

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 7



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Intent Is the Arbiter of Our Actions

A DEATH, they say, relieves us of all our obligations. I know of some who have given this different meanings. Henry VII, the king of England, made a deal with Don Philip,¹ son of the emperor Maximilian — or, to introduce him more honorably, the father of the emperor Charles V — to have Philip hand over the duke of Suffolk² — the White Rose, his enemy — who had escaped him and was hiding in the Low Countries. In return, he promised not to make any attempts on the life of the said duke. But when Henry's time came to die, he used his will to instruct his son to put Suffolk to death as soon as he would pass away.

A That tragic event orchestrated recently by the duke of Alba in Brussels for the count of Horn and the count of Egmont included several remarkable episodes.³ Particularly remarkable was how the count of Egmont, on whose word and assurance the count of Horn had surrendered to the duke of Alba, insisted that he should be executed first so that his death could free him of his obligation to the count of Horn. In fact, the former, dead, would not have been relieved from his pledge any more than the latter, alive, could have held him to it. We cannot be held accountable for what is beyond our efforts and our abilities. And it is so because effects and outcomes are not under our control; because nothing, after all, is under our control except our will, which must make it the foundation of all rules related to our duties. The count of Egmont committing his soul and his will to his promise actually had no power to keep it and could not have been held accountable for it even if he had outlived the count of Horn. The king of England, however, who willfully defaulted on his word, cannot be excused for delaying until after his death the execution of his betrayal. The same goes for Herodotus's stone mason who, after he loyally kept his whole life the secret of the treasures of the king of Egypt, his master, revealed it to his children on his deathbed.

c In my time, I saw many who, swayed by their conscience, decided to let go in their will and after their death of something they had been holding back from someone. They do no good this way, taking so long to deal with such an important thing and seeking to right a wrong with so little heart

and thought. They owe more of themselves. The heavier and greater the cost, the more just and deserved their satisfaction. Repentance demands that we should feel its weight.

☾ But they do worse those who, having secretly wished their whole life to hurt someone close to them, use their last will to do it. They show little concern for their reputation by choosing to be remembered for abusing someone, and less concern still for their conscience by proving unable to quell their own anger in the face of death and by prolonging its life past theirs. Unfit judges who wait to rule on a case that is no longer theirs to hear!

☾ I will not let my death, if I can help it, say something which my life has not said first.

NOTES

- 1 Philip I of Castile
- 2 Richard de la Pole
- 3 The count of Egmont and the count of Horn were beheaded on June 5, 1568, on the Grand Place of Brussels. Their execution is one of the episodes that led to the independence of the Netherlands from Spain.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Du Bellay, Mem.	Du Bellay, Martin, <i>Mémoires</i>
Hdt.	Herodotus, <i>Histories</i>