

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book I · Chapter 7

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That our Intention judgeth our Actions

THE common saying is, that *Death acquits us of all our bonds*. I know some that have taken it in another sence. *Henry the seventh, King of England*, made a composition with *Philip*, son to *Maximilian* the Emperour or (to give him a more honorable title) father to the Emperour *Charles* the fifth, that the said *Philip* should (deliver into his hands the Duke of *Suffolke*, his mortall enemie, who was fled out of *England*, and saved himself in the Low countries, always provided the king should attempt nothing against the Dukes life; which promise notwithstanding, being neere his end, he expresly by will and testament commanded his succeeding-sonne, that immediately after his decease, he should cause him to be put to death.

In the late tragedie, which the Duke of *Alva* presented us withall at *Brussels*, on the Earles of *Horne* and *Egmond* were many remarkable things and worthy to be noted: and amongst others, that the said Count *Egmond* upon whose faithfull word and assurance, the Earle of *Horne* was come in and yielded himselfe to the Duke of *Alva*, required very instantly to be first put to death, to the end his death might acquit and free him of the word and bond, which he ought and was engaged for, to the said Earle of *Horne*. It seemeth that death hath no whit discharged the former of his word given, and that the second, without dying was quit of it. We cannot be tied beyond our strength and meanes. The reason is, because the effects and executions are not any way in our power, and except our will, nothing is truly in our power: on it onely are all the rules of man's dutie grounded and established by necessitie. And therefore Count *Egmond*, deeming his minde and will indebted to his promise, howbeit the power to effect it, lay not in his hands; was no doubt cleerely absolved of his debt and dutie, although he had survived the Count *Horne*. But the King of *England* failing of his word by his intention, cannot be excused, though hee delaide the execution of his disloyaltie untill after his death. No more than *Herodotus* his Mason who during his natural life, having faithfully kept the secret of his Master the King of *Ægypt*s treasure, when he died discovered the same unto his children.

I have in my dayes seene many convicted by their owne conscience, for detaining other men's goods, yet by their last will and testament to dispose themselves, after their decease to make satisfaction. This is

nothing to the purpose. Neither to take time for a matter so urgent, nor with so small interest or shew of feeling, to goe about to establish an injurie. They are indebted somewhat more. And by how much more they pay incommodiously and chargably, so much the more just and meritorious is their satisfaction.

Penitence ought to charge, yet doe they worse, who reserve the revealing of some heinous conceit or affection towards their neighbour, to their last will and affection, having whilest they lived ever kept it secret. And seeme to have little regard of their owne honour, by provoking the partie offended against their owne memory, and lesse of their conscience, since they could never for the respect of death cancell their ill-grudging affection, and in extending life beyond theirs. Oh wicked and ungodly judges, which referre the judgement of a cause to such time as they have no more knowledge of causes!

I will as neere as I can prevent, that my death reveale or utter any thing, my life hath not first publikely spoken.