

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 17



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Of feare

Obstupui, steteruntque, comæ, & vox faucibus hæsit.

*I stood agast, my haire on end,
My jaw-tide tongue no speach would lend.*

I AM no good Naturalist (as they say) and I know not well by what springs feare doth worke in us: but well I wot it is a strange passion: and as physitians say, there is none doth sooner transport our judgement out of his due seat. Verily I have seene divers become madde and senselesse for feare: yea and in him, who is most settled, and best resolved, it is certaine that whilest his fitte continueth, it begetteth many strange dazelings, and terrible amazements in him. I omitte to speake of the vulgare sorte, to whom it sometimes representeth strange apparitions, as their fathers and grandfathers ghosts, risen out of their graves, and in their winding-sheetes: and to others it somtimes sheweth Larves, Hobgoblins, Robingood-fellowes, and such other Bug-beares and *Chimeraes*. But even amongst Souldiers, with whome it ought to have no credit at all, how often hath she changed a flocke of sheep into a troupe of armed men? Bushes and shrubbes into men-at-armes and Lanciers? our friendes into our enemies? and a red crosse into a white? At what time the Duke of *Bourbon* tooke *Rome*, an Ancient that kept Sentinell, in the borough *Saint-Peter*, was at the first alarum surprised with such terror, that with his colours in his hand, hee sodainely threw himselfe through the hole of a breach out of the Cittie, and fell just in the midst of his enemies, supposing the waie to goe strait in the hart of the Cittie: but in the end, he no sooner perceived the Duke of *Burbons* troupes, advancing to withstand him, imagining it to bee some sallie, the Cittizens made that way, he better be-thinking him-selfe, turned head, and the very same way, hee came out, he went into the town againe, which was more than three hundred paces distance towards the fields. The like hapned, but not so succesfully unto Captaine *Julius* his ensigne-bearer at what time *Saint Paule* was taken from us by the Earle of *Bures*, and the Lord of *Reu*, who was so frighted with feare, that going about to caste himselfe over the towne walls, with his Ancient in his hand, or to creepe through a spike-hole, he was cut in pieces by the assailants. At which siege likewise, that horror and feare is verie memorable, which so did choake, seize

upon, and freeze the hart of a gentleman, that having received no hurt at all, hee fell downe starke-dead upon the ground before the breach. The like passion or rage doth sometimes possesse a whole multitude. In one of the encounters that *Germanicus* had with the Germanes, two mighty troupes were at one instant so frighted with feare, that both betooke themselves to their heeles, and ranne away two contrary waies, the one right to that place whence the other fled. It sometimes addeth wings unto our heeles, as unto the first named, and other times it takes the use of feete from us: as we may reade if *Theophilus* the Emperour, who in a battell he lost against the Agarenes, was so amazed and astonied, that he could not resolve to scape away by flight: *aded pavor etiam auxilia formidat: Feare is so afraide even of that should help.* Untill such time as *Manuel*, one of the chiefe leaders in his armie, having rouzed and shaken him, as it were out of a dead sleepe, said unto him, *Sir, if you will not presently follow me, I will surely kill you, for better were it you should loose your life, than being taken prisoner, loose your Empire and all.* Then doth she shew the utmost of hir power, when for hir owne service, she casts us off unto valour, which it hath exacted from our duty and honor. In the first set-battell, the Romans lost against *Haniball*, under the Consul *Sempronius*, a troupe of wel-nigh tenne thousand footemen, was so surprised with feare, that seeing no other way to take, nor by what other course to give their basenes free passage, they headlong bent their flight toward the thickest and strongest squadron of their enemies, which with such furie it rowted and brake through, as it disranked, and slew a great number of the Carthagenians: purchasing a reprochfull and disgracefull flight, at the same rate it might have gained a most glorious victorie. It is feare I stand most in feare of. For, in sharpnesse it surmounteth all other accidents. What affection can be more violent and just than that of *Pompeys* friends, who in his owne ship were spectators of that horrible massacre? yet is it, that the feare of the Ægyptian sailes, which beganne to approach them, did in such sort daunt and skare them, that some have noted, they onely busied themselves to hasten the marriners, to make what speed they could, and by maine strength of oares to save themselves, untill such time, as being arived at *Tyre*, and that they were free from feare, they had leasure to bethinke themselves, of their late losse, and give their plaints and teares free passage, which this other stronger passion had suspended and hindred.

Tum pavor sapientiam omnem mihi ex animo expectorat.

*Feare then unbreasts all wit,
That in my minde did sit.*

Those who in any skirmish or sodaine bickering of warre have been throughly skared, sore-hurt, wounded, and gored as they be, are many times the next day after, brought to charge againe. But such as have conceived a true feare of their enemies, it is hard for you to make them looke them in the face againe. Such as are in continuall feare to loose their goods, to be banished, or to be subdued, live in uncessant agonie and languor; and thereby often loose both their drinking, their eating, and their rest. Whereas the poore, the banished, and seely servants, live often as carelesly and as pleasantly as the other. And so many men, who by the impatience and urging of feare, have hanged, drowned, and headlong tumbled downe from some rocke, have plainely taught us, that feare

is more importunate and intolerable then death. The Græcians acknowledge an other kinde of it, which is beyond the error of our discourse; proceeding, as they say, without any apparant cause, and from an heavenly impulsion. Whole Nations and Armies are often seene surprised with it. Such was that, which brought so wonderfull a desolation to *Carthage*, where nothing was heard but lamentable outcries, and frightfull exclamations: the inhabitants were seene desperately to runne out of their houses, as to a sodaine alarum, and furiously to charge, hurt, and enter-kill one another; as if they had beene enemies come to usurpe and possesse their Cittie. All things were there in a disordered confusion, and in a confused furie, untill such time as by prayers and sacrifices, they had appeased the wrath of their Gods. They call it to this day, the Punike terror.