

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 27



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Cowardize, the Mother of Crueltie

I HAVE often heard it reported, that *Cowardise is the mother of crueltie*: And have perceived by experience, that this malicious sharpnes, and inhumane severitie of corage, is commonly accompanied with feminine remissenes: I have seene some of the cruelest subject to weep easily, and for frivolous causes. *Alexander* the tyrant of *Pheres*, could not endure to see tragedies acted in the Theaters, for feare his subjects should see him sob and weepe at the misfortunes of *Hecuba* and *Andromaca*; he who without remorse or pittie caused daily so many poore people to be most cruelly massacred and barbarously murdered. May it be weaknes of spirit, makes them so pliable to all extremities? valor (whose effect is onely to exercise it selfe against resistance,

Nec nisi bellantis gaudet ceruice iuuenci.

*Nor takes he joy to domineere,
But on the necke of sturdie steere)*

refraines it selfe in seeing hir enimie prostrate to her mercie: But pusillanimitie, to say that she also is of the feaste, since it cannot be joyned to the first part, takes for hir share the second, which is massacre and blood. Murthers after victories, are commonly effected by the baser kinde of people, and officers that waite upon the baggage and cariage. And the reason wee see so many unheard-of cruelties in popular warres, is, that this vulgar rascalitie doth martially flesh and enure it selfe to dive in blood up to the elbowes, and mangle a body, or hacke a carcasse lying and groveling at their feete, having no manner of feeling of other valor.

*Et Lupus & turpes instant morientibus ursi,
Et quæcumque minor nobilitate fera est.*

*A Wolfe or filthie Beare the dying man oppresse,
Or some such beast as in nobilitie is lesse.*

As the Craven Curses, which at home or in their Kennels will tugge and bite the skinnes of those wilde beastes, which in the fields they durst not so much as barke-at. What is it that now adayes makes all our qaurrels mortall? And whereas our forefathers had some degree of revenge, wee now beginne by the last; and at first brunt nothing is spoken of but killing? What is it, if it be not Cowardise? Every man seeth, it is more bravery and disdaine for one to beate hisemie, than make an end of him; and to keepe him at a bay, than make him die. Moreover, that the desire of revenge is thereby alayed, and better contented; for, it aymeth at nothing so much as to give or shew a motion or feeling of revenge onely of her selfe. And that's thereason reason we doe not challenge a beast or fall upon a stone, when it hurtes us, because they are incapable to feele our revenge. And to kill a man, is to shelter him from our offence. And even as *Bias*, exclaimed upon a wicked man; *I know that soone or late thou shalt be punished for thy lewdnes, but I feare me I shall not see it*: And moaned the Orchomenians, because the penance which *Liciscus* had for his treason committed against them, came at such a time, as none of them were living, whome it had concerned, and whom the pleasure of that punishment might most delight: So ought revenge to be moned, when he on whom it is inflicted, looseth the meanes to endure or feel it. For, even as the revenger, will see the action of the revenge, that so he may feele the pleasure of it, so must he on whom he is revenged both see and feele, that he may hereby receive both repentance and grieve. He shal rew it, say we, And though he receive a stabbe or a blow with a pistoll on his head, shall we thinke he will repent? Contrariwise, if we marke him well, we shall perceve that in falling, he makes a moe or bob at us, Hee is farre from repenting, when hee rather seemes to be beholding to us: In asmuch as we affoord him the favourabest office of life, which is to make him dye speedily, and as it were insensibly. We are left to shift up and downe, runne and trot, and squat heere and there, and all to avoyde the Officers, or escape the Magistrates that pursue us; and he is at rest. *To kill a man, is good to escape a future offence, and not revenge the wrongs past*. It is rather an action of feare, than of bravery; Of precaution, than of courage; Of defence, than of an enterprise. It is apparant, that by it, we quit both the true end of revenge, and the respect of our reputation: If he live we feare he wil or may charge us with the like. It is not against him, it is for thee, thou riddest thy selfe of him. In the Kingdome of *Narsinga*, this expedient would be bootlesse: There, not onely Souldiers, and such as professe armes, but every meane Artificer, decide their quarrels with the Swordes point. The King never refuseth anie man the combate, that is disposed to fight; And if they be men of qualitie, he will be by in person, and reward the Victor with a chaine of Gold: Which, whosoever hath a mind unto, and will obtaine it, may freely challenge him that weareth the same, and enter combate with him. And having overcome one combate hath many following the same, If we thought by vertue to be ever superiors unto our enemy, and at our pleasure gourmandize him, it would much grieve us he should escape us, as he doeth in dying. We rather endeavor to vanquish surely, than honourably. And in our quarrels, we rather seeke for the end, than for the glory. *Asinius Polio* for an honest man, lesse excusable, committed a like fault; Who having written certaine invectives against *Plancus*, staide untill he were dead to publish them. It was rather to flurt at a blind man, and raile in a dead-mans eare, and to offend a sencelesse man, than incurre the danger

of his revenge. And men answered in this behalfe, that *it only belonged to Hobgoblins to wrestle with the dead*. He who staieth till the Author be dead, whose writings he will combate, what saith he, but that he is weake and quarrellous? It was told *Aristotle*, that some body had spoken ill of him, to whom he answered, *Let him also whippe me, so my selfe be not by. Our forefathers were contented to revenge an injurie with a lie; a lie with a blowe; a blowe with bloud; and so in order*. They were sufficiently valiant not to feare their adversary, though he lived, and were wronged: Whereas we quake for feare, so long as we see him a foote. And that it is so, doth not our moderne practize, pursue to death, as well him who hath wronged us, as him whom we have offended? It is also a kinde of dastardlinesse, which hath brought this fashion into our single combates, to accompany us into the field with seconds, thirds, and fourths. They were aunciently single combates, but now they are skirmishes and battels. To be alone feared the first that invented it: *Quum in se cuique minimum fiducia esset. When every man had lesse confidence in himselfe*. For, what company soever it be, it doth naturally bring some comfort and ease in danger. In ancient time they were wont to employ third persons as sticklers, to see no trechery or disorder were used, and to beare witnes of the combates successe. But now this fashion is come up, let any man be engaged, whosoever is envited, cannot wel containe himselfe to be a spectator, lest it be imputed unto him, it is either for want of affection, or lacke of courage. Besides the injustice of such an action and villeny, for your honours protection, to engage other valour and force then your owne, I find it a disadvantage in an honest and worthe man, and who wholly trusts unto himselfe, to entermingle his fortune with a second man: every one runneth sufficient hazard for himselfe, and neede not also runne it for another: And hath enough to doe to assure himselfe of his owne vertue, for the defence of his life, without committing so precious a thing into third-mens-handes. For, if the contrarie hath not expressely beene covenanted of all foure, it is a combined party. If your fellow chance to faile, you have two upon you, and not without reason: And to say, it is a Superchery, as it is indeed: as being wel armed, to charge a man who hath but a piece of a sword, or being sound and strong, to set upon a man sore hurt. But if they be advantages you have gotten fighting, you may use them without imputation. Disparitie is not considered, and inequallity is not balanced, but by the state wherin the fight is begunne. As for the rest you must rely on fortune: and if alone or single, you chance to have three upon you, your other two companions being slaine, you have no more wrong done you, than I should offer in War, in striking an enemy, whom at such an advantage I should finde grapled with one of my Fellow-Souldiers. The Nature of societie beareth, where troupe is against troupe (as where our Duke of Orleans chalenged *Henry King of England*, one hundred against another hundred; three hundred against as many, as did the Argians against the Lacedemonians; three to three, as were the *Horatii* against the *Curatii*) the pluralitie of either side is never respected for more than a single man. Whersoever there is company, the hazard is confused and disordered. I have a private interest in this discourse. For, my brother, the Lord of *Matecoulom*, being desired in *Rome*, to second and accompany a Gentleman, with whom hee had no great acquaintance, who was defendant and chalenged by another; The fight begunne, my brother by chance found himselfe confronted with one neerer and better knowne to him (I would faine be resolved of these Lawes of honour, which so often

shocke and trouble those of reason) whom after he had vanquished and dispatched, seeing the two principalls of the quarrell yet standing and unhurt, he went to reskew his fellow. What could he do lesse? should he have stooed still, and (if chance would so have had it) see him defeated, for whose defence he was entred the quarrell? What untill then he had done was nothing to the purpose, and the quarrel was stil undecided. Al the curtesie you can, you ought surely use to your enemy, especialy when you have brought him under, and to some great disadvantage; I know not how a man may use it, when anothers interest depends on it, where you are but accessory, and where the quarrell is not yours. Hee could never be just nor curteous, in hazard of him unto whom he had lent himselfe. So was he presently delivered out of the Italian prisons, by a speedy and solemne letter of commendations from our King. Oh indiscreet Nation! Wee are not contented to manifest our follies, and bewray our vices to the World by reputation: but wee goe unto forraine Nations and there in person shew them. Place three French-men in the deserts of *Libia*, and they will never live one moneth together without brawling, falling out and scratching one another: you would say this peregrination, is a party erected to please strangers with our tragedies; and those most commonly, who rejoyce and scoffe at our evils. We travell into *Italie* to learne the Arte of fencing, and practise it at the cost of our lives, before we know it; it were requisite according to the order of true Discipline, we should preferre the Theorike before the practike. We betray our apprenticesage.

*Primitiæ iuuenum miseræ, bellique futuri
Dura rudimenta.*

*The miserable first essayes of youth,
And hard beginnings of warre that ensu'th.*

I know it is an Arte profitable to her end (in the single combate betweene the two Princes, cosin-Germanes, in *Spaine*, the eldest of which (saieth *T. Livius*) by the skill of his weapons, and by craft, overcame easilie the dismayed forces of the yonger) and as by experience I have knowen, the knowledge and skill whereof, hath puffed up the hart of some, beyond their naturall proportion. But it is not properly a vertue, since shee draweth her stay from dexteritie, and takes her foundation from other than from her selfe. *The honour of combates consisteth in the jealousie of the hart, not of the science.* And therefore have I seene some of my friends, renowned for great Maisters in this exercise, in their quarels to make choise of weapons, that might well take the meane of this advantage or oddes from them; and which w holly depended on fortune, and assurance that their victory might not rather be imputed to their fencing, than ascribed to their valour. And in my infancy, our nobility scorned the reputation of a fencer, though never so cunning, as injurious; and if any learnt it, they would sequester themselves from company, deeming the same as a mystery of craft and subtilty, derogating from true and perfect vertue.

*Non schivar, non parar, non ritirarsi
Vglion costor, ne qui destrezza parte;
on danno i colpi finti hor pieni, hor scarsi;
Toglie l'irae il furor l'uso de l'arte,*

*Odi le spade horribilmente urtarsi
 A mozzo il ferro, il pie d'orma non parte;
 Sempre è il pie fermo, è la man sempre in moto,
 Ne scende tagilio in van, ne punta à voto.*

*T'avoyde, to warde, retiring to give ground
 They reke not, nor hath nimbleness heere a part:
 Nor give false blowes, nor full, nor scarce, nor sound;
 Rage and revenge bereave all use of Arte.
 Their Swordes at halfe Sword horribly resound
 You might heare mette: No foote from steppe doth parte:
 Their foote still fast, their hand still faster mooveth:
 No stroke in vaine, no thrust in vaine, but prooveth.*

Shooting at Buts, Tiltings, Torneyes, Barriers, the true images of martiall combates, were the exercises of our forefathers. This other exercise is so much the lesse noble, by how much it respecteth but a private end; which against the lawes of justice, teacheth us to destroy one another, and every way produceth ever mischievous effects. *It is much more worthy, and better beseeming, for a man to exercise himselfe in things that assure and offend not our Commonwealth; and which respect publike securitie and generall glory.* Publius Rutilius Consus, was the first that ever instituted the Souldier to manage his armes by dexteritie and skill, and joyned arte unto vertue, not for the use of private contentions, but for the wars and Roman peoples quarrells. A popular and civill manner of fencing. And besides the example of *Cæsar*, who appointed his Souldiers, above all things, to aime and strike at the face of *Pompeyes* men in the battell of *Pharsalia*: A thousand other Chieftaines and Generalls have devised new fashions of weapons, and new kindes of striking, and covering of themselves, according as the present affaires required. But even as *Philopæmen* condemned wrestling, wherein he excelled others, forsomuch as the preparations appertaining to this exercise differed from those that belong to military discipline, to which he supposed, men of honour should amuse and addict themselves. Me thinkes also, that this nimbleness or agilitie, to which men fashion and enure themselves, their limbes, their turnings, windings, and nimble-quick motions, wherein youth is instructed and trained in this new schoole, are not onely unprofitable, but rather contrary and damageable for the use of militarie combate: And we see our men doe commonly employ particular weapons, in their fence-schooles, and peculiarly appointed for that purpose. And I have seene it disallowed, that a gentleman chalenged to fight with Rapier and Dagger, should present himselfe in the equipage of a man at armes; or that another should offer to come with his cloake insteade of a Dagger. It is worthy the noting, that *Lachez* in *Plato*, speaking of an apprentissage, how to manage armes, conformable to ours, saith, he could never see any notable warrior come of a schoole of fence, and especially from among the maisters. As for them our owne experience confirmes as much. And for the rest we may at least say, they are sufficiencies of no relation or correspondencie. And in the institution of the children of his Commonwealth, *Plato* interdicts the artes of striking or playing with fists, devised by *Amycus* and *Epeiuis*, and to wrestle, invented by *Anthæus* and *Cecyo*: because they aime at another end, then to adapt youth to warlike service, and have no affinitie with it. But I

digresse much from my theame. The Emperour *Mauricius*, being forewarned by dreames, and sundry prognostications, that one *Phocas*, a Souldier at that time yet unknowne, should kill him, demanded of *Philip* his sonne in law, who that *Phocas* was, his nature, his conditions, and customes, and how amongst other things *Philip* told him, he was a fainte, cowardly, and timorous fellow: The Emperour thereby presently concluded, that he was both cruell and a murtherer. What makes tyrants so blood-thirsty? it is the care of their securitie, and that their faint-hart yeelds them no other meanes to assure themselves, then by rooting out those which may in any sorte offend them; yea seely women for feare they should or bite or scrach them?

Cuncta ferit dum cuncta timet.

*Of all things he afraide,
At all things fiercely laide.*

The first cruelties are exercised by themselves, thence proceedeth the feare of a just revenge, which afterward produceth a swarme of new cruelties; by the one to stifle the other. *Philip*, the King of *Macedone*, who had so many crowes to pull with the Romanes, agitated by the horrour of so many murthers committed by his appointment, and unable to make his partie good, or to take any safe resolution against so many families, by him at severall times injured, resolved at last to seize upon all their children whom he had caused to be murdered, that so he might day by day one after another rid the world of them, and so establish his safety. *Matters of worth are not impertinent wheresoever they be placed.* I, who rather respect the weight and benefite of discourses, then their order and placing, neede not feare to place here at randone a notable storie. When they are so rich of their owne beautie, and may very well upholde themselves alone, I am content with a hairens end, to fitte or joyne them to my purpose. Amongst others who had beene condemned by *Philip*, was one *Herodicus*, Prince of the Thessalians: After whome hee caused his two sonnes in lawe to be putte to death; each of them leaving a yoong sonne behinde him. *Theoxena* and *Arco* were the two widdowes. *Theoxena* although shee were instantly urged thereunto, coude never be induced to marry againe. *Arco* tooke to husbände *Poris*, a chiefe man amongst the *Ænians*, and by him had diverse children, all which she left very yong. *Theoxina* moved by a motherly charitie toward her yoong nephewes, and so to have them in her protection and bringing up wedded *Poris*. Upon this came out the proclamation of the Kings Edict. This noble-minded mother, distrusting the kings crueltie, and fearing the mercilesnes of his Satelites or Officers towards these noble, hopefull and tender youths, feared not to say, that she would rather kil them with her owne hands, then deliver them. *Poris* amazed at her protestations, promiseth her secretly to convey them to *Athens*, there by some of his secret friends to be kept safely. They take occasion of an yearely feast, which to the honor of *Æneas* was solemnized at *Ænia*, and thither they go, where having all day-long assisted to the ceremonies, and publike banquet: night being come, they convey themselves into a ship, appointed for that purpose, in hope to save themselves by Sea. But the winde fell out so contrarie, that the next morning they found themselves in view of the towne, whence the night before they had hoised

sailles, where they were pursued by the guarders and Souldiers of the Porte. Which *Paris* perceiving, laboured to hasten and encourage the Mariners to shift away: But *Theoxena*, enraged through love and revenge, remembering her first resolution, prepared both weapons and poison, and presenting them to their sight, thus shee bespake them: Oh my deare children, take a good heart, death is now the onely meane of your defence and libertie, and shall bee a just cause unto the Gods for their holy justice. These bright-keene blades, these full cuppes shall free you the passage unto it. Courage therefore, and thou my eldest childe, take this sworde to die the strongest death. Who on the one side having so undaunted a perswader, and on the other their enemies ready to cut their throates, in furious manner ranne all to that which came next to his hand. And so all goared and panting were throwne into the Sea. *Theoxena*, prowde shee had so gloriouslie provided for her childrens safety, lovingly embracing her husband, saide thus unto him; Oh my deare heart, let us follow these boyes, and together with them enjoy one selfe same grave, And so close-claspt together, they flung themselves into the maine: So that the ship was brought to shoare againe, but emptie of hir Maisters. Tyrants to act two things together, that is, to kill and cause their rage to be felt, have employed the utmost of their skill, to devise lingring deaths. They will have their enemies die, yet not so soone, but that they may have leisure to feele their vengeance. Wherin they are in great perplexitie: for if the torments be over-violent, they are short; if lingring, not grievous inough. In this they imploy their wits and devises. Many examples whereof we see in antiquitie; and I wot not, whether wittingly we retaine some spice of that barbarisme. *Whatsoever is beyond a simple death, seemeth to mee meere crueltie.* Our justice cannot hope, that he whom the terror of death cannot dismay, be he to be hanged or beheaded, can in any sort be troubled with the imagination of a languishing fire, of a wheele, or of burning pincers. And I wot not, whether in that meane time we bring him to despaire: For, what plight can the soule of a man be in, that is broken uppon wheele, or after the olde fashion, nailed upon a Crosse, and xxiiii. houres together expects his death? *Josephus* reporteth, that whilest the Romane warres continued in *Jurie*, passing by a place where certaine Jewes had beene crucified three dayes before, hee knew three of his friends amongst them, and having gotten leave to remooove then, two of them died, but the third lived long after. *Chalcondylas* a man of credite, in the memories he left of matters happened in his time and there-about, maketh report of an extreame torment, the Emperour *Mechmed* was often wont to put in practise, which was by one onely blow of a Cimitary or broade Persian Sword, to have men cutte in two parts, by the waste of the body, about the Diaphragma, which is a membrane lying overthwart the lower part of the breast, separating the heart and lights from the stomake, which caused them to dy two deaths at once: and affirmeth that both parts were seene ful of life, to moove and stirre long time after, as if they had bin in lingring torment. I do not thinke, they felt any great torture in that mooving. *The gastliest torments to looke upon, are not alwaies the greatest to be endured:* And I find that much more fiercely-horrible, which other Historians write and which he used against certain Lordes of *Epirus*, whom faire and leasurly he caused to be fleade al over, disposed by so malicious a dispensation, that their lives continued fifteen daies in that langor and anguish. And these two others; *Cræsus* having caused a Gentleman to be apprehended, greatly

favoured by *Pantaleon* his brother; ledde him into a fullers or cloth-workers shoppe, where with Cardes and Teazls belonging to that trade, he made him to be carded, scraped, and teazeled so long untill he died of it. *George Sechell* Ring-leader of the Contrymen of *Polonio*, who under the title of a *Croysada*, wrought so many mischiefs, having beene defeated in a battel by the *Vayvoda* of *Transilvania*, and taken Prisoner, was for three dayes together tyed naked to a woden-horse, exposed to al maner of tortures, any man might devise against him; during which time divers other prisoners were kept fasting. At last, he yet living, saw *Lucat* his deare brother, and for whose safty he sued and entreated, forced to drink his blood, drawing all the envy and hatred of his misdeedes upon himselfe. And twentie of his most favoured Captaines were compelled to feed upon his flesh, which with their teeth they must teare off, and swallow their morsels. The rest of his body and entrailes, he being dead, were boiled in a pan, and given for foode to other of his followers.