Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 1 · Chapter 5

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ESSAYS-1-5-20261022-174539

Whether the Commander of a Place Under Siege Ought to Go Out to Parley

a Lucius Marcius, a Roman legate during the war against Perseus, king of Macedon, was looking to stall for time until his army could be ready. He built up expectations of a treaty on the basis of which Perseus, put at ease, agreed to a truce of a few days giving the Romans opportunity and time to mobilize, ushering in his downfall. But older members of the Senate, who kept alive their forefathers' customs, denounced this arrangement as antithetical to their ancient way c which, they said, was to fight with honor, not with tricks, not by sneaking up and attacking at night, not with fake retreats and ambushes or with hazardous counterattacks, but by going to war only after having declared it and, often, after having agreed on a place and time to do battle. It is according to these principles that they sent back to Pyrrhus his treacherous doctor, and to the Falisci their immoral schoolmaster. This was true Roman form, different from Greek ruse or Punic trickery for which it is less glorious to win by force than by cheating. Deception might be useful in a pinch. But only those overwhelmed not by ruse or luck but by the bravery of each and every company in a true and fair war will accept their defeat. a Judging by their words, these good people had not yet received this noble decree,

> a *dolus an uirtus, quis in hoste requirat?*

Ruse or valor? Against the enemy, who cares? • Verg., Aen., 2.390

c The Achaeans, reports Polybius, hated any kind of deception in their wars, deeming no victory earned unless the spirit of their enemy was crushed. *Eam uir sanctus et sapiens sciet ueram esse uictoriam quae salua fide et integra dignitate parabitur*, says another.

> c *Uosne uelit, an me, regnare era, quidue ferat, fors*
> *uirtute experiamur.*

The just and wise man will know that a true victory is one obtained with complete trust and untarnished honor • Flor., 1.6.12

Let Fortune choose who is to rule; you or me, let it be up to Her; let our bravery be put to the test. • Cic., Off., 1.12

c In the Kingdom of Ternate, one of those nations which we so confidently like to call barbarian, custom dictates that they cannot start a war without having announced it, providing considerable details of the means to be used — which and how many men, the type of ammunition, the type of offensive and defensive weapons. But once that is done, they are allowed to use anything that will help them win the war, without judgment.

c The old Florentines were so uninterested in seeking any advantage over their enemies by surprise that they would warn them a month before deploying their army by the continual ringing of a bell they called *martinella*.

a As for those of us less particular who believe that the greater purpose of war is to extract an advantage from it, we agree with Lysander that where there is not enough of the lion's hide, we must sew in a piece of the fox's[1] and that the most common opportunities for an upset come from this method; and so we say that there is no time when a commander ought to be more vigilant than during talks and negotiations. For this reason, it is a rule all military men of our time know that the governor of a place under siege should never leave to negotiate in person. In our fathers' time,[2] the lords of Montmort and of Lassigny, defending Mouzon against the count of Nassau, were criticized for doing so. By the same token, it might be excusable to leave as long as one can remain safe and in control as Guido, count of Rangoni, did in Reggio(if we are to believe Du Bellay since Guicciardini says it was really he) when the lord of Lescun came to meet him to negotiate. Indeed he stayed so close to his fortress that, after trouble erupted during the talks, not only did Sir Thomas of Lescun and his people, who had come out with him, find themselves in the weakest position — so much so that Alessandro Trivulzio was killed right there — but Sir Thomas himself was forced, in order to stay safe, to trust the count and follow him back into the city to move out of the line of fire.

b Eumenes, besieged in the city of Nora by Antigonus, was being pressured by him to come out to parley. Antigonus insisted, after he had met with several others, that since he was the best and strongest it was only natural that Eumenes should come to him. Eumenes made this fine reply: "As long as I have my sword to wield, I will find no one better than I am," then refused to meet unless Antigonus provided a hostage, his own nephew, Ptolemaeus, as requested.

a To be sure, some did very well who went out on the word of their assailant. Case in point: Henry de Vaux, a knight of Champagne, surrounded by the English at the castle of Cormicy. The commander of the siege, Bartholomew Burghersh,[3] having undermined from outside most of the castle wall such that setting the mine on fire would bury all inside under rubble, told Henry he had better come out to talk, which he did, one of four to do so. With proof of his ruin made clear to him, Henry felt much obliged to his opponent, who decided, once he and his company had surrendered, to light the underground fire which caused the wooden stanchions to fail and the whole castle to collapse.

b As for me, I will easily put my trust in someone as long as my acting out of free will and faith in their loyalty will not be mistaken for a lack of hope and courage.

Notes

1 *ὅπου γὰρ ἡ λεοντῆ μὴ ἐφικνεῖται, προσραπτέον ἐκεῖ τὴν ἀλωπεκῆν*: Where the lion's skin will not reach, it must be patched out with the fox's

2 In 1521.

3 Montaigne refers to Bartholomew Burghersh as "Barthelemy de Bonnes," after his source, Jean Froissart, who also refers to him as Barthelemy "Breches," "de Bounes," "de Brennes," and "de Brunes" in his *Chroniques*.

Montaigne's Sources

Cic., Off.	Cicero, *On Duties*
Du Bellay, Mem.	Du Bellay, Martin, *Mémoires*
Flor.	Florus, *Epitome of Roman History*
Plut., Lys.	Plutarch, *Parallel Lives - Lysander*
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, *Æneid*