

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 9

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

HYPERESSAYS is a project to create a modern and accessible online edition of the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne. More information at www.hyperessays.net

ESSAYS-2-9-20260831-212204

On the Armor of the Parthians

'Tis an ill custom and unmanly that the gentlemen of our time have got, not to put on arms but just upon the point of the most extreme necessity, and to lay them by again, so soon as ever there is any show of the danger being over; hence many disorders arise; for every one bustling and running to his arms just when he should go to charge, has his cuirass to buckle on when his companions are already put to rout. Our ancestors were wont to give their head-piece, lance and gauntlets to be carried, but never put off the other pieces so long as there was any work to be done. Our troops are now cumbered and rendered unsightly with the clutter of baggage and servants who cannot be from their masters, by reason they carry their arms.

Titus Livius speaking of our nation: *Intolerantissima laboris corpora vix arma humeris gerebant.*

Many nations do yet, and did anciently, go to war without defensive arms, or with such, at least, as were of very little proof,

Tegmina queis capitum, raptus de subere cortex.

Alexander, the most adventurous captain that ever was, very seldom wore armor, and such among us as slight it, do not by that much harm to the main concern; for if we see some killed for want of it, there are few less whom the lumber of arms helps to destroy, either by being overburthened, crushed, and cramped with their weight, by a rude shock, or otherwise. For, in plain truth, to observe the weight and thickness of the armor we have now in use, it seems as if we only sought to defend ourselves, and are rather loaded than secured by it. We have enough to do to support its weight, being so manacled and immured, as if we were only to contend with our own arms, and as if we had not the same obligation to defend them, that they have to defend us.

Tacitus gives a pleasant description of the men-at-arms among our ancient Gauls, who were so armed as only to be able to stand, without

Bodies most impatient of labor could scarce endure to wear their arms on their shoulders. • LIVY, 10.28

To whom the coverings of the heads were the bark of the cork-tree. • VERG., AEN., 7.742

power to harm or to be harmed, or to rise again if once struck down. Lucullus, seeing certain soldiers of the Medes, who formed the van of Tigranes' army, heavily armed and very uneasy, as if in prisons of iron, thence conceived hopes with great ease to defeat them, and by them began his charge and victory.

And now that our musketeers are in credit, I believe some invention will be found out to immure us for our safety, and to draw us to the war in castles, such as those the ancients loaded their elephants withal.

This humor is far differing from that of the younger Scipio, who sharply reprehended his soldiers for having planted caltrops under water, in a ditch by which those of the town he held besieged might sally out upon him; saying, that those who assaulted should think of attacking, and not to fear; suspecting, with good reason, that this stop they had put to the enemies, would make themselves less vigilant upon their guard.

He said also to a young man, who showed him a fine buckler he had, that he was very proud of, "It is a very fine buckler indeed, but a Roman soldier ought to repose greater confidence in his right hand than in his left."

Now 'tis nothing but the not being used to wear it that makes the weight of our armor so intolerable:

*Lusbergo in dosso haveano, et l'elmo in testa,
Due di questi guerrier, de i quali io canto,
Ne notte o di, doppo ch'entraro in questa
Stanza, gli haveanó mai mesi da canto,
Che facile a portar come la vesta
Era lor, perche in uso l'avean tanto.*

Emperor Caracalla was wont to march on foot, completely armed, at the head of his army.

The Roman infantry always carried not only a morion, a sword, and a shield (for as to arms, says Cicero, they were so accustomed to have them always on, that they were no more trouble to them than their own limbs: *arma enim membra militis esse dicunt*) but, moreover, fifteen days' provision, together with a certain number of stakes, wherewith to fortify their camp, sixty pounds in weight. And Marius's soldiers, laden at the same rate, were inured to march in order of battle five leagues in five hours, and sometimes, upon any urgent occasion, six. Their military discipline was much ruder than ours, and accordingly produced much greater effects. The younger Scipio, reforming his army in Spain, ordered his soldiers to eat standing, and nothing that was dressed. The jeer that was given a Lacedaemonian soldier is marvellously pat to this purpose, who, in an expedition of war, was reproached for having been seen under the roof of a house: they were so inured to hardship that, let the weather be what it would, it was a shame to be seen under any other cover than the roof of heaven. We should not march our people very far at that rate.

Two of the warriors, of whom I sing,
had on their backs their cuirass and
on their heads their helmet, and
never had night or day once laid
them by, whilst here they were; those
arms, by long practice, were grown
as light to bear as a garment. •

ARIOSTO, 12.30

For they say a soldier's weapons are
like limbs • CIC., TUSC., 2.37

As to what remains, Marcellinus, a man bred up in the Roman wars, curiously observes the manner of the Parthians arming themselves, and the rather, for being so different from that of the Romans. “They had,” says he, “armor so woven as to have all the scales fall over one another like so many little feathers; which did nothing hinder the motion of the body, and yet were of such resistance, that our darts hitting upon them, would rebound” (these were the coats of mail our forefathers were so constantly wont to use). And in another place: “they had,” says he, “strong and able horses, covered with thick tanned hides of leather, and were themselves armed ‘cap-a-pie’ with great plates of iron, so artificially ordered, that in all parts of the limbs, which required bending, they lent themselves to the motion. One would have said, that they had been men of iron; having armor for the head so neatly fitted, and so naturally representing the form of a face, that they were nowhere vulnerable, save at two little round holes, that gave them a little light, corresponding with their eyes, and certain small chinks about their nostrils, through which they, with great difficulty, breathed.”

*Flexilis inductis animatur lamina membris,
Horribilis visu; credas simulacra moveri
Ferrea, cognatoque viros spirare metallo.
Par vestitus equis: ferrata fronte minantur,
Ferratosque movent, securi vulneris, armos.*

’Tis a description drawing very near resembling the equipage of the men-at-arms in France, with their barded horses.

Plutarch says, that Demetrius caused two complete suits of armor to be made for himself and for Alcimus, a captain of the greatest note and authority about him, of six score pounds weight each, whereas the ordinary suits weighed but half as much.

Plates of steel are placed over the body, so flexible that, dreadful to be seen, you would think these not living men, but moving images. The horses are similarly armed, and, secured from wounds, move their iron shoulders. • CLAUD., RUF., 2.358

MONTAIGNE’S SOURCES

Ariosto	Ariosto, <i>Orlando Furioso</i>
Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Claud., Ruf.	Claudian, <i>Against Rufinus</i>
Livy	Livy, <i>History of Rome</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>