

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 37

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How We Cry and Laugh at the Same Thing

When we read in history that Antigonus was very much displeased with his son for presenting him the head of King Pyrrhus his enemy, but newly slain fighting against him, and that seeing it, he wept; and that Rene, Duke of Lorraine, also lamented the death of Charles, Duke of Burgundy, whom he had himself defeated, and appeared in mourning at his funeral; and that in the battle of d'Auray (which Count Montfort obtained over Charles de Blois, his competitor for the duchy of Brittany), the conqueror meeting the dead body of his enemy, was very much afflicted at his death, we must not presently cry out:

*E così auen, the l'animo ciascuna
Sua passion sotto el contrario manto,
Ricopre, con la vista hor' chiara hor' bruna.*

When Pompey's head was presented to Caesar, the histories tell us that he turned away his face, as from a sad and unpleasing object. There had been so long an intelligence and society betwixt them in the management of the public affairs, so great a community of fortunes, so many mutual offices, and so near an alliance, that this countenance of his ought not to suffer under any misinterpretation, or to be suspected for either false or counterfeit, as this other seems to believe:

*tutumque putavit
Jam bonus esse socer; lacrymas non sponte cadentes
Effudit, gemitusque expressit pectore læto.*

For though it be true that the greatest part of our actions are no other than visor and disguise, and that it may sometimes be true that

Hæredis fletus sub persona rises est,

yet, in judging of these accidents, we are to consider how much our souls are oftentimes agitated with divers passions. And as they say that in our bodies there is a congregation of divers humors, of which that is the

And thus it happens that the mind of each veils its passion under a different appearance, and beneath a smiling visage, gay beneath a somber air. • CANZONIERE, 102

And now he thought it safe to play the kind father-in-law, shedding forced tears, and from a joyful breast discharging sighs and groans. • LUC., 9.1037

The heir's tears behind the mask are smiles. • P. SYRUS, SENT., H

sovereign which, according to the complexion we are of, is commonly most predominant in us: so, though the soul have in it divers motions to give it agitation, yet must there of necessity be one to overrule all the rest, though not with so necessary and absolute a dominion but that through the flexibility and inconstancy of the soul, those of less authority may upon occasion reassume their place and make a little sally in turn. Thence it is, that we see not only children, who innocently obey and follow nature, often laugh and cry at the same thing, but not one of us can boast, what journey soever he may have in hand that he has the most set his heart upon, but when he comes to part with his family and friends, he will find something that troubles him within; and though he refrain his tears yet he puts foot in the stirrup with a sad and cloudy countenance. And what gentle flame soever may warm the heart of modest and wellborn virgins, yet are they fain to be forced from about their mothers' necks to be put to bed to their husbands, whatever this boon companion is pleased to say:

*Estne novis nuptis odio Venus? anne parentum
Frustrantur falsis gaudia lachrimulis,
Ubertim thalami quasi intra limina fundunt?
Non, ita me divi, vera gemunt, juverint.*

Neither is it strange to lament a person dead whom a man would by no means should be alive.

When I rattle my man, I do it with all the mettle I have, and load him with no feigned, but downright real curses; but the heat being over, if he should stand in need of me, I should be very ready to do him good: for I instantly turn the leaf. When I call him calf and coxcomb, I do not pretend to entail those titles upon him for ever; neither do I think I give myself the lie in calling him an honest fellow presently after. No one quality engrosses us purely and universally. Were it not the sign of a fool to talk to one's self, there would hardly be a day or hour wherein I might not be heard to grumble and mutter to myself and against myself, "Confound the fool!" and yet I do not think that to be my definition.

Who for seeing me one while cold and presently very fond toward my wife, believes the one or the other to be counterfeited, is an ass. Nero, taking leave of his mother whom he was sending to be drowned, was nevertheless sensible of some emotion at this farewell, and was struck with horror and pity.

'Tis said, that the light of the sun is not one continuous thing, but that he darts new rays so thick one upon another that we cannot perceive the intermission:

*Largus enim liquidi fons luminis, ætherius sol,
Irrigat assidue cœlum candore recenti,
Suppeditatque novo confestim lumine lumen.*

Just so the soul variously and imperceptibly darts out her passions.

Is Venus really so alarming to the new-made bride, or does she honestly oppose her parent's rejoicing the tears she so abundantly sheds on entering the nuptial chamber? No, by the Gods, these are no true tears. • CATULL., 66.15

So the wide fountain of liquid light, the ethereal sun, steadily fertilises the heavens with new heat, and supplies a continuous store of fresh light. • LUCR., 5.281

Artabanus coming by surprise once upon his nephew Xerxes, chid him for the sudden alteration of his countenance. He was considering the immeasurable greatness of his forces passing over the Hellespont for the Grecian expedition: he was first seized with a palpitation of joy, to see so many millions of men under his command, and this appeared in the gaiety of his looks: but his thoughts at the same instant suggesting to him that of so many lives, within a century at most, there would not be one left, he presently knit his brows and grew sad, even to tears.

We have resolutely pursued the revenge of an injury received, and been sensible of a singular contentment for the victory; but we shall weep notwithstanding. 'Tis not for the victory, though, that we shall weep: there is nothing altered in that but the soul looks upon things with another eye and represents them to itself with another kind of face; for everything has many faces and several aspects. Relations, old acquaintances, and friendships, possess our imaginations and make them tender for the time, according to their condition; but the turn is so quick, that 'tis gone in a moment:

*Nil adeo fieri celeri ratione videtur
Quam si mens fieri proponit, et inchoat ipsa,
Ocius ergo animus, quam res se perciet ulla,
Ante oculos quorum in promptu natura videtur.*

Nothing therefore seems to be done in so swift a manner than if the mind proposes it to be done, and itself begins. It is more active than anything which we see in nature. •
LUCR., 3.182

And therefore, if we would make one continued thing of all this succession of passions, we deceive ourselves. When Timoleon laments the murder he had committed upon so mature and generous deliberation, he does not lament the liberty restored to his country, he does not lament the tyrant; but he laments his brother: one part of his duty is performed; let us give him leave to perform the other.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Canzoniere	Petrarch, <i>Il Canzoniere</i>
Catull.	Catullus, <i>Poems</i>
Luc.	Lucan, <i>Civil War</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
P. Syrus, Sent.	Publilius Syrus, <i>Sententiae</i>