

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 2

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Of Sadnesse or Sorrowe

NO MAN is more free from this passion than I, for I neither love nor regarde it: albeit the world hath undertaken, as it were upon covenant, to grace it with a particular favour. Therewith they adorne age, vertue, and conscience. Oh foolish and base ornament. The Italians have more properly with it's name entituled malignitie: for, it is a qualitie ever hurtfull, ever sottish; and as ever base and coward, the Stoikes inhibite their Elders and Sages to be therewith tainted, or have any feeling of it. But the Storie saieth, that *Psamneticus* king of *Ægipt*, having bin defeated and taken by *Cambises* king of *Persia*, seeing his owne daughter passe before him in base and vile aray, beeing sent to drawe water from a well, his friends weeping and wailing about him (he with his eies fixed on the ground, could not be mooved to utter one word) and shortly after beholding his sonne led to execution, held still the same undaunted countenance: but perceiving a familiar friend of his haled amongst the captives, he beganne to beate his head, and burst forth into extreame sorrow. This might well be compared to that which one of our Princes was lately seene to doe, who being at *Trent*, and receiving newes of his elder brothers death; but such a brother as on him lay all the burthen and honour of his house; and shortely after tidings of his yonger brothers decease, who was his second hope; and having with an unmatched countenance and exemplar constancie endured these two affronts; it fortun'd not long after, that one of his servants dying, he by this latter accident suffred himselfe to be so far transported, that quitting and forgetting his former resolution, hee so abandoned himselfe to all maner of sorrow and grieffe, that some argued, only this last mischance had toucht him to the quicke: but verily the reason was, that being otherwise full, and over-plunged in sorrowe, the least surcharge brake the bounds and barres of patience. The like might (I say) be judg'd of our storie, were it not it followeth, that *Cambises* inquiring of *Psamneticus*, why he was nothing distemper'd at the misfortune of his sonne and daughter, he did so impatiently beare the disaster of his friend: *It is*, answered he, *Because this last displeasure may bee manifested by weeping, whereas the two former exceede by much, all meanes and compasse to bee expressed by teares.* The invention of that antient Painter might happily fitte this purpose, who in the sacrifice of *Iphigenia*, being to represent the grieffe of the by-standers, according to the qualitie and interest each one bare for the death of so

faire, so yong and innocent a Lady, having ransacked the utmost skill and effects of his arte, when he came to the Virgins father, as if no countenance were able to represent that degree of sorrow, he drew him with a vaile over his face. And that is the reason why our Poets faine miserable *Niobe*, who first having lost seaven sonnes, and immediately as many daughters, as one over-burthened with their losses, to have beene transformed into a stone;

Diriguissè malis:

*And grewe as hard as stone,
By miserie and moane.*

Thereby to expresse this mournfull silent stupiditie, which so doth pierce us, when accidents surpassing our strength orewhelme us. Verily the violence of a griefe, being extreame, must needs astonie the mind, and hinder the liberty of hir actions. As it hapneth at the sodain alarum of some bad tidings, when wee shall feele our selves surprised, benumbed, and as it were deprived of al motion, so that the soule bursting afterward forth into teares and complaints, seemeth at more ease and libertie, to loose, to cleare and dilate it selfe.

Et uia uix tandem uoci laxata dolore est,

*And scarce at last for speach,
By griefe was made a breach.*

In the warres which king *Ferdinando* made against the widow of *John* king of *Hungaria*, about *Buda*; a man at armes was particularly noted of all men, forsomuch as in a certaine skirmish he had shewed exceeding prowesse of his body, and though unknowne, beeing slaine, was highly commended and much bemoaned of all; but yet of none so greatly as of a Germane Lord, called *Kaisciac*, as he that was amased at so rare vertue: his body being recovered and had off, this Lord, led by a common curiositie, drew neere unto it, to see who it might be, and having caused him to be disarmed, perceived him to be his owne sonne; which knowne, did greatly augment the compassion of all the camp: he only without framing word, or closing his eyes, but earnestly viewing the dead body of his sonne, stoode still up upright, till the vehemencie of his sad sorrow, having suppressed and choaked his vitall spirites, fel'd him starke dead to the ground.

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

*He that can say how he doth frie,
In pettie-gentle flames doth lie,*

say those Lovers that would lively represent an intollerable passion.

*miserò 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
Tinniunt aures, gemina teguntur
Lumina nocte.*

*miserably from me,
This bereaves all sense: for I can no sooner
Eie thee my sweete heart, but I wot not one word
to speak amazed.
Tongue-tide as in a trance, while a sprightly thin flame
Flowes in all my joynts, with a selfe- resounding
Both my ears tingle, with a night redoubled
Both mine eies are veild.*

Nor is it in the liveliest, and most ardent heate of the fit, that wee are able to display our plaints and perswasions, the soule being then aggravated with heaue thoughts, and the body suppressed and languishing for love. And thence is sometimes engendered that casuall faintnes, which so unseasonably surpriseth passionate Lovers, and that chilnesse, which by the power of an extreame heate doth seize on them in the verie midst of their joy and enjoying. All passions that may be tasted and digested, are but meane and slight.

Curæ leues loquuntur, ingentes stupent.

*Light cares can freely speake,
Great cares heart rather breake.*

The surprize of an unexpected pleasure astonieth us alike.

*Ut me conspexit uenientem, & Troia circum
Arma amens uidit, magnis exterrita monstis,
Diriguit uisu in medio, calor ossa relinquit,
Labitur, & longo uix tandem tempore fatur.*

*When she beheld me come, and round about
Senslesse sawe Troian armes, she stood afraide
Stone-still at so strange sights: life-heate flew out:
She faints: at last, with long pause thus she saide.*

Besides the Romane Ladie, that died for joy to see her sonne returne alive from the battel of *Canna*. *Sophocles* and *Dionisius* the Tyrant, who deceased through over-gladnes: and *Talua*, who died in *Corsica*, reading the newes of the honours the Roman Senate had conferred upon him: It is reported that in our age, Pope *Leo* the tenth, having received advertisement of the taking of the cittie of *Millane*, which he had so exceedingly desired, entred into such excesse of joy, that he fell into an ague, whereof he shortly died. And for a more authentick testimonie of humane imbecillitie, it is noted by our Antients, that *Diodorus* the Logitian, being surprized with an extreame passion or apprehension of shame, fell downe starke dead, because neither in his Schoole, nor in publike, he had beene able to resolve an argument propounded unto him. I am little subject to these violent passions. I have naturally a hard apprehension, which by discourse I daily harden more and more.