

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 18

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That we should not judge of our happinesse, untill after our death

*scilicet vltima semper
Expectanda dies homini est, dicique beatus
Ante obitum nemo, supremâque funera debet.*

*We must expect of man the latest day,
Nor ere he die, he's happie, can we say*

THE VERIE children are acquainted with the storie of *Cræsus* to this purpose: who being taken by *Cyrus*, and by him condemned to die, upon the point of his execution, cried out aloud: Oh *Solon, Solon!* which words of his, being reported to *Cyrus*, who inquiring what he meant by them, tolde him, hee now at his owne cost verified the advertisement *Solon* had before times given him: which was, that no man, what cheerefull and blandishing countenance soever fortune shewed them, may rightly deeme himselfe happie, til such time as he have passed the last day of his life, by reason of the uncertaintie and vicissitude of humane things, which by a verie light motive, and slight occasion, are often changed from one to another cleane contrary state and degree. And therefore *Agesilaus*, answered one that counted the King of *Persia* happy, because being very yong, he had gotten the garland of so mighty and great a dominion: yea but, said he, *Priame* at the same age was not unhappy; of the Kings of *Macedon*, that succeeded *Alexander* the great, some were afterward seene to become Joyners and Scriveners at *Rome*: and of Tirants of *Sicilie*, Schoolemaisters at *Corinth*: One that had conquered halfe the world, and been Emperour over so many Armies, became an humble, and miserable suter to the raskally officers of a King of *Egypt*: At so high a rate did that great *Pompey* purchase the irksome prolonging of his life but for five or six moneths. And in our fathers dayes, *Lodowicke Sforce*, tenth Duke of *Millane*, under whom the state of *Italie* had so long beene turmoyled and shaken, was seene to die a wretched prisoner at *Loches* in *France*, but not till he had lived and lingered ten yeares in thraldome, which was the worst of his bargain. Oh inhumane and barbarous cruelty! so various and inconsistent is the hand of fortune in disposing of Empires and Kingdomes. And a thousand such like examples. For, it seemeth that as the sea-billowes and

surging waves, rage and storme against the surly pride, and stubborne height of our buildings. So is there above, certaine spirits that envie the rising prosperities and greatnesse here below.

*Vsque adeò res humanas res abdita quaedam
Obterit, & pulchros fasces sævâsque secures
Proculcare, ac ludibrio sibi habere videtur.*

*A hidden powre so mens states hath out worn
Faire swordes, fierce scepters, signes of honours borne,
It seemes to trample and deride in scorne.*

And it seemeth Fortune doth sometimes narrowly watch the last day of our life, thereby to shew her power, and in one moment to overthrow, what for many yeares together she had beene erecting, and makes us crie after *Laberius*, *Nimirum hac die vna plus vixi, mihi quàm vivendum fuit*. Thus it is, *I have lived longer by this one day, than I should*. So may that good advise of *Solon* be taken with reason. But forsomuch as hee is a Philosopher, with whom the favours or disfavours of fortune, and good or ill lucke have no place, and are not regarded by them: and puissances and greatneses, and accidents of qualitie, are well nigh indifferent: I deeme it very likely, he had a further reach, and meant that the same good fortune of our life, which dependeth of the tranquillitie and contentment of a welborne minde, and of the resolution and assurance of a well ordered soule, should never be ascribed unto man, until he have bin seene play the last act of his comedie, and without doubt the hardest. In all the rest there may be some maske: either these sophisticall discourses of Philosophie are not in us but by countenance, or accidents that never touch us to the quick, give us alwaies leasure to keep our countenance settled. But when that last parte of death, and of our selves comes to be acted, then no dissembling will avails, then is it high time to speake plaine english, and put off all vizardes: then whatsoever the pot containeth must be shewne, be it good or bad, foule or cleane, wine or water.

*Nam veræ voces tum demum pectore ab imo
Eijciuntur, & eripitur persona, manet res.*

*For then are sent true speeches from the heart,
We are our selves, we leave to play a parte.*

Loe here, why at this last cast, all our lives other actions must be tride and touched. It is the maister-day, the day that judgeth all others: it is the day, saith an auncient Writer, that must judge of all my forepassed yeares. To death doe I referre the essay of my studies fruite. There shall we see whether my discourse proceede from my heart, or from my mouth. I have seene diverse, by their death, either in good or evill, give reputation, to all their forepassed life. *Scipio*, father in law to *Pompey*, in well dying, repaired the ill opinion, which untill that houre men had ever held of him. *Epaminondas* being demanded, which of the three he esteemed most, either *Chabrias*, or *Iphicrates*, or himselfe; *It is necessary*, saide hee, *that wee be seene to die, before your question may well be resolved*. Verily we should steale much from him, if he should be weighed without the honour and

greatnesse of his ende. God hath willed it, as hee pleased it: but in my time three of the most execrable persons, that ever I knew in all abomination of life, and the most infamous, have beene seene to die very orderly and quietly, and in every circumstance composed even unto perfection. There are some brave and fortunate deaths. I have seene her cut the twine of some mans life, with a progresse of wonderfull advancement, and with so worthie an end, even in the flowre of his growth, and spring of his youth, that in mine opinion, his ambitious and haughtie couragious designes, thought nothing so high, as might interrupt them: who without going to the place where he pretended, arived there more gloriously and worthily, than either his desire or hope aymed at. And by his fall fore-went the power and name, whither by his course he aspired. When I judge of other mens lives, I ever respect, how they have behaved themselves in their end; and my chieftest study is, I may wel demeane my selfe at my last gasp, that is to say, quietly, and constantly.