

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 12



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On Constancy

^a THE LAW of resolve and constancy has nothing to do with hiding from the evils and aggravations that threaten us — insofar as we are able to — or, therefore, from the fear that they could spring up on us. On the contrary, all honest means to prepare ourselves for these ills are not only allowed but laudable. The trick with constancy is mostly to be patient and bear these aggravations against which we have no defense. Which is why there is no dodging or parrying we object to if it can protect us from the blow aimed at us.

◦ Many very fierce nations made decisive gains on the battlefield by retreating and proved more dangerous with their back, rather than their front, turned to the enemy.

◦ The Turks retain some of this.

◦ In Plato, Socrates mocks Laches who defined fortitude as facing and holding the line against the enemy. “Why!” he said. “Would it be cowardly to make room to defeat them?” He then reminds him that Homer had praised Aeneas’s mastery of retreat. And, after Laches changes his mind and admits that the Scythians, and cavalry units in general, made use of it, he reminds him also that, at the battle of Plataea, when the Spartan infantry, famous for standing its ground, found itself unable to open up the Persian phalanx, it decided to withdraw and walk back, feigning a retreat, and thus let this mass break and disperse as it pursued them, by which means they earned their victory.

◦ Regarding the Scythians, it is said that when Darius went off to conquer them, he conveyed his great displeasure to their king for constantly moving away from him and for sidestepping instead of fighting. To which Idanthysus — for that was his name — responded that it was not because he feared him, or any other man alive, but because it was the way his people moved, having no cultivated land, no city, no house to defend, and no worry about the enemy using them to their advantage; also that if he

was so hungry for a fight he should come to where their ancestral tombs were and that he would find him there.

^a In any case, when standing by a battery of cannons, as may often be the case in a war, it is unbecoming to appear startled by the oncoming blast, even though it seems to us unavoidable given its violence and speed. And many have given their comrades an excuse to laugh, or worse, because they brought their hand up or lowered their head.

^a And yet, when Charles the Fifth led a campaign against us in Provence,¹ the marquis of Guast, having gone to reconnoiter the city of Arles and having moved from behind a windmill he had used to cover his approach, was spotted by the lords of Bonneval and seneschal of Agenais who were walking the galleries of the arena. They pointed him out to the artillery commissioner, the lord of Villiers, who aimed a culverin² straight at the Marquis who, had he not noticed the fire being lit and jumped out of the way, would have been hit. Similarly, a few years before, Lorenzo de' Medici, duke of Urbino, father of the Queen, the King's mother,³ at the siege of Mondolfo, a town under imperial vicarship in Italy, spotted a cannon aimed at him being fired and managed to throw himself on the ground. Had he not, the shot would have hit him in the belly instead of merely grazing his scalp. Truth be told, I do not believe that these can be intentional actions; for how can you work out in an instant how high or low someone is aiming? It makes much more sense to believe that luck lend their fear a hand and that, next time, it could just as well throw someone into the line of fire rather than out of it.

^b If I hear the sound of an arquebus where and when I do not expect it, I cannot deny that it makes me flinch, something which I have also witnessed in others much better than me.

^c The Stoics do not expect the soul of the wise to withstand the initial rush of images and disturbing ideas that come to them either. They admit that natural occurrences, like the loud noise of thunder or something crashing down for instance, can leave them pale and shaken. And so too can emotions, as long as their judgment remains unaffected and whole, and that their intellectual core is neither damaged nor altered, and that they not give in to their fright and their pain. As for those who are not wise, the same can be said about the first case but not about the second one because, in them, the imprint of emotions is more than superficial, penetrating deep into the seat of reason, infecting and corrupting it. It affects their judgment and changes them. See here elegantly and plainly put the state of the Stoic

c Mens immota manet; lacrimae uoluntur inanes.

In tears, yet unwavering. • VERG.,
AEN., 4.449

^c Peripatetics⁴ do not think they are above feeling unsettled. But they temper those feelings.

NOTES

- 1 In 1536.
- 2 In sixteenth-century France, a light, portable cannon; a precursor to muskets and arquebuses.
- 3 The queen in question is Catherine de' Medici, mother of Francis II, Charles IX—king of France when Montaigne wrote this chapter—Henry III, and Margaret of Valois.
- 4 Members of the Peripatetic school founded by Aristotle.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Du Bellay, Mem.	Du Bellay, Martin, <i>Mémoires</i>
Guicciardini, SdI	Guicciardini, Francesco, <i>History of Italy</i>
Hdt.	Herodotus, <i>Histories</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>