

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 24



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Of the Romane greatnesse

I WILL but speake a word of this infinite argument, and slightly glance at it, to shew the simplicitie of those, who compare the seely greatnesse of these times unto that. In the seaventh booke of *Ciceroes* familiar Epistles (and let Gramarians remove this title of Familiar, if they please, for to say truth it makes but little to the purpose: and they who in lieu of familiar, have placed *ad familiares*, may wrest some argument for themselves, from that which *Suetonius* saith in *Cæsars* life, that there was a volume of his Epistles *ad familiares*) there is one directed unto *Cæsar* then being in *Gaul*, in which *Cicero* repeats these very words, which were in the end of a former letter that *Cæsar* had written to him: *Touching Marcus Furius, whom thou hast commended unto me, I will make him King of Gaul, and if thou wilt have me preferre any other of thy friends, send them to me.* It was not new in a simple Romane cittizen (as *Cæsar* then was) to dispose of Kingdomes, for as well deprived he King *Deiotarus* of his, to give it to a gentleman of the Cittie of *Pergamo*, called *Mithridates*. And those who writ his life, mention many Kingdomes sold by him. And *Suetonius* reporteth, that he at one time wrested three millions and six hundred thousand crownes of gold from King *Ptolomeus*, which amounted very neere unto the price of his Kingdome.

Tot Galatæ, tot Pontus eat, tot lidia nummis.

*Forsomuch let Galatia go,
Forsomuch Lidia, Pontus so.*

Marcus Antonius said, *the greatnesse of the Romane people, was not so much discerned by what it tooke, as by what it gave.* Yet some ages before *Antonius*, was there one amongst others, of so wonderfull authoritie, as through all his history I know no marke, carrieth the name of his credite higher. *Antiochus* possessed all *Ægypt*, and was very neere to conquer *Cipres*, and others depending of that Empire. Uppon the progresse of his victories, *C. Popilius* came unto him in the behalfe of the Senate, and at first arrivall, refused to take him by the hand, before he had read the letters he brought him. The King having read them, saide, he would deliberate of them. *Popilius* with a wand encircled the place about, where he stood, and thus bespake him; *Give*

me an answer to carry backe unto the Senate, before thou goe out of this circle. Antiochus amazed at the rudenesse of so urging a commandement, after he had pawsed a while, replied thus, I will do what the Senate commandeth me. Then Popilius saluted him as a friend unto the Roman people. To have renounced so great a Monarchie, and forgon the course of so succesfull prosperitie, by the onely impression of three written lines. He had good reason, as afterward he did, by his Ambassadors to send the Senate word, that he had received their ordonances with the same respect, as if they had come from the immortall Gods. All the kingdomes Augustus subdued by right of warre, he restored to those who had lost them, or presented strangers with them: And concerning this purpose, Tacitus speaking of Cogidunas King of England, by a wonderfull tract makes us perceive this infinit greatnes and might. The Romanes (saith he) were from all antiquitie accustomed, to leave those Kings whom they had vanquished, in the possession of their kingdomes, under their authoritie: Ut haberent instrumenta seruitutis & reges. That they might have even Kings also for instruments of their bondage. It is very likely, that Soliman the great Turke, whom we have seene to use such a liberalitie, and give away the kingdome of Hungarie, and other dominions, did more respect this consideration, then that he was wont to alleage; which is, that he was over wearied with the many Monarchies and surcharged with the severall dominions, which either his owne or his ancestors vertue had gotten him.