

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 4



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How the soule dischargeth her passions upon false objects, when the true faile it

A GENTLEMAN of ours exceedingly subject to the gowt, being instantly solicited by his Physitions, to leave all manner of salte-meats, was wont to answer pleasantly, that when the fittes or pangs of the desease tooke him, hee would have some body to quarell with; and that crying and cursing, now against *Bolonie-sausege*, and sometimes by railing against salt neates-tongues, and gammons of bakon, he found some ease. But in good earnest even as the arme being lifted up to strike, if the stroke hit not, but fall voide, we feele some paine in it, and many times strike it out of joynt; and that to yeeld our sight pleasant, it must not bee lost and dispierced in the vaste ayre, but ought rather to have a limited bound to sustaine it by a reasonable distance.

*Uentus ut amittit uires, nisi robore densæ
Occurrant silvæ spatio diffusus inani.*

*As windes in emptie ayre diffus'de, strength lose,
Unlesse thick-old-growne woods their strength oppose.*

So seemes it that the soule moved and tossed, if she have not some holde to take, looseth it selfe in it selfe, and must ever be stored with some object, on which it light and worke. *Plutarke* saieth fitly of those affectionate themselves to Monkies and little Dogges, that the loving parte which is in us, for want of a lawefull holde, rather then it will be idle, doth forge a false and frivolous holde unto it selfe. And wee see that the soule in her passions doth rather deceive it selfe, by framing a false and fantasticall subject unto it selfe, yea against her owne conceite, then not to worke upon something. So doth their owne rage transport beastes, to set upon the stone or weapon that hath hurt them; yea and sometimes with irefull teeth to revenge themselves against themselves, for the hurt or smart they feele.

*Pannonis haud aliter post ictum sæuior ursæ
Cui iaculum parua Lybis amentauit habena,
Se rotat in uulnus, telúmque irata receptum
Impetit, & secum fugientem circuit hastam*

*Even so the wound enraged Austrian beare,
On whom a Moore hath thir'ld his slinged speare,
Wheeles on her wound, and raging bites the darte,
Circling that flies with her, and cannot parte.*

What causes doe wee not invent, for the crosses that happen unto us? bee it right, or wrong: what take we not holde of, to have something to strive withall? It is not the golden locks thou tearest, nor the whitenesse of the breast, which thou through vexation so cruelly doest smite, that have by meanes of an unluckie bullet, lost thy deere-beloved brother, on something else shouldest thou wreake thy selfe. *Livius* speaking of the Romane army in *Spaine*, after the losse of two great Captaines that were brethren. *Flere omnes repentè, & offensare capita: They all wept and often beat their heades.* It is an ordinarie custome: And the Philosopher *Byon*, was very pleasant with the king, that for grieffe he tore his haire, when he said, *Doth this man thinke, that baldnesse will asswage his grieffe?* who hath not seene some to chew and swallow cardes, and well-nigh checke themselves with bales of dice, only to be revenged for the losse of some mony? *Xerxes* whipped the Sea, and writ a cartell of defiance to the hill *Athos*: And *Cyrus* for manie daies together amused his whole armie to bee revenged of the river *Cyndus*, for the feare hee tooke passing over the same: And *Caligula* caused a verie faire house to be defaced, for the pleasure his mother had received in the same. When I was young, my countymen were wont to say, *That one of our neigbbour-Kings, having received a blowe at Gods hand, sware to be revenged on him, and ordained, that for tenne yeares space no man should pray unto him, nor speake of him, nor so long as he were in authoritie, beleeve in him.* By which report, they doe not so much publish the sottishnesse, as the ambitious glorie, peculiar unto that nation of whom it was spoken. They are vices that ever goe together: But in trueth such actions encline rather unto selfe-conceit, then to fondnes. *Augustus Cæsar* having beene beaten by a tempest on the sea, defied the God *Neptune*, and in the celebration of the Circensian games, that so he might be avenged on him, he caused his image to be remooved from-out the place, where it stood amongst the other Gods; wherein he is also lesse excusable, then the former, and lesse than he was afterwarde, when having lost a battell, under *Quintilius Varro* in *Germanie*, all in a rage and desperate, he went up and downe beating his bead against the walles, mainly crying out: *Oh Varro, restore me my Souldiers againe:* For, those exceede, all follie, (forsomuch as impietie is joyned unto it) that will wreake themselves against God, or fortune, as if she had eares subject to our batterie: In imitation of the Thracians, who when it lightens or thunders, begin with a Titanian revenge to shoote against heaven, thinking by shooting of arrowes to drawe God to some reason. Now, as saith that auncient Poet in *Plutarch*,

*Point ne se fout corroucer aux affaires,
Il ne leur chaut de toutes noz choleres.*

*We ought not angry be at what God dooth,
For he cares not who beares an angry tooth.*

But we shal never raile inough against the disorder and unrulinesse of our minde.