

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 1

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By diverse meanes men come unto a like end

THE most usuall waie to appease those mindes wee have offended, when revenge lies in their handes, and that we stand at their mercie, is, by submission to move them to commiseration and pittie: Neverthelesse, courage, constancie, and resolution (meanes altogether opposite) have sometimes wrought the same effect. *Edward* the blacke Prince of *Wales* (who so long governed our Countrie of *Guienne*, a man whose conditions and fortune were accompanied with many notable parts of worth and magnanimity) having bin grievously offended by the *Limosins*, though he by maine force tooke and entred their Cittie, could by no meanes be appeased, nor by the wailefull out-cries of all sorts of people (as of men, women, and children) be moved to any pittie, they prostrating themselves to the common slaughter, crying for mercie, and humbly submitting themselves at his feete, untill such time as in triumphant manner passing through their Cittie, hee perceived three French Gentlemen, who alone, with an incredible and undaunted boldnes gainestood the enraged violence, and made head against the furie of his victorious army. The consideration and respect of so notable a vertue, did first abate the dint of his wrath, and from those three beganne to relent, and shew mercie to all the other inhabitants of the said towne. *Scanderbeg*, Prince of *Epirus*, following one of his souldiers, with purpose to kill him, who by all meanes of humilitie, and submisse entreatie, had first assayed to pacifie him, in such an unavoidable extremity, resolved at last, resolutely to encounter him with his sword in his hand. This resolution did immediately stay his Captaines furie, who seeing him undertake so honourable an attempt, not onely forgave, but received him into grace and favour. This example may happily, of such as have not knowne the prodigious force, and matchlesse valor of the said Prince, admit an other interpretation. The Emperour *Conradus*, third of that name; having besieged *Guelphe*, Duke of *Bavaria*, what townes¹ or base satisfaction soever was offered him, would yeelde to no other milder conditions, but onely to suffer such Gentlewomen as were with the Duke in the Cittie (their honors safe) to issue out the towne afoot, with such things as they could carry about them. They with an unrelenting courage, advised and resolved themselves (neglecting all other riches or jewels) to carrie their husbands, their children, and the Duke himselfe, on their backs: The Emperour perceiving the quaintnes of their device, tooke so

great pleasure at it, that he wept for joy, and forthwith converted that former inexorable rage, and mortall hatred he bare the Duke, into so milde a relenting and gentle kindnes, that thence forward he entreated both him and his, with all favour and courtesie. Either of these wayes might easily perswade mee: for I am much inclined to mercie, and affected to mildnesse. So it is, that in mine opinion, I should more naturally stoope unto compassion, then bend to estimation. Yet is pittie held a vicious passion among the Stoickes. They would have us aide the afflicted, but not to faint, and cosuffer with them. These examples seeme fittest for mee, forsomuch as these mindes are seene to be assaulted and environed by these two meanes, in undauntedly suffering the one, and stooping under the other. It may peradventure be saide, that to yeelde ones heart unto commiseration, is an effect of facilitie, tendernesse, and meeknesse: whence it proceedeth, that the weakest natures, as of women, children, and the vulgare sorte are more subject unto it. But (having contemned teares and wailings) to yeelde unto the onely reverence of the sacred Image of vertue, is the effect of a couragious and inexorable minde, holding a Masculine and constant vigor, in honour and affection. Notwithstanding amazement and admiration may in lesse generous mindes worke the like effect. Witnessse the Thebanes, who having accused and indited their captains, as of capitall crime, forsomuch as they had continued their charge, beyond the time prescribed them, did with one voice condemne *Pelopidas*, because he submissively yeelded under the burthen of such objections, and to save himselfe, imployed no other meanes, but suing-requests, and demisse entreaties; where on the contrary, *Epaminondas* boldely relating the exploits atchieved by him, and with a fierce and arrogant manner, upbraiding the people with them, had not the heart so much as to take their lots into his hands, but went his way, and was freely absolved: the assembly much commending the stoutnesse of his courage. *Dionisius* the elder, after long-lingering and extreame difficulties, having taken the Cittie of *Reggio*, and in it the Capptaine *Phyton* (a very honest man) who had so obstinately defended the same, would needes shew a tragical example of revenge. First, he tolde him, how the day before, he had caused his sonne, and all his kinsfolkes to be drowned. To whome *Phyton*, stoutly out-staring him answered nothing, but that they were more happy then himselfe, by the space of one day. Afterward hee caused him to be stripped, and by his executioners to be taken and dragged through the Citie, most ignominiously, and cruelly whipping him, charging him besides, with outrageous and contumelious speeches. All which notwithstanding, as one no whit dismaide, he ever shewed a constant and resolute heart. And with a cheerefull and bolde countenance went on still, loudly recounting the honourable and glorious cause of his death, which was, that he would never consent to yeelde his Countrie into the handes of a cruell tyrant, menacing him with an imminent punishment of the Gods. *Dionisius* plainly reading in his Souldiers lookes, that in lieu of animating them with braving his conquered enemie, they in contempt of him, and skorne of his triumph, seemed by the astonishment of so rare a vertue, to be mooved with compassion, and enclined to mutinie, yea, and to free *Phyton* from out the hands of his *Satellites*, caused his torture to cease, and secretly sent him to be drowned in the Sea. Surely, man is a wonderfull, vaine, diverse, and wavering subject: it is very hard to ground any directly-constant and uniforme judgement upon him. Beholde *Pompey*, who freely

pardoned all the Cittie of the *Mamertins*, against which hee was grievously enraged, for the love of the magnanimitie, and consideration of the exceeding vertue of *Zeno*, one of their fellow-cittizens, who tooke the publike fault wholly upon himselfe, and desired no other favor, but alone to beare the punishment thereof; whereas *Sillaes* hoste having used the like vertue in the Cittie of *Perusa*, obtained nothing, neither for himselfe, nor for others. And directly against my first example, the hardiest amongst men, and so gracious to the vanquished, *Alexander* the great, after many strange difficulties, forcing the Cittie of *Gaza*, encountered by chauce with *Betis*, that commaunded therein, of whose valour (during the siege) he had heard woonderfull and straunge exploites, beeing then alone, forsaken of all his followers, his armes all-broken, all-besmeared with blood and woundes, fighting amongst a number of Macedonians, who pell-mell layde still uppon him; provoked by so deere a victorie (for among other mishappes hee had newly received two hurtes in his body) saide thus unto him; *Betis, thou shalt not² die as thou wouldest: for make accompt thou must indure all the torments, may possibly bee devised or inflicted upon a caitife wretch, as thou arte.* But he, for all his enemies threatens, without speaking one worde, returned onely an assured, sterne, and disdainefull countenance upon him; which silent obstinacie *Alexander* noting, saide thus unto himselfe: *What? would hee not bend his knee? could hee not utter one suppliant voyce? I will assuredly vanquish his silence, and if I can not wrest a word from him, I will at least make him to sobbe or groane.* And converting his anger into rage, commaunded his heeles to bee through-pierced, and so all alive with a corde through them, to be torne, mangled, and dismembered at a carts-taile. May it be, the force of his courage, was so naturall and peculiar unto him, that because he would no-whit admire him, he respected him the lesse? or deemed he it so proper unto himselfe, that in his height, he could not without the spite of an envious passion, endure to see it in an other? or was the naturall violence of his rage incapable of any opposition? surely, had it received any restraint, it may be supposed, that in the ransacking and desolation of the cittie of *Thebes*, it should have felt the same; in seeing so many Worthies lost, and valiant men put to the sword, as having no meanes of publike defence; for above sixe thousand were slaine and massacred, of which not one was seene, either to runne away, or beg for grace. But on the contrary, some here and there seeking to affront, and endeavouring to choake their victorious enemies, urging and provoking them to force them die an honourable death. Not one was seene to yeelde, and that to his last gaspe did not attempt to revenge himselfe, and with all weapons of dispaire, with the death of some enemy, comfort and sweeten his owne miserie. Yet could not the affliction of their vertue find any ruth or pittie, nor might one day suffice to glut or asswage his revengefull wrath. This butcherous slaughter continued unto the last drop of any remaining blood; where none were spared but the unarmed and naked, the aged and impotent, the women and children; that so from amongst them, they might get thirtie thousand slaves.

NOTES

- 1 Florio misread *viles* (adj.: base, vile) as *viles* (noun: cities, towns) and mistranslated a small part of this sentence. It should say *The Emperour Conradus, third of that name; having besieged Guelphe, Duke of Bavaria, what [vile] or base satisfaction soever was offered him....*
- 2 *not* is missing in this edition.