

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 2



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Of sadnesse or sorrow

NO MAN is more free from this passion than I, for I neither love nor regard 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 entitled malignitie: for, it is a qualitie ever hurtfull, ever sottish; and as ever base and coward, the Stoikes inhibit their Elders and Sages to be therewith tainted, or have any feeling of it.

But the Storie saith; that *Psamneticus* king of *Ægypt*, having been defeated and taken by *Cambises* king of *Persia*, seeing his owne daughter passe before him in base and vile aray, being sent to draw water from a well, his friends weeping and wailing about him (he with his eyes fixed on the ground, could not be moved 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 began to beat 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 shortly after tidings of his younger brothers decease, who was his second hope; and having with an unmatched countenance and exemplar constancie endureth these two affronts; it fortun'd not long after, that one of his servants dying, he by this latter accident suffered himselfe to be so far transported, that quitting and forgetting his former resolution, he so abandoned himselfe to all manner of sorrow and griefe, 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 sorrow, the least surcharge brake the bounds and barres of patience. The light might (I say) be, judged of our storie, were it not it followeth, that *Cambises* enquiring of *Psamneticus*, why he was nothing distempered 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 be manifested by weeping whereas the two former exceed by much, all meanes and compass to bee expressed by teares.*

The invention of that ancient Painter might happily fit this purpose, who in the sacrifice of *Iphigenia*, being to represent the griefe of the by-standers, according to the qualitie and interest each one bare for the death of so faire, so young and innocent a Lady, having ransacked the utmost skill and effects of his art, 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 thereason why our Poets faine miserable *Niobe*, who first having lost seven sonnes and immediately as many daughters, as one over-burthened with their losses, to have been transformed into a stone;

Diriguisse malis:

*And grew as hard as stone,
But miserie and moane.*

Thereby to expresse this mournfull shent stupiditie, which so doth pierce us, when accidents surpassing our strength orewhelme us.

Verily the violence of a griefe, being extreme; must needs astonie the mind, and hinder the liberty of her actions. As it hapneth at the sudden alarum of some bad tidings, when we shall feele our selves surprised, benumbed, and as it were deprived of all 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 via vix tandem voci laxata dolore est.

*And scarce at last for speech,
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, for much as in a certaine skirmish he had shewed exceeding prowess of his body, and though unknowne, being 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 own 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, stood still up upright, till the vehemencie of his sad sorrow, having suppressed and choaked his vitall spirits, fell'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 intolerable passion.

*misero quod omnes
Eripit sensus mihi; Nam simul te*

*Lesbia aspexi, nihil est super mi
 Quod loquar amens
 Lingua torpet, tenuis sub artus
 Flamma dimanant, sonitu suoapte
 Tinniunt aures, gemina teguntur
 Lumina nocte.*

*Miserably from me,
 This bereaves all sense: for I can no sooner
 Eie thee my sweet 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 heat of the fit, that wee are able to display our plaints and perswasions, the soule being then aggravated with heavie 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 childnesse, which by the

Curæ leves loquuntur, ingentes stupent.

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

The surprize of an unexpected pleasure astonieth us alike.

*Vt me conspexit venientem, & Troja circum
 Arma amens vidit, maqnis exterrita monstis,
 Diriguit visu in medio, calor ossa relinquit,
 Labitur, & longo vix tandem tempore fatur.*

*When she beheld me come, and round about
 Senselesse saw Trojan armes, she stood afraid
 Stone-still at so strange sights: life heat flew out.
 She faints: at last, with long pause thus she said.*

Besides the Romane Ladie, that died for joy to see her sonne returne alive from the battell of *Canna*, *Sophocles* and *Dionisius* the Tyrant, who deceased through overgladnes: and *Talva*, who died in *Corsica*, reading the newes of the honours the Roman Senate had conferred 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 authentical testimonie of humane imbecilitie, it is noted by our Ancients that *Diodorus* the Logician, being surprised with an extreme passion or apprehension of shame, fell down starke dead, because neither in his Schoole, nor in publique, he had beene able to resolve an argument prepounded unto him.

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I am little subject to these violent passions. I have naturally a hard apprehension, which by discourse I daily harden more and more.