The doctors say that the thumbs are the master fingers of the hand and that their etymology in Latin is from *pollere.*[1] The Greeks call it ἀντίχειρ, as though to say "another hand." And it seems that sometimes the Latins also take it in the sense of the entire hand:

> But not excited by the gentle voice,
> Nor summoned by the soft thumb, does it rise.
>
> MARTIAL

It was a sign of favor in Rome to close in and hold down the thumbs—

> Your partisan with both his thumbs will praise your game
>
> HORACE

—and of disfavor to raise them and turn them outward:

> When the people's thumb turns up,
> They kill their man to please them.
>
> JUVENAL

The Romans exempted from war those who were wounded in the thumb, as no longer having a firm enough grasp for weapons. Augustus confiscated the goods of a Roman knight who had maliciously cut off the thumbs of two young sons of his to excuse them from going into the army. And before his time the Senate, at the time of the Italian wars, condemned Caius Vatienus to prison for life and confiscated all his goods for having deliberately cut off the thumb of his left hand, to exempt himself from that expedition.

Someone, I don't remember who, having won a naval battle, had the thumbs of his vanquished enemies cut off, to deprive them of the means of fighting and pulling an oar. [C]The Athenians had them cut off the Aeginetans to take away their superiority in naval skill.

[B]In Lacedaemon the schoolmaster chastised children by biting their thumbs.

27 *Cowardice, mother of cruelty*

[A]I have often heard it said that cowardice is the mother of cruelty. [B]And I have found by experience that the bitterness and hardness of a malicious and inhuman heart are usually accompanied by feminine weakness. I have observed that some of the most cruel are subject to weeping easily and for frivolous reasons. Alexander, tyrant of Pheres, could not bear to hear tragedies played in the theater for fear that his citizens might see him groaning at the misfortunes of Hecuba and Andromache, he who, without pity, had so many people cruelly mur-

[1] To be powerful. The Latin word for *thumb* is *pollex.*

dered every day. Could it be weakness of soul that made them so easily bent to every extreme?

[A]Valor, whose effect it is to act only against resistance—

Nor is it joy to kill the bull unless he fights

CLAUDIAN

—stops on seeing the enemy at its mercy. But pusillanimity, in order to say that it is also in the game, having been unable to take part in this first act, takes as its part the second, that of massacre and bloodshed. The murders in victories are usually done by the mob and the baggage officers. And what causes so many unheard-of cruelties in wars in which the people take part is that that beastly rabble tries to be warlike and brave by ripping up a body at their feet and bloodying themselves up to their elbows, having no sense of any other kind of valor:

[B]The wolves and loathsome bears fall on a dying foe,
And of the other beasts the lowest of the low,

OVID

[A]like cowardly curs, that in the house tear and bite the skins of wild beasts that they did not dare attack in the fields.

What is it that makes our quarrels all mortal these days; and why, whereas our fathers recognized some degrees in revenge, do we nowadays begin with the ultimate, and from the outset speak of nothing but killing? What is it, if it is not cowardice?

Every man clearly feels that there is more defiance and disdain in beating his enemy than in finishing him off, and in making him lick the dust than in making him die. Moreover, the appetite for vengeance is thereby better assuaged and contented, for it aims only at making itself felt. That is why we do not attack an animal or a stone when they hurt us, because they are incapable of feeling our revenge. And to kill a man is to put him in shelter from our harm.

[B]And just as Bias called out to a wicked man, "I know that sooner or later you will be punished for it, but I am afraid I may not see it," and pitied the Orchomenians because the penalty Lyciscus paid for the treason committed against them came at a time when there was no one left of those who had been injured by it and who would take pleasure in this penalty; just so vengeance is to be pitied when its object loses the means of feeling it. For, as the avenger wants to be aware of it in order to derive pleasure from it, the one on whom he takes revenge must be aware of it also in order to suffer pain and repentance.

[A]"He will repent it," we say. And because we have given him a pistol shot in the head, do we think that he repents it? On the contrary, if we consider it, we will find that he makes a face at us as he falls. He does not even hold it against us, so far is he from repenting. [C]And we do him the greatest favor of life, which is to make him die suddenly and insensibly. [A]We are busy hiding like rabbits, trotting about and fleeing the officers of justice who are pursuing us; and he is at rest. Killing is good to avoid an injury to come, not to avenge one already

done; [C]it is an act more of fear than of defiance, of precaution than of courage, of defense than of attack. [A]It is apparent that by it we abandon both the true end of vengeance and the care of our reputation. We fear that if he remains alive, he may renew the attack. [C]It is not against him, but for yourself, that you get rid of him.

In the kingdom of Narsinga this expedient would remain useless to us. There not only the men-at-arms but also the artisans settle their quarrels at sword's point. The king does not refuse the field to anyone who wants to fight, and looks on when they are persons of quality, rewarding the victor with a gold chain. But to conquer it, the first man who wants to can come to blows with the one who wears it; and he, for having disposed of one combat, has several on his hands.

[A]If we thought that by valor we would always be masters of our enemy and triumph over him at our pleasure, we would be very sorry for him to escape us, as he does by dying. We want to conquer, but more safely than honorably; [C]and in our quarrel we seek an ending more than glory.

For an honorable man, Asinius Pollio represented a like error; having written some invectives against Plancus, he waited until he was dead to publish them. That was like thumbing one's nose at a blind man, or uttering filthy abuse at a deaf man, or wounding an insensible man, rather than run the risk of his resentment. And so it was said about him that it was only for ghosts to wrestle with the dead. He who waits to see the death of the author whose writings he wants to combat, what is he saying but that he is weak and quarrelsome? Aristotle was told that someone had spoken ill of him. "Let him do more," he said, "let him whip me, provided I am not there."

[A]Our fathers contented themselves with avenging an insult by giving the lie, the lie by a blow, and so on in order. They were valorous enough not to fear their enemy, living and outraged. We tremble with fear as long as we see him on his feet. And as proof that this is so, does not our fine practice of today involve pursuing to death the man we have insulted as well as the man who has insulted us?

[B]It is also a type of cowardice that has introduced into our single combats this custom of being accompanied by seconds, and thirds, and fourths. Formerly they were duels; nowadays they are encounters and battles. The first ones who hit upon it were afraid of being alone: [C]*since neither man had any confidence in himself* [Livy]. [B]For naturally any company whatever brings comfort and relief in danger. Formerly they used third parties to guard against irregularity and foul play, [C]and to bear witness to the outcome of the combat. [B]But since it has become the fashion for them to take part themselves, whoever is invited cannot honorably stand by as a spectator, for fear this may be attributed to lack of affection or of courage.

Besides the injustice and baseness of such an action, engaging another valor and strength than your own in the protection of your honor, I find it a disadvantage, for a good man who trusts fully in himself, to go and involve his fortune with that of a second. Each man

runs enough risk for himself without running it also for another, and has enough to do to assure himself in his own valor for the defense of his life, without committing a thing so dear to the hands of a third party. For unless it has been expressly agreed to the contrary, it is a joint combat of the four. If your second is down, you have two on your hands, and rightly so. And if you say that it is unfair, it is indeed so, just like attacking, fully armed, a man who has only the stump of a sword, or, in full health, a man who is already badly wounded. But if these are advantages you have won in fighting, you may use them without reproach.

Disparity and inequality are weighed and considered only in regard to the state in which the fray begins; for the rest, take it up with fortune. And when you alone have three on you, your two companions having let themselves be killed, no one is wronging you, any more than I would do in war by striking with my sword, with a similar advantage, an enemy whom I saw engaged with one of our men. The nature of association has it that where there is troop against troop (as when our duke of Orléans challenged King Henry of England, a hundred against a hundred; [C]three hundred against the same number, like the Argives against the Lacedaemonians; three to three, like the Horatii against the Curiatii), [B]the entire number on either side is considered as only a single man. Wherever there is company the risk is confounded and mingled.

I have a family interest in this consideration; for my brother, the sieur de Mattecoulon, was called on in Rome to second a gentleman he hardly knew, who was the defender and challenged by another. In this combat he found himself by chance matched with one who was much closer and better known to him. (I would like to have someone justify by reason these laws of honor that so often clash with those of reason and confuse them.) After having disposed of his man, seeing the two principals still on their feet and intact, he went to the relief of his teammate. What less could he do? Should he have kept still and, if chance had so willed it, watched the man for whose defense he had come there being defeated? What he had done till then was of no help to the job: the quarrel was undecided.

The courtesy that you can and indeed should offer to your enemy when you have reduced him to bad terms and some great disadvantage, I do not see how you can offer it when the interest of another is at stake, where you are only an assistant, where the dispute is not your own.

He could be neither just nor courteous at the risk of the man to whom he had lent himself. Accordingly he was delivered from the prisons of Italy by a very prompt and solemn recommendation of our king.

Immoderate nation! We are not content with making our vices and follies known to the world by reputation, we go to foreign countries to display them in person. Put three Frenchmen in the deserts of Libya; they will not be together a month without harassing and scratching one another. You would think that this peregrination of ours is an

affair specially arranged to give foreigners the pleasure of our tragedies, and most often to those who rejoice in our misfortunes and laugh at them.

We go and learn fencing in Italy, [C]and practice it at the expense of our lives before we learn it. [B]And yet by the rule of discipline we should put theory before practice. We betray ourselves as apprentices:

> Bitter your youth's first-fruits, harsh your apprenticeship
> Into the war to come.
>
> VIRGIL

I know very well that it is an art [C]useful for its purpose (in the duel between the two princes in Spain, cousins-german, the elder, says Livy, by skill at arms and ruse easily overcame the reckless power of the younger), and an art, as I have learned by experience, [B]the knowledge of which has swelled the hearts of some beyond their natural measure. But this is not properly valor, since it draws its support from skill and has its basis in something other than itself.

The honor of the combat consists in the jealousy of courage, not of craft. And therefore I have observed a friend of mine, renowned as a grand master in this exercise, to choose in his quarrels weapons that deprived him of the means of this advantage, and which depended entirely on fortune and assurance, so that his victory should not be attributed to his fencing skill rather than his valor. And in my childhood the nobility avoided the reputation of good fencers as insulting, and learned it furtively, as a cunning trade, derogating from true and natural valor:

> To dodge, parry, withdraw, they do not seek;
> Nor does skill in their combat play a part;
> Their blows are not feints, now full, now oblique,
> Fury and rage forbid the use of art.
> Hear how their swords clash with a horrid shriek;
> Their feet stand fast, and never move apart.
> Their hands keep moving, though their feet remain,
> And not a thrust or slash is made in vain.
>
> TASSO

Shooting at the butts, tournaments, tiltings, practice at warlike combats, were the exercise of our fathers. This other exercise is all the less noble as it regards only a private end, which teaches us to destroy one another, contrary to the laws and justice, and in every way always produces harmful results. It is much more worthy and fitting to exercise at things that strengthen, not injure, our government, and that regard the public safety and the common glory.

Publius Rutilius, the consul, was the first who instructed the soldier in handling his weapons with skill and science, who joined art and valor, not for use in private quarrels, but for the wars and quarrels of the Roman people: [C]fencing for the people and the civic good.

And besides the example of Caesar, who ordered his men to shoot principally at the faces of Pompey's soldiers in the battle of Pharsalia,

a thousand other military leaders have thus bethought themselves of inventing new forms of weapons, new ways of striking and defending, according to the needs of the affair at hand.

[B]But just as Philopoemen condemned wrestling, in which he excelled, because the training for that exercise was different from that which pertained to military discipline, to which alone he considered that men of honor should apply themselves, so it seems to me that this adroitness to which we fashion our limbs, these dodges and movements to which young men are trained in this new school, are not only useless, but rather contrary and harmful to the practice of military combat.

[C]Moreover, our people commonly employ special weapons peculiarly planned for this purpose. And I have known the time when it was considered hardly the right thing for a gentleman, challenged to fight with sword and dagger, to present himself in military equipment. It is worthy of consideration that Laches, in Plato, speaking of an apprenticeship similar to ours in the handling of weapons, says he never saw any great warrior come out of this school, especially from its masters. As for these, our own experience tells us as much. Of the rest we can at least say that these are abilities that have no mutual relation or correspondence. And in the education of the children in his Republic, Plato forbids the arts of boxing, introduced by Amycus and Epeius, and of wrestling, by Antaeus and Cercyo, because they have another purpose than to make youths more fit for military service, and contribute nothing to it.

[B]But I am straying rather a bit from my theme.

[A]The Emperor Maurice, being warned by dreams and several prognostics that one Phocas, a soldier then unknown, was to kill him, was asking his son-in-law Philip who this Phocas was, his nature, his traits, and his habits; and when Philip told him among other things that he was cowardly and timorous, the Emperor immediately concluded from this that he was therefore murderous and cruel.

What makes tyrants so bloodthirsty? It is concern for their security, and the fact that their cowardly heart furnishes them with no other means of making themselves secure than by exterminating those who can injure them, even to the women, for fear of a scratch:

> [B]He strikes all things because he fears all things.
>
> CLAUDIAN

[C]The first cruelties are practiced for their own sake; thence arises the fear of a just revenge, which afterward produces a string of new cruelties, in order to stifle the first by the others.

Philip, king of Macedon, the one who had so many bones to pick with the Roman people, agitated by the horror of the murders committed by his orders, unable to make up his mind what to do against so many families injured by him at various times, decided to seize all the children of the people he had had killed, in order to destroy them one after the other, day by day, and thus make sure of his peace of mind.

Fine materials are always in place, wherever you sow them. I, who

have more concern for the weight and utility of the arguments than for their order and sequence, should not fear to place here, a little out of the way, a very beautiful story. Among others condemned by Philip there had been one Herodicus, prince of the Thessalians. Later, Philip also had Herodicus' two sons-in-law put to death, each one leaving a very small son. Theoxena and Archo were the two widows. Theoxena could not be induced to remarry, though she was much sought after. Archo married Poris, the leading man among the Aenians, and had a number of children by him, all of whom she left very young when she died. Theoxena, spurred by a maternal love for her nephews, married Poris in order to have them under her own guidance and protection.

Then came the proclamation of the king's edict. This courageous mother, mistrustful both of Philip's cruelty and of the licentiousness of his satellites toward these fair and tender children, dared to state that she would rather kill them with her own hands than give them up. Poris, alarmed by this declaration, promised her to steal them away and take them to Athens into the safekeeping of some faithful guest-friends of his. They took the occasion of an annual feast that was celebrated at Aenia in honor of Aeneas, and they went to it. Having attended the ceremonies and the public banquet during the day, at night they slipped out in a vessel that was ready, to get away by sea.

The wind was against them; and finding themselves the next morning in sight of the land from which they had put to sea, they were pursued by the harbor guards. As these were catching up, while Poris was busy hurrying the sailors in their flight, Theoxena, frantic with love and vengeance, fell back on her first plan. She prepared weapons and poison, and, showing them to the boys, said: "Come, my children, death is henceforth the only means of your defense and freedom, and will give the gods matter for their sacred justice. These drawn swords, these cups, open the way to it. Courage! And you, my son, who are the eldest, grasp this blade and die the braver death."

Having this vigorous counselor on one side, the enemies at their throats on the other, they each ran in a frenzy to what was nearest at hand; and, half-dead, they were thrown into the sea. Theoxena, proud of having provided so gloriously for the safety of all her children, warmly embraced her husband and said: "Let us follow these boys, my dear, and enjoy the same grave with them." And holding each other in this embrace they plunged headlong into the sea; so that the ship was brought back to shore empty of its masters.

[A]Tyrants, in order to do both things together, both to kill and to make their anger felt, have used all their ingenuity to find a way to prolong death. They want their enemies to be gone, but not so fast that they may not have leisure to savor their vengeance. Thereupon they are in great perplexity; for if the tortures are violent, they are short; if they are long, they are not painful enough to suit them. So they go dispensing their instruments of torture. We see a thousand examples of it in antiquity, and I know not whether, without thinking about it, we do not retain some trace of this barbarity.

All that is beyond plain death seems to me pure cruelty.[1] Our justice cannot hope that the man who will not be deterred from doing wrong by the fear of dying on the block or the gallows will be prevented by the idea of a slow fire, or pincers, or the wheel. And I do not know but that we meanwhile drive them to despair. For what can be the state of a man's soul who is waiting twenty-four hours for death broken on a wheel, or, in the old fashion, nailed to a cross?

Josephus relates that during the wars of the Romans in Judea, passing a place where they had crucified some Jews three days before, he recognized three of his friends and obtained leave to remove them from there. Two died, he says; the other lived on after.

[c]Chalcondylas, a trustworthy man, in the memoirs he left of things that happened in his time and in his vicinity, reports as an extreme punishment one that Emperor Mohammed II often practiced, of having men cut in two parts across the middle at the diaphragm with a single blow of a scimitar, whence it happened that they died as it were two deaths at once; and, he says, you saw both parts moving a long time after, full of life and writhing in torment.

I do not believe there was much feeling in that movement. The most hideous tortures to see are not always the hardest to endure. And I find more atrocious what other historians report he inflicted on some lords of Epirus: that he had them flayed piecemeal with such a maliciously ordered arrangement that their life lasted two weeks in this anguish.

Also these two others. Croesus, having had a gentleman seized who was the favorite of his brother Pantaleon, took him into a fuller's shop, where he had him so scratched and carded with the cards and combs of this carder that he died of it.

When George Sechel, leader of those Polish peasants who, under pretext of a crusade, did so much harm, had been defeated in battle by the voivode of Transylvania and taken, he was for three days bound naked to a wooden horse, exposed to every kind of torture that anyone could devise against him; during which time the other prisoners were given neither food nor drink. In the end, while he still lived and could see, they gave his blood to drink to his dear brother Lucat, for whose safety he kept praying, drawing upon himself all the hatred for their misdeeds. And they had twenty of his most favored captains feed on him, tearing his flesh with their teeth and swallowing the morsels. The rest of his body and the inner parts, when he was dead, were boiled and given to others of his followers to eat.

[1] This was one of the statements criticized by the papal censors in Rome when Montaigne was there in 1580–81. Montaigne neither changed nor suppressed it in later editions.