

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 16

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A tricke of certaine Ambassadors

IN ALL MY TRAVELLS I did ever observe this custome, that is, alwayes to learne something by the communication of others (which is one of the best schooles that may be) to reduce those I confer withall, to speake of that wherein they are most conversant and skilfull.

*Basti al nocchiero ragionar de'venti,
Al bifolco de'tori, & le sue piaghe
Conti il guerrier, conti il pastor gl'armenti.*

*Sailers of windes, plow-men of beastes take keepe,
Let Souldiers count their wounds, shepheards their sheepe.*

For commonly we see the contrary, that many chuse rather to discourse of any other trade than their own; supposing it to be so much new reputation gotten: witness the quip *Archidamus* gave *Periander*, saying that he forsooke the credite of a good Phisitian, to become a paltrie Poet. Note but how *Cesar* displayeth his invention at large, when hee would have us conceive his inventions how to builde bridges, and devises, how to frame other war-like engines; and in respect of that how close and succinct he writes, when he speaketh of the offices belonging to his profession, of his valour, and of the conduct of his warrefare. His exploits prove him a most excellent Captaine, but he would be knowne for a skilfull Ingenier, a qualitie somewhat strange in him. *Dionisius* the elder was a very great chieftaine and Leader in warre, as a thing best fitting his fortune: but he greatly labored, by meanes of Poetrie, to assume high commendation unto himselfe, howbeit he had but little skill in it. A certaine Lawyer was not long since brought to see a studie, stored with all manner of bookes, both of his owne, and of all other faculties, wherein he found no occasion to entertaine himselfe withall, but like a fond cunning clarke earnestly busied himselfe to glosse and censure a fence or barre, placed over the screw of the studie, which a hundred Captaines and Souldiers see every day, without observing, or taking offence at them

Optat ephippia bos piger, optat arare caballus.

*The Oxe would trappings weare,
The Horse, ploughs-yoake would beare*

By this course you never come to perfection, or bring any thing to good passe. Thus must a man indevor to induce the Architect, the Painter, the Shoemaker to speake of their owne trade, and so of the rest, everie man in his vocation. And to this purpose am I wont, in reading of histories (which is the subject of most men) to consider who are the writers: If they be such as professe nothing but bare learning, the chiefe thing I learne in them, is their stile, and language: if Phisitions: I believe them in whatsoever they shall report concerning the temperatenesse of the aire, the health and complexion of Princes, or of hurts and infirmities: If Lawiers, we should observe the controversies of rights, titles, and pretenses of lawes and customes, the establishments of policies, and such like things: If Divines, we may note the affaires of the Church, the Ecclesiasticall censures, dispensations, cases of conscience, and marriages: If Courtiers, maners, complements, cerimonies, and entertainements: If Warriors, what belongs unto their charge, but chiefly the managing and conduct of the achievements or exploits wherein they have bin themselves in person: If Ambassadors, the negotiations, intelligences, practises, pollicies, and maner how to direct, complot, and conduct them. And therefore, what in an other Writer I should peradventure have cursorie passed over, I have with some advisednesse considered and marked the same in the history of the Lord of *Langey*, a man most expert, and intelligent in such matters: which is, that after he had exactly set downe and declared those glorious, and farre-fetcht remonstrances of the Emperour *Charles* the fifth made in the consistorie of *Rome*, in the presence of the Bishoppe of *Macon*, and the Lord of *Velly*, our Ambassadors; wherein he entermixed manie bitter and outragious words against us; and amongst others, that if his Captaines and Souldiers were not of much more faithfulness, and sufficiencie in the arte of warre, then our Kings, he would forthwith tie a roape about his necke, and goe aske him mercie: whereof hee seemed to believe something: for afterward whilest hee lived, he chanced twice or thrice to utter the verie same wordes. Moreover, that he had challenged the king to fight with him, man to man in his shirt, with Rapier and Dagger in a boate. The saide Lord of *Langey*, following his story, addeth that the saide Ambassadors making a dispatch of what had passed unto the King, dissembled the chieftest part unto him, yea and concealed the two precedent articles from him. Now me thought it very strange, that it should lie in the power of an Ambassadour to dispence with any point, concerning the advertisements he should give unto his Maister, namely of such consequence, comming from such a person, and spoken in so great an assembly, whereas me seemed it should have beene the office of a trustie servant, truely and exactly to set downe things as they were, and in what manner they had succeeded: to the end the libertie of disposing, judging and chusing, might wholly lie in the maister. For, to alter and conceale the truth from him, for feare he should conster and take it otherwise than he ought, and lest that might provoke him to some bad resolution; and in the meane while to suffer him to be ignorant of his owne affaires, me thought should rather have appertained to him, that giveth the law, then to him that receiveth the same; to the Maister or overseer of the schoole, and not to him who should thinke himselfe inferior, as well in authoritie, as in wisdom and good counsell. Howsoever it were, I would be loath to be so used in mine owne small and particular busines,

we doe so willingly upon every slight occasion and pretence neglect and forgoe commaundement, and are so farre from obeying, that we rather usurpe a kinde of maisterie, and free power: every man doth so naturally aspire unto libertie and authoritie, that no profite ought to be so deare unto a superiour, proceeding from those that serve him, as their simple and naturall obedience. Whosoever obeyeth by discretion, and not by subjection, corrupteth and abuseth the office of commanding. And *P. Crassus* hee whome the Romans deemed five times happy, when he was Consull in *Asia*, having sent a Græcian Inginer, to bring the greatest of two shippe-masts before him, which hee had seene in *Athens*, therewith to frame an engine of batterie: This man under colour of his skil, presumed to do otherwise than he was bidden, and brought the lesser of the two masts which according to his artes reason he deemed the fittest. *Crassus* having patiently heard his reasons and allegations, caused him to be wel whipped; preferring the interest of true discipline, before that of the worke. On the other side a man might also consider, that this so strict obedience, belongs but to precise and prefixed commaundements. Ambassadors have a more scopefull and free charge, which in manie points dependeth chiefly of their disposition. They do not meerey execute, but frame and direct by their owne advise and counsel, the will of their Maister. I have in my dayes seene some persons of commaundement, checked and found fault withall, because they had rather obeyed the literall sense, and bare wordes of the Kings letters, than the occasions of the affaires they had in hand. Men of understanding and experience do yet at this day condemne the custome of the Kings of *Persia*, which was to mince the instructions given to their Agents, and Lieutenants so small, that in the least accident they might have recourse to their directions and ordinances: This delay, in so farre-reaching a scope of domination, having often brought great prejudice, and notable damage unto their affaires. And *Crassus* writing unto a man of that profession, and advertising him of the use whereto he purposed the foresaide mast; seemeth he not to enter into conference with him concerning his determination, and wish him to enterpose his censure or advise of it?