

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 21

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

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ESSAYS-2-21-20260831-212237

Against Laziness

The Emperor Vespasian, being sick of the disease whereof he died, did not for all that neglect to inquire after the state of the empire, and even in bed continually despatched very many affairs of great consequence; for which, being reproved by his physician, as a thing prejudicial to his health, "An emperor," said he, "must die standing." A fine saying, in my opinion, and worthy a great prince. The Emperor Hadrian since made use of the same words, and kings should be often put in mind of them, to make them know that the great office conferred upon them of the command of so many men, is not an employment of ease; and that there is nothing can so justly disgust a subject, and make him unwilling to expose himself to labor and danger for the service of his prince, than to see him, in the meantime, devoted to his ease and frivolous amusement, and to be solicitous of his preservation who so much neglects that of his people.

Whoever will take upon him to maintain that 'tis better for a prince to carry on his wars by others, than in his own person, fortune will furnish him with examples enough of those whose lieutenants have brought great enterprises to a happy issue, and of those also whose presence has done more hurt than good: but no virtuous and valiant prince can with patience endure so dishonorable councils. Under color of saving his head, like the statue of a saint, for the happiness of his kingdom, they degrade him from and declare him incapable of his office, which is military throughout: I know one who had much rather be beaten, than to sleep whilst another fights for him; and who never without jealousy heard of any brave thing done even by his own officers in his absence. And Soliman I said, with very good reason, in my opinion, that victories obtained without the master were never complete. Much more would he have said that that master ought to blush for shame, to pretend to any share in the honor, having contributed nothing to the work, but his voice and thought; nor even so much as these, considering that in such work as that, the direction and command that deserve honor are only such as are given upon the spot, and in the heat of the business. No pilot performs his office by standing still. The princes of the Ottoman family, the chiefest in the world in military fortune, have warmly embraced this opinion, and Bajazet II, with his son, who swerved from it, spending their time in science and other retired employments, gave great blows to

their empire; and Amurath III, now reigning, following their example, begins to find the same. Was it not Edward III, king of England, who said this of our Charles V: "There never was king who so seldom put on his armor, and yet never king who gave me so much to do." He had reason to think it strange, as an effect of chance more than of reason. And let those seek out some other to join with them than me, who will reckon the Kings of Castile and Portugal among the warlike and magnanimous conquerors, because at the distance of twelve hundred leagues from their lazy abode, by the conduct of their captains, they made themselves masters of both Indies; of which it has to be known if they would have had even the courage to go and in person enjoy them.

The Emperor Julian said yet further, that a philosopher and a brave man ought not so much as to breathe; that is to say, not to allow any more to bodily necessities than what we cannot refuse; keeping the soul and body still intent and busy about honorable, great, and virtuous things. He was ashamed if any one in public saw him spit, or sweat (which is said by some, also, of the Lacedaemonian young men, and which Xenophon says of the Persian), forasmuch as he conceived that exercise, continual labor, and sobriety, ought to have dried up all those superfluities. What Seneca says will not be unfit for this place; which is, that the ancient Romans kept their youth always standing, and taught them nothing that they were to learn sitting.

'Tis a generous desire to wish to die usefully and like a man, but the effect lies not so much in our resolution as in our good fortune; a thousand have proposed to themselves in battle, either to overcome or to die, who have failed both in the one and the other, wounds and imprisonment crossing their design and compelling them to live against their will. There are diseases that overthrow even our desires, and our knowledge.

Fortune ought not to second the vanity of the Roman legions, who bound themselves by oath, either to overcome or die: *Victor, Marce Fabi, revertar ex acie: si fallo, Jovem patrem, Gradivumque Martem aliosque iratos invoco deos*. The Portuguese say that in a certain place of their conquest of the Indies, they met with soldiers who had condemned themselves, with horrible execrations, to enter into no other composition but either to cause themselves to be slain, or to remain victorious; and had their heads and beards shaved in token of this vow. 'Tis to much purpose for us to hazard ourselves and to be obstinate: it seems as if blows avoided those who present themselves too briskly to them, and do not willingly fall upon those who too willingly seek them, and so defeat them of their design. Such there have been, who, after having tried all ways, not having been able with all their endeavor to obtain the favor of dying by the hand of the enemy, have been constrained, to make good their resolution of bringing home the honor of victory or of losing their lives, to kill themselves even in the heat of battle. Of which there are other examples, but this is one: Philistus, general of the naval army of Dionysius the Younger against the Syracusans, presented them battle which was sharply disputed, their forces being equal: in this engagement, he had the better at the first, through his own valor: but the Syracusans drawing about his gally to environ him, after having done great things in his own person to disengage himself and hoping for no relief, with his own hand he took away the life he had so liberally, and in vain, exposed to the enemy.

I will return, Marcus Fabius, a conqueror, from the fight: and if I fail, I invoke Father Jove, Mars Gradivus, and the other angry gods. • LIVY, 2.45

Mule Moloch, king of Fez, who lately won against Sebastian, king of Portugal, the battle so famous for the death of three kings, and for the transmission of that great kingdom to the crown of Castile, was extremely sick when the Portuguese entered in an hostile manner into his dominions; and from that day forward grew worse and worse, still drawing nearer to and foreseeing his end; yet never did man better employ his own sufficiency more vigorously and bravely than he did upon this occasion. He found himself too weak to undergo the pomp and ceremony of entering into his camp, which after their manner is very magnificent, and therefore resigned that honor to his brother; but this was all of the office of a general that he resigned; all the rest of greatest utility and necessity he most, exactly and gloriously performed in his own person; his body lying upon a couch, but his judgment and courage upright and firm to his last gasp, and in some sort beyond it. He might have wasted his enemy, indiscreetly advanced into his dominions, without striking a blow; and it was a very unhappy occurrence, that for want of a little life or somebody to substitute in the conduct of this war and the affairs of a troubled state, he was compelled to seek a doubtful and bloody victory, having another by a better and surer way already in his hands. Notwithstanding, he wonderfully managed the continuance of his sickness in consuming the enemy, and in drawing them far from the assistance of the navy and the ports they had on the coast of Africa, even till the last day of his life, which he designedly reserved for this great battle. He arranged his battalions in a circular form, environing the Portuguese army on every side, which round circle coming to close in and to draw up close together, not only hindered them in the conflict (which was very sharp through the valor of the young invading king), considering that they had every way to present a front, but prevented their flight after the defeat, so that finding all passages possessed and shut up by the enemy, they were constrained to close up together again: *coacerventurque non solum cæde, sed etiam fuga*, and there they were slain in heaps upon one another, leaving to the conqueror a very bloody and entire victory. Dying, he caused himself to be carried and hurried from place to place where most need was, and passing along the files, encouraged the captains and soldiers one after another; but a corner of his main battalions being broken, he was not to be held from mounting on horseback with his sword in his hand; he did his utmost to break from those about him, and to rush into the thickest of the battle, they all the while withholding him, some by the bridle, some by his robe, and others by his stirrups. This last effort totally overwhelmed the little life he had left; they again laid him upon his bed; but coming to himself, and starting as it were out of his swoon, all other faculties failing, to give his people notice that they were to conceal his death the most necessary command he had then to give, that his soldiers might not be discouraged (with the news) he expired with his finger upon his mouth, the ordinary sign of keeping silence. Who ever lived so long and so far into death? whoever died so erect, or more like a man?

piled up not only in slaughter but
in flight, • LIVY, 24.39

The most extreme degree of courageously treating death, and the most natural, is to look upon it not only without astonishment but without care, continuing the wonted course of life even into it, as Cato did, who entertained himself in study, and went to sleep, having a violent and bloody death in his heart, and the weapon in his hand with which he was resolved to despatch himself.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Livy

Livy, *History of Rome*