"A Princelike Soldier and Soldierlike Prince": Contemporary Views of the Military Leadership of Henry IV

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In the preface to his biography of Henry IV, historian David Buisseret defended the prominence he gave in the book to the king's military affairs and military events on the premise that the first Bourbon monarch of France "was above all a military man," and "had any one of half a dozen events gone the other way, . . . [Henry] would not have reached the throne or retained it and, I venture to say, the history of France in the early seventeenth century would have been quite different." Yet Buisseret's argument could be stronger still. For Henry IV's ultimate success in the French wars of religion pivoted to an enormous degree on his military ability and inspired leadership. Indeed, his final victory over the Holy Catholic League and its Spanish allies cannot be attributed solely to his political acumen or final conversion to Catholicism of July 1593; it owed at least as much to his talented generalship.

Too often, however, historians have dismissed the Bourbon monarch's great skill as a soldier and commander, alleging that although he was an able battlefield tactician, he was essentially an opportunist with little or no aptitude for strategy or for conducting extended campaigns. They

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also have accused the king of acting impetuously in war and of exposing himself needlessly to danger because of an alleged love of combat, irrespective of the potential for disaster if he were killed or gravely wounded. Their chief authority for these views is Alexander Farnese, prince of Parma, the outstanding commander of the day, who allegedly remarked after skirmishing with Henry near the town of Aumale in 1591, "I expected to see a general: this is only an officer of light cavalry!" When Henry was forced to withdraw before the Spanish counter-attack, the prince reportedly sneered that the French king's retreat was "gallant," but for his part he would never put himself in a position from which he would be forced to retire in the same manner.\(^2\) If, however, Parma's criticisms of Henry's generalship are well known and often quoted, his praise for the king's skills is not. In direct contrast to other statements, he noted with genuine respect for his royal French adversary "that this Prince was an Eagle in warre which soared into the cloudes when they thought to take him, and fell sodenly upon them which held him to be farther off\(^3\)"—high praise from a great general who, surrounded by Henry's forces at Yvetot in March 1592 during the Rouen campaign, found himself exactly in that position from which, he had boasted a year before, he would never be forced to retire.

In fact, the majority of contemporaries admired the king's great merits as a military commander, a master of the


art of war, a gifted tactician, and an able strategist who rose above many of the limitations imposed by contemporary circumstances upon military operations of the day.\textsuperscript{4} Hailed as a latter-day Caesar, "this princelike soouldier and soouldierlike Prince"\textsuperscript{5} was described by friend and foe alike as "a very good and experienced captain;"\textsuperscript{6} "diligent, vigilant and industrious" in all his undertakings;\textsuperscript{7} and decisive in action and adaptable to changing conditions, because he knew "how to keep his advantages whenever he had them."\textsuperscript{8} Such qualities, noted the English observer Edmund Skory, were "the essentaill parts of a [great] General."\textsuperscript{9} If Henry often seemed impatient with long deliberations when forming plans of action, delay being "contrary to his disposition,"\textsuperscript{10} he also knew how to wait for favorable opportunities, to act upon good advice, and to delegate authority well. He "never risked a dangerous


\textsuperscript{5} Edmund Skory, \textit{An extract out of the historie of the French King Henry the fourth} (London: R. Barker, 1610), n.p. (italics his).

\textsuperscript{6} Bibliothèque Nationale, Fonds Français 3977, fol. 191.


\textsuperscript{8} Joly, 10-11, 17-18; c.v., Villegomblain, 2:200; and \textit{Quatre excellents discours sur l'état présent de la France} (n.p.: 1593), 32.

\textsuperscript{9} Skory, n.p. (italics his).


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action but when obliged to do it by necessity."\textsuperscript{11} Nor did he undertake any fresh project without first assuring himself of ultimate victory, weighing the odds and considering all possible contingencies with "extraordinary prudence" prior to any new campaign.\textsuperscript{12} Such clear-thinking was the "foundation of all Royal virtues, . . . the mother of his actions and the root of his other perfections."\textsuperscript{13} In short, Henry was no mere opportunist with a flare for winning battles. On the contrary, he took the business of war very seriously, and in terms of strategic thinking, he was "so earnest about that which is laide before him, . . . that he regardeth less what is passed, and what is to come: he will not conceive much of any farrefetched practices, being content with his hope, and referring all upon it."\textsuperscript{14}

Perhaps the major contributor to the discrepancy between early modern and modern views of Henry IV's martial ability is the persistent tendency in much military history to compartmentalize the subject into distinct categories of battlefield tactics, strategy, and logistics without reference to a wider complex of influences on the decision-making of prominent historical figures whose careers cut across such artificial lines. Whether in the sixteenth century or today, the art of war cannot be waged with mathematical precision according to neat equations irrespective of all other considerations. Warfare is subject


\textsuperscript{12} Villegomblain, 2:53-4; Sully, 1:412-3; \textit{Quatre excellents discours}, 32; and Giovanni Mocenigo to the Doge and Senate of Venice, \textit{CSP Venice}, 8: 503.

\textsuperscript{13} Joly, 10.

\textsuperscript{14} Hurault, \"Discours,\" 41. For similar views, see Péréfixe, 93, and \textit{Quatre excellents discours}, 32.
instead to multiple variables, including random chance, that can dramatically affect for good or ill the best laid plans, preparations, and desired outcomes. Among these variables are economic, political, diplomatic, social, and personality factors that, in Henry's case, were further complicated by the role of religion and dynastic interest in his motives for selecting one course of action over another. To be sure, early modern commentators could be just as myopic in their evaluation of the Bourbon king's conduct in war as their modern counterparts. Even some of his closest companions-in-arms criticized him on occasion for his impetuosity in battle or for failing to take advantage of apparent opportunities in victory. Yet behind both their criticism and their praise was an appreciation, expressed sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, of the contemporary conditions under which Henry labored. These conditions included prevailing attitudes toward royal responsibility and the need for leadership by example in an age when old feudal bonds still united man to man according to an aristocratic code of chivalry. The difficulties imposed by religious division, dynasticism, and conflicts of loyalty among his supporters determined what was and was not possible for the king to achieve.

Whether before or after Henry's accession as French monarch in 1589, his military activities during the last of France's endemic civil-religious wars were dictated not by opportunism but by a pragmatic political strategy that focused on far greater religious and dynastic goals than simply winning battles. As king of Navarre and Calvinist heir presumptive to the Catholic French throne, his military posture between 1585 at the war's commencement and 1589 was consistently defensive. It aimed at sustaining the Huguenot cause against the superior forces of the Valois crown and the ultra-Catholic League without alienating the
reigning monarch, Henry III, with whom the Huguenot leader hoped to ally against their common enemy, the Spanish-backed Guise faction. Moreover, the Valois king was receptive to the idea but for the obstacle of religion, which the Calvinist Navarre sought to overcome by making the important political decision to undertake no project that would bring him into direct military conflict with Henry III, whom he persistently wooed with proffers of loyalty and support against mounting Guise arrogance at court.

This policy, not an alleged desire to lay captured enemy standards at the feet of his mistress, explains Navarre's apparent failure to exploit his first major victory at Coutras in 1587, though some Huguenots despaired at seeing their short-term military gains "float away like smoke on the wind." Had Henry taken the offensive by marching upon the Loire, as several advisers urged in the wake of the enemy's defeat, that action would have forced a battle with an army immediately under royal command and thereby destroyed his carefully planned political campaign to win over the Valois monarch. Ultimately, Navarre's defensive posture was vindicated when the two kings allied against the League a year and a half later. Yet not all of Henry's gains from Coutras were lost. The League's seigneur de Villegomblain recalled in later years that the victory established the Huguenot leader's military reputation among his contemporaries and "placed him in the ranks of the great captains of his time . . . because he demonstrated on that occasion much assurance and excellent judgment."

Although Henry's military posture became far more

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16 Villegomblain, 1:414-5.
aggressive after his succession to the French throne in August 1589, it was still governed by his political vision. On the one hand he sought to end the civil war in a manner which would satisfy his dynastic goal of securing the crown that was rightfully his by birth and pacifying the war-torn realm. On the other hand was his equally strong religious goal of preserving his Calvinist profession of faith in the face of mounting pressure to abjure from those moderate Catholics who had acknowledged his accession on condition that he convert. Consequently, between August 1589 and July 1593, the Bourbon monarch pursued a military plan of action directed toward consolidating his hold on the throne through decisive victory over the League, while deflecting the attention of his Catholic servitors away from the sensitive issue of his faith with a concentration on military affairs. As the Calvinist king of a Catholic France, Henry IV fully recognized that the army was for the moment "the sole basis of my authority and the conservation of the state."\(^{17}\) His strategy was therefore to apply relentless military pressure against the League to defeat it as quickly as possible. Otherwise, he knew, his Catholic supporters would fall away and the enemy would "usurp all the rest of this state, or at least leave me with only a small corner of it; but if I intensify the war, I can ruin and destroy them."\(^{18}\)

In fact, the king's aggressiveness in prosecuting the war with the League paid swift dividends. In addition to the damage they inflicted on the enemy's ability to resist, the royal victories at Arques (1589) and Ivry (1590) in particular produced such positive results within Henry's


\(^{18}\) Henry IV to the maréchal de Matignon, c. Dec. 1590, Ibid., 316.
own party that even his most restive Catholic supporters no longer contested "his rank, his quality or his absolute power" on religious grounds. The effect of the king's military successes was equally dramatic outside the realm in terms of the upsurge they inspired in international recognition of his legitimacy among some important Catholic states. Ultimately, however, Spanish military intervention in the civil war frustrated the king's political strategy. Twice the prince of Parma descended from the Netherlands to interrupt royal sieges before Paris (1590) and Rouen (1592). A master of maneuver, the prince avoided pitched battle with the Bourbon monarch, whose abilities he respected too much to gamble everything on a single field engagement. Unable, thereafter, to capture Paris – "the symbol of the maintenance of the Catholic League" – or win any more meaningful victories against the remnants of that faction, Henry IV was forced to recognize that his religious and dynastic goals were no longer compatible. That left him with no other option than to accept Catholicism as the only means to secure his throne and restore peace to France.

If Henry's long-term political policy lay in tatters, however, his military reputation as a great captain, in some eyes Parma's equal, endured. According to contemporaries, already in his youth he had begun to manifest those

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20 Ibid., 183.

qualities of leadership for which he was later held in such high esteem, having learned from the Huguenot party's defeats early in the civil-religious wars how "to bee a Captaine."22 Such reverses had "accustomed . . . [him] to the divers accidents of fortune"23 – a valuable lesson for his future military career. Trained as a battlefield commander by the Calvinist chiefs, Prince Louis de Condé and Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, the youthful Henri had so distinguished himself in his first engagements at Jarnac (1569), Montcontour (1569), and Arnay-le-duc (1570) that an impressed Blaise de Montluc predicted in 1576 that he would become a great leader.24 "And surely so hee is," attested the Huguenot sage Philippe Duplessis-Mornay twelve years later, "yea such a one as many compare with the mightiest that ever was. . . ."25

What contemporaries found especially praiseworthy was Henri IV's ability to inspire his followers. The League's maréchal de Tavannes certainly admired the king's capacity to rally his soldiers' morale and to sustain their loyalty at the enemy's expense, noting, for example, that Henry always spoke of forthcoming engagements as if his opponents already were defeated. This fostered such confidence among his troops, Tavannes recalled, that his battles were half-won before they had begun.26 Even the duc de Mayenne, who became leader of the Catholic League following the murder of his two older brothers in 1588, grudgingly acknowledged that his royal adversary's

22 Michel Hurault, "A Discourse upon the present state of France" (London: 1588), 7.
23 Quatre excellenents discours, 118.
25 Hurault, 7.
26 Gaspard de Saulx, seigneur de Tavannes, Mémoires, in Michaud and Poujoulat, 8:423.
followers drew their courage and diligence from his inspiration and leadership.  

In modern terms, what the French king implicitly understood was the need to secure a psychological advantage over an opponent, especially when that opponent – like the Catholic League – enjoyed superior financial and material resources to prosecute war. Under such circumstances, it was not simply useful but essential to inspire the troops' confidence and loyalty as a vital ingredient for military success. At the root of Henry IV's ability to inspire men lay his approachability – a quality that William Shakespeare defined in reference to an earlier English monarch of the same name as "A little touch of Henry in the night." Contemporaries admired how the king took time to relax with his soldiers whenever he could, "because he was assured that the more men knew him the more they would esteem him." Furthermore, he shared the discomforts of military life equally with his troops on the principle that "the dignity of Generall dispens'd him not from the dangers of the common soldier," with whom "he suffered patiently, and under-went . . . [equal] perils, inconveniences, and labours." This had the double effect of increasing Henry's popularity with his men along with his visibility while assuring their loyalty and ready  

29 "Discours envoyé à Rome et à son Altesse," 76.  
31 Skory, n.p.
obedience to his commands.\textsuperscript{32} At the same time, his personal conduct in battle strongly reinforced his image. Described as being "alwaies . . . the first in ye onset and the last in the retreat" and "without fear to endanger himself and his life" to defend his cause,\textsuperscript{33} the king was praised highly by contemporaries for "behaving himselfe moste royallie."\textsuperscript{34} Indeed, recalled the duc de Sully, a staunch admirer and faithful comrade-in-arms, "wherever there was most danger, there [Henry] was to be seen at the head of his soldiers."\textsuperscript{35}

Yet the king was also criticized for taking too many risks, for endangering his person, and for acting more like a field commander than a monarch.\textsuperscript{36} Even his closest advisers occasionally scolded their royal master for being "always too prodigal of his own blood, and too careful of that of his soldiers."\textsuperscript{37} Because of his chronic shortages in money, materiel, and manpower, however, Henry knew he had "to do the acts of light horse" and to be seen in the most dangerous places in action in order "to accelerate labours, animate his soldiers, sustain them in sallies, comfort the wounded, and cause money to be distributed

\textsuperscript{32} Péréfixe, 94.
\textsuperscript{35} Sully, 1:206.
\textsuperscript{37} Sully, 1:86.
amongst them.\textsuperscript{38} Otherwise, his moderate Catholic followers especially would have hesitated to fight for their Huguenot monarch who was dependent upon their support for ultimate victory in the long civil conflict with the rebellious Catholic League. The Venetian ambassador precisely identified the importance of the king's personal leadership when writing of the royal siege of Rouen in 1592 where "his Majesty ran some risk in his desire to set an example to the others [in the army], who are backward at attacking unless his Majesty exposes himself to danger."\textsuperscript{39} The English envoy, Sir Henry Unton, similarly stressed that the king was "only followed for his trewe vallour."\textsuperscript{40} Henry summarized his position best when he observed in the face of criticism, however well intentioned, that he daily endangered his life "to maintain my reputation, . . . since it is far better that I should die with arms in my hands, than live to see my kingdom ruined, and myself forced to seek refuge in a foreign country."\textsuperscript{41} In short, because he "knew that he owed his leadership . . . less to his place in the succession than to his willingness to risk his life in the forefront of every skirmish . . . more like a common cavalry captain than a Prince,"\textsuperscript{42} he had "rather to exceed the limits of valour," wrote Jean de Serres in


\textsuperscript{39} Giovanni Mocenigo to the Doge and Senate of Venice, CSP Venice, 8:590.

\textsuperscript{40} Sir Henry Unton to Lord Burghley, 6 Nov. 1591, in Unton, 129. See also Péréfixe, 58.

\textsuperscript{41} Quoted in Sully, 1:261.

1611, "then to be noted of any cowardise."\textsuperscript{43}

For parallel reasons, Henry "wanted no one to be compared to him in the matter of the waging of war." Some alleged even further that he was so jealous of his own reputation for victory that "he took no pleasure" in the distinction won by his subordinates in battle, "because he believed this was to the shame and disparagement of his own."\textsuperscript{44} Instead, claimed the seigneur de Villegomblain, he belittled their achievements and always blamed others for mistakes that occurred on campaign.\textsuperscript{45} What appears on the surface to have been petty jealousy, however, contemporaries justified as Henri's crucial need to maintain his personal renown as a soldier, "by which kings and princes sustain themselves far more often than by all their forces and means."\textsuperscript{46} After all, the sixteenth century was an age when the ancient code of chivalry and the idea of divine approval in trial by combat still had deep meaning. As Henry himself expressed it, "nothing preserves the authority of Princes like reputation, especially in this Kingdom [of France], composed as it is of a Nobility who make profession of honor and spill their blood in order to acquire it."\textsuperscript{47}

Despite contemporary testimony to the contrary, a tradition of criticism prevails among modern historians who otherwise agree that Henry IV was as skillful in battle as he was shrewd in politics and that his personal example often tipped the balance in his favor. They continue,

\textsuperscript{44} Villegomblain, 1:404.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 2:132, 162.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Lettres du cardinal d'Ossat}, 5 vols. (Amsterdam: P. Humbert, 1714), 1:228.
\textsuperscript{47} Henri IV to cardinal d'Ossat, 7 Mar. 1597, Ibid., 1:444.
however, to fault him for alleged military shortcomings, in particular for an inaptitude for strategic thinking. Early in the twentieth century, for example, Pierre de Vaissière agreed that Henry was tactically expert and that his personal *élan* and ability to inspire his men aided his cause. While never openly criticizing the king, Vaissière implied that Henry lacked talent in the science of strategy and tacitly supported the view that, although the king was swift to exploit any opportunity that came his way, he was generally negligent in taking advantage of victory. 48 Henry's failure to follow up his successes at Coutras and especially Ivry, when Paris was defenseless and vulnerable to royal attack in the wake of the League's defeat, were "lapses in strategy," wrote American historian Lynn Montross, which demonstrated that Henry "knew better how to gain than to use a victory." 49 The same view prevails in military quarters. General Maxime Weygand, who was himself familiar with defeat, also appreciated Henry IV's tactical skill on the field of battle and "the force of his personality," but he claimed that the Bourbon monarch had no real understanding of military theory. 50 To be sure, a few authors appreciated Henry's ability and urged their readers not to judge his military actions according to modern standards of warfare. 51 Yet they never tackled

directly the major criticism of the king's generalship, being content to defend both his actions after his battles and his self-exposure to danger under arms in broad outline.

Among the numerous modern critics of Henry IV's leadership, however, Sir Charles Oman stands paramount. Relying on the authority of Parma and a comparison of the Spanish commander with his royal French adversary – the basis of all criticism of Henry – Oman harshly disparaged Henry's faults in the field. He even attributed most setbacks experienced by the Huguenot-royalist cause directly to the king's limitations as a commander, arguing that Henry's decisions were motivated less by strategic thinking than by simple opportunism.\textsuperscript{52} The problem with these various criticisms of Henry's leadership, especially his alleged opportunism, is that they all derive from a superficial focus on his battlefield tactics – the logical outcome of a rigid and selective adherence among historians to Parma's observations. This comparison to the Spanish general's abilities is unfair because it considers neither the context or accompanying conditions that largely determined what the king could and could not achieve nor his ultimate political objectives. Hence the very sharp contrast between modern historical, even professional, military opinion and contemporary assessments that appreciated the circumstances under which Henry labored.\textsuperscript{53}


\textsuperscript{52} Sir Charles Oman, \textit{A History of the Art of War in the Sixteenth Century} (London: Methuen, 1937), 515. For similar criticisms, see Montross, 242-3; and John Keegan and Andrew Wheatcroft, \textit{Who's Who in Military History} (London: Wiedenfield and Nicolson, 1976), 155-6.

\textsuperscript{53} One recent author who has challenged the traditional view of Henry IV's generalship is Howard A. Lloyd, \textit{The Rouen Campaign 1590-1592: Politics, Warfare and the Early-Modern State} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). In this excellent study, Lloyd grants...
While Parma certainly deserves his enduring reputation for genius in the field, he also enjoyed advantages apparent to contemporary observers that the Bourbon monarch never had. Parma commanded a disciplined, professional army in contrast to Henry's largely volunteer forces, at least where the nobility were concerned. Furthermore, the Spanish commander could rely upon a large reservoir of men to reinforce his depleted ranks as well as the wealth and backing of the Spanish-Habsburg empire, whatever its occasional fiscal difficulties. In brief, Parma was able to execute sweeping campaigns by sixteenth-century standards and conduct formal siegecraft simply because he had the means to do so. Men, ammunition, and supplies were generally plentiful, even if constant delays in the arrival of money or the Spanish crown's periodic experience of bankruptcy did spark the occasional mutiny among Parma's tercios.

Henry IV, on the other hand, had neither the necessary force to engage in protracted campaigns nor sufficient backing at home or abroad to ensure plentiful reinforcements and supplies. Moreover, he had to contend with conflicts of politics, religion, and personalities within his own party that often divided those who served under his command. His campaigns were thus brief of necessity, while many were interrupted by his inability to keep his forces together because of simple logistical difficulties. The contemporary historian Henrico Davila clearly saw the contrast between the means available to the commanders and how these dictated their different styles of warfare. Henry IV was, he noted,

the General of a voluntary Army, and having no . . . other

Henry far greater due as a strategist than previous and even current historians.
security but himself, was necessitated to venture his own person upon all occasions, making way with his danger for those that followed him: but the Duke of Parma coming only to succour the Confederates [i.e., Leaguers], would not hazard at once the hopes of France, and the possession of Flanders, without expectation of some fruit by his victory, that might countervail so great a loss; and therefore with art and prudence . . . he pretended not to conquer, but not to be conquered.\textsuperscript{54}

Reflecting on Parma's narrow escape from Yvetot in 1592, the duc de Sully added further that one should consider two issues before comparing Henry's methods and behavior with Parma's: first, how a king laboring under so many disadvantages "was able to perform what is related of him" and, second, what that prince might have achieved if he had ever had access to a disciplined professional army such "as those conquerors had, whose actions have been so highly extolled by posterity."\textsuperscript{55} Otherwise, Sully implied, any attempt to contrast the respective abilities of the two commanders would be inaccurate and unjust.

Parma's invasions of France in 1590 and 1592 were masterpieces of maneuver that clearly attest to his skill. All too frequently Henry was forced to withdraw from his objectives when on the verge of victory by the timely arrival of Spanish relief and by Parma's refusal to fight him in open combat. Instead, the latter operated masterfully to achieve his goals with a minimum of loss, while Henry marched in vain to bring his opponent to battle. But if Parma was so confident of his own talent in contrast to his royal adversary's lesser ability, why did he never meet the king in a fair fight? According to royalist and rebel observers alike, Philip II's great commander "was afraid of engaging with a general such as he knew Henry to be, and

\textsuperscript{54} Davila, 534 (italics his).
\textsuperscript{55} Sully, 1:281.
of exposing to the event of battle the reputation of the greatest warrior in Europe," for he never had "found in all those wars so importunate nor so pressing an enemy as the king." "Only God can perform miracles," the prince once wrote to Philip II, admitting his reluctance to challenge a "triumphant enemy" who might shatter the military reputation Parma had worked so hard to acquire or to put that image "willingly into the arbitrement of Fortune, which he had already safe in his own hands." Just like Henry, Parma understood that his continuing success whether as governor of the rebellious Spanish Netherlands or an ally of the rebellious Catholic League depended upon his personal reputation as a soldier in battle as much as any other factor. Only this respect for Henry's abilities explains the prince's unwillingness to gamble on a field engagement, fearing perhaps that the king's generalship might prove more than a match for his own.

Clearly, contemporaries on both sides of the French religious wars appreciated Henry IV's military talent and leadership. His chief ability was his management and manipulation of men; he could reason with them, inspire them with confidence, and cajole them into actions beneficial to his cause. As one recent historian states in a more political context, the "art of using men well, such was, such will still be and such will always be the real talent of Henry IV, with that of commanding them well." But the king, who was "not a prince to lose his way in the conduct of war," also had greater tactical and strategic

56 Davila, 427.
58 Giovanni Mocenigo to the Doge and Senate of Venice, CSP Venice, IX, 18.
skills than are usually credited to him – skills extolled by his contemporaries. Perhaps the duc de Sully best captured these qualities when he wrote of his sovereign:

what utility it is for a general of an army not only to possess that quality of the mind which embraces all possible contingencies, but to be acquainted with the names, abilities, and good or bad qualities of all the officers, as well as of the different bodies which compose his army, and in his turn to be known by them as the only one of all the general officers whose advice . . . his soldiers would choose in any difficult conjunction to follow as the wisest and best; . . . to inspire them with a fondness for their occupation; to render their discipline pleasing; . . . in a word, to possess the art of making himself be at all times readily obeyed by them.59


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