had gone away: if he walked, he never stopped for any impediment that stood in his way, being preserved from precipices, collision with carts, and other like accidents, by the care of his friends: for, to fear or to avoid anything, had been to shock his own propositions, which deprived the senses themselves of all election and certainty. Sometimes he suffered incision and cauteries with so great constancy as never to be seen so much as to wince.

'Tis something to bring the soul to these imaginations; 'tis more to join the effects, and yet not impossible; but to conjoin them with such perseverance and constancy as to make them habitual, is certainly, in attempts so remote from the common usage, almost incredible to be done. Therefore it was, that being sometime taken in his house sharply scolding with his sister, and being reproached that he therein transgressed his own rules of indifference: "What!" said he, "must this bit of a woman also serve for a testimony to my rules?" Another time, being seen to defend himself against a dog: "It is," said he, "very hard totally to put off man; and we must endeavor and force ourselves to resist and encounter things, first by effects, but at least by reason and argument."

About seven or eight years since, a husbandman yet living, but two leagues from my house, having long been tormented with his wife's jealousy, coming one day home from his work, and she welcoming him with her accustomed railing, entered into so great fury that with a sickle he had yet in his hand, he totally cut off all those parts that she was jealous of and threw them in her face.

And, 'tis said that a young gentleman of our nation, brisk and amorous, having by his perseverance at last mollified the heart of a fair mistress, enraged, that upon the point of fruition he found himself unable to perform, and that,

*nec viriliter
Iners senile penis extulerat caput,*

But the lifeless penis of an old man
showed its tip. • PRIAPEA, 83.4

as soon as ever he came home he deprived himself of the rebellious member, and sent it to his mistress, a cruel and bloody victim for the expiation of his offense. If this had been done upon mature consideration, and upon the account of religion, as the priests of Cybele did, what should we say of so high an action?

A few days since, at Bergerac, five leagues from my house, up the river Dordogne, a woman having overnight been beaten and abused by her husband, a choleric ill-conditioned fellow, resolved to escape from his ill-usage at the price of her life; and going so soon as she was up the next morning to visit her neighbors, as she was wont to do, and having let some words fall in recommendation of her affairs, she took a sister of hers by the hand, and led her to the bridge; whither being come, and having taken leave of her, in jest as it were, without any manner of alteration in her countenance, she threw herself headlong from the top into the river, and was there drowned. That which is the most remarkable in this is, that this resolution was a whole night forming in her head.

It is quite another thing with the Indian women for it being the custom there for the men to have many wives, and the best beloved of them to kill herself at her husband's decease, every one of them makes it the business of her whole life to obtain this privilege and gain this advantage over her companions; and the good offices they do their husbands aim at no other recompense but to be preferred in accompanying him in death,

*ubi mortifero jacta est fax ultima lecto,
Uxorum fuis stat pia turba comis;
Et certamen habent lethi, quæ viva sequatur
Coniugium: pudor est non licuisse mori.
Ardent victrices, et flammæ pectora præbent
Imponuntque suis ora perusta viris.*

A certain author of our times reports that he has seen in those Oriental nations this custom in practice, that not only the wives bury themselves with their husbands, but even the slaves he has enjoyed also; which is done after this manner: The husband being dead, the widow may if she will (but few will) demand two or three months' respite wherein to order her affairs. The day being come, she mounts on horseback, dressed as fine as at her wedding, and with a cheerful countenance says she is going to sleep with her spouse, holding a looking-glass in her left hand and an arrow in the other. Being thus conducted in pomp, accompanied with her kindred and friends and a great concourse of people in great joy, she is at last brought to the public place appointed for such spectacles: this is a great space, in the midst of which is a pit full of wood, and adjoining to it a mount raised four or five steps, upon which she is brought and served with a magnificent repast; which being done, she falls to dancing and singing, and gives order, when she thinks fit, to kindle the fire. This being done, she descends, and taking the nearest of her husband's relations by the hand, they walk to the river close by, where she strips herself stark naked, and having distributed her clothes and jewels to her friends, plunges herself into the water, as if there to cleanse herself from her sins; coming out thence, she wraps herself in a yellow linen of five-and-twenty ells long, and again giving her hand to this kinsman of her husband's, they return back to the mount, where she makes a speech to the people, and recommends her children to them, if she have any. Betwixt the pit and the mount there is commonly a curtain drawn to screen the burning furnace from their sight, which some of them, to manifest the greater courage, forbid. Having ended what she has to say, a woman presents her with a vessel of oil, wherewith to anoint her head and her whole body, which when done with she throws into the fire, and in an instant precipitates herself after. Immediately, the people throw a good many billets and logs upon her that she may not be long in dying, and convert all their joy into sorrow and mourning. If they are persons of meaner condition, the body of the defunct is carried to the place of sepulture, and there placed sitting, the widow kneeling before him, embracing the dead body; and they continue in this posture whilst the people build a wall about them, which so soon as it is raised to the height of the woman's shoulders, one of her relations comes behind her, and taking hold of her head, twists her neck; so soon as she is dead, the wall is presently raised up, and closed, and there they remain entombed.

For when they threw the torch on the funeral bed, the pious wives with hair dishevelled, stand around striving, which, living, shall accompany her spouse; and are ashamed that they may not die; they who are preferred expose their breasts to the flame, and they lay their scorched lips on those of their husbands. • PROP., 3.13.17

There was, in this same country, something like this in their gymnosophists; for not by constraint of others nor by the impetuosity of a sudden humor, but by the express profession of their order, their custom was, as soon as they arrived at a certain age, or that they saw themselves threatened by any disease, to cause a funeral pile to be erected for them, and on the top a stately bed, where, after having joyfully feasted their friends and acquaintance, they laid them down with so great resolution, that fire being applied to it, they were never seen to stir either hand or foot; and after this manner, one of them, Calanus by name; expired in the presence of the whole army of Alexander the Great.

And he was neither reputed holy nor happy among them who did not thus destroy himself, dismissing his soul purged and purified by the fire, after having consumed all that was earthly and mortal.

This constant premeditation of the whole life is that which makes the wonder.

Among our other controversies, that of 'Fatum' has also crept in; and to tie things to come, and even our own wills, to a certain and inevitable necessity, we are yet upon this argument of time past: "Since God foresees that all things shall so fall out, as doubtless He does, it must then necessarily follow, that they must so fall out": to which our masters reply: "that the seeing anything come to pass, as we do, and as God Himself also does (for all things being present with him, He rather sees, than foresees), is not to compel an event: that is, we see because things do fall out, but things do not fall out because we see: events cause knowledge, but knowledge does not cause events. That which we see happen, does happen; but it might have happened otherwise: and God, in the catalog of the causes of events which He has in His prescience, has also those which we call accidental and voluntary, depending upon the liberty. He has given our free will, and knows that we do amiss because we would do so."

I have seen a great many commanders encourage their soldiers with this fatal necessity; for if our time be limited to a certain hour, neither the enemies' shot nor our own boldness, nor our flight and cowardice, can either shorten or prolong our lives. This is easily said, but see who will be so easily persuaded; and if it be so that a strong and lively faith draws along with it actions of the same kind, certainly this faith we so much brag of, is very light in this age of ours, unless the contempt it has of works makes it disdain their company.

So it is, that to this very purpose the Sire de Joinville, as credible a witness as any other whatever, tells us of the Bedouins, a nation among the Saracens, with whom the king St. Louis had to do in the Holy Land, that they, in their religion, so firmly believed the number of every man's days to be from all eternity prefixed and set down by an inevitable decree, that they went naked to the wars, excepting a Turkish sword, and their bodies only covered with a white linen cloth: and for the greatest curse they could invent when they were angry, this was always in their mouths: "Accursed be thou, as he that arms himself for fear of death." This is a testimony of faith very much beyond ours.

And of this sort is that also that two friars of Florence gave in our fathers' days. Being engaged in some controversy of learning, they agreed to go both of them into the fire in the sight of all the people, each for the verification of his argument, and all things were already prepared, and the thing just upon the point of execution, when it was interrupted by an unexpected accident.

A young Turkish lord, having performed a notable exploit in his own person in the sight of both armies, that of Amurath and that of Huniades, ready to join battle, being asked by Amurath, what in such tender and inexperienced years (for it was his first sally into arms) had inspired him with so brave a courage, replied, that his chief tutor for valor was a hare. "For being," said he, "one day a hunting, I found a hare sitting, and though I had a brace of excellent greyhounds with me, yet methought it would be best for sureness to make use of my bow; for she sat very fair. I then fell to letting fly my arrows, and shot forty that I had in my quiver, not only without hurting, but without starting her from her form. At last I slipped my dogs after her, but to no more purpose than I had shot: by which I understood that she had been secured by her destiny; and, that neither darts nor swords can wound without the permission of fate, which we can neither hasten nor defer." This story may serve, by the way, to let us see how flexible our reason is to all sorts of images.

A person of great years, name, dignity, and learning boasted to me that he had been induced to a certain very important change in his faith by a strange and whimsical incitation, and one otherwise so inadequate, that I thought it much stronger, taken the contrary way: he called it a miracle, and so I look upon it, but in a different sense.

The Turkish historians say, that the persuasion those of their nation have imprinted in them of the fatal and unalterable prescription of their days, manifestly conduces to the giving them great assurance in dangers. And I know a great prince who makes very fortunate use of it, whether it be that he really believes it, or that he makes it his excuse for so wonderfully hazarding himself: let us hope Fortune may not be too soon weary of her favor to him.

There has not happened in our memory a more admirable effect of resolution than in those two who conspired the death of the Prince of Orange. 'Tis marvellous how the second who executed it, could ever be persuaded into an attempt, wherein his companion, who had done his utmost, had had so ill success; and after the same method, and with the same arms, to go attack a lord, armed with so recent a late lesson of distrust, powerful in followers and bodily strength, in his own hall, amidst his guards, and in a city wholly at his devotion. Assuredly, he employed a very resolute arm and a courage enflamed with furious passion. A dagger is surer for striking home; but by reason that more motion and force of hand is required than with a pistol, the blow is more subject to be put by or hindered. That this man did not run to a certain death, I make no great doubt; for the hopes any one could flatter him withal, could not find place in any sober understanding, and the conduct of his exploit sufficiently manifests that he had no want of that, no more than of courage. The motives of so powerful a persuasion may be diverse, for our fancy does what it will, both with itself and us.

The execution that was done near Orleans was nothing like this; there was in this more of chance than vigor; the wound was not mortal, if fortune had not made it so, and to attempt to shoot on horseback, and at a great distance, by one whose body was in motion from the motion of his horse, was the attempt of a man who had rather miss his blow than fail of saving himself. This was apparent from what followed; for he was so astonished and stupefied with the thought of so high an execution, that he totally lost his judgment both to find his way to flight and to govern his tongue. What needed he to have done more than to fly back to his friends across the river? 'Tis what I have done in less dangers, and that I think of very little hazard, how broad soever the river may be, provided your horse have easy going in, and that you see on the other side easy landing according to the stream. The other, when they pronounced his dreadful sentence, "I was prepared for this," said he, "beforehand, and I will make you wonder at my patience."

The Assassins, a nation bordering upon Phoenicia, are reputed among the Mohammedans a people of very great devotion and purity of manners. They hold that the nearest way to gain Paradise is to kill some one of a contrary religion; which is the reason they have often been seen, being but one or two, and without armor, to attempt against powerful enemies, at the price of a certain death and without any consideration of their own danger. So was our Raymond, Count of Tripoli, assassinated (which word is derived from their name) in the heart of his city, during our enterprises of the Holy War: and likewise Conrad, Marquis of Monteferrat, the murderers at their execution bearing themselves with great pride and glory that they had performed so brave an exploit.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Priapea	<i>Priapea</i>
Prop.	Propertius, <i>Elegies</i>