

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 27

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Cowardice, Mother of Cruelty

I have often heard it said that cowardice is the mother of cruelty: and I have found by experience that malicious and inhuman animosity and fierceness are usually accompanied with feminine weakness. I have seen the most cruel people, and upon frivolous occasions, apt to cry. Alexander, the tyrant of Pheres, dared not be a spectator of tragedies in the theater, for fear lest his citizens should see him weep at the misfortunes of Hecuba and Andromache, who himself without pity caused so many people every day to be murdered. Is it not meanness of spirit that renders them so pliable to all extremities?

Valor (whose effect is only to be exercised against resistance,

Nec nisi bellantis gaudet cervice juvenci)

stops when it sees the enemy at its mercy; but pusillanimity, to say that it was also in the game, not having dared to meddle in the first act of danger, takes as its part the second, of blood and massacre. The murders in victories are commonly performed by the rascality and hangers-on of an army, and that which causes so many unheard of cruelties in domestic wars is, that this canaille makes war in imbruing itself up to the elbows in blood, and ripping up a body that lies prostrate at its feet, having no sense of any other valor:

*Et lupus, et turpes instant morientibus ursi,
Et quaecunque minor nobilitate fera est;*

like cowardly dogs, that in the house worry and tear the skins of wild beasts, they dared not come near in the field. What is it in these times of ours that makes our quarrels mortal; and that, whereas our fathers had some degrees of revenge, we now begin with the last in ours, and at the first meeting nothing is to be said but, kill? What is this but cowardice? Every one is sensible that there is more bravery and disdain in subduing an enemy, than in cutting, his throat; and in making him yield, than in putting him to the sword: besides that the appetite of revenge is better satisfied and pleased because its only aim is to make itself felt: And this is the reason why we do not fall upon a beast or a stone when they hurt us,

Nor delights in killing a bull unless
he resists. • CLAUD., FAM., C.M.22

Wolves and the filthy bears, and all
the baser beasts, fall upon the
dying. • OV., TRI., 3.5.35

because they are not capable of being sensible of our revenge; and to kill a man is to save him from the injury and offense we intend him.

And as Bias cried out to a wicked fellow, "I know that sooner or later thou wilt have thy reward, but I am afraid I shall not see it"; and pitied the Orchomenians that the penitence of Lyciscus for the treason committed against them, came at a season when there was no one remaining alive of those who had been interested in the offense, and whom the pleasure of this penitence should affect: so revenge is to be pitied, when the person on whom it is executed is deprived of means of suffering under it: for as the avenger will look on to enjoy the pleasure of his revenge, so the person on whom he takes revenge should be a spectator too, to be afflicted and to repent.

"He will repent it," we say, and because we have given him a pistol-shot through the head, do we imagine he will repent? On the contrary, if we but observe, we shall find, that he makes mouths at us in falling, and is so far from penitency, that he does not so much as repine at us; and we do him the kindest office of life, which is to make him die insensibly, and soon: we are afterward to hide ourselves, and to shift and fly from the officers of justice, who pursue us, whilst he is at rest. Killing is good to frustrate an offense to come, not to revenge one that is already past; and more an act of fear than of bravery; of precaution than of courage; of defense than of enterprise. It is manifest that by it we lose both the true end of revenge and the care of our reputation; we are afraid, if he lives he will do us another injury as great as the first.

'Tis not out of animosity to him, but care of thyself, that thou gettest rid of him.

In the kingdom of Narsinga this expedient would be useless to us, where not only soldiers, but tradesmen also, end their differences by the sword. The king never denies the field to any who wish to fight; and when they are persons of quality; he looks on, rewarding the victor with a chain of gold,—for which any one who pleases may fight with him again, so that, by having come off from one combat, he has engaged himself in many.

If we thought by virtue to be always masters of our enemies, and to triumph over them at pleasure, we should be sorry they should escape from us as they do, by dying; but we have a mind to conquer, more with safety than honor, and, in our quarrel, more pursue the end than the glory. Asinius Pollio, who, as being a worthy man, was the less to be excused, committed a like error, when, having written a libel against Plancus, he forbore to publish it till he was dead; which is to bite one's thumb at a blind man, to rail at one who is deaf, to wound a man who has no feeling, rather than to run the hazard of his resentment. And it was also said of him that it was only for hobgoblins to wrestle with the dead. He who stays to see the author die, whose writings he intends to question, what does he say but that he is weak in his aggressiveness?

It was told to Aristotle that some one had spoken ill of him: "Let him do more," said he; "let him whip me too, provided I am not there."

Our fathers contented themselves with revenging an insult with the lie, the lie with a box of the ear, and so forward; they were valiant enough not to fear their adversaries, living and provoked we tremble for fear so soon as we see them on foot. And that this is so, does not our noble practice of these days, equally to prosecute to death both him that has offended us and him we have offended, make it out?

'Tis also a kind of cowardice that has introduced the custom of having seconds, thirds, and fourths in our duels; they were formerly duels; they are now skirmishes, rencontres, and battles. Solitude was, doubtless, terrible to those who were the first inventors of this practice: *Cum in se cuique minimum fiduciæ esset*, for naturally any company whatever is consolatory in danger. Third persons were formerly called in to prevent disorder and foul play only, and to be witness of the fortune of the combat; but now they have brought it to this pass that the witnesses themselves engage; whoever is invited cannot handsomely stand by as an idle spectator, for fear of being suspected either of want of affection or of courage.

Because each one trusted in themselves least, • LIVY, 34.28

Besides the injustice and unworthiness of such an action, of engaging other strength and valor in the protection of your honor than your own, I conceive it a disadvantage to a brave man, and who wholly relies upon himself, to shuffle his fortune with that of a second; every one runs hazard enough himself without hazarding for another, and has enough to do to assure himself in his own valor for the defense of his life, without intrusting a thing so dear in a third man's hand. For, if it be not expressly agreed upon before to the contrary, 'tis a combined party of all four, and if your second be killed, you have two to deal withal, with good reason; and to say that it is foul play, it is so indeed, as it is, well armed, to attack a man who has but the hilt of a broken sword in his hand, or, clear and untouched, a man who is desperately wounded: but if these be advantages you have got by fighting, you may make use of them without reproach. The disparity and inequality are only weighed and considered from the condition of the combatants when they began; as to the rest, you must take your chance: and though you had, alone, three enemies upon you at once, your two companions being killed, you have no more wrong done you, than I should do in a battle, by running a man through whom I should see engaged with one of our own men, with the like advantage. The nature of society will have it so that where there is troop against troop, as where our Duke of Orleans challenged Henry, king of England, a hundred against a hundred; three hundred against as many, as the Argians against the Lacedaemonians; three to three, as the Horatii against the Curiatii, the multitude on either side is considered but as one single man: the hazard, wherever there is company, being confused and mixed.

I have a domestic interest in this discourse; for my brother, the lord of Mattecoulon, was at Rome asked by a gentleman with whom he had no great acquaintance, and who was a defendant challenged by another, to be his second; in this duel he found himself matched with a gentleman much better known to him. (I would fain have an explanation of these rules of honor, which so often shock and confound those of reason.) After having despatched his man, seeing the two principals still on foot and sound, he ran in to disengage his friend. What could he do less? should he have stood still, and if chance would have ordered it so, have seen him

he was come thither to defend killed before his face? what he had hitherto done helped not the business; the quarrel was yet undecided. The courtesy that you can, and certainly ought to show to your enemy, when you have reduced him to an ill condition and have a great advantage over him, I do not see how you can do it, where the interest of another is concerned, where you are only called in as an assistant, and the quarrel is none of yours: he could neither be just nor courteous, at the hazard of him he was there to serve. And he was therefore enlarged from the prisons of Italy at the speedy and solemn request of our king.

Indiscreet nation! we are not content to make our vices and follies known to the world by report only, but we must go into foreign countries, there to show them what fools we are. Put three Frenchmen into the deserts of Libya, they will not live a month together without fighting; so that you would say this peregrination were a thing purposely designed to give foreigners the pleasure of our tragedies, and, for the most part, to such as rejoice and laugh at our miseries.

We go into Italy to learn to fence, and exercise the art at the expense of our lives before we have learned it; and yet, by the rule of discipline, we should put the theory before the practice. We discover ourselves to be but learners:

*Primitiæ iuvenum miseræ, bellicæ futuri
Dura rudimenta.*

I know that fencing is an art very useful to its end (in a duel betwixt two princes, cousin-germans, in Spain, the elder, says Livy, by his skill and dexterity in arms, easily overcoming the greater and more awkward strength of the younger), and of which the knowledge, as I experimentally know, has inspired some with courage above their natural measure; but this is not properly valor, because it supports itself upon address, and is founded upon something besides itself. The honor of combat consists in the jealousy of courage, and not of skill; and therefore I have known a friend of mine, famed as a great master in this exercise, in his quarrels make choice of such arms as might deprive him of this advantage and that wholly depended upon fortune and assurance, that they might not attribute his victory rather to his skill in fencing than his valor. When I was young, gentlemen avoided the reputation of good fencers as injurious to them, and learned to fence with all imaginable privacy as a trade of subtlety, derogating from true and natural valor:

*Non schivar non parar, non ritirarsi,
Vogliono costor, ne qui destrezza ha parte;
Non danno i colpi or finti, or pieni, or scarsi;
Toglie l'ira a il furor l'uso de l'arte.
Odi le spade orribilmente utarsi
A mezzo il ferro; il pie d'orma non parte,
Sempre a il pie fermo, è la man sempre in moto;
Ne scende taglio in van, ne punta à voto.*

Butts, tilting, and barriers, the feint of warlike fights, were the exercises of our forefathers: this other exercise is so much the less noble, as it only respects a private end; that teaches us to destroy one another against law

Wretched the elementary trials of youth, and hard the rudiments of approaching war. • VERG., AEN., 11.156

They neither shrank, nor vantage sought of ground, They traversed not, nor skipped from part to part, Their blows were neither false, nor feigned found: In fight, their rage would let them use no art. Their swords together clash with dreadful sound, Their feet stand fast, and neither stir nor start, They move their hands, steadfast their feet remain. Nor blow nor foin they struck, or thrust in vain. •

and justice, and that every way always produces very ill effects. It is much more worthy and more becoming to exercise ourselves in things that strengthen than that weaken our government and that tend to the public safety and common glory.

TASSO, GERUS., 12.55

The consul, Publius Rutilius, was the first who taught the soldiers to handle their arms with skill, and joined art with valor, not for the rise of private quarrel, but for war and the quarrels of the people of Rome; a popular and civil defense. And besides the example of Caesar, who commanded his men to shoot chiefly at the face of Pompey's soldiers in the battle of Pharsalia, a thousand other commanders have also bethought them to invent new forms of weapons and new ways of striking and defending, according as occasion should require. But as Philopoemen condemned wrestling, wherein he excelled, because the preparatives that were therein employed were differing from those that appertain to military discipline, to which alone he conceived men of honor ought wholly to apply themselves; so it seems to me that this address to which we form our limbs, those writhings and motions young men are taught in this new school, are not only of no use, but rather contrary and hurtful to the practice of fight in battle; and also our people commonly make use of particular weapons, and peculiarly designed for duel; and I have seen, when it has been disapproved, that a gentleman challenged to fight with rapier and dagger appeared in the array of a man-at-arms, and that another should take his cloak instead of his dagger.

It is worthy of consideration that Laches in Plato, speaking of learning to fence after our manner, says that he never knew any great soldier come out of that school, especially the masters of it: and, indeed, as to them, our experience tells as much. As to the rest, we may at least conclude that they are qualities of no relation or correspondence; and in the education of the children of his government, Plato interdicts the art of boxing, introduced by Amycus and Epeius, and that of wrestling, by Antaeus and Cercyo, because they have another end than to render youth fit for the service of war and contribute nothing to it.

But I see that I have somewhat strayed from my theme.

The Emperor Mauricius, being advertised by dreams and several prognostics, that one Phocas, an obscure soldier, should kill him, questioned his son-in-law, Philip, who this Phocas was, and what were his nature, qualities, and manners; and so soon as Philip, among other things, had told him that he was cowardly and timorous, the emperor immediately concluded then that he was a murderer and cruel. What is it that makes tyrants so sanguinary? 'Tis only the solicitude for their own safety, and that their faint hearts can furnish them with no other means of securing themselves than in exterminating those who may hurt them, even so much as women, for fear of a scratch,

Cuncta ferit, dum cuncta timet.

He strikes at all who fears all. •
CLAUD., EU., 1.182

The first cruelties are exercised for themselves thence springs the fear of a just revenge, which afterward produces a series of new cruelties, to obliterate one another. Philip, king of Macedon, who had so much to do with the people of Rome, agitated with the horror of so many murders

committed by his order, and doubting of being able to keep himself secure from so many families, at divers times mortally injured and offended by him, resolved to seize all the children of those he had caused to be slain, to despatch them daily one after another, and so to establish his own repose.

Fine matter is never impertinent, however placed; and therefore I, who more consider the weight and utility of what I deliver than its order and connection, need not fear in this place to bring in an excellent story, though it be a little by-the-by; for when they are rich in their own native beauty, and are able to justify themselves, the least end of a hair will serve to draw them into my discourse. Among others condemned by Philip, had been one Herodicus, prince of Thessaly; he had, moreover, after him caused his two sons-in-law to be put to death, each leaving a son very young behind him. Theoxena and Archo were their two widows. Theoxena, though highly courted to it, could not be persuaded to marry again: Archo married Poris, the greatest man among the Aenians, and by him had a great many children, whom she, dying, left at a very tender age. Theoxena, moved with a maternal charity toward her nephews, that she might have them under her own eyes and in her own protection, married Poris: when presently comes a proclamation of the king's edict. This brave-spirited mother, suspecting the cruelty of Philip, and afraid of the insolence of the soldiers toward these charming and tender children was so bold as to declare that she would rather kill them with her own hands than deliver them. Poris, startled at this protestation, promised her to steal them away, and to transport them to Athens, and there commit them to the custody of some faithful friends of his. They took, therefore, the opportunity of an annual feast which was celebrated at Aenia in honor of Aeneas, and thither they went. Having appeared by day at the public ceremonies and banquet, they stole the night following into a vessel laid ready for the purpose, to escape away by sea. The wind proved contrary, and finding themselves in the morning within sight of the land whence they had launched overnight, and being pursued by the guards of the port, Poris perceiving this, labored all he could to make the mariners do their utmost to escape from the pursuers. But Theoxena, frantic with affection and revenge, in pursuance of her former resolution, prepared both weapons and poison, and exposing them before them; "Go to, my children," said she, "death is now the only means of your defense and liberty, and shall administer occasion to the gods to exercise their sacred justice: these sharp swords, and these full cups, will open you the way into it; courage, fear nothing! And thou, my son, who art the eldest, take this steel into thy hand, that thou mayest the more bravely die." The children having on one side so powerful a counsellor, and the enemy at their throats on the other, run all of them eagerly upon what was next to hand; and, half dead, were thrown into the sea. Theoxena, proud of having so gloriously provided for the safety of her children, clasping her arms with great affection about her husband's neck. "Let us, my friend," said she, "follow these boys, and enjoy the same sepulchre they do"; and so, having embraced, they threw themselves headlong into the sea; so that the ship was carried — back without the owners into the harbor.

Tyrants, at once both to kill and to make their anger felt, have employed their capacity to invent the most lingering deaths. They will have their

enemies despatched, but not so fast that they may not have leisure to taste their vengeance. And therein they are mightily perplexed; for if the torments they inflict are violent, they are short; if long, they are not then so painful as they desire; and thus plague themselves in choice of the greatest cruelty. Of this we have a thousand examples in antiquity, and I know not whether we, unawares, do not retain some traces of this barbarity.

All that exceeds a simple death appears to me absolute cruelty. Our justice cannot expect that he, whom the fear of dying by being beheaded or hanged will not restrain, should be any more awed by the imagination of a languishing fire, pincers, or the wheel. And I know not, in the meantime, whether we do not throw them into despair; for in what condition can be the soul of a man, expecting four-and-twenty hours together to be broken upon a wheel, or after the old way, nailed to a cross? Josephus relates that in the time of the war the Romans made in Judaea, happening to pass by where they had three days before crucified certain Jews, he among them knew three of his own friends, and obtained the favor of having them taken down, of whom two, he says, died; the third lived a great while after.

Chalcondylas, a writer of good credit, in the records he has left behind him of things that happened in his time, and near him, tells us, as of the most excessive torment, of that the Emperor Mohammed very often practised, of cutting off men in the middle by the diaphragm with one blow of a scimitar, whence it followed that they died as it were two deaths at once; and both the one part, says he, and the other, were seen to stir and strive a great while after in very great torment. I do not think there was any great suffering in this motion the torments that are the most dreadful to look on are not always the greatest to endure; and I find those that other historians relate to have been practised by him upon the Epirot lords, are more horrid and cruel, where they were condemned to be flayed alive piecemeal, after so malicious a manner that they continued fifteen days in that misery.

And these other two: Croesus, having caused a gentleman, the favorite of his brother Pantaleon, to be seized, carried him into a fuller's shop, where he caused him to be scratched and carded with the cards and combs belonging to that trade, till he died. George Sechel, chief commander of the peasants of Poland, who committed so many mischiefs under the title of the Crusade, being defeated in battle and taken by the Vayvode of Transylvania, was three days bound naked upon the rack exposed to all sorts of torments that any one could contrive against him: during which time many other prisoners were kept fasting; in the end, he living and looking on, they made his beloved brother Lucat, for whom alone he entreated, taking on himself the blame of all their evil actions drink his blood, and caused twenty of his most favored captains to feed upon him, tearing his flesh in pieces with their teeth, and swallowing the morsels. The remainder of his body and his bowels, so soon as he was dead, were boiled, and others of his followers compelled to eat them.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Claud., Eu.	Claudian, <i>Against Eutropius</i>
Claud., Fam.	Claudian, <i>Letters to Friends</i>
Livy	Livy, <i>History of Rome</i>
Ov., Tri.	Ovid, <i>Tristia</i>
Tasso, Gerus.	Tasso, Torquato, <i>Jerusalem Delivered</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Æneid</i>