

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 15



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There Is a Price to Pay for Needlessly Defending a Position

A LIKE OTHER VIRTUES, bravery has its limits and crossing them leads us into vice. Those who do not know where the line is, who are unable to determine where valor ends, can cross from it into rashness, stubbornness, and folly. It is out of this insight that was born our custom in wars to punish, with death sometimes, those who insist on defending a position which, in military terms, cannot be held. Otherwise, with no fear of punishment, any old shack could hold back an army.

A At the siege of Pavia, Grand Constable de Montmorency had been tasked with crossing the Ticino and setting up camp in the Sant'Antonio district. When he was held up at a bridgehead that insisted on being taken by force, he had everyone in the tower hanged. And once more afterward, while following the crown prince on his journey beyond the mountains,¹ after he seized the castle of Villane,² and after soldiers, in their fury, tore to pieces everything in it save for its captain and its ensign, he had them strung up and hanged for the same reason. And so did Captain Martin du Bellay, then governor of Turin in the same country, with the captain of Saint Bony,³ the rest of his people having been massacred when the place fell.

A Still, even though a place's worth and weakness can be determined by appraising and weighing out the forces attacking it — anyone rightly standing firm against a pair of culverins would seem raging mad holding out against thirty cannons — when the greatness of the opposing prince, his reputation, and respect owed to him are taken into account, one might give that side slightly too much weight. And by the same token, some have such a high opinion of themselves and their abilities that, concluding that nothing is worthy of confronting them, they put everyone to the sword wherever they find resistance, for as long as their luck lasts anyway. In fact, we see it at work — proud, smug, and full of some Oriental assertiveness — in the various kinds of demands and challenges issued by Eastern princes and their successors in power today.

c And over where the Portuguese nicked the Indies, they found states with this universal and inalienable law whereby no negotiation over ransom or

mercy can take place for any enemy defeated in the presence of the king or his lieutenant.

▮ Above all, it is best, if possible, to avoid finding oneself at the mercy of the judgment of an armed and victorious foe.

NOTES

- 1 Beyond the Alps, that is. In October 1537, King Francis I sent his 18-year-old son, Henry, to Piedmont to secure the area around Turin. Henry had become crown prince the year before, after the death of his older brother, Francis III. Anne de Montmorency, Francis I's trusted lieutenant general, led the campaign.
- 2 "Villane" is likely modern Avigliana, a small town 15 miles west of Turin which is featured on some early modern maps as "Vigliano."
- 3 "Saint Bony" should be "Sambuy" — nowadays a suburb of Turin — but Montaigne is using du Bellay's text as a reference and du Bellay got the name of the fort wrong. "Sambuy" is not derived from the name of a Catholic saint but rather from a regional variation of the Italian word for elderberry: sambuco. (See Flechia, G., *Nomi locali d'Italia derivati dal nome delle piante in Atti della R. Accademia delle scienze di Torino. Italy: Stamperia Reale, 1879., p. 839*)

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Du Bellay, Mem.

Du Bellay, Martin, *Mémoires*