

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 26



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Of Thumbs

TACITUS reporteth, that amongst certaine barbarous Kings, for the confermation of an inviolable bonde, or covenant, their manner was, to joyne their right hands close and hard together, with enterlacing their thumbs: And when by hard wringing them the blood appeared at their ends, they pricked them with some sharpe point, and then mutually entersuck't each one the others. Phisicians say, thumbs are the maister-fingers of the hand and that their Latin Ethymologie is derived of *pollere*. The Græcians call it *ἀντιχειρ*, as a man would say another hand. And it seemeth, the Latins likewise take them sometimes in this sense, *id est*, for a whole hand:

*Sed nec uocibus excitata blandis,
Molli pollice nec rogata surgit.*

*It will not rise, though with sweete words excited,
Nor with the touch of softest thumb invited.*

In Rome it was heretofore a signe of favor, to wring and kisse the thumbs,

Fautor utroque tuum laudabit pollice ludum:

*He that applaudes will praise,
With both his thumbs thy plaies.*

and of disfavour or disgrace to lift them up, and turne them outward:

*conuerso pollice uulgi
Quemlibet occidunt populariter.*

*When people turne their thumbs away,
The popularly any slay.*

Such as were hurt or maymed in their thumbs, were by the Romanes dispensed from going to warre, as they who had lost their weapons hold-fast. *Augustus* did confiscat all the goods of a Romane Knight, who through malice had cut off the thumbes of two yong children of his,

thereby to excuse them from going to warre: And before him, the Senate in the time of the Italian warres, had condemned *Caius Vatienus* to perpetuall prison, and confiscated all his goods, forsomuch as he had willingly cut off the thumbe of his left hand, so to exempt himselfe from that voyage. Some one, whose name I remember not, having gained a great victorie by Sea, caused all the enemies whom he had vanquished and taken prisoners to have their thumbes cut off, thinking thereby to deprive them of all meanes of fighting, of rowing, or handling their oares. The Athenians likewise caused them to be cut off from the of *Æginettes*, to barre them of the preheminance in the arte of navigation. In *Lacedemon*, maisters punished their servants¹ by byting their thumbs.

NOTES

- 1 Montaigne had *enfans*. Florio later replaced *servants* with *Schollers*.