

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 4



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That the Soul discharges her Passions upon false Objects, where the true are wanting

A Gentleman of my Country, who was very often tormented with the Gout, being importun'd by his Physicians totally to reclaim his Appetite from all manner of salt Meats, was wont presently to reply, that he must needs have something to quarrel with in the extremity of his Fits, and that he fancy'd, that railing at, and cursing one while the *Bologna* Sawsages, and another the dry'd Tongues and the Hamms, was some mitigation to his pain. And in good earnest, as the Arm when it is advanc'd to strike, if it fail of meeting with that upon which it was design'd to discharge the blow, and spends it self in vain, does offend the Striker himself; and as also, that to make a pleasant Prospect the Sight should not be lost and dilated in vast extent of empty Air, but have some Bounds to limit and circumscribe it at a reasonable distance:

*Ventus ut amittit vires, nisi robore densæ
Occurrant Sylvæ, spatium diffusum inani.*

*As Winds do lose their strength, unless withstood
By some dark Grove of strong opposing wood.*

So it appears, that the Soul, being transported and discompos'd, turns its violence upon it self, if not supply'd with something to oppose it, and therefore always requires an Enemy object on which to discharge its Fury and Resentment. *Plutarch* says very well of those who are delighted with little Dogs and Monkey's; that the amorous part that is in us, for want of a legitimate Object, rather than lie idle, does after that manner forge, and create one frivolous and false; as we see that the Soul, in the exercise of its Passions, inclines rather to deceive it self, by creating a false and fantastical Subject, even contrary to its own Belief, than not to have something to work upon. And after this manner Brute Beasts direct their Fury to fall upon the Stone or Weapon that has hurt them, and with their Teeth even execute Revenge upon themselves, for the Injury they have receiv'd from another.

*Pannonis haud aliter post ictum saevior Ursa,
Cui jaculum parua Lybis amentavit habena,
Se rotat in uulnus telumque irata receptum
Impetit, & secum fugientem circuit Hastam.*

*So the fierce Bear, made fiercer by the smart
Of the bold Lybian's mortal guided Dart,
Turns round upon the Wound, and the tough Spear
Contorted o'er her Breast does flying bear.*

What causes of the misadventures that befall us do we not invent? what is it that we do not lay the fault to right or wrong, that we may have something to quarrel with? Those beautiful Tresses, young Lady, you may so liberally tear off, are no way guilty, nor is it the whiteness of those delicate Breasts you so unmercifully beat, that with an unlucky Bullet has slain your beloved Brother: quarrel with something else. *Livy*, speaking of the Roman Army in Spain, says, that for the loss of two Brothers, who were both great Captains: *Flere omnes repente, & offensare capita*. that they all wept, and tore their Hair. 'Tis the common practice of Affliction. And the Philosopher *Bion* said pleasantly of the King, who by handfulls pull'd his Hair off his Head for Sorrow, *Does this man think that Baldness is a Remedy for Grief?* Who has not seen peevish Gamesters worry the Cards with their Teeth, and swallow whole Bales of Dice in revenge for the Loss of their Money? *Xerxes* whip'd the Sea, and writ a Challenge to Mount *Athos*; *Cyrus* employ'd a whole Army several days at work, to revenge himself of the River *Gnydus*, for the Fright it had put him into in passing over; and *Caligula* demolish'd a very beautiful Palace for the Pleasure his Mother had once enjoy'd there. I remember there was a Story currant, when I was a Boy, That one of our Neighbouring Kings having receiv'd a Blow from the Hand of GOD, swore he would be reveng'd, and in order to it, made Proclamation, that for ten Years to come no one should pray to him, or so much as mention him throughout his Dominions: by which we are not so much to take measure of the Folly, as the Vain-Glory of the Nation of which this Tale was told. They are Vices that indeed always go together; but such Actions as these have in them more of Presumption than want of Wit. *Augustus Cæsar*, having been tost with a Tempest at Sea, fell to defying *Neptune*, and in the Pomp of the *Circensian* Games, to be reveng'd, depos'd his Statue from the place it had amongst the other Deities. Wherein he was less excusable than the former, and less than he was afterwards, when having lost a Battel under *Quintilius Varus* in Germany, in Rage and Despair he went running his Head against the Walls, and crying out, *O Varus!* give me my Men again! for these exceed all Folly, forasmuch as Impiety is joyn'd with it invading God himself, or at least Fortune, as if she had Ears that were subject to our Batteries; like the *Thracians*, who when it Thunders or Lightens, fall to Shooting against Heaven with a *Titanian* Madness, as if by Flights of Arrows they intended to reduce God Almighty to Reason. Though the ancient Poet in *Plutarch* tells us,

*Point ne se faut couroucer aux affaires,
Il ne leur chaut de toutes nos choleres.*

*We must not quarrel Heaven in our Affairs,
That little for a mortal's Anger cares.*

But we can never enough decry nor sufficiently condemn the senseless and ridiculous Sallies of our unruly Passions.