

LAW 20

DO NOT COMMIT TO ANYONE

JUDGMENT

It is the fool who always rushes to take sides. Do not commit to any side or cause but yourself. By maintaining your independence, you become the master of others—playing people against one another, making them pursue you.

PART I: DO NOT COMMIT TO ANYONE, BUT BE COURTED BY ALL

If you allow people to feel they possess you to any degree, you lose all power over them. By not committing your affections, they will only try harder to win you over. Stay aloof and you gain the power that comes from their attention and frustrated desire. Play the Virgin Queen: Give them hope but never satisfaction.

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

When Queen Elizabeth I ascended the throne of England, in 1558, there was much to-do about her finding a husband. The issue was debated in Parliament, and was a main topic of conversation among Englishmen of all classes; they often disagreed as to whom she should marry, but everyone thought she should marry as soon as possible, for a queen must have a king, and must bear heirs for the kingdom. The debates raged on for years. Meanwhile the most handsome and eligible bachelors in the realm—Sir Robert Dudley, the Earl of Essex, Sir Walter Raleigh—vied for Elizabeth's hand. She did not discourage them, but she seemed to be in no hurry, and her hints as to which man might be her favorite often contradicted each other. In 1566, Parliament sent a delegation to Elizabeth urging her to marry before she was too old to bear children. She did not argue, nor did she discourage the delegation, but she remained a virgin nonetheless.

The delicate game that Elizabeth played with her suitors slowly made her the subject of innumerable sexual fantasies and the object of cultish worship. The court physician, Simon Forman, used his diary to describe his dreams of deflowering her. Painters represented her as Diana and other goddesses. The poet Edmund Spenser and others wrote eulogies to the Virgin Queen. She was referred to as "the world's Empresse," "that virtuous Virgo" who rules the world and sets the stars in motion. In conversation with her, her many male suitors would employ bold sexual innuendo, a dare that Elizabeth did not discourage. She did all she could to stir their interest and simultaneously keep them at bay.

Throughout Europe, kings and princes knew that a marriage with Elizabeth would seal an alliance between England and any nation. The king of Spain wooed her, as did the prince of Sweden and the archduke of Austria. She politely refused them all.

The great diplomatic issue of Elizabeth's day was posed by the revolt of the Flemish and Dutch Lowlands, which were then possessions of Spain. Should England break its alliance with Spain and choose France as its main ally on the Continent, thereby encouraging Flemish and Dutch independence? By 1570 it had come to seem that an alliance with France

would be England's wisest course. France had two eligible men of noble blood, the dukes of Anjou and Alençon, brothers of the French king. Would either of them marry Elizabeth? Both had advantages, and Elizabeth kept the hopes of both alive. The issue simmered for years. The duke of Anjou made several visits to England, kissed Elizabeth in public, even called her by pet names; she appeared to requite his affections. Meanwhile, as she flirted with the two brothers, a treaty was signed that sealed peace between France and England. By 1582 Elizabeth felt she could break off the courtship. In the case of the duke of Anjou in particular, she did so with great relief: For the sake of diplomacy she had allowed herself to be courted by a man whose presence she could not stand and whom she found physically repulsive. Once peace between France and England was secure, she dropped the unctuous duke as politely as she could.

By this time Elizabeth was too old to bear children. She was accordingly able to live the rest of her life as she desired, and she died the Virgin Queen. She left no direct heir, but ruled through a period of incomparable peace and cultural fertility.

Interpretation

Elizabeth had good reason not to marry: She had witnessed the mistakes of Mary Queen of Scots, her cousin. Resisting the idea of being ruled by a woman, the Scots expected Mary to marry and marry wisely. To wed a foreigner would be unpopular; to favor any particular noble house would open up terrible rivalries. In the end Mary chose Lord Darnley, a Catholic. In doing so she incurred the wrath of Scotland's Protestants, and endless turmoil ensued.

Elizabeth knew that marriage can often lead to a female ruler's undoing: By marrying and committing to an alliance with one party or nation, the queen becomes embroiled in conflicts that are not of her choosing, conflicts which may eventually overwhelm her or lead her into a futile war. Also, the husband becomes the de facto ruler, and often tries to do away with his wife the queen, as Darnley tried to get rid of Mary. Elizabeth learned the lesson well. She had two goals as a ruler: to avoid marriage and to avoid war. She managed to combine these goals by dangling the possibility of marriage in order to forge alliances. The moment she committed to any single suitor would have been the moment she lost her power. She had to emanate mystery and desirability, never discouraging anyone's hopes but never yielding.

Through this lifelong game of flirting and withdrawing, Elizabeth dominated the country and every man who sought to conquer her. As the center of attention, she was in control. Keeping her independence above all, Elizabeth protected her power and made herself an object of worship.

I would rather be a beggar and single than a queen and married.
Queen Elizabeth I, 1533-1603

KEYS TO POWER

Since power depends greatly on appearances, you must learn the tricks that will enhance your image. Refusing to commit to a person or group is one of these. When you hold yourself back, you incur not anger but a kind of respect. You instantly seem powerful because you make yourself ungraspable, rather than succumbing to the group, or to the relationship, as most people do. This aura of power only grows with time: As your reputation for independence grows, more and more people will come to desire you, wanting to be the one who gets you to commit. Desire is like a virus: If we see that someone is desired by other people, we tend to find this person desirable too.

The moment you commit, the magic is gone. You become like everyone else. People will try all kinds of underhanded methods to get you to commit. They will give you gifts, shower you with favors, all to put you under obligation. Encourage the attention, stimulate their interest, but do not commit at any cost. Accept the gifts and favors if you so desire, but be careful to maintain your inner aloofness. You cannot inadvertently allow yourself to feel obligated to anyone.

Remember, though: The goal is not to put people off, or to make it seem that you are incapable of commitment. Like the Virgin Queen, you need to stir the pot, excite interest, lure people with the possibility of having you. You have to bend to their attention occasionally, then—but never too far.

The Greek soldier and statesman Alcibiades played this game to perfection. It was Alcibiades who inspired and led the massive Athenian armada that invaded Sicily in 414 B.C. When envious Athenians back home tried to bring him down by accusing him of trumped-up charges, he defected to the enemy, the Spartans, instead of facing a trial back home. Then, after the Athenians were defeated at Syracuse, he left Sparta for Persia, even though the power of Sparta was now on the rise. Now, however, both the Athenians and the Spartans courted Alcibiades because of his influence with the Persians; and the Persians showered him with honors because of his power over the Athenians and the Spartans. He made

promises to every side but committed to none, and in the end he held all the cards.

If you aspire to power and influence, try the Alcibiades tactic: Put yourself in the middle between competing powers. Lure one side with the promise of your help; the other side, always wanting to outdo its enemy, will pursue you as well. As each side vies for your attention, you will immediately seem a person of great influence and desirability. More power will accrue to you than if you had rashly committed to one side. To perfect this tactic you need to keep yourself inwardly free from emotional entanglements, and to view all those around you as pawns in your rise to the top. You cannot let yourself become the lackey for any cause.

In the midst of the 1968 U.S. presidential election, Henry Kissinger made a phone call to Richard Nixon's team. Kissinger had been allied with Nelson Rockefeller, who had unsuccessfully sought the Republican nomination. Now Kissinger offered to supply the Nixon camp with valuable inside information on the negotiations for peace in Vietnam that were then going on in Paris. He had a man on the negotiating team keeping him informed of the latest developments. The Nixon team gladly accepted his offer.

At the same time, however, Kissinger also approached the Democratic nominee, Hubert Humphrey, and offered his aid. The Humphrey people asked him for inside information on Nixon and he supplied it. "Look," Kissinger told Humphrey's people, "I've hated Nixon for years." In fact he had no interest in either side. What he really wanted was what he got: the promise of a high-level cabinet post from both Nixon and Humphrey. Whichever man won the election, Kissinger's career was secure.

The winner, of course, was Nixon, and Kissinger duly went on to his cabinet post. Even so, he was careful never to appear too much of a Nixon man. When Nixon was reelected in 1972, men much more loyal to him than Kissinger were fired. Kissinger was also the only Nixon high official to survive Watergate and serve under the next president, Gerald Ford. By maintaining a little distance he thrived in turbulent times.

Those who use this strategy often notice a strange phenomenon: People who rush to the support of others tend to gain little respect in the process, for their help is so easily obtained, while those who stand back find themselves besieged with supplicants. Their aloofness is powerful, and everyone wants them on their side.

When Picasso, after early years of poverty, had become the most successful artist in the world, he did not commit himself to this dealer or that dealer, although they now besieged him from all sides with attractive offers and grand promises. Instead, he appeared to have no interest in their services; this technique drove them wild, and as they fought over him his prices only rose. When Henry Kissinger, as U.S. secretary of state, wanted to reach detente with the Soviet Union, he made no concessions or conciliatory gestures, but courted China instead. This infuriated and also scared the Soviets—they were already politically isolated and feared further isolation if the United States and China came together. Kissinger's move pushed them to the negotiating table. The tactic has a parallel in seduction: When you want to seduce a woman, Stendhal advises, court her sister first.

Stay aloof and people will come to you. It will become a challenge for them to win your affections. As long as you imitate the wise Virgin Queen and stimulate their hopes, you will remain a magnet of attention and desire.

Image:

The Virgin Queen.

The center of attention,
desire, and worship. Never
succumbing to one suitor or the
other, the Virgin Queen keeps
them all revolving around
her like planets, unable to
leave her orbit but never
getting any closer
to her.

Authority: Do not commit yourself to anybody or anything, for that is to be a slave, a slave to every man.... Above all, keep yourself free of commitments and obligations—they are the device of another to get you into his power.... (Baltasar Gracián, 1601-1658)

PART II: DO NOT COMMIT TO ANYONE-STAY ABOVE THE FRAY

Do not let people drag you into their petty fights and squabbles. Seem interested and supportive, but find a way to remain neutral; let others do the fighting while you stand back, watch and wait. When the fighting parties are good and tired they will be ripe for the picking. You can make it a practice, in fact, to stir up quarrels between other people, and then offer to mediate, gaining power as the go-between.

THE KITES, THE CROWS, AND THE FOX

The kites and the crows made an agreement among themselves that they should go halves in everything obtained in the forest. One day they saw a fox that had been wounded by hunters lying helpless under a tree, and gathered round it. The crows said, "We will take the upper half of the fox." "Then we will take the lower half," said the kites. The fox laughed at this, and said, "I always thought the kites were superior in creation to the crows; as such they must get the upper half of my body, of which my head, with the brain and other delicate things in it, forms a portion. " "Oh, yes, that is right," said the kites, "we will have that part of the fox." "Not at all," said the crows, "we must have it, as already agreed." Then a war arose between the rival parties, and a great many fell on both sides, and the remaining few escaped with difficulty. The fox continued there for some days, leisurely feeding on the dead kites and crows, and then left the place hale and hearty, observing, The weak benefit by the quarrels of the mighty . "

INDIAN FABLES

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

In the late fifteenth century, the strongest city-states in Italy—Venice, Florence, Rome, and Milan—found themselves constantly squabbling. Hovering above their struggles were the nations of France and Spain, ready to grab whatever they could from the weakened Italian powers. And trapped in the middle was the small state of Mantua, ruled by the young Duke Gianfrancesco Gonzaga. Mantua was strategically located in northern Italy, and it seemed only a matter of time before one of the powers swallowed it up and it ceased to exist as an independent kingdom.

Gonzaga was a fierce warrior and a skilled commander of troops, and he became a kind of mercenary general for whatever side paid him best. In the year 1490, he married Isabella d'Este, daughter of the ruler of another small Italian duchy, Ferrara. Since he now spent most of his time away from Mantua, it fell to Isabella to rule in his stead.

Isabella's first true test as ruler came in 1498, when King Louis XII of France was preparing armies to attack Milan. In their usual perfidious fashion, the Italian states immediately looked for ways to profit from Milan's difficulties. Pope Alexander VI promised not to intervene, thereby giving the French *carte blanche*. The Venetians signaled that they would not help Milan, either—and in exchange for this, they hoped the French would give them Mantua. The ruler of Milan, Lodovico Sforza, suddenly found himself alone and abandoned. He turned to Isabella d'Este, one of his closest friends (also rumored to be his lover), and begged her to persuade Duke Gonzaga to come to his aid. Isabella tried, but her husband balked, for he saw Sforza's cause as hopeless. And so, in 1499, Louis swooped down on Milan and took it with ease.

Isabella now faced a dilemma: If she stayed loyal to Lodovico, the French would now move against her. But if, instead, she allied herself with France, she would make enemies elsewhere in Italy, compromising Mantua once Louis eventually withdrew. And if she looked to Venice or Rome for help, they would simply swallow up Mantua under the cloak of coming to her aid. Yet she had to do something. The mighty king of France was breathing down her neck: She decided to befriend him, as she had

befriended Lodovico Sforza before him—with alluring gifts, witty, intelligent letters, and the possibility of her company, for Isabella was famous as a woman of incomparable beauty and charm.

In 1500 Louis invited Isabella to a great party in Milan to celebrate his victory. Leonardo da Vinci built an enormous mechanical lion for the affair: When the lion opened its mouth, it spewed fresh lilies, the symbols of French royalty. At the party Isabella wore one of her celebrated dresses (she had by far the largest wardrobe of any of the Italian princesses), and just as she had hoped, she charmed and captivated Louis, who ignored all the other ladies vying for his attention. She soon became his constant companion, and in exchange for her friendship he pledged to protect Mantua's independence from Venice.

Men of great abilities are slow to act. for it is easier to avoid occasions for committing yourself than to come well out of a commitment. Such occasions test your judgment; it is safer to avoid them than to emerge victorious from them. One obligation leads to a greater one, and you come very near to the brink of disaster.

BALTASAR GRACIÁN, 1601-1658

As one danger receded, however, another, more worrying one arose, this time from the south, in the form of Cesare Borgia. Starting in 1500, Borgia had marched steadily northward, gobbling up all the small kingdoms in his path in the name of his father, Pope Alexander. Isabella understood Cesare perfectly: He could be neither trusted nor in any way offended. He had to be cajoled and kept at arm's length. Isabella began by sending him gifts—falcons, prize dogs, perfumes, and dozens of masks, which she knew he always wore when he walked the streets of Rome. She sent messengers with flattering greetings (although these messengers also acted as her spies). At one point Cesare asked if he could house some troops in Mantua; Isabella managed to dissuade him politely, knowing full well that once the troops were quartered in the city, they would never leave.

Even while Isabella was charming Cesare, she convinced everyone around her to take care never to utter a harsh word about him, since he had spies everywhere and would use the slightest pretext for invasion. When Isabella had a child, she asked Cesare to be the godfather. She even dangled in front of him the possibility of a marriage between her family and his.

Somehow it all worked, for although elsewhere he seized everything in his path, he spared Mantua.

In 1503 Cesare's father, Alexander, died, and a few years later the new pope, Julius II, went to war to drive the French troops from Italy. When the ruler of Ferrara—Alfonso, Isabella's brother—sided with the French, Julius decided to attack and humble him. Once again Isabella found herself in the middle: the pope on one side, the French and her brother on the other. She dared not ally herself with either, but to offend either would be equally disastrous. Again she played the double game at which she had become so expert. On the one hand she got her husband Gonzaga to fight for the pope, knowing he would not fight very hard. On the other she let French troops pass through Mantua to come to Ferrara's aid. While she publicly complained that the French had "invaded" her territory, she privately supplied them with valuable information. To make the invasion plausible to Julius, she even had the French pretend to plunder Mantua. It worked once again: The pope left Mantua alone.

In 1513, after a lengthy siege, Julius defeated Ferrara, and the French troops withdrew. Worn out by the effort, the pope died a few months later. With his death, the nightmarish cycle of battles and petty squabbles began to repeat itself.

A great deal changed in Italy during Isabella's reign: Popes came and went, Cesare Borgia rose and then fell, Venice lost its empire, Milan was invaded, Florence fell into decline, and Rome was sacked by the Hapsburg Emperor Charles V. Through all this, tiny Mantua not only survived but thrived, its court the envy of Italy. Its wealth and sovereignty would remain intact for a century after Isabella's death, in 1539.

THE EAGLE AND THE SOW

An eagle built a nest on a tree, and hatched out some eaglets. And a wild sow brought her litter under the tree. The eagle used to fly off after her prey, and bring it back to her young. And the sow rooted around the tree and hunted in the woods, and when night came she would bring her young something to eat.

And the eagle and the sow lived in neighborly fashion. And a grimalkin laid her plans to destroy the eaglets and the little sucking pigs. She went to the eagle, and said: "Eagle, you had better not fly very far away. Beware of the

sow; she is planning an evil design. She is going to undermine the roots of the tree. You see she is rooting all the time.”

Then the grimalkin went to the sow and said: “Sow, you have not a good neighbor. Last evening I heard the eagle saying to her eaglets: ‘My dear little eaglets, I am going to treat you to a nice little pig. Just as soon as the sow is gone, I will bring you a little young sucking pig.’”

From that time the eagle ceased to fly out after prey, and the sow did not go any more into the forest. The eaglets and the young pigs perished of starvation, and grimalkin feasted on them.

FABLES, LEO TOLSTOY, 1828-1910

Interpretation

Isabella d'Este understood Italy's political situation with amazing clarity: Once you took the side of any of the forces in the field, you were doomed. The powerful would take you over, the weak would wear you down. Any new alliance would lead to a new enemy, and as this cycle stirred up more conflict, other forces would be dragged in, until you could no longer extricate yourself. Eventually you would collapse from exhaustion.

Isabella steered her kingdom on the only course that would bring her safely through. She would not allow herself to lose her head through loyalty to a duke or a king. Nor would she try to stop the conflict that raged around her—that would only drag her into it. And in any case the conflict was to her advantage. If the various parties were fighting to the death, and exhausting themselves in the process, they were in no position to gobble up Mantua. The source of Isabella's power was her clever ability to seem interested in the affairs and interests of each side, while actually committing to no one but herself and her kingdom.

Once you step into a fight that is not of your own choosing, you lose all initiative. The combatants' interests become your interests; you become their tool. Learn to control yourself, to restrain your natural tendency to take sides and join the fight. Be friendly and charming to each of the combatants, then step back as they collide. With every battle they grow weaker, while you grow stronger with every battle you avoid.

When the snipe and the mussel struggle, the fisherman gets the benefit.

Ancient Chinese saying

KEYS TO POWER

To succeed in the game of power, you have to master your emotions. But even if you succeed in gaining such self-control, you can never control the temperamental dispositions of those around you. And this presents a great danger. Most people operate in a whirlpool of emotions, constantly reacting, churning up squabbles and conflicts. Your self-control and autonomy will only bother and infuriate them. They will try to draw you into the whirlpool, begging you to take sides in their endless battles, or to make peace for them. If you succumb to their emotional entreaties, little by little you will find *your* mind and time occupied by *their* problems. Do not allow whatever compassion and pity you possess to suck you in. You can never win in this game; the conflicts can only multiply.

On the other hand, you cannot completely stand aside, for that would cause needless offense. To play the game properly, you must seem interested in other people's problems, even sometimes appear to take their side. But while you make outward gestures of support, you must maintain your inner energy and sanity by keeping your emotions disengaged. No matter how hard people try to pull you in, never let your interest in their affairs and petty squabbles go beyond the surface. Give them gifts, listen with a sympathetic look, even occasionally play the charmer—but inwardly keep both the friendly kings and the perfidious Borgias at arm's length. By refusing to commit and thus maintaining your autonomy you retain the initiative: Your moves stay matters of your own choosing, not defensive reactions to the push-and-pull of those around you.

THE PRICE OF ENVY

While a poor woman stood in the market place selling cheeses, a cat came along and carried off a cheese. A dog saw the pilferer and tried to take the cheese away from him. The cat stood up to the dog. So they pitched into each other. The dog barked and snapped; the cat spat and scratched, but they could bring the battle to no decision.

“Let's go to the fox and have him referee the matter, ” the cat finally suggested. “Agreed, ” said the dog. So they went to the fox. The fox listened

to their arguments with a judicious air.

“Foolish animals,” he chided them, “why carry on like that? If both of you are willing, I’ll divide the cheese in two and you’ll both be satisfied. ”

“Agreed, ” said the cat and the dog.

So the fox took out his knife and cut the cheese in two, but, instead of cutting it lengthwise, he cut it in the width. “My half is smaller!” protested the dog.

The fox looked judiciously through his spectacles at the dog’s share.

“You’re right, quite right!” he decided.

So he went and bit off a piece of the cat’s share.

“That will make it even!” he said.

When the cat saw what the fox did she began to yowl:

“Just look! My part’s smaller now!”

The fox again put on his spectacles and looked judiciously at the cat’s share.

“Right you are!” said the fox. “Just a moment, and I’ll make it right.”

And he went and bit off a piece from the dog’s cheese. This went on so long, with the fox nibbling first at the dog’s and then at the cat’s share, that he finally ate up the whole cheese before their eyes.

A TREASURY OF JEWISH FOLKLORE, NATHAN AUSUBEL, ED.,
1948

Slowness to pick up your weapons can be a weapon itself, especially if you let other people exhaust themselves fighting, then take advantage of their exhaustion. In ancient China, the kingdom of Chin once invaded the kingdom of Hsing. Huan, the ruler of a nearby province, thought he should rush to Hsing’s defense, but his adviser counseled him to wait: “Hsing is not yet going to ruin,” he said, “and Chin is not yet exhausted. If Chin is not exhausted, [we] cannot become very influential. Moreover, the merit of supporting a state in danger is not as great as the virtue of reviving a ruined one.” The adviser’s argument won the day, and as he had predicted, Huan later had the glory both of rescuing Hsing from the brink of destruction and then of conquering an exhausted Chin. He stayed out of the fighting until the forces engaged in it had worn each other down, at which point it was safe for him to intervene.

That is what holding back from the fray allows you: time to position yourself to take advantage of the situation once one side starts to lose. You can also take the game a step further, by promising your support to both

sides in a conflict while maneuvering so that the one to come out ahead in the struggle is you. This was what Castruccio Castracani, ruler of the Italian town of Lucca in the fourteenth century, did when he had designs on the town of Pistoia. A siege would have been expensive, costing both lives and money, but Castruccio knew that Pistoia contained two rival factions, the Blacks and the Whites, which hated one another. He negotiated with the Blacks, promising to help them against the Whites; then, without their knowledge, he promised the Whites he would help them against the Blacks. And Castruccio kept his promises—he sent an army to a Black-controlled gate to the city, which the sentries of course welcomed in. Meanwhile another of his armies entered through a White-controlled gate. The two armies united in the middle, occupied the town, killed the leaders of both factions, ended the internal war, and took Pistoia for Castruccio.

Preserving your autonomy gives you options when people come to blows—you can play the mediator, broker the peace, while really securing your own interests. You can pledge support to one side and the other may have to court you with a higher bid. Or, like Castruccio, you can appear to take both sides, then play the antagonists against each other.

Oftentimes when a conflict breaks out, you are tempted to side with the stronger party, or the one that offers you apparent advantages in an alliance. This is risky business. First, it is often difficult to foresee which side will prevail in the long run. But even if you guess right and ally yourself with the stronger party, you may find yourself swallowed up and lost, or conveniently forgotten, when they become victors. Side with the weaker, on the other hand, and you are doomed. But play a waiting game and you cannot lose.

In France's July Revolution of 1830, after three days of riots, the statesman Talleyrand, now elderly, sat by his Paris window, listening to the pealing bells that signaled the riots were over. Turning to an assistant, he said, "Ah, the bells! We're winning." "Who's 'we,' *mon prince*?" the assistant asked. Gesturing for the man to keep quiet, Talleyrand replied, "Not a word! I'll tell you who we are tomorrow." He well knew that only fools rush into a situation—that by committing too quickly you lose your maneuverability. People also respect you less: Perhaps tomorrow, they think, you will commit to another, different cause, since you gave yourself so easily to this one. Good fortune is a fickle god and will often pass from one side to the other. Commitment to one side deprives you of the

advantage of time and the luxury of waiting. Let others fall in love with this group or that; for your part don't rush in, don't lose your head.

Finally, there are occasions when it is wisest to drop all pretence of appearing supportive and instead to trumpet your independence and self-reliance. The aristocratic pose of independence is particularly important for those who need to gain respect. George Washington recognized this in his work to establish the young American republic on firm ground. As president, Washington avoided the temptation of making an alliance with France or England, despite the pressure on him to do so. He wanted the country to earn the world's respect through its independence. Although a treaty with France might have helped in the short term, in the long run he knew it would be more effective to establish the nation's autonomy. Europe would have to see the United States as an equal power.

Remember: You have only so much energy and so much time. Every moment wasted on the affairs of others subtracts from your strength. You may be afraid that people will condemn you as heartless, but in the end, maintaining your independence and self-reliance will gain you more respect and place you in a position of power from which you can choose to help others on your own initiative.

Image: A Thicket of Shrubs. In the forest, one shrub latches on to another, entangling its neighbor with its thorns, the thicket slowly extending its impenetrable domain. Only what keeps its distance and stands apart can grow and rise above the thicket.

Authority: Regard it as more courageous not to become involved in an engagement than to win in battle, and where there is already one interfering fool, take care that there shall not be two. (Baltasar Gracián, 1601-1658)

REVERSAL

Both parts of this law will turn against you if you take it too far. The game proposed here is delicate and difficult. If you play too many parties against one another, they will see through the maneuver and will gang up on you. If you keep your growing number of suitors waiting too long, you will inspire not desire but distrust. People will start to lose interest. Eventually you may find it worthwhile to commit to one side—if only for appearances' sake, to prove you are capable of attachment.

Even then, however, the key will be to maintain your inner independence—to keep yourself from getting emotionally involved. Preserve the unspoken option of being able to leave at any moment and reclaim your freedom if the side you are allied with starts to collapse. The friends you made while you were being courted will give you plenty of places to go once you jump ship.