

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 7



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That the Intention Is Judge of Our Actions

'TIS a saying, *That Death discharges us of all our Obligations*. However, I know some who have taken it in another Sence. *Henry* the Seventh, King of *England*, articed with *Don Philip*, Son to *Maximilian* the Emperour, and Father to the Emperour *Charles* the Fifth, when he had him upon *English* Ground, that the said *Philip* should deliver up the Duke of *Suffolk* of the *White Rose*, his mortal Enemy, who was fled into the *Low Countries*, into his Hands; which *Philip* (not knowing how to evade it) accordingly promis'd to do, but upon condition nevertheless, that *Henry* should attempt nothing against the Life of the said Duke, which during his own Life he perform'd; but coming to die, in his last Will, commanded his Son to put him to Death immediately after his Decease. And lately, in the Tragedy, that the Duke of *Alva* presented to us in the Persons of the two Counts, *Egmont* and *Horne*, at *Brussels*, there were very remarkable Passages, and one amongst the rest, that the said Count *Egmont* (upon the security of whose Word and Faith Count *Horne* had come and surrendred himself to the Duke of *Alva*) earnestly entreated that he might first mount the Scaffold, to the end that Death might disingage him from the Obligation he had pass'd to the other. In which Case, methinks Death did not acquit the former of his Promise, and the second was satisfied in the good Intention of the other, even though he had not died with him: for we cannot be oblig'd beyond what we are able to perform, by reason that the Effects and Intentions of what we promise are not at all in our Power, and that indeed we are Masters of nothing but the Will, in which, by necessity, all the Rules and whole Duty of Mankind is founded and establish'd. And therefore Count *Egmont*, conceiving his Soul and Will bound and indepted to his Promise, although he had not the Power to make it good, had doubtless been absolv'd of his Duty, even though he had outliv'd the other; but the King of *England* willfully and premeditately breaking his Faith was no more to be excus'd for deferring the Execution of his Infidelity till after his Death, than *Herodotus* his Mason, who having inviolably, during the time of his Life, kept the Secret of the Treasure of the King of *Aegypt* his Master, at his Death discover'd it to his Children. I have taken notice of several in my time, who, convinc'd by their Consciences of unjustly detaining the Goods of another, have endeavour'd to make amends by their Will, and after their Decease: but they had as good do nothing and delude themselves both in taking so

much time in so pressing an Affair, and also in going about to repair an Injury with so little Demonstration of Resentment and Concern. They owe over and above something of their own, and by how much their Payment is more strict and incommodious to themselves, by so much is their Restitution more perfect, just, and meritorious; for Penitency requires Penance: but they yet do worse than these, who reserve the Declaration of a mortal Animosity against their Neighbour to the last Gasp, having conceal'd it all the time of their Lives before, wherein they declare to have little regard of their own Honour whilst they irritate the Party offended against their Memory; and less to their Conscience, not having the Power, even out of Respect to Death it self, to make their Malice die with them; but extending the Life of their Hatred even beyond their own. Unjust Judges, who deferr Judgment to a time wherein they can have no Knowledge of the cause! For my part, I shall take Care, if I can, that my Death discover nothing that my Life has not first openly manifested, and publickly declar'd.