

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE  
ESSAYS

**Book 1 · Chapter 47**

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## Of the uncertaintie of our judgement

IT IS EVEN as, that verse saith,

*Ἐπέων δὲ πολὺς νόμος ἐνθα καὶ ἐνθα,*

*Of words on either side,  
A large deale they divide.*

There is law sufficient to speake every where, both *pro* and *contra*; As for example:

*Uinse Hannibal, & non seppe usar' poi  
Ben la victoriosa sua ventura.*

*Hanniball conquer'd, but he knew not after  
To use well his victorious good fortune.*

He that shall take this part, and with our men go about, to make that oversight prevaile, that we did not lately pursue our fortune at *Montcontour*: Or he that shall accuse the King of *Spaine*, who could not use the advantage he had against-us at *Saint Quintin*, may say this fault to have proceeded from a minde drunken with his good fortune, and from a courage ful-gorged with the beginning of good lucke; looseth the taste how to encrease-it, being already hindred from digesting what he hath conceived of-it: He hath his hands ful, and cannot take holde of any more: Unworthie that ever fortune should cast so great a good into his lappe: For, what profit hath he of-it, if notwithstanding, he give his enemy leasure and meanes to recover himselfe? What hope may one have, that he will once more adventure to charge these re-enforced and re-united forces, and new armed with despite and vengeance, that durst-not, or knew-not how to pursue them being dismayed and put to rowt?

*Dum fortuna calet, dum conficit omnia terror.*

*While fortune is at height in heate,  
And terror worketh all by great.*

But to conclude, what can he expect better, then what he hath lately lost? It is not, as at Fence, where the number of venies given, gets the victory: So long as the enemy is on foote, a man is newly to begin. It is no victory, except it end the warre. In that conflict where *Cæsar* had the worse, neer the Cittie of *Oricum*, hee reprochfully said unto *Pompeis* Souldiers, *that he had utterly been overthrowne, had their Captaine knowne how to conquer: and paide him home after another fashion when it came to his turne.* But why may not a man also hold the contrary? That it is the effect of an insatiate and rash-headlong minde, not to know how to limite or periode his covetousnesse: That it is an abusing of Gods favours, to goe about to make them loose the measure he hath prescribed them, and that a-new to cast himselfe into danger after the victory, is once more to remit the same unto the mercy of fortune: That one of the chiefest policies in military profession, is, not to drive his enemy unto dispaire. *Silla* and *Marius* in the sociall warre, having discomfited the Marsians, seeing one squadron of them yet on foote, which through dispaire, like furious beasts were desperately comming upon them, could not be induced to stay or make head against them. If the fervor of *Monsieur de Foix* had not drawne-him over-rashly and moodily to pursue the straglers of the victory at *Ravenna*, hee had not blemished the same with his untimely death; yet did the fresh-bleeding memory of his example serve to preserve the Lord of *Anguien* from the like inconvenience, at *Serisoles*. It is dangerous to assaile a man, whom you have bereaved of all other meanes to escape or shift for himselfe, but by his weapons: for, necessitie is a violent schoole-mistris, and which teacheth strange lessons: *grauissimi sunt morsus irritatæ necessitatis. No biting so grievous, as that of necessitie provoked and enraged.*

*Uincuur haud gratis ingulo qui prouocat hostem.*

*For nought you over-come him not,  
Who bids his foe come cut his throate.*

And that is the reason, why *Pharax* empeached the King of *Lacedemon*, who came from gaining of a victory against the *Mantineans*, from going to charge a thousand *Argians*, that were escaped whole from the discomfiture; but rather to let them passe with al libertie, lest he should come to make trial of provoked and despited virtue, through and by ill fortune. *Clodomire* king of *Aquitaine*, after his victory, pursuing *Gondemar* king of *Burgundie*, vanquished and running away, forced him to make a stand, and make head againe, but his unadvised wilfulnesse deprived him of the fruite of the victory, for he dyed in the action. Likewise hee that should chuse, whether it were best to keepe his souldiers richly and sumptuously armed, or only for necessity, should seeme to yeeld in favour of the first, whereof was *Sertorius*, *Philopæmen*, *Brutus*, *Cæsar*, and others, urging that it is ever a spurre to honor and glory, for a souldier to see himselfe gorgeously attired, and richly armed, and an occasion to yeeld himselfe more obstinate to sight, having the care to save his armes, as his goods and inheritance. A reason (saith *Xenophon*) why the *Asiatikes* carried with them, when they went to warres their wives and Concubines, with all their jewels and

chiefest wealth. And might also encline to the other side, which is, that a man should rather remove from his souldier, all care to preserve himselfe, than to encrease-it unto him: for, by that meanes he shall doubly feare to hazard or engage himselfe, seeing these rich spoiles do rather encrease an earnest desire of victory in the enemy: and it hath bin observed, that the said respect hath sometimes wonderfully encouraged the Romans against the Samnites. *Antiochus* shewing the Army, he prepared against them, gorgeously accoutred with all pompe and statelinesse, unto *Hanniball*, and demanding of him, whether the Romanes would be contented with-it: yea verily, answered the other, they will be very well pleased with-it: They must needs be so, were they never so covetous. *Licurgus* forbid his Souldiers, not onely all maner of sumptuousnesse, in their equipage, but also to uncase or strippe their enemies, when they overcame-them, willing, as he said, that frugalitie and poverty should shine with the rest of the battell. Both at sieges, and els-where, where occasion brings-us neere the enemy, we freely give our souldiers liberty, to brave, to disdain, and injury him with all maner of reproaches: And not without apparance of reason; for, it is no small matter, to take from them all hope of grace and composition, in presenting unto them, that there is no way left to expect-it, from-him, whom they have so egregiously outraged, and that there is no remedy left but from victorie. Yet had *Vitellius* but bad successe in that; for, having to deale with *Otho*, weaker in his Souldiers valour, and of-long disaccustomed from warre, and effeminated through the delights and pleasures of the Citty, himselfe in the end set them so on fire with his reproachfull and injurious words, upbrayding them with their pussilanimitie and faint-hartednesse, and with the regret of their Ladies, banquettings and sensualities, which they had left at *Rome*, that he put them into hart againe, which no perswasions or other meanes could doe before; and himselfe drew an olde house upon his head, and made them voluntarily to runne away, that before could not be urged to give the on-set. And verily, when they are injuries that touch a man to the quicke, they shal easily urge him, who was very backward to fight for his Kings quarrell, to be very forward in his owne cause or interest. If a man but consider of what consequence the preservation, and importance, the safety of a generall is in an army, and how the enemies chiefest ayme, is at the fairest marke, which is the head, from which all other depend, it seemeth that that counsell cannot be doubted-of, which by sundry great Chieftaines wee have seene put in practise, which is, in the beginning of the fight, or in the fury of the battell, to disguise themselves. Notwithstanding the inconvenience a man may by this meanes incurre, is no lesse then that mischief, which a man seeketh to avoyd: For the Captaine being unseene and unknowne of his Souldiers, the courage they take by his example, and the hart they keepe by his presence, is therewithall empaired and diminished; and loosing the knowne ensignes, and accustomed markes of their Leader, they either deeme him dead, or despairing of any good successe, to be fledde. And touching experience, we sometimes see-it to favor the one, and sometimes the other partie. The accident of *Pirrhus* in the battell he had against the Consull *Levinus* in *Italie*, serveth us for both uses: For, by concealing himselfe under the armes of *Demogacles*, and arming him with his owne, indeed he saved his life, but was in great danger to fall into the other mischief, and loose the day. *Alexander*, *Cæsar*, *Lucullus*, loved (at what time they were to enter fight) to arme and attire themselves with the richest armes, and garish clothes they had, and

of particular bright-shining colours. *Agis*, *Agesilaus*, and that great *Gilippus*, contrary, would ever goe to warres meanly accoutred, and without any imperial ornament. Among other reproaches, that *Pompey* is charged withall in the battell of *Pharsalia*, this is one speciall, that he idly lingred with his army, expecting what his enimie would attempt; forasmuch as that (I will here borrow the very words of *Plutarke*, which are of more consequence then mine) weakeneth the violence, that running giveth the first blowes, and therewithall remooveth the charging of the Combattants one against another, which more, then any other thing is wont to fill them with fury and impetuositie, when with vehemence they come to enter-shocke one another, augmenting their courage by the cry and running; and in a maner alayeth and quaieth the heate of the Souldiers: Loe-here what he saith concerning this. But had *Cæsar* lost, who might not also have said, that contrariwise the strongest and firmest situation, is that, where a man keeps his hold-fast without hoping, and that who is settled in his march, closing, and against any time of need, sparing his strength in himselfe, hath a great advantage against him, that is in motion and disordered, and that running hath already consumed part of his breath? Moreover, that an army being a body composed of so many severall partes, it is impossible it should in such furie advance it selfe with so just a march, and proportioned a motion, and not breake and dis-ranke, or at least alter hir ordinance, and that the nimblest be not grappling before his fellowes may help-him. In that dreary battel of the two Persian brethren, *Clearchus* the Lacedemonian, who commaunded the Græcians that followed *Cirus* his faction, led them faire and gently without any haste-making to their charges; but when he came within fisty paces of his enemies, hee bad them with all speede to runne unto it; hoping by the shortnesse of the distance to manage their order, and direct their breath; in the meane time giving them the advantage of the impetuositie, both for their bodies, and for their shooting-armes. Others have ordered this doubt in their army after this maner: If your enemies headlong runne upon you, stay for them and bouge not: If they without stirring stay for you, runne with fury upon them.

In the passage which the Emperour *Charles* the fift made into *Provence*, our king *Francis* the first, stood a good while upon this choice; whether it were best, by way of prevention, to go and meete with him in *Italie*, or to stay his comming into *France*, and albeit he considered what an advantage it is, for one to preserve his house from the troubles and mischiefes that warre brings with-it, to the end that possessing hir whole strength, it may continually, in all times of need, store him with mony, and supply him with all other helpes, and considering how the necessitie of direfull warre, doth dayly enforce a Generall to make spoyle of goods, and waste the Country, which cannot well be done in our owne goods and country: and if the countriman doth not as patiently indure this ravage at his friends hands, as at his enemies, so as seditions may ensew amongst our owne factions, and troubles among our friends: That licence to robbe and spoile, which in his Country may not be tolerated, is a great furtherance in a Souldier, and makes him the more willing, to endure the miseries and toylings that folow warre: And what a hard matter it is to keepe the Souldier in office and hart, who hath no other hope of profite, but his bare pay, and is so neere his wife, his children, his friends, and his home: *That hee who layeth the cloth, is ever put to the greatest charges: That there is more*

*pleasure in assailing than in defending:* And that the apprehension of a battell lost in our owne home and entrailles, is so violent, that it may easily shake the whole frame, and distemper the whole body. Seeing there is no passion so contagious, as that of feare, nor so easily apprehended and taken a trust, or doth more furiously possesse all partes of man: And that the Citties or Townes, which have either heard the bustling noise of the Tempest, or seene the sparkles of this all-consuming fire at their gates, or have perhaps received their captaines wounded, their Cittizens pursued, and their souldiers spoiled, and all out of breath, if they bee not more then obstinately-constant, it is a thousand to one, if in that brunt of fury, they doe not headlong cast themselves into some desperate resolution: yet did he conclude and chose this resolve for the best. First to revoke his forces, he had beyond the Mountaines in *Italie*, and to stay his enemies approches. For, he might on the contrary part imagine, that being in his owne Country, and amidst good friends, hee had the better leasure to re-enforce his decayed forces, and more opportunitie, to strengthen Townes, to munitie Castles, to store Rivers with all necessaries they wanted, and to keep all passages at his devotion, which done, all the wayes should be open for him, and might by them have all maner of victuals, mony, and other habilements of warre brought-him, in safety, and without convoy: that he should have his subjects so much the more affectionate unto him, by how much nearer they should see the danger: That having so many Citties, Townes, Houlds, Castles, and Barres for his securitie, he might at all times, according to apportunitie and advantage, appoint and give law unto the fight: And if he were pleased to temporize, whilest he tooke his ease, kept his forces whole, and maintained himselfe in safety, he might see his enemy consume and waste himselfe, by the difficulties which dayly must necessarily assault, environ and combate-him, as he who should be engaged in an enemy-country and foe-land; Where he should have nothing, nor meete with any thing, eyther before, or behind him, or of any side; that did not offer him continuall warre: no way nor meanes to refresh, to ease or give his army elbow-roome, if any sicknesse or contagion should come amongst his men, nor shelter to lodge his hurt and maymed Souldiers: where neither monie, munition, nor victuals might come unto him, but at the swords point; where he should never have leasure to take any rest, or breath; where he should have no knowledge of places, passages, woods, foords, rivers, or countrie, that might defend him from ambuscados, or surprises: And if he should unfortunately chance to loose a battell, no hope to save, or meanes to re-unite the reliques of his forces. And there want not examples to strengthen both sides. *Scipio* found-it better for him to invade his enemies countrie of *Affrica*, then to defend his owne, and fight with him in *Italie*, where hee was, wherein he had good successe. But contrariwise, *Hanniball*, in the same warre wrought his owne overthrowe, by leaving the conquest of a forraine countrie, for to goe and defend his owne. The Athenians having left the enemy in their owne land, for to passe into *Sicilie*, had very ill successe, and were much contraried by fortune: whereas *Agathocles* King of *Siracusa* prospered and was favoured by her, what time he passed into *Affrica*, and left the warre on foote in his owne countrie. And we are accustomed to say with some shew of reason, that especially in matters of warre, the events depend (for the greatest part) on fortune; which seldome wil yeeld, or never subject herselfe unto our discourse or wisdom, as say these ensuing verses.

*Et malè consultis pretium est, prudentia fallax,  
Nec fortuna probat causas sequiturque merentes:  
Sed uaga per cunctos nullo discrimine fertur:  
Scilicet est aliud quod nos cogâtque regâtque  
Maius, & in proprias ducat mortalia leges.*

*T'is best for ill-advised, wisdom may faile,  
Fortune proves not the cause that should prevaile,  
But here and there without respect doth saile,  
A higher power forsooth us over-drawes,  
And mortall states guides with immortall lawes.*

But if it be well taken, it seemeth that our counsells and deliberations, doe as much depend of her; and that fortune doth also engage our discourses and consultations in her trouble and uncertaintie. *We reason rashly, and discourse at randon, saith Timeus in Plato: For, even as we, so have our discourses great participation with the temeritie of hazard.*