

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

# ESSAYS



## Book 1 • Chapter 16

Translation by Charles Cotton (1685, Public domain) • Last updated on February 17, 2022

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COTTON-1-16-20250106-191448

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## A Proceeding of some Ambassadors

I OBSERVE in all my Travels this Custom, ever to learn something from the Information of those with whom I confer (which is the best School of all other) and to put my Company upon those Subjects they are the best able to speak of:

*Basti al no c chiero ragionar de venti,  
Al bifolco dei Tori, & le sue Pyaghe  
Conti'l guerrier, conti'l Pastor gli armenti.*

*The Sea-men best can reason of the Winds,  
Of Oxen none so well as lab'ring Hinds;  
The huffing Souldier best of Wounds and Knocks,  
And gentler Shepherds of their harmle ss Flocks.*

For it often falls out, that, on the contrary, every one will rather choose to be prating of another Man's Province than his own, thinking it so much new reputation acquir'd; witness the Jeer *Archidamus* put upon *Periander*, *That he had quitted the Glory of being an excellent Physician to gain the Repute of a very bad Poet*. And do but observe how large and ample *Cæsar* is to make us understand his Invention of building Bridges, and contriving Engines of War, and how succinct and reserv'd in Comparison, where he speaks of the Offices of his Profession, his own Valour, and military Conduct. His Exploits sufficiently prove him a great Captain, and that he knew well enough; but he would be thought a good Engineer to boot; a quality something rare, and not much to be expected in him. The elder *Dionysius* was a very great Captain, as it befitted his Fortune he should be; but he took very great Pains to get a particular Reputation by Poetry, and yet he was never cut out for a Poet. A Gentleman of the long Robe being not long since brought to see a Study furnish'd with all sorts of Books, both of his own and all other Faculties, took no occasion at all to entertain himself with any of them, but fell very rudely and impertinently to descant upon a Barricado plac'd before the Study-door, a thing that a hundred Captains and common Souldiers see every day without taking any notice or offence.

*Optat ephippia bos piger, optat arare caballus.*

*The lazy Oxe would Saddle have and Bit,  
The Steed a Yoke, neither for either fit.*

By this course a Man shall never improve himself, nor arrive at any Perfection in any thing. He must therefore make it his Business, always to put the Architect, the Painter, the Statuary, as also every Mechanick Artizan, upon discourse of their own Capacities. And to this purpose, in reading Histories, which is every Body's Subject, I use to consider what kind of Men are the Authors; which, if Persons that profess nothing but mere Learning, I in and from them principally observe and learn the Stile and Language; If Physicians, I upon that account the rather incline to credit what they report of the Temperature of the Air, of the Health and Complexions of Princes, of Wounds, and Diseases; if Lawyers, we are from them to take notice of the Controversies of Right and Title, the Establishment of Laws and Civil Government, and the like; if Divines, the Affairs of the Church, Ecclesiastical Censures, Marriages and Dispensations; if Courtiers, Manners and Ceremonies; if Souldiers, the things that properly belong to their Trade, and principally the Accounts of such Actions and Enterprizes wherein they were personally engaged; and if Ambassadors, we are to observe their Negotiations, Intelligences, and Practices, and the Manner how they are to be carried on. And this is the reason why (which perhaps I should have lightly pass'd over in another) I dwelt upon and maturely consider'd one Passage in the History writ by Mounsieur *de Langey* (a Man of very great Judgment in things of that nature) which was, after having given a Narrative of the fine Oration *Charles* the Fifth had made in the Consistory at *Rome*, and in the Presence of the Bishop of *Mascon* and Monsieur *de Velley* our Ambassadors there, wherein he had mixed several tart and injurious Expressions to the Dishonour of our Nation; and amongst the rest, *That if his Captains and Souldiers were not Men of another kind of Fidelity, Resolution, and sufficiency in the Knowledge of Arms, than those of the King, he would immediately go with a Rope about his Neck and sue to him for Mercy*, (and it should seem the Emperour had really this, or a very little better Opinion of our military Men, for he afterward, twice or thrice in his Life, said the very same thing) as also, that he challenged the King to fight him in his Shirt with Rapier and Poiniard in a Boat: the said *Sieur de Langey* pursuing his History, adds, that the forenam'd Ambassadors, sending a Dispatch to the King of these things, conceal'd the greatest part, and particularly the two last Passages. At which I could not but wonder, that it should be in the Power of an Ambassador to dispense with any thing which he ought to signifie to his Master, especially of so great importance as this, coming from the Mouth of such a Person, and spoke in so great an Assembly; and should rather conceive it had been the Servant's Duty faithfully to have represented to him the whole and naked Truth as it past, to the end that the Liberty of disposing, judging and concluding, might absolutely have remain'd in him: for either to conceal, or to disguise the Truth for fear he should take it otherwise than he ought to do, and lest it should prompt him to some extravagant Resolution, and in the mean time to leave him ignorant of his Affairs, should seem, methinks, rather to belong to him who is to give the Law, than to him who is only to receive it; to him who is in supream Command, and best can judge of his own Interests, and not to him who

ought to look upon himself as inferiour in Authority, so also in Prudence and good Counsel: but let it be how it will, I for my part would be loth to be so serv'd in my little Concerns. We do so willingly slip the Collar of Command upon any Pretence whatever, and are so ready to usurp upon Dominion, and every one does so naturally aspire to Liberty and Power, that no Utility whatever deriv'd from the Wit or Valour of those he does employ, ought to be so dear to a Superiour, as a down-right and sincere Obedience. To obey more upon the Account of Understanding than of Subjection, is to corrupt the Office, and to subvert the Power of Command; insomuch that *P. Crassus*, the same whom the *Romans* reputed five times happy, at the time when he was Consul in *Asia*, having sent to a Greek Engineer to cause the greater of two Masts of Ships that he had taken notice of at *Athens*, to be brought to him, to be employed about some Engine of Battery he had a design to make; the other, presuming upon his own Science and sufficiency in those Affairs, thought fit to do otherwise than directed, and to bring the less; which also, according to the Rules of Art, was really more proper for the use to which it was design'd: but *Crassus*, though he gave ear to his Reasons with great Patience, would not however take them, how sound or convincing soever, for current Pay, but yet remained so highly offended at his Disobedience, that he caus'd him to be sufficiently whip'd for his Pains, valuing the Interest of Discipline much more than of the thing. Notwithstanding, we may on the other side consider, that so precise and implicate an Obedience as this, is only due to positive and limited Commands. The Employment of an Ambassadour is never so confin'd; several things in the management of Affairs, and in the various and unforeseen Occurrences and Accidents that may fall out in the Management of a Negotiation of this nature, being wholly referr'd to the absolute Sovereignty of their own Conduct: neither do they simply execute only, but also to their own Discretion and Wisdom form and model their Master's Pleasure; and I have in my time known Men of command who have been check'd for having rather obeyed the express Words of the King's Letters, than the necessity of the Affairs they had in hand. Men of Understanding do yet to this day condemn the Custom of the Kings of *Persia*, to give their Lieutenants and Agents so little Rein, that upon the least arising Difficulties they must evermore have Recourse to their further Commands; this delay in so vast an extent of Dominion having often very much prejudic'd their Affairs. And *Crassus*, writing to a Man whose Profession it was best to understand those things, and pre-acquainting him to what use this Mast was design'd, did he not seem to consult his Advice, and in a manner invite him to interpose his better Judgment?