

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



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Observations on Julius Caesar's Methods of Waging War

'Tis related of many great leaders that they have had certain books in particular esteem, as Alexander the Great, Homer; Scipio Africanus, Xenophon; Marcus Brutus, Polybius; Charles V, Philippe de Commynes; and 'tis said that, in our times, Machiavelliis elsewhere still in repute; but the late Marshal Strozzi, who had taken Caesar for his man, doubtless made the best choice, seeing that it indeed ought to be the breviary of every soldier, as being the true and sovereign pattern of the military art. And, moreover, God knows with that grace and beauty he has embellished that rich matter, with so pure, delicate, and perfect expression, that, in my opinion, there are no writings in the world comparable to his, as to that business.

I will set down some rare and particular passages of his wars that remain in my memory.

His army, being in some consternation upon the rumor that was spread of the great forces that king Juba was leading against him, instead of abating the apprehension which his soldiers had conceived at the news and of lessening to them the forces of the enemy, having called them all together to encourage and reassure them, he took a quite contrary way to what we are used to do, for he told them that they need no more trouble themselves with inquiring after the enemy's forces, for that he was certainly informed thereof, and then told them of a number much surpassing both the truth and the report that was current in his army; following the advice of Cyrusin Xenophon, forasmuch as the deception is not of so great importance to find an enemy weaker than we expected, than to find him really very strong, after having been made to believe that he was weak.

It was always his use to accustom his soldiers simply to obey, without taking upon them to control, or so much as to speak of their captain's designs, which he never communicated to them but upon the point of execution; and he took a delight, if they discovered anything of what he intended, immediately to change his orders to deceive them; and to that purpose, would often, when he had assigned his quarters in a place,

pass forward and lengthen his day's march, especially if it was foul and rainy weather.

The Swiss, in the beginning of his wars in Gaul, having sent to him to demand a free passage over the Roman territories, though resolved to hinder them by force, he nevertheless spoke kindly to the messengers, and took some respite to return an answer, to make use of that time for the calling his army together. These silly people did not know how good a husband he was of his time: for he often repeats that it is the best part of a captain to know how to make use of occasions, and his diligence in his exploits is, in truth, unheard of and incredible.

If he was not very conscientious in taking advantage of an enemy under color of a treaty of agreement, he was as little so in this, that he required no other virtue in a soldier but valor only, and seldom punished any other faults but mutiny and disobedience. He would often after his victories turn them loose to all sorts of licence, dispensing them for some time from the rules of military discipline, saying withal that he had soldiers so well trained up that, powdered and perfumed, they would run furiously to the fight. In truth, he loved to have them richly armed, and made them wear engraved, gilded, and damasked armor, to the end that the care of saving it might engage them to a more obstinate defense. Speaking to them, he called them by the name of fellow-soldiers, which we yet use; which his successor, Augustus, reformed, supposing he had only done it upon necessity, and to cajole those who merely followed him as volunteers;

*Rheni mihi Caesar in undis
Dux erat; hic socius; facinus quos inquinat, æquat;*

but that this carriage was too mean and low for the dignity of an emperor and general of an army, and therefore brought up the custom of calling them soldiers only.

With this courtesy Caesar mixed great severity to keep them in awe; the ninth legion having mutinied near Placentia, he ignominiously cashiered them, though Pompey was then yet on foot, and received them not again to grace till after many supplications; he quieted them more by authority and boldness than by gentle ways.

In that place where he speaks of his, passage over the Rhine to Germany, he says that, thinking it unworthy of the honor of the Roman people to waft over his army in vessels, he built a bridge that they might pass over dry-foot. There it was that he built that wonderful bridge of which he gives so particular a description; for he nowhere so willingly dwells upon his actions as in representing to us the subtlety of his inventions in such kind of handiwork.

I have also observed this, that he set a great value upon his exhortations to the soldiers before the fight; for where he would show that he was either surprised or reduced to a necessity of fighting, he always brings in this, that he had not so much as leisure to harangue his army. Before that great battle with those of Tournay, "Caesar," says he, "having given order for everything else, presently ran where fortune carried him to encourage his people, and meeting with the tenth legion, had no more time to say

In the waters of the Rhine Caesar was my general; here at Rome he is my fellow. Crime levels those whom it polluted. • LUC., 5.289

anything to them but this, that they should remember their wonted valor; not to be astonished, but bravely sustain the enemy's encounter; and seeing the enemy had already approached within a dart's cast, he gave the signal for battle; and going suddenly thence elsewhere, to encourage others, he found that they were already engaged." Here is what he tells us in that place. His tongue, indeed, did him notable service upon several occasions, and his military eloquence was, in his own time, so highly reputed, that many of his army wrote down his harangues as he spoke them, by which means there were volumes of them collected that existed a long time after him. He had so particular a grace in speaking, that his intimates, and Augustus among others, hearing those orations read, could distinguish even to the phrases and words that were not his.

The first time that he went out of Rome with any public command, he arrived in eight days at the river Rhone, having with him in his coach a secretary or two before him who were continually writing, and him who carried his sword behind him. And certainly, though a man did nothing but go on, he could hardly attain that promptitude with which, having been everywhere victorious in Gaul, he left it, and, following Pompey to Brundisium, in eighteen days'time he subdued all Italy; returned from Brundisium to Rome; from Rome went into the very heart of Spain, where he surmounted extreme difficulties in the war against Afranius and Petreius, and in the long siege of Marseilles; thence he returned into Macedonia, beat the Roman army at Pharsalia, passed thence in pursuit of Pompey into Egypt, which he also subdued; from Egypt he went into Syria and the territories of Pontus, where he fought Pharnaces; thence into Africa, where he defeated Scipio and Juba; again returned through Italy, where he defeated Pompey's sons,

Ocior et cœli fiammis, et tigride fœta.

*Ac veluti montis saxum de, vertice præceps
Cum ruit avulsum vento, seu turbidus imber
Proluit, aut annis solvit sublapsa vetustas,
Fertur in abruptum magno mons improbus actu,
Exultatque solo, silvas, armenta, virosque,
Involvens secum.*

Speaking of the siege of Avaricum, he says, that it, was his custom to be night and day with the pioneers. In all enterprises of consequence he always reconnoitred in person, and never brought his army into quarters till he had first viewed the place, and, if we may believe Suetonius, when he resolved to pass over into England, he was the first man that sounded the passage.

He was wont to say that he more valued a victory obtained by counsel than by force, and in the war against Petreius and Afranius, fortune presenting him with an occasion of manifest advantage, he declined it, saying, that he hoped, with a little more time, but less hazard, to overthrow his enemies.

He there also played a notable part in commanding his whole army to pass the river by swimming, without any manner of necessity

Swifter than lightning, or the cub-bearing tigress • LUC., 5.405

And as a stone torn from the mountain's top by the wind or rain torrents, or loosened by age, falls massive with mighty force, bounds here and there, in its course sweeps from the earth with it woods, herds, and men. • VERG., AEN., 12.684

*rapuitque ruens in praelia miles,
Quod fugiens timuisset, iter; mox uda receptis
Membra foveant armis, gelidosque a gurgite, cursu
Restituunt artus.*

I find him a little more temperate and considerate in his enterprises than Alexander, for this man seems to seek and run headlong upon dangers like an impetuous torrent which attacks and rushes against everything it meets, without choice or discretion:

*Sic tauriformis volvitur Aufidus,
Qui regna Dauni perfluit Appuli,
Dum sævit, horrendamque cultis
Diluvium meditatur agri.*

and, indeed, he was a general in the flower and first heat of his youth, whereas Caesar took up the trade at a ripe and well advanced age; to which may be added that Alexander was of a more sanguine, hot, and choleric constitution, which he also inflamed with wine, from which Caesar was very abstinent.

But where necessary occasion required, never did any man venture his person more than he for my part, methinks I read in many of his exploits a determinate resolution to throw himself away to avoid the shame of being overcome. In his great battle with those of Tournay, he charged up to the head of the enemies without his shield, just as he was seeing the van of his own army beginning to give ground; which also several other times befell him. Hearing that his people were besieged, he passed through the enemy's army in disguise to go and encourage them with his presence. Having crossed over to Dyrrachium with very slender forces, and seeing the remainder of his army which he had left to Antony's conduct slow in following him, he undertook alone to repass the sea in a very great storm and privately stole away to fetch the rest of his forces, the ports on the other side being seized by Pompey, and the whole sea being in his possession.

And as to what he performed by force of hand, there are many exploits that in hazard exceed all the rules of war; for with how small means did he undertake to subdue the kingdom of Egypt, and afterwards to attack the forces of Scipio and Juba, ten times greater than his own? These people had, I know not what, more than human confidence in their fortune.

And he was wont to say that men must embark, and not deliberate, upon high enterprises.

After the battle of Pharsalia, when he had sent his army away before him into Asia, and was passing in one single vessel the strait of the Hellespont, he met Lucius Cassius at sea with ten tall men-of-war, when he had the courage not only to stay his coming, but to sail up to him and summon him to yield, which he did. Having undertaken that furious siege of Alexia, where there were fourscore thousand men in garrison, all Gaul being in arms to raise the siege and having set an army on foot of a hundred and nine thousand horse, and of two hundred and forty thousand foot, what a boldness and vehement confidence was it in him

The soldier rushing through a way to fight which he would have been afraid to have taken in flight: then with their armor they cover wet limbs, and by running restore warmth to their numbed joints. • LUC., 4.151

So the biforked Aufidus, which flows through the realm of the Apulian Daunus, when raging, threatens a fearful deluge to the tilled ground. • HOR., CARM., 4.14.25

that he would not give over his attempt, but resolved upon two so great difficulties—which nevertheless he overcame; and, after having won that great battle against those without, soon reduced those within to his mercy. The same happened to Lucullus at the siege of Tigranocerta against King Tigranes, but the condition of the enemy was not the same, considering the effeminacy of those with whom Lucullus had to deal.

I will here set down two rare and extraordinary events concerning this siege of Alexia; one, that the Gauls having drawn their powers together to encounter Caesar, after they had made a general muster of all their forces, resolved in their council of war to dismiss a good part of this great multitude, that they might not fall into confusion. This example of fearing to be too many is new; but, to take it right, it stands to reason that the body of an army should be of a moderate greatness, and regulated to certain bounds, both out of respect to the difficulty of providing for them, and the difficulty of governing and keeping them in order. At least it is very easy to make it appear by example that armies monstrous in number have seldom done anything to purpose.

According to the saying of Cyrus in Xenophon, “’Tis not the number of men, but the number of good men, that gives the advantage”: the remainder serving rather to trouble than assist. And Bajazet principally grounded his resolution of giving Tamerlane battle, contrary to the opinion of all his captains, upon this, that his enemies numberless number of men gave him assured hopes of confusion. Skanderbeg, a very good and expert judge in such matters, was wont to say that ten or twelve thousand reliable fighting men were sufficient to a good leader to secure his regulation in all sorts of military occasions.

The other thing I will here record, which seems to be contrary both to the custom and rules of war, is, that Vercingetorix, who was made general of all the parts of the revolted Gaul, should go shut up himself in Alexia: for he who has the command of a whole country ought never to shut himself up but in case of such last extremity that the only place he has left is in concern, and that the only hope he has left is in the defense of that city; otherwise he ought to keep himself always at liberty, that he may have the means to provide, in general, for all parts of his government.

To return to Caesar. He grew, in time, more slow and more considerate, as his friend Oppius witnesses: conceiving that he ought not lightly to hazard the glory of so many victories, which one blow of fortune might deprive him of. ’Tis what the Italians say, when they would reproach the rashness and foolhardiness of young people, calling them *bisognosi d'honore*, “necessitous of honor,” and that being in so great a want and dearth of reputation, they have reason to seek it at what price soever, which they ought not to do who have acquired enough already. There may reasonably be some moderation, some satiety, in this thirst and appetite of glory, as well as in other things: and there are enough people who practise it.

He was far remote from the religious scruples of the ancient Romans, who would never prevail in their wars but by dint of pure and simple valor; and yet he was more conscientious than we should be in these days, and did not approve all sorts of means to obtain a victory. In the war against Ariovistus, whilst he was parleying with him, there happened

some commotion between the horsemen, which was occasioned by the fault of Ariovistus's light horse, wherein, though Caesar saw he had a very great advantage of the enemy, he would make no use on it, lest he should have been reproached with a treacherous proceeding.

He was always wont to wear rich garments, and of a shining color in battle, that he might be the more remarkable and better observed.

He always carried a stricter and tighter hand over his soldiers when near an enemy.

When the ancient Greeks would accuse any one of extreme insufficiency, they would say, in common proverb, that he could neither read nor swim; he was of the same opinion, that swimming was of great use in war, and himself found it so; for when he had to use diligence, he commonly swam over the rivers in his way; for he loved to march on foot, as also did Alexander the Great. Being in Egypt forced, to save himself, to go into a little boat, and so many people leaping in with him that it was in danger of sinking, he chose rather to commit himself to the sea, and swam to his fleet, which lay two hundred paces off, holding in his left hand his tablets, and drawing his coatarmor in his teeth, that it might not fall into the enemy's hand, and at this time he was of a pretty advanced age.

Never had any general so much credit with his soldiers: in the beginning of the civil wars, his centurions offered him to find every one a man-at-arms at his own charge, and the foot soldiers to serve him at their own expense; those who were most at their ease, moreover, undertaking to defray the more necessitous. The late Admiral Chastillon showed us the like example in our civil wars; for the French of his army provided money out of their own purses to pay the foreigners that were with him. There are but rarely found examples of so ardent and so ready an affection among the soldiers of elder times, who kept themselves strictly to their rules of war.

Passion has a more absolute command over us than reason. And yet it happened in the war against Hannibal, that by the example of the people of Rome in the city, the soldiers and captains refused their pay in the army, and in Marcellus's camp those were branded with the name of Mercenaries who would receive any.

Having got the worst of it near Dyrrachium, his soldiers came and offered themselves to be chastised and punished, so that there was more need to comfort than reprove them. One single cohort of his withstood four of Pompey's legions above four hours together, till they were almost all killed with arrows, so that there were a hundred and thirty thousand shafts found in the trenches. A soldier called Scaeva, who commanded at one of the avenues, invincibly maintained his ground, having lost an eye, with one shoulder and one thigh shot through, and his shield hit in two hundred and thirty places. It happened that many of his soldiers being taken prisoners, rather chose to die than promise to join the contrary side. Granius Petronius was taken by Scipio in Africa: Scipio having put the rest to death, sent him word that he gave him his life, for he was a man of quality and quaestor, to whom Petronius sent answer back, that

Caesar's soldiers were wont to give others their life, and not to receive it; and immediately with his own hand killed himself.

Of their fidelity there are infinite examples among them, that which was done by those who were besieged in Salona, a city that stood for Caesar against Pompey, is not, for the rarity of an accident that there happened, to be forgotten. Marcus Octavius kept them close besieged; they within being reduced to the extremest necessity of all things, so that to supply the want of men, most of them being either slain or wounded, they had manumitted all their slaves, and had been constrained to cut off all the women's hair to make ropes for their war engines, besides a wonderful dearth of victuals, and yet continuing resolute never to yield. After having drawn the siege to a great length, by which Octavius was grown more negligent and less attentive to his enterprise, they made choice of one day about noon, and having first placed the women and children upon the walls to make a show, sallied upon the besiegers with such fury, that having routed the first, second, and third body, and afterwards the fourth, and the rest, and beaten them all out of their trenches, they pursued them even to their ships, and Octavius himself was fain to fly to Dyrrachium, where Pompey lay. I do not at present remember that I have met with any other example where the besieged ever gave the besieger a total defeat and won the field, nor that a sortie ever achieved the result of a pure and entire victory.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Hor., Carm.	Horace, <i>Odes</i>
Luc.	Lucan, <i>Civil War</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>