

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 • Chapter 48

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On War Horses

I here have become a grammarian, I who never learned any language but by rote, and who do not yet know adjective, conjunction, or ablative. I think I have read that the Romans had a sort of horses by them called *funales* or *dextrarios*, which were either led horses, or horses laid on at several stages to be taken fresh upon occasion, and thence it is that we call our horses of service 'destriers;' and our romances commonly use the phrase of *adestrer* for *accompaigner*, to accompany. They also called those that were trained in such sort, that running full speed, side by side, without bridle or saddle, the Roman gentlemen, armed at all pieces, would shift and throw themselves from one to the other, *desultorios equos*. The Numidian men-at-arms had always a led horse in one hand, besides that they rode upon, to change in the heat of battle: *quibus, desultorum in modum, binos trahentibus equos, inter acerrimam saepe pugnam, in recentem equum, ex fesso, armatis transultare mos erat: tanta velocitas ipsis, tamque docile equorum genus*.

There are many horses trained to help their riders so as to run upon any one, that appears with a drawn sword, to fall both with mouth and heels upon any that front or oppose them: but it often happens that they do more harm to their friends than to their enemies; and, moreover, you cannot loose them from their hold, to reduce them again into order, when they are once engaged and grappled, by which means you remain at the mercy of their quarrel. It happened very ill to Artybius, general of the Persian army, fighting, man to man, with Onesilus, king of Salamis, to be mounted upon a horse trained after this manner, it being the occasion of his death, the squire of Onesilus cleaving the horse down with a scythe betwixt the shoulders as it was reared up upon his master.

And what the Italians report, that in the battle of Fornova, the horse of Charles VIII, with kicks and plunges, disengaged his master from the enemy that pressed upon him, without which he had been slain, sounds like a very great chance, if it be true.

The Mamalukes make their boast that they have the most ready horses of any cavalry in the world; that by nature and custom they were taught to

To whom it was a custom, leading along two horses, often in the hottest fight, to leap armed from a tired horse to a fresh one; so active were the men, and the horses so docile. •

LIVY, 23.29

know and distinguish the enemy, and to fall foul upon them with mouth and heels, according to a word or sign given; as also to gather up with their teeth darts and lances scattered upon the field, and present them to their riders, on the word of command.

'Tis said, both of Caesar and Pompey, that among their other excellent qualities they were both very good horsemen, and particularly of Caesar, that in his youth, being mounted on the bare back, without saddle or bridle, he could make the horse run, stop, and turn, and perform all its airs, with his hands behind him.

As nature designed to make of this person, and of Alexander, two miracles of military art, so one would say she had done her utmost to arm them after an extraordinary manner for every one knows that Alexander's horse, Bucephalus, had a head inclining to the shape of a bull; that he would suffer himself to be mounted and governed by none but his master, and that he was so honored after his death as to have a city erected to his name. Caesar had also one which had forefeet like those of a man, his hoofs being divided in the form of fingers, which likewise was not to be ridden, by any but Caesar himself, who, after his death, dedicated his statue to the goddess Venus.

I do not willingly alight when I am once on horseback, for it is the place where, whether well or sick, I find myself most at ease. Plato recommends it for health, as also Pliny says it is good for the stomach and the joints. Let us go further into this matter since here we are.

We read in Xenophon a law forbidding any one who was master of a horse to travel on foot. Trogus Pompeius and Justin say that the Parthians were wont to perform all offices and ceremonies, not only in war but also all affairs whether public or private, make bargains, confer, entertain, take the air, and all on horseback; and that the greatest distinction betwixt freemen and slaves among them was that the one rode on horseback and the other went on foot, an institution of which King Cyrus was the founder.

There are several examples in the Roman history (and Suetonius more particularly observes it of Caesar) of captains who, on pressing occasions, commanded their cavalry to alight, both by that means to take from them all hopes of flight, as also for the advantage they hoped in this sort of fight, *quo baud dubie superat Romanus*, says Livy.

And so the first thing they did to prevent the mutinies and insurrections of nations of late conquest was to take from them their arms and horses, and therefore it is that we so often meet in Caesar: *arma proferri, jumenta produci, obsides dari jubet*. The Grand Signior to this day suffers not a Christian or a Jew to keep a horse of his own throughout his empire.

Our ancestors, and especially at the time they had war with the English, in all their greatest engagements and pitched battles fought for the most part on foot, that they might have nothing but their own force, courage, and constancy to trust to in a quarrel of so great concern as life and honor. You stake (whatever Chrysanthus in Xenophon says to the contrary) your valor

Wherein the Roman does questionless excel, • LIVY, 9.22

He commanded the arms to be produced, the horses brought out, hostages to be given. • CAES., BGALL., 7.2

and your fortune upon that of your horse; his wounds or death bring your person into the same danger; his fear or fury shall make you reputed rash or cowardly; if he have an ill mouth or will not answer to the spur, your honor must answer for it. And, therefore, I do not think it strange that those battles were more firm and furious than those that are fought on horseback:

*Caedebant pariter, pariterque ruebant
Victores victique; neque his fuga nota, neque illis.*

Their battles were much better disputed. Nowadays there are nothing but routs: *primus clamor atque impetus rem decernit*. And the means we choose to make use of in so great a hazard should be as much as possible at our own command: wherefore I should advise to choose weapons of the shortest sort, and such of which we are able to give the best account. A man may repose more confidence in a sword he holds in his hand than in a bullet he discharges out of a pistol, wherein there must be a concurrence of several circumstances to make it perform its office, the powder, the stone, and the wheel: if any of which fail it endangers your fortune.

A man himself strikes much surer than the air can direct his blow:

*Et, quo ferre velint, permittere vulnera ventis:
Esis habet vires, et gens quaecumque virorum est,
Bella gerit gladiis.*

But of that weapon I shall speak more fully when I come to compare the arms of the ancients with those of modern use; only, by the way, the astonishment of the ear abated, which every one grows familiar with in a short time, I look upon it as a weapon of very little execution, and hope we shall one day lay it aside.

That missile weapon which the Italians formerly made use of both with fire and by sling was much more terrible: they called a certain kind of javelin, armed at the point with an iron three feet long, that it might pierce through and through an armed man, Phalarica, which they sometimes in the field darted by hand, sometimes from several sorts of engines for the defense of beleaguered places; the shaft being rolled round with flax, wax, rosin, oil, and other combustible matter, took fire in its flight, and lighting upon the body of a man or his target, took away all the use of arms and limbs. And yet, coming to close fight, I should think they would also damage the assailant, and that the camp being as it were planted with these flaming truncheons, would produce a common inconvenience to the whole crowd:

*magnum stridens contorta Phalarica venit
Fulminis acta modo.*

They had, moreover, other devices which custom made them perfect in (which seem incredible to us who have not seen them), by which they supplied the effects of our powder and shot. They darted their spears with so great force, as oftentimes to transfix two targets and two armed men at once, and pin them together. Neither was the effect of their slings less

They fought and fell pell-mell, victors and vanquished; nor was flight thought of by either. • VERG., AEN., 10.756

The first shout and charge decides the business. • LIVY, 25.41

And so where they choose to carry [the arrows], the winds allow the wounds; the sword has strength of arm: and whatever nation of men there is, they wage war with swords. • LUC., 8.384

The Phalarica, launched like lightning, flies through the air with a loud rushing sound. • VERG., AEN., 9.705

certain of execution or of shorter carriage: *saxis globosis funda mare apertum incessentes: coronas modic circuli, magno ex intervallo loci, assueti trajicere: non capita modo hostium vulnerabant, Sed quem locum destinassent.* Their pieces of battery had not only the execution but the thunder of our cannon also: *ad ictus moenium cum terribili sonitu editos, pavor et trepidatio cepit.* The Gauls, our kinsmen in Asia, abominated these treacherous missile arms, it being their use to fight, with greater bravery, hand to hand: *Non tam patentibus plagis moventur: ubi latior quam altior plaga est, etiam gloriosius se pugnare putant: idem, cum aculeus sagitta auto glandis abditæ intusus tenui vulnere in speciem urit, tum, in rabiem et pudorem tam parvæ perimentis, pestis versi, prosternunt corpora humi:* A pretty description of something very like an arquebuse-shot.

The ten thousand Greeks in their long and famous retreat met with a nation who very much galled them with great and strong bows, carrying arrows so long that, taking them up, one might return them back like a dart, and with them pierce a buckler and an armed man through and through. The engines, that Dionysius invented at Syracuse to shoot vast massy darts and stones of a prodigious greatness with so great impetuosity and at so great a distance, came very near to our modern inventions.

But in this discourse of horses and horsemanship, we are not to forget the pleasant posture of one Maistre Pierre Pol, a doctor of divinity, upon his mule, whom Monstrelet reports always to have ridden sideways through the streets of Paris like a woman. He says also, elsewhere, that the Gascons had terrible horses, that would wheel in their full speed, which the French, Picards, Flemings, and Brabanters looked upon as a miracle, “having never seen the like before,” which are his very words. Caesar, speaking of the Suabians: “in the charges they make on horseback,” says he, “they often throw themselves off to fight on foot, having taught their horses not to stir in the meantime from the place, to which they presently run again upon occasion; and according to their custom, nothing is so unmanly and so base as to use saddles or pads, and they despise such as make use of those conveniences: insomuch that, being but a very few in number, they fear not to attack a great many.”

That which I have formerly wondered at, to see a horse made to perform all his airs with a switch only and the reins upon his neck, was common with the Massilians, who rid their horses without saddle or bridle:

*Et gens, quae nudo residens Massylia dorso,
Ora levi flectit, frænorum nescia, virga.*

Et Numidae infraeni cingunt.

King Alfonso, he who first instituted the Order of the Band or Scarf in Spain, among other rules of the order, gave them this, that they should never ride a male or female mule, upon penalty of a mark of silver; this I had lately out of Guevara's Letters. Whoever gave these the title of Golden Pistles had another kind of opinion of them than I have.

Culling round stones from the beach for their slings; and with these practising over the waves, so as from a great distance to throw within a very small circuit, they became able not only to wound an enemy in the head, but hit any other part at pleasure. • LIVY, 38.29

At the battery of the walls, performed with a terrible noise, the defenders began to fear and tremble. • LIVY, 38.5

They are not so much concerned about large gashes—the bigger and deeper the wound, the more glorious do they esteem the combat but when they find themselves tormented by some arrow-head or bullet lodged within, but presenting little outward show of wound, transported with shame and anger to perish by so imperceptible a destroyer, they fall to the ground. • LIVY, 38.21

The Massilians, mounted on the bare backs of their horses, bridleless, guide them by a mere switch. • LUC., 4.682

The Numidians guiding their horses without bridles. • VERG., AEN., 4.41

The *Courtier* says, that till his time it was a disgrace to a gentleman to ride on one of these creatures: but the Abyssinians, on the contrary, the nearer they are to the person of Prester John, love to be mounted upon large mules, for the greatest dignity and grandeur. Xenophon tells us, that the Assyrians were fain to keep their horses fettered in the stable, they were so fierce and vicious; and that it required so much time to loose and harness them, that to avoid any disorder this tedious preparation might bring upon them in case of surprise, they never sat down in their camp till it was first well fortified with ditches and ramparts.

His Cyrus, who was so great a master in all manner of horse service, kept his horses to their due work, and never suffered them to have anything to eat till first they had earned it by the sweat of some kind of exercise.

The Scythians when in the field and in scarcity of provisions used to let their horses blood, which they drank, and sustained themselves by that diet,

Venit et epoto Sarmata pastus equo.

The Scythian comes, who feeds on horse-flesh. • MART., SPECT., 3.4

Those of Crete, being besieged by Metellus, were in so great necessity for drink that they were fain to quench their thirst with their horses urine.

To shew how much cheaper the Turkish armies support themselves than our European forces, 'tis said that besides the soldiers drink nothing but water and eat nothing but rice and salt flesh pulverized (of which every one may easily carry about with him a month's provision), they know how to feed upon the blood of their horses as well as the Muscovite and Tartar, and salt it for their use.

These new-discovered people of the Indies, when the Spaniards first landed among them, had so great an opinion both of the men and horses, that they looked upon the first as gods and the other as animals ennobled above their nature; insomuch that after they were subdued, coming to the men to sue for peace and pardon, and to bring them gold and provisions, they failed not to offer of the same to the horses, with the same kind of harangue to them they had made to the others: interpreting their neighing for a language of truce and friendship.

In the other Indies, to ride upon an elephant was the first and royal place of honor; the second to ride in a coach with four horses; the third to ride upon a camel; and the last and least honor to be carried or drawn by one horse only.

Some one of our late writers tells us that he has been in countries in those parts where they ride upon oxen with pads, stirrups, and bridles, and very much at their ease.

Quintus Fabius Maximus Rullianus, in a battle with the Samnites, seeing his horse, after three or four charges, had failed of breaking into the enemy's battalion, took this course, to make them unbridle all their horses and spur their hardest, so that having nothing to check their career, they might through weapons and men open the way to his foot, who by that means gave them a bloody defeat.

The same command was given by Quintus Fulvius Flaccus against the Celtiberians: *Id cum major vi equorum facietis, si effrenatos in hostes equos immittitis: quod sæpe romanos equites cum laude fecisse sua, memoriæ proditum est. Detractisque frenis, bis ultro citroque cum magna strage hostium, infractis omnibus hastis, transcurrerunt.*

The Duke of Muscovy was anciently obliged to pay this reverence to the Tartars, that when they sent an embassy to him he went out to meet them on foot, and presented them with a goblet of mares' milk (a beverage of greatest esteem among them), and if, in drinking, a drop fell by chance upon their horse's mane, he was bound to lick it off with his tongue. The army that Bajazet had sent into Russia was overwhelmed with so dreadful a tempest of snow, that to shelter and preserve themselves from the cold, many killed and embowelled their horses, to creep into their bellies and enjoy the benefit of that vital heat.

Bajazet, after that furious battle wherein he was overthrown by Tamerlane, was in a hopeful way of securing his own person by the fleetness of an Arabian mare he had under him, had he not been constrained to let her drink her fill at the ford of a river in his way, which rendered her so heavy and indisposed, that he was afterward easily overtaken by those that pursued him. They say, indeed, that to let a horse stale takes him off his mettle, but as to drinking, I should rather have thought it would refresh him.

Croesus, marching his army through certain waste lands near Sardis, met with an infinite number of serpents, which the horses devoured with great appetite, and which Herodotus says was a prodigy of ominous portent to his affairs.

We call a horse entire, that has his mane and ears so, and no other will pass muster. The Lacedaemonians, having defeated the Athenians in Sicily, returning triumphant from the victory into the city of Syracuse, among other insolences, caused all the horses they had taken to be shorn and led in triumph. Alexander fought with a nation called Dahas, whose discipline it was to march two and two together armed on one horse, to the war; and being in fight, one of them alighted, and so they fought on horseback and on foot, one after another by turns.

I do not think that for graceful riding any nation in the world excels the French. A good horseman, according to our way of speaking, seems rather to have respect to the courage of the man than address in riding. Of all that ever I saw, the most knowing in that art, who had the best seat and the best method in breaking horses, was Monsieur de Carnavalet, who served our King Henry II. I have seen a man ride with both his feet upon the saddle, take off his saddle, and at his return take it up again and replace it, riding all the while full speed; having galloped over a cap, make at it very good shots backward with his bow; take up anything from the ground, setting one foot on the ground and the other in the stirrup: with twenty other ape's tricks, which he got his living by. There has been seen in my time at Constantinople two men upon one horse, who, in the height of its speed, would throw themselves off and into the saddle again by turn;

You will do your business with greater advantage of your horses' strength, if you send them unbridled upon the enemy, as it is recorded the Roman horse to their great glory have often done; their bits being taken off, they charged through and again back through the enemy's ranks with great slaughter, breaking down all their spears. • LIVY, 40.40

and one who bridled and saddled his horse with nothing but his teeth; an other who betwixt two horses, one foot upon one saddle and the other upon another, carrying the other man upon his shoulders, would ride full career, the other standing bolt upright upon and making very good shots with his bow; several who would ride full speed with their heels upward, and their heads upon the saddle betwixt several scimitars, with the points upward, fixed in the harness. When I was a boy, the prince of Sulmona, riding an unbroken horse at Naples, prone to all sorts of action, held reals under his knees and toes, as if they had been nailed there, to shew the firmness of his seat.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Caes., BGall.	Caesar, <i>Gallic War</i>
Livy	Livy, <i>History of Rome</i>
Luc.	Lucan, <i>Civil War</i>
Mart., Spect.	Martial, <i>On the Spectacles</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>