

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 9



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Of the Parthians Armes

IT IS A vitious-fond fashion of the nobilitie and gentry of our age, and full of nice-tenderness, never to betake themselves to armes, except upon some urgent and extreame necessitie; and to quit them as soone as they perceive the least hope or apparance, that the danger is past: Whence ensue many disorders, and inconveniences: For, every one running and calling for his armes when the alarume is given, some have not yet buckled their cuirace, when their fellowes are already defeated. Indeede our forefathers would have their Caske, Lance, Gantlets, and Shields carried, but so long as the service lasted, themselves would never leave-off their other pieces. Our troopes are now all confounded and disordered, by reason of bag and baggage, of carriages, of lackies, and foote-boyes, which because of their maisters armes they carry, can never leave them. *Titus Livius*, speaking of the French, *Intolerantissima laboris corpora uix arma humeris gerebant. Their bodies most impatient of labour could hardly beare armour on their backs.* Diverse nations, as they did in former times, so yet at this day, are seene to goe to the warres, without any thing about them, or if they had, it was of no defence; but were all naked and bare.

Tegmina queis capitem raptus de subere cortex.

*Whose caske to cover all their head,
Was made of barke from Corke-tree flea'd.*

Alexander the most daring and hazardous Captaine that ever was, did very seldome arme himselfe: And those which amongst us neglect them, doe not thereby much empaire their reputation. If any man chance to be slaine for want of an armour, there are as many more that miscary with the over-heavy burthen of their armes, and by them are engaged, and by a counterbuff are brused, or otherwise defeated. For in truth, to see the unweyldie weight of our and their thickness, it seemeth we but endeavour to defend our selves, and we are rather charged then covered by them. We have enough to do, to endure the burthen of them, and are so engaged and shackled in them, as if we were to fight but with the shocke or brunt of our armes: And as if we were as much bound to defend them, as they to shield

us. *Cornelius Tacitus* doth pleasantly quip and jest at the men of warre of our ancient Gaules, so armed, onely to maintaine themselves, as they that have no meane, either to offend or to bee offended, or to raise themselves being overthrowne. *Lucullus* seeing certaine Median men at armes, which were in the front of *Tigranes* armie, heavily and unweildely armed, as in an yron-prison, apprehended thereby an opinion, that he might easily defeate them, and beganne to charge them first, and got the victorie. And now that our muskettiers, are in such credite, I thinke wee shall have some invention found to immure us up, that so wee may be warranted from them, and to traine-us to the warres in skonces and bastions, as those which our fathers caused to be carried by Elephants. A humour farre different from that of *Scipio* the yoonger, who sharply reprooved his souldiers, because they had scattred certaine Calthrops under the water alongst a dike, by which those of the Towne that he besieged might sallie out upon him, saying; *that those which assailed, should resolve to enterprise and not to feare*: And had some reason to feare, that this provision might secure and lull their vigilancie asleepe to guard themselves. Moreover he saide to a yoong man, that shewed him a faire shield he had; Indeede good youth, it is a faire one, but *a Roman souldier ought to have more confidence in his right hand, than in his left*. It is onely custome that makes the burthen of our armes intolerable unto us.

*Lusbergo in dosso haveano, & l'elmo in testa,
 Due di quelli guerrier de i quali io canto.
 Ne notte o di dopo ch'entraro in questa
 Stanza, gl'havean mai messi da canto;
 Che facile da portar come la vesta
 Era lor, perche in uso l'havean tanto.*

*Cuirasse on backe did those two warriors beare,
 And caske on head, of whome I make report,
 Nor day, nor night, after they entred there,
 Had they them laide aside from their support:
 They could with ease them as a garment weare,
 For long time had they usde them in such sort.*

The Emperour *Caracalla* in leading of his army was ever wont to march a foot armed at all assayes. The Roman footemen carried not their morions, sword, and target only; as for other arms (saith *Cicero*) they were so accustomed to weare them continually, that they hindered them no more then their limbs: *Arma enim, membra militis esse dicunt*: for they say armor and weapon are a soldiers limbs. But therewithal such victuals as they should need for a fortnight and a certaine number of stakes, to make their rampards or palisadoes with; so much as weighed threescore pound weight. And *Marius* his souldiers thus loden, marching in battelarray, were taught to march five leagues in five houres, yea sixe if need required. Their military discipline was much more laborsome then ours: So did it produce far different effects. *Scipio* the yonger, reforming his army in *Spaine*, appointed his souldiers to eate no meate but standing, and nothing sodden or rosted. It is worth the remembrance how a Lacedemonian souldier being in an expedition of warre, was much noted and blamed, because hee was once seene to seeke for shelter under a house: They were

so hardened to endure all manner of labor and toyle, that it was counted a reprochful infamie for a souldier to be seen under any other rooffe then that of heavens-vault, in what wether soever: Were we to doe so, we should never leade our men far. *Marcellinus* a man well trained in the Roman warres, doth curiously observe the maner, which the Parthians used to arme themselves, and noteth it so much the more, by how much it was farre different from the Romans. They had (saieth hee) certaine armes so curiously enter-wrought, as they seemed to be made like feathers, which nothing hindered the stirring of their bodies, and yet so strong, that our darts hitting them, did rather rebound, or glance by, then hurt them (they be the skales our ancestors were so much wont to use.) In another place, they had (saith he) their horses stiffe and strong, covered with thicke hides, and themselves armed from head to foote, with massie yron plates so artificially contrived, that where the joynts are, there they furthered the motion, and helped the stirring. A man would have said, they had beene men made of yron: For they had pieces so handsomely fitted, and so lively representing the forme and partes of the face, that there was no way to wounde them, but at certaine little holes before their eyes, which served to give them some light, and by certaine chinckes about their nostrils, by which they hardly drew breath.

*Flexilis inductis hamatur lamina membris,
Horribilis uisu, credas simulacra moueri
Ferrea, cognatòque uiros spirare metallo.
Par Vestitus equis, ferrata fronte minantur,
Ferratòsque mouent securi uulneris armos.*

*The bending plate is hook't on limbes ore-spread,
Fearefull to sight, steele images seem'd ledde,
And men to breathe in mettall with them bredde.
Like furniture for horse, with steeled head,
They threat, and safe from wound,
With barr'd limbs tread the ground.*

Loe-heere a description, much resembling the equipage of a compleate French man-at-armes, with all his bardes. *Plutarke* reporteth that *Demetrius* caused two armours to be made, each one weighing sixe score poundes, the one for himselfe, the other for *Alcinus*, the chiefe man of warre, that was next to him, whereas all common armours weighed but three score.