

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 1



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By diverse meanes men come unto a like end

THE most usuall waie to appease those minds we have offended (when revenge lies in their hands, and that we stand at their mercy) is, by submission to move them to commiseration and pittie: Neverthelesse, courage, constancie, and resolution (meanes altogether opposite) have sometimes wrought the same effect. *Edward* the black Prince of *Wales* (who so long governed our Country of *Guienne*, a man whose conditions and fortune were accompanied with many notable parts of worth and magnanimitie) having beene grievously offended by the *Limosins*, though he by maine force tooke and entered their Citie, could by no meanes be appeased, nor by the wailefull out-cries of all sorts of people (as of men, women, and children) be moved to any pittie, they prostrating themselves to the common slaughter, crying for mercy, and humbly submitting themselves at his feet, until such time as in triumphant manner passing thorow their Citie, he perceived three French Gentlemen, who alone, with an incredible and undaunted boldnesse gainstood the enraged violence, and made head against the furie of his victorious armie. The consideration and respect of so notable a vertue, did first abate the dint of his wrath, and from those three began to relent, and shew mercy to all the other inhabitants of the said towne. *Scanderbeg*, Prince of *Epirus*, following one of his souldiers, with purpose to kill him, who by all means of humilitie, and submisse entreatie, had first offered to pacifie him, in such an unavoidable extremitie, resolved at last, resolutely to encounter him with his sword in his hand. This resolution did immediately stay his Captains fury, who seeing him undertake so honourable an attempt, not only forgave, but received him into grace and favour. This example may haply, of such as have not knowne the prodigious force and matchless valour of the said Prince, admit another interpretation. The Emperor *Conradus*, third of that name, having besieged *Guelphe*, Duke of *Bavaria*, what vile or base satisfaction soever was offered him, would yeeld to no other milder conditions, but only to suffer such Gentlewomen as were with the Duke in the Citie (their honours safe) to issue out of the Towne afoot, with such things as they could carry about them. They with an unrelenting courage advised and resolved themselves (neglecting all other riches or jewels) to carry their husbands, their children, and the Duke himselfe, on their

backs: the Emperour perceiving the quaintnesse of their device, tooke so great pleasure at it, that hee wept for joy, and forthwith converted that former inexorable rage, and mortall hatred he bare the Duke, into so milde a relenting and gentle kindnesse, that thence forward he entreated both him and his with all favour and courtesie. Either of these wayes might easily perswade mee: for I am much inclined to mercie, and affected to mildnesse. So it is, that in mine opinion, I should more naturally stoope unto compassion, than bend to estimation. Yet is pittie held a vicious passion among the Stoicks. They would have us aid the afflicted, but not to faint and co-suffer with them. These examples seeme fittest for mee, forsomuch as these minds are seene to be assaulted and environed by these two meanes, in undauntedly suffering the one, and stooping under the other. It may peradventure be said, that to yeeld ones heart unto commiseration, is an effect of facility, tendernesse, and meeknesse: whence it proceedeth, that the weakest natures, as of women, children, and the vulgar sort are more subject unto it. But (having contemned teares and wailings) to yeeld unto the onely reverence of the sacred Image of vertue, is the effect of a couragious and imployable mind, holding a masculine and contant vigour, in honour and affection. Notwithstanding, amazement and admiration may in lesse generous minds worke the like effect. Witnessse the Thebanes, who having accused and indited their Captaines, as of a capitall crime, forsomuch as they had continued their charge beyond the time prescribed them, absolved and quit *Pelopidas* of all punishment, because he submissively yeelded under the burden of such objections, and to save himselfe, employed no other meanes, but suing-requests, and demisse entreaties; where on the contrary, *Epaminondas* boldly relating the exploits atchieved by him, and with a fierce and arrogant manner upbraiding the people with them, had not the heart so much as to take their lots into his hands, but went his way, and was freely absolved; the assembly much commending the stoutnesse of his courage. *Dionisius* the elder, after extreme difficulties, having taken the Citie of *Reggio*, and in it the Captaine *Phyton* (a worthy honest man), who had so obstinately defended the same, would needs shew a tragicall example of revenge. First, he told him, how the day before, he had caused his sonne and all his kinsfolkes to be drowned. To whom *Phyton*, stoutly out-staring him, answered nothing, but that they were more happy than himselfe by the space of one day. Afterward he caused him to be stripped, and by his executioners to be taken and dragged thorow the Citie most ignominiously, whipping him, charging him besides with contumelious speeches. All which notwithstanding, as one no whit dismayed, he ever shewed a constant and resolute heart; and with a cheerefull and bold countenance went on still, loudly recounting the honourable and glorious cause of his death, which was, that he would never consent to yeeld his Country into the hands of a cruell tyrant, menacing him with an imminent punishment of the Gods. *Dionisius* plainly reading in his Souldiers lookes, that in lieu of animating them with braving his conquered enemie, they in contempt of him, and scorn of his triumph, seemed by the astonishment of so rare a vertue, to be moved with compassion, and inclined to mutinie, yea, and to free *Phyton* from out the hands of his *Satellites*, caused his torture to cease, and secretly sent him to be drowned in the sea. Surely, man is a wonderful, vaine, divers, and wavering subject: it is very hard to ground any directly-constant and uniforme judgement upon him. Behold

Pompey, who freely pardoned all the Cittie of the *Mamertines* (against which he was grievously enraged) for the love of the magnanimitie, and consideration of the exceeding vertue of *Zeno*, one of their fellow-citizens, who tooke the publike fault wholly upon himselfe, and desired no other favour, but alone to beare the punishment thereof; whereas *Sillaes* hoste having used the like vertue in the Cittie of *Perusa*, obtained nothing, neither for himself, nor for others. And directly against my first example, the hardiest amongst men, and so gracious to the vanquished, *Alexander* the great, after many strange difficulties, forcing the Cittie of *Gaza*, encountred by chance with *Betis*, that commanded therein, of whose valour (during the siege) he had felt wonderfull and strange exploits, being then alone, forsaken of all his followers, his armes all-broken, all-besmeared with bloud and wounds, fighting amongst a number of Macedonians, who pell-mell laid still upon him; provoked by so deare a victorie (for among other mishaps he had newly received two hurts in his body) said this unto him; *Betis, thou shalt not die as thou wouldest: for make account thou must indure all the torments may possibly bee devised or inflicted upon a caitife wretch, as thou arte.* But he, for all his enemies threats, without speaking one word, returned only an assured, sterne, and disdainfull countenance upon him; which silent obstinacie *Alexander* noting, said thus unto himselfe: *What? would hee not bend his knee? could he not utter one suppliant voyce? I will assuredly vanquish his silence, and if I can not wrest a word from him, I will at least make him to sob or groane.* And converting his anger into rage, commanded his heeles to bee through-pierced, and so all alive with a cord through them, to be torne, mangled, and dismembered at a carts-taile. May it be, the force of his courage, was so naturall and peculiar unto him, that because he would no-whit admire him, he respected him the lesse? or deemed he it so proper unto himselfe, that in his height, he could not without the spigot of envious passion, endure to see it in an other? or was the naturall violence of his rage incapable of any opposition? Surely, had it received any restraint, it may be supposed, that in the ransacking and desolation of the cittie of *Thebes*, it should have felt the same; in seeing so many Worthies lost, and valiant men put to the sword, as having no meanes of publike defence; for above six thousand were slaine and massacred, of which not one was seene, either to run away, or beg for grace. But on the contrary, some here and there seeking to affront, and endeavouring to check their victorious enemies, urging and provoking them to force them die an honourable death. Not one was seene to yeeld, and that to his last gaspe did not attempt to revenge himselfe, and with all weapons of dispaire, with the death of some enemie, comfort and sweeten his owne miserie. Yet could not the affliction of their vertue find any ruth or pitie, nor might one day suffice to glut or asswage his revengefull wrath. This butcherous slaughter continued unto the last drop of any remaining bloud; where none were spared but the unarmed and naked, the aged and unpotent, the women and children; that so from amongst them, they might get thirtie thousand slaves.