

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 1

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That Men by various Ways arrive at the same end

THE most likely and most usual way in Practice of appeasing the Indignation of such as we have any way offended, when we see them in Possession of the Power of Revenge, and find that we absolutely lie at their Mercy, is by Submission (than which, nothing more flatters the Glory of an Adversary) to move them to Commiseration and Pity: and yet Bravery, Constancy, and Resolution, however quite contrary means, have sometimes served to produce the same effect. *Edward the Black Prince of Wales* (the same who so long govern'd our Province of *Guienne*, a Person whose high Condition, excellent Qualities, and remarkable Fortune, have in them a great deal of the most noble and most considerable Parts of Grandeur) having, through some Misdemeanours of theirs, been highly incens'd by the *Limosins*, and in the heat of that Resentment taking their City by Assault, was not, in the Riot commonly attending such Executions, either by the Out-cries of the People, or the Prayers and Tears of the Women and Children, abandon'd to Slaughter and prostrate at his Feet for Mercy, to be stayed from prosecuting his Revenge; till, penetrating further into the Body of the Town, he at last took notice of three *French* Gentlemen, who with incredible Bravery, alone sustained the whole Power of his victorious Army: And then it was, that the Consideration of, and the Respect unto so remarkable a Vertue, first stopt the Torrent of his Fury, and that his Clemency, beginning in the Preservation of these three Cavaliers, was afterwards extended to all the remaining Inhabitants of the City. *Scanderbeg* Prince of *Epirus*, in great Wrath pursuing one of his Souldiers, with a resolute Purpose to kill him, and the Souldier having in vain tryed by all the ways of Humility and Supplication to appease him, seeing him notwithstanding obstinately bent to his Ruine, resolv'd, as his last Refuge, to face about and expect him with his Sword in his Hand; which Behavior of his gave a sudden stop to his Captain's Fury, who for seeing him assume so notable a Resolution, receiv'd him to Grace: an Example, however, that might suffer another Interpretation with such as have not read of the prodigious Force and Valour of that invincible Prince. The Emperour *Conrade* the 3d. having besieg'd *Guelfo* Duke of *Bavaria*, would not be prevail'd upon, what mean and unmanly Satisfactions soever had been tender'd to him, to condescend to milder Conditions, than that

the *Ladies* and *Gentlewomen* only who were in the Town might go out without Violation of their Honour, on foot, and with so much only as they could carry about them. Which was no sooner known, but that out of Magnanimity of Heart, and an Excess of good Nature, they presently contriv'd to carry out, upon their Shoulders, their Husbands and Children, and even the Duke himself; a Sight at which the Emperour was so pleased, that ravish'd with the Generosity of the Action, he wept for Joy, and immediately extinguishing in his Heart the mortal and implacable Hatred he had conceiv'd against this Duke, he from that time forward, treated Him and His with all Humanity and Affection. The one, and the other, of these two ways, would with great Facility work upon my Nature; for I have a marvellous Propensity to Mercy and Mildness, and to such a degree of Tenderness, that I fansie, of the two I should sooner surrender my Anger to *Compassion* than *Esteem*: And yet Pity is reputed a Vice amongst the *Stoicks*, who will that we succour the Afflicted, but not that we should be so affected with their Sufferings as to suffer with them. I conceiv'd these Examples not ill suited to the Question in hand, and the rather, because therein we observe these great Souls, assaulted and tryed by these two several ways to resist the one without relenting, and to be shook and subjected by the other. It is true, that to suffer a Man's Heart to be totally subdued by Compassion, may be imputed to Facility, Effeminacy, and Over-tenderness; whence it comes to pass, that the weaker Natures, as of Women, Children, and the common sort of People, are the most subject to it: but after having resisted, and disdain'd the Power of Sighs and Tears, to surrender a Man's Animosity to the sole Reverence of the Sacred Image of Vertue, this can be no other than the Effect of a strong and inflexible Soul, enamour'd of, and and ravish'd with a Masculine and obstinate Valour. Nevertheless, Astonishment and Admiration may in less generous Minds beget a like Effect. Witness the People of *Thebes*, who having put two of their Generals upon Tryal for their Lives, for having continued in Arms beyond the precise Term of their Commission, very hardly pardon'd *Pelopidas*, who bowing under the weight of so dangerous an Accusation, had made no manner of Defence for himself, nor produc'd other Arguments than Prayers and Supplications to secure his Head; whereas, on the contrary, *Epaminondas* being brought to the Bar, and falling to magnifie the Exploits he had perform'd in their Service, and after a haughty and arrogant manner reproaching them with Ingratitude and Injustice, they had not the Heart to proceed any further in his Tryal, but broke up the Court and departed, the whole Assembly highly commending the Courage and Confidence of this Man. *Dionysius* the elder, after having by a tedious Siege, and through exceeding great Difficulties, taken the City of *Rhegium*, and in it the Governour *Phyton*, a very gallant Man, who had made so obstinate a Defence, he was resolved to make him a tragical Example of his Revenge; in order whereunto, and the more sensibly to afflict him, he first told him, *That he had the Day before caus'd his Son and all his Kindred to be drown'd*: To which *Phyton* return'd no other Answer but this, *That they were then by one Day happier than he*. After which, causing him to be strip'd, and delivering him into the Hands of the Tormentors, he was by them not only dragg'd through the Streets of the Town, and most ignominiously and cruelly whipp'd, but moreover, vilified with most bitter and contumelious Language: yet still, he maintain'd his Courage entire all the way, with a

strong Voice and undaunted Countenance proclaiming the glorious Cause of is Death; namely, for that he would not deliver up his Countrey into the Hands of a Merciless Tyrant; at the same time denouncing against him a sudden Chastisement from the offended Gods. At which the Tyrant rowling his Eyes about, and reading in his Souldiers Looks, that instead of being incens'd at the haughty Language of this conquer'd Enemy, to the Contempt of him their Captain and his Triumph, they not only seem'd truck with Admiration of so rare a Vertue, but moreover inclin'd to Mutiny, and were even ready to rescue the Prisoner out of the Hangman's hands, he caused the Execution to cease, and afterwards privately caus'd him to be thrown into the Sea. Man (in good earnest) is a Marvellous vain, fickle, and unstable Subject, and on whom it is very hard to form any certain or proportionate Judgment. For *Pompey* could pardon the whole City of the *Mammertines*, though furiously incens'd against it, upon the single Account of the Vertue and Magnanimity of one Citizen, *Zeno*, who took the Fault of the Publick wholly upon himself; neither intreated other Favour, but alone to undergo the Punishment for all: and yet *Sylla*'s Host, having in the City of *Perugia* manifested the same Vertue, obtain'd nothing by it, either for himself or his Fellow-Citizens. And, directly contrary to my first Examples, the bravest of all Men, and who was reputed so gracious and civil to all those he overcame, *Alexander the Great*, having after many great Difficulties forc'd the City of *Gaza*, and, entring, found *Betis*, who commanded there, and of whose Valour in the time of this Siege he had most noble and manifest Proof; alone, forsaken by all his Souldiers, his Arms hack'd and hew'd to pieces, covered all over with Bloud and Wounds, and yet still fighting in the Crow'd of a great Number of *Macedonians*, who were laying on him on all sides, he said to him, netled at so dear bought Victory, and two fresh Wounds he had newly receiv'd in his own Person, *Thou shalt not die Betis so honourably as thou dost intend, but shalt assuredly suffer all the Torments that can be inflicted on a miserable Captive.* To which Menaces the other returning no other Answer, but only a fierce and disdainful Look; What, says the Conquerour (observing his obstinate Silence) *Is he too stiff to bend a Knee! Is he too proud to utter one suppliant Word! I shall certainly conquer this Silence; and if I cannot force a Word from his Mouth, I shall at least extract a Groan from his Heart.* And thereupon converting his Anger into Fury, presently commanded his Heels to be boar'd through, causing him alive to be dragg'd, mangled, and dismembred at an infamous Carts-Tail. Was it that the height of Courage was so natural and familiar to this Conqueror, that because he could not admire, he should the less esteem this *Hero*? Or was it that he conceiv'd Valour to be a Vertue so peculiar to himself, that his Pride could not, without Envy, endure it in another? Or was it that the natural Impetuosity of his Fury was incapable of Opposition? Certainly, had it been capable of any manner of Moderation or Satiety, it is to be believ'd, that in the Sack and Desolation of *Thebes*, to see so many valiant Men lost and totally destitute of any further Defence, cruelly massacred before his Eyes, would have appeas'd it: where there were above six thousand put to the Sword, of which not one was seen to fly, or heard to cry out for Quarter; but on the contrary, every one running here and there to seek out and to provoke the Victorious Enemy to help them to an honourable end. Not one who did not to his last Gasp yet endeavour to revenge himself, and with all the Arms of a brave Despair to sweeten his own Death in the Death of an

Enemy. Yet did their Vertue create no Pity, and the length of one day was not enough to satiate the Thirst of the Conquerour's Revenge; but the Slaughter continued to the last drop of Bloud that was capable of being shed, and stopp'd not till it met with none but naked and impotent Persons, old Men, Women, and Children, of them to carry away to the number of thirty thousand Slaves.