

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 7

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That our intention judgeth our actions

THE COMMON SAYING is, that *Death acquits us of all our bondes*. I knowe some that have taken it in another sence. *Henry* the seaventh, king of *England*, made a composition with *Philip*, sonne to *Maximilian* the Emperor, or to give him a more honorable title, father to the Emperor *Charles* the fifth, that the said *Philip* should deliver into his handes, the Duke of *Suffolke*, his mortall enemie, who was fled out of *England*, and saved himselfe in the Low countries, alwaies provided the king should attempt nothing against the Dukes life; which promise notwithstanding, beeing neere his end, he expresselie by will and testament commaunded his succeeding-sonne, that immediately after his decease, hee 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 remarkeable things, and worthie to bee noted: and amongst others, that the saide Count *Egmond* upon whose faithfull word and assurance, the Earle of *Horne* was come in, and yeilded himselfe to the Duke of *Alva*, required verie instantlie to be first put to death, to the end his death might acquit and free him of the worde and bond, which he ought and was engaged for, to the saide Earle of *Horne*. It seemeth that death hath no whit discharged the former of his worde 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 waie in our power, and except our will, nothing is truely in our power: on it onely are all the rules of mans 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 clearly 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 he delaide the execution of his disloyaltie untill after his death. No more than *Herodotus* his Mason who during his naturall life, having faithfully kept the secret of his Maister the King of *Ægypt*s treasure when he died, discovered the same unto his children. I have in my daies seen many convicted by their owne conscience, for detaining other mens 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 chargeably, so much the more just and meritorious is their satisfaction. Penitence ought to charge, yet do they worse, who reserve the revealing of some hainous conceit or affection towards their neighbour, to their last will and affection, having whilst they lived ever kept it secret. And seeme to have little regarde of their owne honor, by provoking the partie offended against their owne memory, and lesse of their conscience, since they coulde 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 anie thing, my life hath not first publikelie spoken.