Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 1 · Chapter 16

Translation by HyperEssays (2020–26, Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International) · Last updated on October 22, 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-1-16-20261022-183219

A Record of Some Ambassadors

a When I travel, I use the following method to always learn something from my conversations with others (which is one of the finest schools there is): I always bring those with whom I speak back to what they know best.

a *Basti al nocchiero ragionar de' venti,*
Al bifolco dei tori; et le sue piaghe
Conti'l guerrier; conti'l pastor gli armenti.[1]

Let the sailor speak of winds and the farmer of oxen; and let the soldier count his wounds and the shepherd his sheep. • Prop., 2.1.43

a Because it usually goes the other way. They would rather talk at length about other people's trade than about their own, and so hope to be seen as accomplished in yet another field. Like when Archidamus faulted Periander for abandoning his reputation as a good doctor to acquire one as a bad poet.

c See how Caesar goes out of his way to make us understand his ingenuity in building bridges and siege weapons. And, conversely, how much he refrains from talking about the responsibilities of his profession, his courage, and how he led his troops. His deeds prove he was an excellent officer. He wants to be known as an excellent engineer, an entirely different occupation!

c Dionysius the Elder was a great military leader, as befitted his fortune. But he did everything he could to be known mainly through poetry, although he knew little of it.

c When a man of the legal profession was recently taken to see an office full of books relevant to his trade (and many others too), he found nothing to say about it. Yet he made a point of lecturing rudely about a barricade set up on the stairs to the office, a barricade which hundreds of officers and soldiers look at every day without commenting on it or being offended by it.

c *Optat ephippia bos piger, optat arare caballus.*

The lazy ox wishes for a saddle; the horse wishes to plow. • Hor., Epist., 1.14.43

c You can never do anything worthwhile this way.

a We must strive, then, to always return an architect, a painter, a cobbler, and so on, to their occupation. And on that topic, when reading history books, which all kinds of people write, I have made it a habit to consider their authors. With those who earn a living solely as writers, I focus on their style and language. With doctors, I am more likely to believe what they say about air temperature, the health and complexion of princes, injuries and diseases. With jurists: let us pay attention to legal debates, laws, public order, and similar things. With theologians: matters of the Church, ecclesiastical censures, dispensations and marriages. With courtiers: manners and ceremonies. With soldiers: whatever concerns them, mainly their conclusions on the deeds they witnessed. With ambassadors: the use of deception, secret negotiations, and operations.

a I learned and noted something that way which I would have disregarded had it come from someone else, from a history book by the lord of Langey,[2] a man well versed in such things. It is found after he tells of the fine scene Charles V made before the consistory, in Rome, speaking outrageous words against us in front of the bishop of Mâcon and the lord of Velly, our ambassadors.[3] Among other things, that if his officers and soldiers were only as faithful and competent in military matters as those of the king, he would immediately tie a noose around his neck and go beg for the king's mercy. (He seemed to believe this, for he spoke the same words two or three times again in his life.) Also, that he challenged the king to meet him, in his shirt, for a sword-and-dagger fight on a boat.[4] The same lord of Langey, continuing with his story, adds that when the same ambassadors wrote about these events to the king, they left most of it out. They even hid the two preceding points from him. Well, I found it very peculiar that an ambassador could use his discretion to omit statements intended for his master, particularly of such importance, coming from such a person, and made before such a large assembly. I would have thought it the duty of servants to present all things in full, as they unfolded, so that masters should retain the liberty to command, judge, and decide. To misrepresent or hide the truth from them, for fear that they should not react appropriately and that they could make wrong decisions because of it, and yet to leave them uninformed of their own affairs, belongs, in my mind, with those who make the law, not with those who follow it. To tutors and teachers, not to those who must know their place in relation to authority, prudence, and good advice. Regardless, this is not how I, in my little world, would wish to be served.

c We happily use any excuse to disregard orders. We challenge mandates. Everyone aspires so naturally to freedom and authority that nothing can be worth more to those who rule than the simple and true obedience of those who serve them.

c Those who obey not by subjection but by choice undermine the power of command. While he was consul in Asia, Publius Crassus, whom the Romans deemed five times blessed,[5] sent a Greek engineer to fetch the taller of two ship masts he had seen in Athens in order to turn it into a kind of battering ram. The engineer, claiming scientific expertise, gave himself permission to choose otherwise and took the smaller one, the more convenient one by the standards of his art. Crassus, having patiently

heard his reasons, had him copiously whipped. Discipline was more valuable to him than his device.

c On the other hand, one could argue that obedience of such a narrow kind applies only to precise and routine orders. Ambassadors have more freedom in their mission. In many ways it relies on their judgment most of all. They do not merely follow their master's will but, by their counsel, shape and refine it too. In my time, I saw commanders reprimanded for going by the king's written orders rather than by the circumstances around them.

c To this day, knowledgeable people condemn the way kings of Persia kept their agents and lieutenants on such a short leash that they sought their king's guidance in the smallest matters. These delays, over so extensive a dominion, often caused considerable damage to their affairs.

c And when Crassus wrote to an expert and explained what he intended to do with that mast, did he not seem to be discussing his decision with that man and to invite him to object to his plans?

Notes

1 Propertius wrote, in Latin: navita de ventis, de tauris narrat arator, enumerat miles vulnera, pastor ovis. Montaigne uses an Italian translation of the verses.

2 Guillaume du Bellay.

3 The episode in question took place in April 1536. The king Montaigne refers to is the king of France, Francis I. A consistory is a meeting of the College of Cardinals called by the pope.

4 Du Bellay's story is slightly different. He writes that Charles V offers to meet the king of France for a duel to avoid an all-out war. The emperor presents, for convenience's (and presumably neutrality's) sake, several possible settings — a bridge, an island, or a boat — and argues that any weapon will do, even a sword or a dagger.

5 Aulus Gellius, the source of this anecdote about Publius Crassus, explains that Crassus was 1) of high birth, 2) rich, 3) eloquent, 4) learned (in the law), and 5) made chief pontiff (*pontifex maximus*).

Montaigne's Sources

Amyot, Plut.	Amyot, Jacques, *Oeuvres morales et meslees de Plutarque*
Du Bellay, Mem.	Du Bellay, Martin, *Mémoires*
Gell.	Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*
Hor., Epist.	Horace, *Epistles*
Plut., Apoph.	Plutarch, *Moralia - Sayings of Spartans*
Prop.	Propertius, *Elegies*