

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 24

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On Roman Greatness

I will only say a word or two of this infinite argument, to show the simplicity of those who compare the pitiful greatness of these times with that of Rome. In the seventh book of Cicero's *Familiar Epistles* (and let the grammarians put out that surname of familiar if they please, for in truth it is not very suitable; and they who, instead of familiar, have substituted "ad Familiares," may gather something to justify them for so doing out of what Suetonius says in the *Life of Caesar*, that there was a volume of letters of his *ad Familiares*) there is one directed to Caesar, then in Gaul, wherein Cicero repeats these words, which were in the end of another letter that Caesar had written to him: "As to what concerns Marcus Furius, whom you have recommended to me, I will make him king of Gaul, and if you would have me advance any other friend of yours send him to me."

It was no new thing for a simple citizen of Rome, as Caesar then was, to dispose of kingdoms, for he took away that of King Deiotarus from him to give it to a gentleman of the city of Pergamus, called Mithridates; and they who wrote his Life record several cities sold by him; and Suetonius says, that he had once from King Ptolemy three millions and six hundred thousand crowns, which was very like selling him his own kingdom:

Tot Galatae, tot Pontus, tot Lydia, nummis.

Marcus Antonius said, that the greatness of the people of Rome was not so much seen in what they took, as in what they gave; and, indeed, some ages before Antonius, they had dethroned one among the rest with so wonderful authority, that in all the Roman history I have not observed anything that more denotes the height of their power. Antiochus possessed all Egypt, and was, moreover, ready to conquer Cyprus and other appendages of that empire: when being upon the progress of his victories, C. Popilius came to him from the Senate, and at their first meeting refused to take him by the hand, till he had first read his letters, which after the king had read, and told him he would consider of them, Popilius made a circle about him with his cane, saying: "Return me an answer, that I may carry it back to the Senate, before thou stirrest out of

So much for Galatia, so much for Pontus, so much for Lydia. • CLAUD.,
EU., 1.203

this circle." Antiochus, astonished at the roughness of so positive a command, after a little pause, replied, "I will obey the Senate's command." Then Popilius saluted him as friend of the Roman people. To have renounced claim to so great a monarchy, and a course of such successful fortune, from the effects of three lines in writing! Truly he had reason, as he afterwards did, to send the Senate word by his ambassadors, that he had received their order with the same respect as if it had come from the immortal gods.

All the kingdoms that Augustus gained by the right of war, he either restored to those who had lost them or presented them to strangers.

And Tacitus, in reference to this, speaking of Cogidunus, king of England, gives us, by a marvellous touch, an instance of that infinite power: the Romans, says he, were from all antiquity accustomed to leave the kings they had subdued in possession of their kingdoms under their authority: *ut haberent instrumenta servitutis et reges*.

That they might have even kings to be their slaves. • LIVY, 45.13

'Tis probable that Solyman, whom we have seen make a gift of Hungary and other principalities, had therein more respect to this consideration than to that he was wont to allege, viz., that he was glutted and overcharged with so many monarchies and so much dominion, as his own valor and that of his ancestors had acquired.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Claud., Eu. Claudian, *Against Eutropius*

Livy Livy, *History of Rome*