

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 2



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Last updated on January 4, 2024

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ESSAYS-1-2-20240215-144444

On Sorrow

b I AM LARGELY FREE of this emotion. c And I neither like it nor admire it even though the rest of the world has chosen to treat it as something special, as if it simply were. They wrap wisdom, virtue, and conscience in it. A dumb and ugly trick! But the Italians rightfully invoke its name to speak of a vicious mood. For it is always harmful and unpredictable, and so cowardly and vile that the Stoics forbade their people from giving in to it.

b But a the story says that Psammenitus, king of Egypt, having been defeated and taken prisoner by Cambyses, king of Persia, and seeing his daughter dressed as a servant and sent to fetch water, managed to remain silent and not look at her while his friends around him were crying and lamenting. And seeing later his son being led to be executed he stayed the same. But once he caught a glimpse of one of his people taken away prisoner, he hit himself on the head and led all into a full wail.

a Something similar happened recently to one of our princes who, while in Trent, heard the news of his elder brother's death—not just a brother but the bedrock and honor of his family—soon followed by that of his younger brother, his second hope.¹ Having borne these blows with exemplary steadiness, he fell apart when he was told, a few days later, that one of his people had died. He let himself go and gave in to mourning and regrets to such an extent that some said only the latter of these losses had touched him. In truth it was that, being already so full of sadness, the smallest addition exceeded the limits of his suffering. Our historical tale could be understood the same way, or so I believe, did it not go on to say that, when Cambyses asked Psammenitus why, unfazed by the misfortune of his son and of his daughter, he could not bear to see that of his friends, he responded that he was able to express the sadness of the latter through tears but that the first two far exceeded any means of expression.

a The story also comes to mind of an ancient painter who, being tasked with showing Iphigenia's sacrifice and the sorrow of those around her, each one according to how closely they were connected to the death of this beautiful, innocent girl, and who, having used every last artistic means at

his disposal, when came time to the maiden's father, chose to depict him with his face hidden, as if no expression could convey the extent of his sorrow. This is the reason why poets evoke Niobe, this poor mother who lost seven sons and then as many daughters, a woman overwhelmed by losses, turned into a rock,

a dirigisse malis²

a to speak of this dull, mute, and deaf shock which paralyzes us when what befalls us is too much to bear.

a For it is true that pain, when it is so extreme, manages to shock every part of the soul and to deprive it of its ability to act. When terrible news suddenly reaches us, we feel stunned, frozen, as if robbed of our movements. Yet once the soul finds, in tears and in sobs, a way to let go, it is as if it could escape, unfurl, and be whole and free again.

b Et uia uix tandem uoci laxata dolore est.

c During the war between King Ferdinand and the widow of King John of Hungary,³ in Buda, a cavalryman stood out for his excellent service in a certain battle. Unknown yet highly praised, when he died there he was missed by all and by one Raissiac in particular, a German lord, a man imbued with a rare character. Curious to find out the man's identity, he joined others to go see the body that had been brought back only to recognize, once the armor was taken off, his own son. His companions felt a deeper sadness but he alone stood silent, eyes wide open, staring at the body of his son, until the intensity of his sorrow, having overwhelmed his vital spirit, struck him dead.

a Chi puo dir com'egli arde è in picciol fuoco

a as lovers say when they want to speak of an unbearable passion.

*a misero quod omnes
Eripit sensus mihi. Nam simul te
Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi
Quod loquar amens.
Lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus
Flamma dimanat, sonitu suopte
Tintinant aures, gemina teguntur
Lumina nocte.*

b And so it cannot be in these intense feverish states that we will find words to convey our grievances and our wishes, when the mind is mired in obsessive thoughts and the body exhausted and languishing in love.

a And thence the unfortunate failure which sometimes catches lovers at the worst time; and, at the height of pleasure, the chill that seizes them arising from the intensity of their desire.⁴ When passions are palatable and digestible they are but mediocre.

Petrified by misery. • Ov., MET., 6.303

And at length and with difficulty is a passage opened by grief for utterance. • Verg., AEN., 11.151

He who can say how he burns with love, has little fire. • CANZONIERE, 170

Love deprives me of all my faculties; Lesbia, when once in thy presence, I have not left the power to tell my distracting passion; my tongue becomes torpid; a subtle flame creeps through my veins; my ears tingle in deafness; my eyes are veiled with darkness. • CATULL., 51

^a *Curae leues loquuntur, ingentes stupent.*

^b The surprise of unexpected joy has the same effect on us:

^b *Ut me conspexit uenientem, et Troia circum
Arma amens uidit, magnis exterrita monstris,
Dirigit uisu in medio, calor ossa reliquit,
Labitur, et longo uix tandem tempore fatur.*

^a Aside from the Roman mother who died of relief when her son returned from the defeat at Cannae; from Sophocles and Dionysius the Tyrant who died of joy; and from Thalna⁵ who died in Corsica reading the news that the Senate of Rome had formally praised him; we hear in our time of Pope Leo X who fell ill and died, overjoyed after learning of the fall of Milan which he had desperately wished for. And, for an even more remarkable example of human foolishness, ancient sources noted that Diodorus the Dialectician died on the spot, overcome by shame when, at his school and in public, he failed to counter a point that had been made to him.

^b I am not very much prone to these violent passions. I have a sturdy kind of intelligence which I grow and harden every day with words.

Light griefs can speak; deep sorrows are dumb. • SEN., PHAEDRA, 2.3.607

When [Andromache] sees me advancing and notices the arms of Troy all around, she stares, dumbstruck and terrified by this great wonder. The warmth drains from her body and she faints. At last, she manages to speak. • VERG., AEN., 3.306

NOTES

- 1 Montaigne refers to Charles de Guise who lost one brother (François de Guise, assassinated) on February 24th and another on March 6th, 1563.
- 2 Modern editions of the *Metamorphoses* have *diriguitque malis*.
- 3 Isabella Jagiellon
- 4 “something which I have experienced myself” Montaigne originally added. He crossed it off on his annotated copy.
- 5 Marcus Juventius Thalna, in 163 BCE

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Canzoniere	Petrarch, <i>Il Canzoniere</i>
Catull.	Catullus, <i>Poems</i>
Ov., Met.	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>

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Sen., Phaedra

Seneca, *Phaedra*

Verg., Aen.

Virgil, *Aeneid*