

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE  
ESSAYS

**Book 2 · Chapter 34**

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## Observations concerning the meanes to warre after the maner of Julius Cæsar

IT IS REPORTED of divers chiefe Generalles in warre, that they have particularly affected some peculiar booke or other: as *Alexander* the great highly esteemed *Homer*; *Scipio Affricanus*, *Xenophon*: *Marcus Brutus*, *Polybius*; *Charles* the fifth, *Philip de Comines*: And it is lately averred, that in some places, and with some men, *Machiavell* is much accompted of: But our late Marshall *Strozzi*, who had made especiall choise to love *Cæsar*; without doubt, I thinke of all other chose best: for truely he ought to be the Breviarie of all true Souldiers, as beeing the absolute and perfect chiefe patterne of Military profession. And God hee knowes with what grace, and with what decorum, hee hath embellished this rich subject, with so pure a kinde of speech, so pleasing and so absolutely perfect, that to my taste, there are no writing in the world, which in this subject may be compared to his. I will here register certaine particular and rare parts concerning his maner of warre, which yet remaine in my memory. His Armie beeing somewhat afrighted, upon the reporte that ranne of the great forces, which king *Juba* brought against him, instead of abating the opinion his souldiers had conceived of it, and to diminish the meanes or forces of his enemy, having caused them to be assembled altogether, thereby to assure and incorage them, he tooke a cleane contrary course, to that which in like cases we are accustomed to do: for he bade them troble themselves no more to finde out the number of the forces, which his enemies brought against him, for himselfe had already true knowledge and certaine intelligence of them: and told them a number farre exceeding both the truth and reporte of them: following what *Cyrus* commandeth in *Xenophon*. Forasmuch as the deceit is not of like interest, for a man to finde his enemies in effect weaker then he hoped, then stronger indeede, having once conceived an opinion of their weakenesse. He enured all his Souldiers simply to obey, without controlling, gainesaying or speaking of their Captaines desseignes, which he never communicated unto them, but upon the last point of execution: and was pleased, if by chance they had any inkling of them, so to deceive them, presently to change his opinion: And having prefixt a place to quarter-in at night, he hath often beene seene to march further, and lengthen his journey, namely if the weather were foule, or if it rained. The Swizzers in the beginning of his warres in *Gaule*, having

sent toward him to give them free passage through the Roman countries, and he being resolved by force to impeach them, did notwithstanding shew them very good looks, and tooke certaine dayes respite to give them an answer, during which time he might have leasure to assemble his Armie together. These poore people knew not how well he could husband time: For he often repeated, that *the skill to embrace occasions in the nick, is the chiefeſt part of an absolute Captaine*: And truly the diligence he used in all his exploits, is incredible; and the like was never heard-of. If he were not over consciencious in that, under colour of some treatie, parlie or accord, to take any advantage of his enemies: he was as little scrupulous, in that *he required no other vertue in his Souldiers, but valour*; and except mutinie and disobedience, he punished not greatly other vices. After his victories, he often gave them the reines to all licentiousnesse, for a while dispensing them from all rules of military discipline; saying moreover, his souldiers were so well instructed, that though they were in their gayest clothes, pranked up, musked and perfumed, they would notwithstanding runne furiously to any combate. And in truth he loved to see them richly armed, and made them weare gilt, graven and silvered armours, that their care to keepe them cleane and bright, might make them more fierce, and readie to defend themselves. Speaking to them, hee ever called them by the name of Fellow-souldiers; a name used at this day by some Captaines; which his successour *Augustus* afterward reformed, esteeming he had done it for the necessitie of his affaires, and to flatter the hearts of those which followed him but voluntarily;

*Rheni mihi Cæsar in undis.  
Dux erat, hic socius, facinus quos inquinat, æquat.*

*When Cæsar past the Rhine, he was my Generall,  
My Fellow heere: sinne, whom it staines, makes fellowes-all.*

but that this custome was over-lowelie for the dignitie of an Emperour, and chiefe Generall of an Armie, and brought up the fashion againe to call them only Souldiers. To this curtesie, *Cæsar* did notwithstanding intermixe a great severity, to suppress and keep them humble. His ninth Legion having mutined neere unto *Placentia*, hee presently cassiered the same with great ignominie unto it, notwithstanding that *Pompey* were yet on foote and strong; and would not receive it into favour, but with humble petitions and entreatie. Hee did more appease them by authoritie and audacitie, then by mildenesse and affabilitie. Where hee speaketh of his passage over the river of *Rheine*, towardes *Germanie*, he saith, that deeming it unworthy the honour of the Romane people, his Armie should passe over in ships, he caused a bridge to be built, that so it might passe over drie-foote. There he erected that admirable bridge, whereof he so particularly describeth the frame: For hee never more willingly dilates himselfe in describing any of his exploits, then where he endevoreth to represent unto us the subtiltie of his inventions, in such kindes of manuall workes. I have also noted this in his booke, that he much accompteth of his exhortations he made to his Souldiers before any fight: for where he would shew to have beene either surprised or urged, he ever alledgeth this, that he had so much leasure as to make an oration to his Souldiers or Armie. Before that great battell against those of *Tournay*; *Cæsar* (saith he) having

disposed of the rest, ranne sodainely whither fortune carried him, to exhort his men: and meeting with the tenth Legion, hee had not leasure to say any thing else unto them, but that *they should remember their former wonted vertue, they should nothing be danted, they should stoutly resist the encounter of their adversaries;* and forasmuch as the enemie was come within an arrow-shoote unto him, he gave the signall of the battell; and sodainely going elsewhere, to encourage others, he found them already together by the eares; See here what himselfe saith of it in that place. Verely his tongue hath in divers places much bestead, and done him notable service, and even whilst he lived, his militarie eloquence was so highly regarded, that many of his Armie were seene to copie and keepe his orations; by which meanes divers volumes were filled with them, and continued many ages after his death. His speech had particular graces, so that his familiar friends, and namely *Augustus*, hearing that rehearsed, which had beene collected of his, knew by the Phrases and words, what was his or not. The first time that with any publike charge he issued out of *Rome*, hee came in eight dayes to the river of *Rhone*, having ever one or two Secretaries before him, who continually writ what hee ended, and one behinde him that carried his sword. And surely, if one did nothing but runne up and downe, he could very hardly attaine to that promptitude, wherewith ever being victorious, having left *Gaule*, and following *Pompey* to *Brundisium*, in eighteene dayes he subdued all *Italie*; returned from *Brundisium* to *Rome*, and thence went even to the hart of *Spaine*, where he past many extreame difficulties, in the warres betweene *Affranius* and *Petreibus*, and at the long siege of *Marseille*: from whence he returned into *Macedon*, overthrew the Romane Armie at *Pharsalia*; thence pursuing *Pompey* hee passed into *Ægipt*, which he subdued; from *Ægipt* he came unto *Siria*, and into the countrie of *Pontus*, where he fought with *Pharnaces*; thence into *Affrica*, where he defeated *Scipio* and *Juba*, and thence through *Italie* he returned into *Spaine*, where he overthrew *Pompeys* children.

*Ocior & cæli flammis & tigride fœta.  
Ac ueluti montis saxum de uertice præceps  
Cùm ruit auulsum uento, seu turbidus imber  
Proluit, aut annis soluit sublapsa uetustas,  
Fertur in abruptum magno mons improbus actu  
Exultâtque solo, siluas, armenta, uirôsque,  
Inuoluens secum.*

*Swifter then breed-yong Tiger, or heav'ns flash,  
And as from mountaines top a headlong stone  
Rent-off by winde, or by stormes troublous dash  
Washt-off, or loos'd by age of yeares ore-gone,  
Crosse-carried with great force that hill-like masse  
Bounds on the earth, and rowles with it in one,  
Woods, heards, and men, and all that neere-it was.*

Speaking of the siege of *Avaricum*, he saith, that it was his custome, both day and night, ever to be neere and about such workemen, as he had set a worke. In all enterprises of consequence he was ever the first skout-man, or survayer of any place: and his Armie never approached place, which hee had not viewd or survayd himselfe. And if wee may believe *Suetonius*, at

what time he attempted to passe over into *England*, he was the first man that sounded the passage. He was wont to say, *that he esteemed that victorie much more, which was conducted by advise, and managed by counsell, then by maine strength and force.* In the warre against *Pretreius* and *Affranius*, Fortune presenting an apparant occasion of advantage unto him, he saith, that he refused it, hoping with a little more time, but with lesse hazard, to see the overthrow of his enemie. Where he also plaide a notable part, to command all his Armie to swimme over a river, without any necessitie,

*rapuitque ruens in praelia miles,  
Quod fugiens timuisset iter, mox uda receptis  
Membra fouent armis, gelidósque à gurgite cursu  
Restituunt artus.*

*The Souldier rids that way in haste to fight,  
Which yet he would have fearde in haste of flight;  
His limbs with water wet and cold before,  
With armes he covers, running doth restore.*

I finde him somewhat more warie and considerate in his enterprises, then *Alexander*; for, the latter seemeth to seeke out, and by maine force to runne into dangers, as an impetuous or raging torrent, which without heede, discretion, or choise, shockes and check-mates what ere it meeteth withall.

*Sic tauri formis uoluitur Aufidus,  
Qui Regna Dauni perfluit Appuli  
Dum sæuit, horrendámque cultis  
Diluuiem meditatur agris.*

*So Bull-fac't Aufidus still rowling growes,  
Which through Apulias ancient kingdome flowes,  
When he doth rage in threatning meditation  
To bring on faire fields fearefull inundation.*

And to say truth, his hap was to bee most employed in the spring-time, and first heate of his age; whereas *Cæsar* was well stricken in yeares, when he beganne to follow armes. *Alexander* was of a more chollerike, sanguine and violent constitution, which humour hee stirred up with wine, whereof *Cæsar* was verie abstinent. But where occasions of necessitie were offered, and where the subject required it, there was never man that so little regarded his person. As for me, me seemeth I reade in divers of his exploits, a certaine resolution rather to loose himselfe, than to abide the brunt or shame to be overthrowne. In that great battell, which he fought against those of *Turnay*, seeing the vangarde of his Army somewhat enclining to route, even as hee was, without shield or target, hee ranne headlong to the front of his enemies: Which many other times happened unto him. Hearing once how his men were besieged, he past disguised through the midst and thickest of his enemies campe, so to encourage and awe them with his presence. Having crossed the way to *Dyrrhachium*, with verie few forces, and perceiving the rest of his Armie (the Conduct whereof hee had left unto *Antonius*,) to be somewhat slowe in comming, he undertooke all alone, to repasse the Sea, notwithstanding a violent and

raging Tempest; and secretly stole himself away to fetch the rest of his forces: All the havens on that side, yea and all the Sea being possessed by *Pompey*, And concerning the enterprises he under-went with armed hand, there are divers of them, which in respect of the hazard, exceede all discourse of militarie reason: for, with how weake meanes undertooke he to subdue the Kingdome of *Ægypt*, and afterward to front the forces of *Scipio* and *Juba*, which were tenne partes greater than his? Me thinkes such men have had a kinde of more than humane confidence of their fortune: And himselfe was wont to say, that *Haughtie enterprises were to be executed and not consulted upon*. After the battel of *Pharsalia*, having sent his Armie before into *Asia*, and himselfe with only one ship passing through the straite of *Hellespont*, he mette on the Seas with *Lucius Cassius*, attended on with tenne tall ships of Warre; he was so farre from shunning him, that he durst not onely stay for him, but with al haste make toward and summon him, to yeeld himselfe to his mercie; which he did. Having undertaken that furious siege of *Alexia*, wherein were fourescore thousand men of Defence, and all *France* up in armes, with a resolution to runne upon him and raise the siege, and having an Armie on foote of one hundred and nine thousand horse, and two hundred fortie thousand foote; What a fond-hardy and outrageous confidence was it in him, that he would never give over his attempt and resolve in two so great difficulties together? Which he notwithstanding under went: And after he had obtained so notable a battell of those which were without, he soone reduced those that were besieged in the Towne to his mercie. The verie like happened to *Lucullus* at the siege of *Tigranocerta*, against King *Tigranes* but with an unlike condition, seeing his enemies demissenesse, with whom *Lucullus* was to deale. I will heere note two rare and extraordinarie events, touching the siege of *Alexia*; the one, that the French-men beeing all assembled together with a purpose to meete with *Cæsar*, having diligently survaied and exactly numbred all their forces, resolved in their counsell, to cutte-off a great part of this huge multitude, for feare they might breede a confusion. This example is new, to feare to bee over many; yet if it be well taken, it is very likely, that *The bodie of an Armie ought to have a well proportioned greatnesse, and ordered to indifferent bounds*. Whether it be for the difficultie to feed the same, or to leade it in order and keepe it in awe. And we may easily verifie by examples, that *These numerous and infinite Armies have seldome brought anie not able thing to passe*: According to *Cyrus* his saying in *Xenophon*. *It is not the multitude of men, but the number of good men, that causeth an advantage*: The rest rather breeding confusion and trouble, than helpe or availe. And *Baiazeth* tooke the chieftest foundation of his resolution, against the advise of all his Captaines, to joyne fight with *Tamburlane*, onely because the innumerable number of men, which his enemie brought into the field, gave him an assured hope of route and confusion. *Scanderbeg*, a sufficient and most expert Judge in such a case, was wont to say, that tenne or twelve thousand trusty and resolute fighting men, ought to suffice any sufficient Chieftaine of Warre, to warrant his reputation in any kinde of military exploite. The other point, which seemeth to be repugnant both unto custome and reason of Warre, is, that *Vercingentorix*, who was appointed chiefe Generall of all the forces of the revolted *Gaules*, undertooke to immure and shutte himselfe into *Alexia*. For, *He that hath the commaundement of a whole Countrie ought never to engage himselfe, except in cases of extremitie*, and where all his rest and last refuge goeth on it, and hath no other hope lest him, but the

defence of such a place. Otherwise he ought to keepe himselfe free, that so he may have meanes to provide in all partes of his Government. But to returne to *Cæsar*, he became in time somewhat more slow, heedy, and considerate, as witnesseth his familiar friend *Oppius*; deeming, he should not so easily hazard the honour of so many Victories which one onely disaster, or mis-encounter, might make him loose. It is that the Italians are wont to say, when they will or blame or reproach any man with this overdaring, or rash fond-hardinesle, which is often seene in yoong men, calling them, *Bisognosi d'honore*, as much to say as needie of honour: And that being yet hungrie, greedy and voyde of reputation, they have reason to seeke after it, whatsoever it may cost them; Which they should never doe, that have already acquired the same. There may be some just moderation in this desire of glory, and some sacietie in this appetite, as well as in others; Divers doe so practize it. He was farre from that religion of the auncient Romans, who in their Warres would never prevaile but with meere and genuine vertue: But rather joyned more conscience unto it, than now-adayes wee should doe; And would never allow of all meanes, were he never so certaine to get the victory. In his Warres against *Ariovistus*, whilst he was in Parly with him, some tumult or insurrection happened betweene the two armies, which beganne by the fault or negligence of some of *Ariovistus* horsmen. In which hurlie-burlie *Cæsar* found himselfe to have a great advantage over his enemies, which notwithstanding he would not embrace, for feare he might be taxed or suspected to have proceeded falsly, or consented to any trechery. At what time so -ever he went to fight, he was accustomed to weare a verie rich garment, and of a sheene and garish colour, that so he might the better be marked. When his Souldiers were neerest unto their enemies, he restrained and kept them very short. When the ancient Græcians would accuse or tax any man of extreame insufficiencie, they used this common Proverbe; *That he could neyther read nor swimme*: And himselfe was of this opinion, that the arte of swimming was most necessary and beneficiall in Warre; and a Souldier might reape divers commodities by it. If he were in haste, and to make speede, he would ordinarily swimme over al the Rivers he met withal: and loved greatly to travell on foote, as *Alexander* the Great was wont. In *Ægypt* being on a time forced (to save himselfe) to leape into a little Whirry or Boate, and so many of his people following him, that he was in danger to sinke, hee rather chose to fling himselfe into the Sea, which he did; and swimming came into his fleete, that was more than two hundred paces from him, holding his writing-Tables in his left hand out of the Water, and with his teeth drawing his Coate of Armes after him, that his enemies might not enjoy it: and this did he being well stricken in yeares. No Generall of Warre had ever so much credite with his Souldiers. In the beginning of his civill warres, his Centeniers offered him every one, at their owne charges to pay and finde him a man at Armes, and his foote-men to serve him for nothing, and those that were best able, to defray the poore and needie.

Our late Admirall of *France* Lord *Chastillion*, in our late civill warres shewed such an example: For, the French-men of his armie, at their proper cost and charges helped to pay such strangers as followed him. Few examples of so loving and earnest affection may be found amongst those that follow the old manner of warre, and strictly hold themselves under the ancient

pollicie of their lawes. *Passion hath more sway over us, then reason:* Yet hath it chanced in the warres against *Hanniball*, that imitating the example of the Romane peoples liberalitie in the Cittie, the Souldiers and Captaines refused their pay; and in *Marcellus* his campe, those were called mercenarie, that tooke any pay. Having had some deffeaate neere unto *Dyrachium*, his Souldiers came voluntarily before him, and offred themselves to be punished; so that he was more troubled to comfort, then to chide them. One onely of his *Cohortes* (whereof ten went to a Legion) held fight above foure howres with foure of *Pompeies* whole Legions, untill it was well-nigh all defeated with the multitude and force of arrowes: And in his trenches were afterward found one hundred and thirtie thousand shafts. A Souldier of his, named *Scæva*, who commanded one of the entrances, did so invincibly defend and keepe himselfe, that he had one of his eyes thrust out, and one shoulder and one thigh thrust through, and his shield flawed and pearced in two hundred and thirtie severall places. It hath befallne to many of his Souldiers, being taken prisoners, to chuse rather to die then promise to follow any other faction, or receive any other entertainment. *Granius Petronius* taken by *Scipio* in *Affrike*: After *Scipio* had caused all his fellowes to be put to death, sent him word that he gave him his life, forsomuch as hee was a man of ranke and a Questore: *Petronius* answered, that *Cæsars* Souldiers were wont to give life to others, and not accept it themselves; And therewithall with his owne handes killed himselfe. Infinit examples there are of their fidelitie. That part, which they acted, who were besieged in *Salona*, a Cittie, which tooke part with *Cæsar* against *Pompey*, must not be forgotten, by reason of a rare accident that there hapned. *Marcus Octavius*, having long time beleagred the Towne, they within were reduced to such extreamitie and pinching necessitie of all things, that to supply the great want they had of men, most of them being alreadie or hurt or dead; they had set all their slaves at libertie, and for the behoofe of their engines, were compelled to cut-off all their womens haire, to make ropes with them; besides a wonderfull lacke of victualles, resolving notwithstanding never to yeeld themselves: After they had a long time lingered the siege, and that *Octavius* was thereby become more carelesse, and lesse heeding or attentive to his enterprise; they one day about high noone (having first ranged their wives and children upon the walles, to set the better face upon the matter) rushed out in such a furie upon the besiegers, that having put to rout and defeated the first, the second, and third *corps de garde*; then the fourth and the rest; and having forced them to quit their trenches, chased them even to their shippes; and *Octavius* with much a doe saved himselfe in *Dyrachium*, where *Pompey* was. I remember not at this time, to have read of any other example, where the beleagred doe in grosse beate the beleagrers, and get the maistrie and possession of the field; nor that a sallie hath drawne a meere and absolute victorie of a battle into consequence.