

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 23

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On Bad Means to a Good End

There is wonderful relation and correspondence in this universal government of the works of nature, which very well makes it appear that it is neither accidental nor carried on by divers masters. The diseases and conditions of our bodies are, in like manner, manifest in states and governments; kingdoms and republics are founded, flourish, and decay with age as we do. We are subject to a repletion of humors, useless and dangerous: whether of those that are good (for even those the physicians are afraid of; and seeing we have nothing in us that is stable, they say that a too brisk and vigorous perfection of health must be abated by art, lest our nature, unable to rest in any certain condition, and not having whither to rise to mend itself, make too sudden and too disorderly a retreat; and therefore prescribe wrestlers to purge and bleed, to qualify that superabundant health), or else a repletion of evil humors, which is the ordinary cause of sickness. States are very often sick of the like repletion, and various sorts of purgations have commonly been applied. Some times a great multitude of families are turned out to clear the country, who seek out new abodes elsewhere and encroach upon others. After this manner our ancient Franks came from the remotest part of Germany to seize upon Gaul, and to drive thence the first inhabitants; so was that infinite deluge of men made up who came into Italy under the conduct of Brennus and others; so the Goths and Vandals, and also the people who now possess Greece, left their native country to go settle elsewhere, where they might have more room; and there are scarce two or three little corners in the world that have not felt the effect of such removals. The Romans by this means erected their colonies; for, perceiving their city to grow immeasurably populous, they eased it of the most unnecessary people, and sent them to inhabit and cultivate the lands conquered by them; sometimes also they purposely maintained wars with some of their enemies, not only to keep their own men in action, for fear lest idleness, the mother of corruption, should bring upon them some worse inconvenience,

*Et patimur longæ pacis mala; sævior armis
Luxuria incumbit.*

And we suffer the ills of a long peace;
luxury is more pernicious than war. •

but also to serve for a blood-letting to their Republic, and a little to evaporate the too vehement heat of their youth, to prune and clear the branches from the stock too luxuriant in wood; and to this end it was that they maintained so long a war with Carthage.

JUV., 6.291

In the treaty of Bretigny, Edward III, king of England, would not, in the general peace he then made with our king, comprehend the controversy about the Duchy of Brittany, that he might have a place wherein to discharge himself of his soldiers, and that the vast number of English he had brought over to serve him in his expedition here might not return back into England. And this also was one reason why our King Philip consented to send his son John upon a foreign expedition, that he might take along with him a great number of hot young men who were then in his pay.

There are many in our times who talk at this rate, wishing that this hot emotion that is now among us might discharge itself in some neighboring war, for fear lest all the peccant humors that now reign in this politic body of ours may diffuse themselves farther, keep the fever still in the height, and at last cause our total ruin; and, in truth, a foreign is much more supportable than a civil war, but I do not believe that God will favor so unjust a design as to offend and quarrel with others for our own advantage:

*Nil mihi tam valde placeat, Rhamnusia virgo,
Quod temere invitis suscipiatur heris.*

Rhamnusia virgin, let nothing ever so greatly please me which is taken without justice from the unwilling owners. • CATULL., 68.77

And yet the weakness of our condition often pushes us upon the necessity of making use of ill means to a good end. Lycurgus, the most perfect legislator that ever was, virtuous and invented this very unjust practice of making the helots, who were their slaves, drunk by force, to the end that the Spartans, seeing them so lost and buried in wine, might abhor the excess of this vice.

And yet those were still more to blame who of old gave leave that criminals, to what sort of death soever condemned, should be cut up alive by the physicians, that they might make a true discovery of our inward parts, and build their art upon greater certainty; for, if we must run into excesses, it is more excusable to do it for the health of the soul than that of the body; as the Romans trained up the people to valor and the contempt of dangers and death by those furious spectacles of gladiators and fencers, who, having to fight it out to the last, cut, mangled, and killed one another in their presence,

*Quid vesani aliud sibi vult ars impia ludi,
Quid mortes juvenum, quid sanguine pasta voluptas?*

What other end does the impious art of the gladiators propose to itself, what the slaughter of young men, what pleasure fed with blood. • PRUDENT., C. SYMM., 2.643

and this custom continued till the Emperor Theodosius' time:

*Arripe dilatam tua, dux, in tempora famam,
Quodque patris superest, successor laudis habeto
Nullus in urbe cadat, cuius sit pœna voluptas.
Iam solis contenta feris, infamis arena
Nulla cruentatis homicidia ludat in armis.*

Prince, take the honors delayed for thy reign, and be successor to thy fathers; henceforth let none at Rome be slain for sport. Let beasts' blood

It was, in truth, a wonderful example, and of great advantage for the training up the people, to see every day before their eyes a hundred; two hundred, nay, a thousand couples of men armed against one another, cut one another to pieces with so great a constancy of courage, that they were never heard to utter so much as one syllable of weakness or commiseration; never seen to turn their backs, nor so much as to make one cowardly step to evade a blow, but rather exposed their necks to the adversary's sword and presented themselves to receive the stroke; and many of them, when wounded to death, have sent to ask the spectators if they were satisfied with their behavior, before they lay down to die upon the place. It was not enough for them to fight and to die bravely, but cheerfully too; insomuch that they were hissed and cursed if they made any hesitation about receiving their death.

The very girls themselves set them on:

*consurgit ad ictus;
Et, quoties victor ferrum iugulo inserit, illa
Delitias ait esse suas, pectusque iacentis
Virgo modesta jubet converso pollice rumpi.*

The first Romans only condemned criminals to this example: but they afterwards employed innocent slaves in the work, and even freemen too, who sold themselves to this purpose, nay, moreover, senators and knights of Rome, and also women:

*Nunc caput in mortem vendunt, et funus arena,
Atque hostem sibi quisque parat, cum bella quiescunt.*

*Hos inter fremitus novosque lusus,
Stat sexus rudis insciusque ferri,
Et pugnas capit improbus viriles.*

which I should think strange and incredible, if we were not accustomed every day to see in our own wars many thousands of men of other nations, for money to stake their blood and their lives in quarrels wherein they have no manner of concern.

stain the infamous arena, and no more homicides be there acted. • PRUDENT., C. SYMM., 2.643

The modest virgin is so delighted with the sport, that she applauds the blow, and when the victor bathes his sword in his fellow's throat, she says it is her pleasure, and with turned thumb orders him to rip up the bosom of the prostrate victim. • PRUDENT., C. SYMM., 2.617

They sell themselves to death and the circus, and, since the wars are ceased, each for himself a foe prepares. • MANILIUS, 4.225

Amidst these tumults and new sports, the tender sex, unskilled in arms, immodestly engaged in manly fights. • STAT., SILV., 1.6.51

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Catull.	Catullus, <i>Poems</i>
Juv.	Juvenal, <i>Satires</i>
Manilius	Manilius, <i>Astronomica</i>
Prudent., C. Symm.	Prudentius, <i>Against Symmachus</i>

Stat., Silv.

Statius, *Silvae*