

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 48



Translation by John Florio (1603, Public domain) · Last updated on February 13, 2022

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FLORIO-1-48-20220213-204845

Of Steedes, called in French Destriers

BEHOLD, I am now become a Gramarian, I, who never learn't tongue but by way of roate, and that yet know knot what either Adjective, Conjunctive, or Ablative meaneth. As farre as I remember, I have sometimes heard-say, that the Romanes had certaine horses, which they called *Funales*, or *Dextrarios*, which on the right hand were led-by as spare horses, to take them fresh at any time of neede: And thence it commeth, that we call horses of service *Destriers*. And our ancient Romanes doe ordinarily say, to *Adexter*, in steede of, to accompany. They also called *Desultorios equos*, certaine horses that were so taught, that mainely-running with all the speede they had, joyning sides to one another, without either bridle or saddle, the Roman gentlemen armed at all assayes, in the middest of their running-race, would cast and recast themselves from one to an other horse. The Numidian men at armes, were wont to have a second spare-horse led by hand, that in the greatest furie of the battell, they might shift and change horse: *Quibus, desultorum in modum, binos trahentibus equos, inter acerrimam sæpe pugnam in recentem equum ex fesso armatis transultare, mos erat. Tanta uelocitas ipsis, tàmque docile equorum genus. Whose maner was, as if they had been vaulters, leading two horses with them in armour, to leape from their tired horse to the fresh-one, even in the hottest of the fight. So great agilitie was in themselves, and so apte to be taught was the race of their horses.* There are manie horses found, that are taught to helpe their maister, to runne upon any man shall offer to draw a naked sword upon them; furiously to leape upon any man, both with feete to strike, and with teeth to bite, that shall affront them; but that for the most parte they rather hurt their friends then their enemies. Considering also, that if they once be graped, you can not easily take them-off, and you must needes stand to the mercy of their combat. *Artibius*, Generall of the Persian armie had very ill lucke to be mounted upon a horse fashioned in this schoole, at what time he fought man to man against *Onesilus* King of *Salamina*; for, he was the cause of his death, by reason, the shield-bearer or squire of *Onesilus* cut him with a faulchon betweene the two shoulders, even as he was leaping upon his maister. And if that, which the Italians reporte be true, that in the battell of *Fornovo*, King *Charles* his horse with kicking, wincing, and flying, rid both his maister and himselfe from the enemies that encompast-him, to dismount or kill him, and without that, he had beene lost: He committed himselfe to a

great hazard, and scap't a narrow scowring. The Mammalukes boast, that they have the nimblest and readiest horses of any men at armes in the world. That both by nature they are instructed to discern, and by custome taught to distinguish their enemie, on whom they must leape and wince with feet, and bite with teeth, according to the voyce their maister speaketh, or rider giveth them. And are likewise taught to take up from the ground, lances, dartes, or any other weapons with their mouths, and as he commandeth to present them to their rider. It is said of *Cæsar*, and of *Pompey* the Great, that amongst their many other excellent qualities, they were also most cunning and perfect horsemen; and namely of *Cæsar*, that in his youth being mounted upon a horse, and without any bridle, he made him runne a full carriere, make a sodaine stop, and with his hands behinde his backe performe what ever can be expected of an excellent ready horse. And even as nature was pleased to make both him and *Alexander* two matchlesse miracles in militarie profession, so would you say, she hath also endeoured yea enforced herselfe to arme them extraordinarily; For, all men know, that *Alexanders* horse called *Bucephalus*, had a head shaped like unto that of a bull; that he suffered no man to get-on and sit-him, but his maister; that none could wealde and manage him but he; what honours were done him after his death, all know, for he had a Cittie erected in his name. *Cæsar* likewise had another, who had his fore-feet like unto a mans, with hoofes cloven in forme of fingers, who could never be handled, drest, or mounted but by *Cæsar*, who when he died, dedicated his image to the Goddess *Venus*. If I be once on horse-backe, I alight very unwillingly; for, it is the seate I like best, whether I be sound or sicke. Plato commendeth-it to be availefull for health: And *Plinie* affirmeth the same to be healthfull for the slomake, and for the joynts. And sithence we be falne into this subject, let-us alittle follow-it I pray you. We reade of a lawe in *Xenophon*, by which all men that either had or were able to keepe a horse, were expressely forbidden to travell and goe a foote. *Trogus* and *Justinus* reporte, that the Parthians were not onely accustomed to warre on horse-backe, but also to dispatch all their businesse, and negotiate their affaires both publike and private; as to bargaine, to buy, to sell, to parlie, to meete, to entertaine one another, and to converse and walke together; and that the chieftest difference betweene free men and servants amongst them, is, that the first ever ride, and the other goe alwayes on-foote. An institution first devised by King *Cyrus*. There are many examples in the Romane histories (and *Suetonius* doth more particularly note-it in *Cæsar*) of Captaines that commanded their horsemen to alight, whensoever, by occasion, they should be urged unto-it, thereby to remove all maner of hope from their Souldiers to save themselves by flight, and for the advantage they hoped-for in this maner of fight: *Quo haud dubiè superat Romanus. Wherein undantedly the Romanes is superiour to all saith Titus Livius*: yet shall we see, that the first provision, and chiefe meanes they used to bridle rebellion amongst their new conquered nations, was to deprive them of all armes and horses. Therefore finde we so often in *Cæsar*; *Arma proferrî, iumenta produci, obsides dari iubet*: He commands all their armour should be brought forth, all their cattell should be driven out, and hostages should be delivered. The great Turke doth not permit at this day any Christian or Jew, to have or keepe any horse for himselfe, throughout all his large Empire. Our ancestors, and especially at what time we had warres with the English, in all solemne combats or set battells, would (for the most part) alight from their horses, and fight on foote, because they would not adventure to

hazard so precious a thing as their honour and life, but on the trust of their owne proper strength, and vigour of their undanted courage, and confidence of their limbes. Let *Chrisanthes* in *Xenophon* say what hee pleaseth: whosoever fighteth on horse-backe, engageth his valour, and hazardeth his fortune on that of his horse; his hurtes, his stumbling, his death, drawes your life and fortune into consequence, if he chance to startle or bee afraide, then are you induced to doubt or feare: if to leape forward, then to become rash and fond-hardie: if he want a good mouth or a timely spurre, your honour is bound to answer for-it. And therefore doe not I finde-it strange, that those combats were more firme and furious, then those which now we see foughten on horse-backe.

cedebant pariter, paritèrque ruebant
Victores, uictique, neque his fuga nota, neque illis.

The victors and the vanquisht both together
Gave backe, came on: the flight was knowne in neither.

Their battels are seene much better compact and contrived: They are now but bickerings and routes: *Primus clamor atque impetus rem decernit. The first shoute and shocke makes an end of the matter.* And the thing wee call to help us, and keepe-us company in so great and hazardous an adventure, ought as much as possible may be, lie still in our disposition and absolute power. As I would counsell a gentleman to chuse the shortest weapons, and such as he may best assure himselfe-of. It is most apparant, that a man may better assure himselfe of a sworde he holdeth in his hand, then of a bullet shot out of a pistoll, to which belong so many severall partes, as powder, stone, locke, snap-hanse, barrell, stocke, scowring-piece, and many others, whereof if the least faile, or chance to breake, and be distempered, it is able to overthrow, to hazard, or miscarry your fortune. Seldome doth that blow come or light on the marke it is aymed-at, which the ayre doth carry.

Et quò ferre uelint permittere uulnera a uentis,
Ensis habet uires, & gens quæcunque uirorum est,
Bella gerit gladiis.

Giving windes leave to give wounds as they list,
But swords have strength, and right men never mist
With sword t'assault, and with sword to resist.

But concerning that weapon, I shall more amplie speake of-it, where I will make a comparison betweene ancient and moderne armes: And except the astonishment and frightening of the eare, which nowadaies is growne so familiar amongst men, that none dooth greatly feare-it; I thinke it to be a weapon of small effect, and hope to see the use of-it abolished. That wherewith the Italians were wont to throw, with fire in-it, was more frightfull and terrour-moving. They were accustomed to name a kinde of javelin, *Phalarica*, armed at one end with an yron-pike of three foote long, that it might pierce an armed man-through, which lying in the field they used to lanch or hurle with the hand, and sometimes to shoote out of certaine engines, for to defend besieged places: the staffe whereof being wound about with hemp or flax, all pitched and oiled over, flying in the ayre, would soone be set-a-fire, and lighting upon any body

or target, deprived the partie hit therewith, of all use of weapons or limbes. Me thinkes neverthelesse, that comming to grapple, it might aswell hinder the assailant, as trouble the assailed, and that the ground strewed with such burning truncheons, might in a pell-mell-confusion produce a common incommoditie.

*magnum stridens contorta Phalarica uenit
Fulminis acta modo.*

*With monstrous buzzing came a fire-dart thirled.
As if a thunder-bolt had there beene whirled.*

They had also other meanes, to the use of which, custome enured them, and that by reason of inexperience seeme incredible-to-us; wherewith they supplied the defect of our powder and bullets. They with such fury darted their Piles, and with such force hurled their javelins, that they often pierced two targets and two armed men through, as it were with a spit. They hit as sure and as farre with their slings, as with any other shot: *Saxis globosis funda, mare apertum incessentes: coronas modici circuli magno ex intervallo loci assueti traicere: non capita modò hostium vulnerabant, sed quem locum destinassent. While they were boyes, with round stones in a sling, making ducks and drakes upon the sea, they accustomed to cast through round marks of small compasse a great distance off: whereby they, not onely hit and hurt the heads of their enemies, but would strike any place they aymed-at.* Their battering or murthuring pieces represented, as well the effect, as the clattering and thundering noise of ours: *adictus mœnium cum terribili sonitu editos, pauor & trepidatio cœpit. At the batterie of the walles made with a terrible noise, feare and trembling beganne to attach them within.* The Gaules our ancient forefathers in Asia, hated mortally such treacherous and flying weapons, as they that were taught to fight hand to hand, and with more courage. *Non tam petentibus plagis mouentur, ubi latior quàm altior plaga est, etiam gloriosius se pugnare putant; iidem quum aculeus sagittæ aut glandis abditæ intrusus tenui uulnere in speciem urit: tum in rabiem & pudorem tam paruæ perimentis pestis uersi, prosternunt corpora humi. They are not so much moved with wide gashes, where the wound is more broad then it is deepe, there they thinke, that they fight with more bravery; but when the sting of an arrow or a bullet, with a small wound to shew, galles them inwardly, then falling into rage and shame that so slight a hurt should kill them, they cast their bodies on the ground.*

A modell or picture very neere unto an *harquebusada*. The ten thousand Græcians in their long-lingring, and farre-famous retreat, encountered with a certaine nation, that exceedingly much endomaged them with stiffe-strong and great bowes, and so long arrowes, that taking them-up, they might throw them after the maner of a dart, and with them pierce a target and an armed man through and through. The engines which *Dionisius* invented in *Siracusa*, to shoote and cast mightie big arrowes, or rather timber-pieces, and huge-great stones, so farre and with such force, did greatly represent, and come very neere our moderne inventions. Wee may not also forget, the pleasant seate, which one named maister *Peter Pol*, doctor in divinitie used to sit upon his mule, who as *Monstrelet* reporteth, was wont to ride up and downe the streetes of *Paris*, ever sitting sideling, as women use. He also saith in another place, that the Gascoines had certaine horses so fiece and terrible, taught to turne and stop sodainely in running, whereat the French, the Piccards,

the Flemmings, and Brabantins (as they who were never accustomed to see the like) were greatly amazed, and thought it a wonder: I use his very words. *Cæsar* speaking of those of *Swethen*, saith, In any skirmish or fight on horse-backe, they often alight to combate on foote, having so trained and taught their horses, that so long as the fight lasteth, they never bouge from their maisters side, that if neede require, they may sodainely mount-up againe: and according to their naturall custome, there is nothing accounted more base or vile, then to use saddles or bardels, and they greatly contemne and scorne such as use them: So that a few of them feare not to encounter with a troupe farre exceeding them in number. That which I have other times wondered-at, to see a horse fashioned and taught, that a man having but a wand in his hand, and his bridle loose-hanging over his eares, might at his pleasure manage, and make him turne, stop, runne, carriere, trot gallop, and what ever else may be expected of an excellent ready horse, was common amongst the Massilians, who never used either bridle or saddle.

*Et gens quæ nudo residens Massilia dorso,
Ora leui flectit frænorum nescia, uirga.*

*Massilian horsemen on bare horse-backe-sit
Manage with light rod, without reynes or bit.*

Et Numidæ infræni cingunt.

*Numidians who their horses ride
Without bit, round about us bide.*

Equi sine frænis, deformis ipse cursus, rigida ceruice & extento capite currentium:
*The horses being without bridles, their course is ill favoured, they running with a stiffe necke, and out-stretch't head (like a roasted Pigg:) Alphonsus King of Spaine, that first established the order of Knights, called the order of the Bend or skarfe, amongst other rules devised this one, that none of them, upon paine to forfait a marke of silver, for every time offending, should ever ride either mule or mulet; as I lately read in Guevaras epistles, of which whosoever called them his golden epistles, gave a judgement farre different from mine. The Courtier saith, That before his time, it was counted a great shame in a gentleman to be seene riding upon a mule: Whereas the Abyssines are of a contrary opinion, who accordingly as they are advanced to places of honour, or dignitie, about their Prince, called Prester-John, so doe they more and more affect in signe of pompe and state, to ride upon large-great mules. Xenophon reporteth, that the Assirians were ever wont to keepe their horses fast-tied in fetters or gyves, and ever in the stable, they were so wilde and furious. And for that they required so much time to unshackle, and to harnish them, (least protracting of so long time, might, if they should chance at unawares, and being unreadie, to be surprised by their enemies, endamage them) they never tooke up their quarter in any place, except it were wel dyked and intrenched. His *Cirus*, whom he maketh so cunning in horsemanship, did alwayes keepe his horses at a certaine stint, and would never suffer them to have any meate before they had deserved the same by the sweate of some exercise. If the Scythians in time of warre chanced to be brought to any necessitie of victualls, the readiest remedie*

they had, was to let their horses blood, and therewithall quenched their thirst, and nourished themselves.

Venit & epoto Sarmata pastus equo

*The Scithian also came, who strangely feedes
On drinking out his horse (or that he bleedies)*

Those of *Crotta* being hardly besieged by *Metellus*, were reduced to so hard a pinch, and strait necessitie of all maner of other beverage, that they were forced to drinke the stale or urine of their horses. To verifie how much better cheape the Turkes doe both levie, conduct, and maintaine their armies, then we Christans doe; They reporte, that besides their souldiers never drinke any thing but water, and feede on nothing but rice, and drie-salt flesh, which they reduce into a kinde of powder (whereof every private man doth commonly cary so much about him, as will serve for a moneths provision) and for a shift, will live a long time with the blood of their horses; Wherein they use to put a certain quantitie of salt, as the Tartares and Moskovites doe. These new discovered people of the Indies, when the Spaniardes came first amongst them, esteemed that aswell men as horses, were eyther gods, or creatures farre beyond, and excelling their nature in nobilitie. Some of which, after they were vanquished by them, comming to sue for peace and beg pardon at their handes, to whome they brought presents of gold, and such viands as their country yeilded; omitted not to bring the same, and as much unto their horses, and with as solemne Orations as they had made unto men, taking their neighings, as a language of truce and composition. In the hether Indies, the chiefe and royallest honour was antiently wont to be, to ride upon an Elephant; the second to goe in Coaches drawne with foure horses; the third, to ride uppon a Camell; the last and basest, was to be carried or drawne by one horse alone. Some of our moderne Writers report, to have seene some Countries in that climate, where the people ride oxen, with packe-saddles, stirrops, and bridles, by which they were carried very easily. *Quintus Fabius Maximus Rutilianus*, warring against the Samnites, and seeing that his horsemen, in three or foure charges they gave, had missed to breake and runne through his enemies battalion, at last resolved thus, that they should all unbridle their horses, and with maine force of sharpe spures pricke and broach them; which done, the horses as enraged, tooke such a running, thorow, and athwart the enemies campe, armes and men, that nought was able to resist them; and with such a furie, that by opening, shouldring, and overthrowing, the battallion, they made way for his Infanterie, which there committed a most bloody slaughter, and obtained a notable victorie. The like was commaunded and effected by *Quintus Fulvius Flaccus* against the Celtiberians: *Id cum maiore vi equorum facietis, si effrænatos in hostes equos immittitis; quod sæpe Romanos equites cum laude fecisse memoriæ proditum est. Detractisque frænis bis ultrò curòque cum magna strage hostium, infractis omnibus hastis, transcurrerunt. That shall you doe with more violence of horse, if you force your horse unbridled on the enemy; which it is recorded, the Roman horsemen have often perfourmed with great prooffe and praise. So pulling of the bridles, they twice ranne through forward, and backe againe with great slaughter of the enemy, all their launces broken.*

The duke of *Moscovie* did anciently owe this reverence unto the Tartares; at what time soever they sent any Ambassadors to him, that hee must goe meete them on foote, and present them with a goblet full of mares-milke (a drinke counted very delicious amongst them) which whilst they were drinking, if any drop chaunced to be spilt upon their horses haire, he was, by duty, bound to lick the same up with his tongue. The army which the Emperor *Baiazeth* had sent into *Russia*, was overwhelmed by so horrible a tempest of snow, that to find some shelter and to save themselves from the extremitie of the cold, many advised to kil and unpanch their horses, and enter into their panches, to enjoy and finde some ease by that vitall heate. *Baiazeth* after that bloody and tragicall conflict wherein he was overthrowne by the Scithian *Tamburlane*, in seeking to escape, had no doubt saved himselfe, by the swiftnesse of an Arabian mare, on which he was mounted that day, if unluckily he had not beene forced to let her drinke her fill in passing over a river, which made her so faint and foundred, that he was easily overtaken and apprehended by those that pursued him. The common saying is, that to let a horse stale after a full carriere, doth take downe his speede, but I would never have thought that drinking had done it, but rather strengthened and heartned him.

Cræssus passing amongst the citty of *Sardis*, found certaine thickets, wherein were great store of snakes and serpents, on which his horses fed very hungerly, which thing as *Herodotus* saith, was an ill-boding-prodigie unto his affaires. We call him an entire horse, that hath his full mane, and whole eares, and which in shew, or at a muster, doth not exceed others. The Lacedemonians having defeated the Athenians in *Sicilie*, returning in great pompe and glory from the victorie, into the City of *Siracusa*, among other Bravadoes of theirs, caused such horses as they had taken from their enemies to be shorne all over, and so led them in triumph. *Alexander* fought with a nation called *Dahas*, where they went to warre two and two, all armed upon one horse, but when they came to combate, one must alight, and so successively one fought on foote, and the other on horse backe, each in his turne one after another. I am perswaded that in respect of sufficiencie, of comliness, and of grace on horseback, no Nation goeth beyond us. A good horse-man, (speaking according to our phrase) seemeth rather to respect an undismayed courage, then an affected cleane seate. The man most skillfull, best and surest-sitting, comeliest-graced, and nimblest-handed, to sit, to ride, and mannage a horse conningly, that ever I knew, and that best pleased my humor, was Monsieur de *Carnevalet*, who was Maister of the horse unto our King *Henry* the second. I have seene a man take his full carriere, standing bolt-up-right on both his feet in the saddle, leap downe to the ground from-it, and turning backe take-off the saddle, and presently set-it on againe as fast as ever it was, and then leap into-it againe, and all this did he whilst his horse was running as fast as might be with his bridle on his necke. I have also seene him ride over a bonet or cap, and being gone a good distance from it, with his bow shooting backward, to sticke many arrows in the same; then sitting still in the saddle to take up any thing from the ground: To set one foote to the ground, and keepe the other in the stirrop, and continually running doe a thousand such tumbling and apish tricks, wherewith he got his living. There have in my time two men beene seene in *Constantinople*, both at once upon one horse, and who in his speediest running, would by turns, first one, and then another, leap downe to the ground, and then into the saddle againe, the one still taking

the others place. And another, who only with teeth, and without the helpe of any hand, would bridle, curry, rubbe, dresse, saddle, guirt, and harnish his horse. Another, that betweene two horses, and both saddled, standing up-right, with one foote in the one, and the second in the other, did beare another man on his armes, standing up-right, runne a full speedy course, and the uppermost to shoote and hitte any marke with his arrows. Divers have bin seene, who standing on their heads, and with their legs out-stretched-aloft, having many sharp-pointed cimitaries fastned round about the saddle, to gallop a full speed. While I was a yoong lad, I saw the Prince of *Sulmona* at *Naples*, manage a yoong, a rough, and fierce horse, and shew all maner of hors-man-ship; To holde testons or realles under his knees, and toes, so fast, as if they had beene nayled there, and all to shew his sure, steedy, and unmovable sitting.