

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE  
ESSAYS

**Book 3 · Chapter 7**



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## Of the incommoditie of greatnesse

SINCE we cannot attaine unto it, let us revenge our selves with railing against it: yet is is not absolute railing, to finde faulte with any thing: *There are defects found in all things, how faire soever in showe, and desirable they be.* It hath generally this evident advantage, that when ever it pleaseth it will decline, and hath well nigh the choise of one and other condition. For, a man doth not fall from all heights; divers there are, whence a man may descend without falling. Verilie, me seemeth, that we value it at too high a rate: and prize over-deare the resolution of those, whome we have eyther seene or heard, to have contemned, or of their owne motion rejected the same. Hir essence is not so evidentlie commodious, but a man may refuse it without wonder. Indeede I finde the labour verye hard in suffring of evils; but in the contentment of a meane measure of fortune, and shunning of greatnesse, therein I see no great difficultie. In my conceite, it is a vertue, whereunto my selfe, who am but a simple ninnie, might easilie attaine, and without great contention. What shall they doe, who would also bring into consideration, the glory, which accompanieth this refusall, wherein may-fall more ambition, then even in the desire and absolute enjoying of greatnesse? *Forsomuch as ambition is never better directed according to it selfe, then by a straying and unfrequented pathe.* I sharpen my courage toward pacience, and weaken the same against desire. I have as much to wish for as another, and leave my wishes as much libertie and indiscretion: but yet, it never came into my minde, to wishe for Empire, for royaltie or eminencie of high and commanding fortunes. I ayme not that way: I love my selfe too well. When I thinke to growe, it is but meanely; with a forced and coward advancement; fit for me: yea in resolution, in wisdom, in health, in beautie and also in ritches. But this credite, this aspiring reputation, this overswaying auctoritie, suppresseth my imaginatiō. And cleane opposite to some other, I should peradventure love my selfe better, to be the second or third man in *Perigot*, then the first in *Paris*: At least, without faining, I had rather be the third man in *Paris*, then the first in charge. I wil neither contend with an usher of a doore, as a sillie unknowne man; nor with gaping and adoration make a lane through the throng as I passe. I am enured to a meane calling; mediocritie best fitteth me, as well by my fortune, as by mine owne

humor. And have shewed by the conduct of my life and course of my enterprises, that I have rather sought to avoide, then otherwise to embrace beyond the degree of fortune that at my birth it pleased God to call me unto. *Each naturall constitution, is equally just and easie.* My minde is so dull and slowe, that I measure not good fortune according to her height, but rather according to her facility. And if my hart be not great enough, it is ratably free and open, and who biddeth me, bouldly to publish my weakenesse. Should any will me, on the one part, to conferre and consider the life of *L. Thorius Balbus*, a worthy gallant man, wise, faire, goodly, healthie, of good understanding, ritchly-plentious in all manner of commodities and pleasures, leading a quiet easefull life, altogether his owne, with a minde armed, and well prepared against death, superstition, griefes, cares and other encombrances of humane necessity; dying in his olde age, in an honourable battell, with his weapons in his hand, for the defence of his country; and on the other side the life of *M. Regulus*, so heigh and great, as all men know, together with his admirable and glorious ende: the one unmentioned and without dignity, the other exemplare and wonderfull renoued: truely I would say what *Cicero* saith of it, had I the guift of well-speaking as he had. But if I were to sute them unto mine, I would also say, that the former is asmuch agreeing to my quality, and to the desire I endeavour to conforme my quality unto, as the second is farre beyond it. That to this I cannot attaine but by veneration; and to the other I would willingly attaine by custome. But returne we to our temporall greatnesse, whence we have digressed. I am distasted of all maistry, both active and passive. *Otanés* one of the seaven that by right might chalenge the crowne, or pretend the kingdome of *Persia*, resolved upon such a resolution as I should easily have done the like: which was, that he uterly renounced all maner of claime he might in any sort pretend unto that crowne, to his fellow competitores, were it either by election or chance: alwayes provided that both himselfe and all his, might live in that Empire, free from all subjections, and exempted from all manner of commaundement, except that of the auncient lawes: and might both chalenge all liberty, and enjoy all immunities, that should not prejudice them: being as impacient to commaund, as to be commaunded. *The sharpest and most difficile profession of the world*, is (in mine opinnion) *worthily to act and play the king*. I excuse more of their faultes, then commonly other men doe: and that in consideration of the downe-bearing waight of their immense charge, which much astonisheth me: *It is a very hard taske, to keepe a due measure, in so unmeasurable a power.* Yet is it, that even with those, that are of a lesse excellent nature, it is a singular incitation to vertue, to be seated in such a place, where you shall doe no manner of good, that is not registred and recorded: And where the least well-dooing, extendeth to so many persons: And where your sufficiencie (as that of Preachers) is principally directed to the people; a weake and parciall judge, easilie to be beguiled, and easie to be pleased *There are but fewe things, of which wee may give a sincere judgement*: for there be very fewe, wherein in some sorte or other, we are not particularly interested. Superioritie and inferioritie, maistrie and subjection, are joyntly tyde unto a naturall kinde of envie and contestation; they must perpetually enter-spoyle one another. I beleeve neither the one nor the other, concerning hir companions rights: let us suffer reason to speake of it, which is inflexible and impassible, when or how wee shall make an end. I was not long since reading of two Scottish

bookes, striving upon this subject. The populare makes the King to be of worse condition then a Carter: and hee that extolleth Monarchie, placeth him both in powre and soveraigntie, many steps above the Gods. Now the incommoditie of greatnesse, which here I have undertaken to note and speake of, (upon some occasion lately befallne mee) is this. There is peradventure nothing more pleasing to the commerce of men, then the *Essayes*, which wee through jealousie of honour or valoure, make one against another, be it in the exercise of the body or of the minde: wherein soveraigne greatnesse, hath no true or essentiall part. Verilie, it hath often seemed unto me, that through over much respect, Princes are therein used disdainefully and treated injuriouslie: For, the thing whereat (in my youth) I was infinitelie offended, was, that those which were trained and schooled with me, should forbear to doe it in good earnest, because they found mee unworthy to be withstood or to resist their endeavours. It is that we dayly see to happen unto them; every man finding himselfe unworthy to force himselfe against them. If one perceiveth them never so little affected to have the victorie, there is none but will strive to yeelde it them, and that will not rather wrong his glory, then offend theirs: No man employeth more diligence then needes he must to serve their honour. What share have Princes in the throng, where all are for them? Me thinkes I see those *Paladines* of former ages, presenting themselves in joustes, tiltings and combates, with bodies and armes enchanted. *Brisson* running against *Alexander*, counterfetteth his course: *Alexander* chid him for it: but he should have caused him to be whipt. For this consideration, was *Carneades* wont to say, that *Princes children learn't nothing aright but to mannage and ride horses; for somuch as in all other exercises, every man yeeldeth, and giveth them the victory: but a horse who is neither a flatterer nor a Courtier, will as soone throw the childe of a king as the sonne of a base porter.* *Homer* hath bene forced to consent that *Venus* (so sweete a saint and delicate a Goddess) should be hurt at the siege of *Troy*, thereby to ascribe courage and hardynesse unto her qualities never seene in those that are exempted from danger. The Gods themselves are fained to be angry, to feare, to be jealous, to greeve, to show passion, and be subject to mortall sence, thereby to honour them with the vertues which Poets devise and Philosophers invent amongst us: Naie, they are supposed to runne away, and to have a feeling of all our imperfections. *Who doth not participate both hazard and difficulties, cannot justly pretend interest in the honour, or challenge share in the pleasure, that followeth dangerous actions or hazardous attempts.* It is pittie a man should be so powerfull, that all things must yeelde and give place unto him. Such as are in so high eminencie of greatnesse, their fortune rejects society and conversation too farre from them; she placeth them in over remote and uncouth places. This easefull life and plausible facilitie to bring all under, and subject mens mindes, is an enemie to all manner of pleasure. It is a kinde of sliding, and not a going: It is to sleepe, and not to live. Conceave man accompanied with omnipotencie, you overwhelme him: he must in begging manner crave some empeachment and resistance of you. His being and his good, is in want and indigence. Their good qualities are dead and lost: for, they are not heard but by comparison, and they are excluded: they have little knowledge of true praise, beeing beaten with so continuall and uniforme an approbation. Have they to doe with the simplest of their subjects? they have no meane to take advantage of him, if he but say; It is because he is my King, he

supposeth to have sufficiently expressed, and you must understand, that in so saying, he hath lent a helping hand to overthrowe himselfe. This qualitie suppresseth and consumeth all other true and essentiall qualities: they are even drowned in the Royaltie; which gives them no leave, to make the offices of their charge to prevaile, except in such actions as directly concerne and stead the same. *To be a King, is a matter of that consequence, that onely by it he is so.* That strange-glimmering and eye-dazeling light, which round about environeth, overcasteth and hideth him from us: our weake sight is thereby bleared and dissipated, as being filled and obscured by that greater and further-spredding brightnes. The Romane Senate allotted the honor and prise of eloquence unto *Tiberius*; he refused it, supposing that if it had beene true, he could not revenge himselfe of so limited and partiall judgement. As we yeeld Princes all advantages of honor, so we aucthorize their deffects and sooth-up their vices: not onely by approbation, but also by imitation. All *Alexanders* followers bare their heads sidelings, as he did. And such as flattered *Dionisius*, in his owne presence did run and juttle one another, and either stumbled at, or overthrow what ever stood before their feete, to inferre; that they were as short-sighted or spur-blinde, as he was. Naturall imperfections have sometimes served for commendation and favour. Nay I have seene deafnesse affected. And because the maister hated his wife, *Plutarch* hath seen courtiers to sue a divorce of theirs, whom they loved very well. And which is more, paillardise and all maner of dissolution hath thereby beene held in credit; as also disloyaltie, blasphemie, crueltie, heresie, superstition, irreligion, wantonnesse and worse, if worse may be. Yea by an example more dangerous, then that of *Mithridates* his flatterers, who forsomuch as their maister pretended to have skill in phisick, and aspired to the honour of a good Phisition, came to him to have their members incized and cauterized. For, these others suffer to have their soules cauterized; a much more precious and nobler part then the body. But to end where I began: *Adrian* the Emperor, debating with *Favorinus* the Philosopher about the interpretation of some word; *Favorinus* did soone yeeld the victory unto him, his friends finding-fault with him for it; you but jest, my maisters (quoth he) *would you not have him to be much wiser then I, who hath the absolute command over thirtie legions?* *Augustus* writ some verses against *Asinius Pollio*, which *Pollio* hearing, he said, I will hould my peace; for, *it is no wisdome to contend in writing with him, who may proscribe.* And they had reason: For, *Dionisius*, because he could not equall *Philoxenus* in Poesie, nor match *Plato* in discourse, condemned the one to the stone-quaries, and sent the other to be sould as a slave in the Ile of *Aegina*.