

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 37



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How we weepe and laugh at one selfe-same thing

WHEN WE READE in Histories, that *Antigonus* was highly displeased with his sonne, at what time he presented the head of King *Pirrhus* his enemy unto him, whom he at that instant had slaine in single combate; which he no sooner saw, but he burst forth a weeping. And that *Renate* Duke of *Lorraine*, wept for the death of *Charles* Duke of *Burgundie*, whom he had eftsones discomfired, and was as an assistant mourner at his funeralles: And that in the battel of *Auroy* (which the Earle of *Montfort* had gained against the faction of *Charles de Blois*, for the Dutchie of *Britanie*) the victorious conqueror met with the bodie of his enemy deceased, mourned very grievously for him; a man must not sodainly exclaime.

*E così auvien', che l'animo ciascuna
Sua passion, sotto contrario manto
Ricuopre, con la vista hor chiara, hor bruna.*

So happens it, the minde covers each passion
Under a cloake of colours opposite,
To sight now cleare, now darke, in divers fashion.

When *Cæsar* was presented with *Pompeis* head, Histories report that he turn'd his lookes aside, as from a ghastly and displeasing spectacle. There had beene so long a correspondencie and societie in the managing of publike affaires, mutually betweene them, such a communitie of fortunes, so many reciprocall offices and bondes of alliance, that a man cannot thinke his countenance to have beene forced, false, and wiely, as this other supposeth.

*tutumque putauit
Iam bonus esse socer, lacrymas non sponte cadentes
Effudit gemitusque expressit pectore læto.*

Now to be kinde indeed he did not doubt
Father in lawe, teares, which came hardly out

He shed, and grones exprest
From inward-pleased brest.

For certainly, howbeit the greatest number of our actions be but masked
and painted over with dissimulation, and that it may sometimes be true,

Haredis fletus sub persona risus est.

The weeping of an heire, is laughing under a visard or disguise.

Yet must a man consider, by judging of his accidents, how our mindes are often agitated by divers passions; For (as they say) there is a certaine assembly of divers humors in our bodies, whereof she is souveraigne mistris, who most ordinarily, according to our complexions doth commaund-us: so in our minde, although it containe severall motions that agitate the same, yet must one chiefly be predominant. But it is not with so full an advantage, but for the volubilitie and supplenes of our minde, the weakest may by occasion reobtaine the place againe, and when their turne commeth, make a new change, whence we see, not onely children, who simply and naturally follow nature, often to weepe and laugh at one selfe-same thing; but none of us all can vaunt himselfe, what wished-for, or pleasant voyage soever he undertake, but that taking leave of his familie and friends, he shall feele a chilling and panting of the heart: and if he shed not teares, at least he put his foote in the stirrop with a sad and heavie cheere. And what gentle flame soever doth warme the heart of yong virgines, yet are they hardly drawne to leave and forgoe their mothers, to betake them to their husbands: what soever this good fellow say;

*Est ne novis nuptis odio Venus, áne parentum
Frustrantur falsis gaudia lacrymalis,
Ubertim thalami quas intra limina fundunt?
Non, ita me diui, vera gemunt, uiverint.*

Doe yong Brides hate indeede fresh *Venus* toyes,
Or with false teares delude their parents joyes,
Which in their chambers they powre out amaine?
So helpe me God, they do not true complaine.

So is it not strange to mourne for him dead, whom a man by no meanes would have alive againe. When I chide my boy, I doe-it with the best heart I have: They are true and not fained imprecations: but that fit passt-over, let him have neede of me, I wil gladly doe him all the good I can; and by and by I turne-over another leafe. If I chance to call one knave or asse, my purpose is not, for ever to enfeoffe him with those nick-names; nor doe I thinke to say, tongue thou liest, if immediately after I call him an honest man. No qualitie doth embrace us purely and universally. If it were not the countenance of a foole to speake alone, or to himselfe, there would scarce be day, or houre, wherein some-body should not heare me mutter and grumble to my selfe, and against my selfe. A () in the fooles teeth, yet do not I think it to be my definition. He that seeth me sometimes to cast a frowning looke upon my wife, or sometimes a loving countenance, and thinkes, that either of them is but fained, he is a foole. *Nero* taking leave of

his mother, whom he sent to bee drowned, felt notwithstanding the emotion of that motherly farewell, and at one instant was stricken with horror and pittie. It is said, that the Sunnes-light, is not of one continued piece, but that it so uncessantly, and without intermission doth cast so thicke new raies, one in the necke of another upon-us, that we cannot perceive the space betweene them.

*Largus enim liquidi fons luminis ætherius sol
Inrigat assiduè cælum candore recenti,
Suppedit átque nouo confestim lumine lumen.*

Heav'ns sunne the plenteous spring of liquid light
Still heav'n bedewes with splendor fresh and bright,
Still light supplies with light of fresher sight.

So doth our minde cast hir points diversly and imperceptibly. *Artabanus* surprised *Xerxes* his nephew, and chid him for the sodaine changing of his countenance. He was to consider the unmeasurable greatnes of his forces at the passage of *Hellespont*, for the enterprise of *Greece*. First he was sodainly assailed by an excessive joy, to see so many thousands of men at his service, and witnessed the same by the alacritie and cheerefulnes of his countenance: And immediately at that very moment, his thoughts suggesting, how so many lives were to be consumed, and should come to nothing (at the furthest, within one age) he gan to frowne his browes, and grew so pensive, that he wept. We have with a resolute and inexorable mind pursued the revenge of an injurie, and felt a singular content for the victorie; yet upon better advice doe we weepe: it is not that we weepe-for: the thing is as it was, there is nothing changed: But that our minde beholdes the thing with another eye, and under an other shape it presents it-selfe unto us. For every thing hath divers faces, sundrie byases, and severall lustres. Aliance, kinred, olde acquaintances, and long friendship seize on our imagination, and at that instant, passionate the same according to their qualitie; but the turne or change of it, is so violent, that it escapes-us

*Nil adeo fieri celeri ratione videtur,
Quàm si mens fieri proponit & inchoat ipsa.
Ocius ergo animus quàm res se perciet ulla,
Ante oculos quarum in promptu natura videtur.*

Nothing in so quicke sort seemes to be done,
As mind set on a thing, and once begun,
The mind that swifter stirres before our eies,
Then any thing, whose forme we soone comprize.

And therefore, intending to continue one body of all this pursuite, we deceive our selves. When *Timoleon* weepeth the murder he hath perpetrated with so mature and generous a determination, he weepeth not the liberty restored to his countrie, nor the Tyrant, but hee weepeth for his brother. One part of his duetie is acted, let us permit him to play the other.