Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 2 · Chapter 31

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Of anger and choller

Plutarke is every where admirable, but especially where he judgeth of humane actions. The notable things he reporteth, may be perceived in the comparison of *Lycurgus* and *Numa*, speaking of the great simplicitie we commit, in leaving yong children under the government and charge of their fathers and parents. Most of our policies, or Common-wealths, saith *Aristotle* (as the Cyclopes were wont) commit the conduct of their wives, and charge of their children, to all men, according to their foolish humor or indiscreete fantazies. And wel-nigh, none but the Lacedemonian and Cretensian, have resigned the discipline of children to the lawes. *Who seeth not, that in an estate all things depend of nurture and education?* And all the while, without descretion, it is wholy left to the parents mercie, how foolish and wicked soever they be. Amongst other things, how often (walking through our streetes) have I desired to have a play or comedie made in revenge of yoong boyes, which I sawe thumpt, misused, and well nigh murthered by some hare-brained, moodie, and through choller-raging Fathers and Mothers, from out whose eyes a man might see sparkles of rage to startle,

> *rabie iecur incendente feruntur*
> *Præcipites, ut saxa iugis abrupta, quibus mons*
> *Subtrahitur, cliuóque latus pendente recedit:*
>
> They headlong runne with rage, which doth enflame their livers
> Like stones that broken fall from mountaine tops in shivers,
> The hill withdrawes, and they are rould,
> From hanging cliffe which leaves their hold.

(And according to *Hypocrates*, the most dangerous infirmities, are those which disfigure the face) and with a loud thundring voice often to follow children that came but lately from nurce; Which after prove lame, maimed, blockish and dull-pated with blowes: And yet our lawes make no accoumpt of it, as if these spraines, and unjoyntings of lims, or these maimes were no members of our Common-wealth.

Gratum est quód patriæ ciuem populóque dedisti,
Si facis ut patriæ sit idoneus utilis agris,
Vtilis & bellorum & pacis rebus agendis.

That you to th'countrie give a man, 'tis acceptable,
If for the countrie fit you make him, for field's able,
Of peace and warre for all achievements profitable.

There is no passion so much transports the sinceritie of judgement, as doth anger. No man would make conscience to punish that Judge by death, who in rage or choller had condemned an offender. And *why should fathers be allowed to beate, or schoolemasters be suffered to whip children, or to punish them being angrie?* It is no longer correction, but revenge. *Punishment is unto children as phisike;* and would any man endure a phisicion, that were angrie and wroth against his patient? Our selves (did we well) during the time of our anger, should never lay hands one our servants. So long as our pulse panteth, and wee feele any concitation, so long remit we the partie: And things will seeme farre otherwise unto us, if we once come to our senses againe, and shall better bethinke us. Then is it passion that commandes. It is passion that speaketh and not we. Athwart it, faults seeme much greater unto us, as bodies doe athwart a foggie mist. Who so is hungrie, useth meate, but who so will use chastisement, should never hunger nor thirst after it. Moreover, corrections given with discretion and moderation, are more gently received, and with more good to him that receiveth them. Otherwise he shall never thinke to have beene justly condemned, by a man who is transported by rage and choller, and for his justification alleadgeth the extraordinarie motions of his maister, the inflammation of his face, his unwonted othes, his chafing, his unquiernesse and his rash precipitation.

Ora tument ira, nìgrescunt sanguine uenæ,
Lumina Gorgoneo sæuius igne micant.

The face with anger swelles, the veines growe blacke with blood,
The eyes more fiercely shine then *Gorgons,* fierie moode.

Suetonius writeth, that *Caius Rabirius,* having by *Cæsar* bin condemned, nothing, did him so much good toward the people (to whom he appealed) to make him obtain his sute, as the sharpnes and over boldnes which *Cæsar* had declared in that judgement. *Saying is one thing, and doing another. A man must consider the sermone apart and the preacher severall.* Those have made themselves good sport, who in our daies have gone about to checke the veritie of our Church, by the ministers vice: She fetcheth hir testimonie from elsewhere. It is a foolish manner of arguing, and which would soone reduce all things to a confusion. *An honest man may sometimes have false opinions, and a wicked man may preach truth: Yea such a one as beleeves it not.* Verely, *it is a pleasing harmonie, when doing and saying goe together.* And I will not deny, but saying, when deedes follow, is of more efficacie and authoritie: As said *Eudamidas,* when he heard a Philosopher discourse of warre: *These speeches are good, but he that speakes them, is not to be beleeved,* For his eares were never accustomed to heare the clang of trumpets, nor rattling of drums. And *Cleomenes* hearing a Rethoritian speake of valour,

burst out into an extreame laughter: Whereat the other being offended, he said unto him: *I would doe as much if it were a Swallowe should speake of it, but were he an Eagle, I should gladly heare him*. Me seemeth I perceive in ancient mens writings, that he who speakes what he thinketh, toucheth nearer the quicke, then he who counterfaits. Heare *Cicero* speake of the love of libertie; then listen to *Brutus*, their very wordes will tell you and sound in your eare, the latter was a man raedie to purchase it with the price of his life. Let *Cicero*, that father of eloquence treate of the contempt of death, and let *Seneca* discourse of the same; the first drawes it on languishing, and you shall plainely perceive, he would faine resolve you of a thing, whereof he is not yet resolved himselfe. He giveth you no heart, for himselfe hath none: Whereas the other doth rowze, animate and inflame you. I never looke upon an Author, be they such as write of vertue and of actions, but I curiously endevor to finde out what he was himselfe. For, the *Ephores* of *Sparta*, hearing a dissolute liver propose a very beneficiall advise unto the people, commaunded him to hold his peace, and desired an honest man to assume the invention of it unto himselfe and to propound it. *Plutarkes* compositions, if they be well favored, doe plainely manifest the same unto us: And I am perswaded I knowe him inwardly: Yet would I be glad, we had some memories of his owne life: And by the way I am falne into this discourse, by reason of the thankes I owe unto *Aulus Gellius*, in that he hath left us written this storie of his manners, which fitteth my subject of anger. A slave of his, who was a lewd and vicious man, but yet whose eares were somewhat fedde with Philosophicall documents, having for some faults by him committed, by the commandement of *Plutarke* his maister, bin stripped naked, whilst another servant of his whipped him, grombled in the beginning, that he was whipped without reason, and had done nothing: But in the end, mainly crying out, he fell to rayling and wronging his maister, upbrading him, that he was not a true Philosopher, as he vanted himselfe to be, and how he had often heard him say, that, *it was an unseemely thing in a man to be angrie*. And that he had made a booke of it: And now all plonged in rage, and engulfed in choller to cause him so cruelly to be beaten, was cleane contrarie to his owne writing. To whom *Plutarke* with an unaltered, and milde-settled countenance, said thus unto him. What? Thou raskall, whereby doest thou judge I am now angrie? Doth my countenance, doth my voice, doth my colour, or doth my speech give thee any testimonie, that I am either moved or chollerike? Me seemeth, mine eyes are not staringly-wilde, nor my face troubled, nor my voice frightfull or distempered: Doe I waxe redde? Doe I foame at the mouth? Dooth any word escape me I may repent heareafter? Doe I startle and quake? Doe I rage and ruffle with anger? For, to tell thee true, these are the right signes of choler and tokens of anger. Then turning to the party that whipped him, bade him continue still thy worke, whilst this fellow and I dispute of the matter. This is the report of *Gellius*. *Architas Tarentinus* returning from a warre, where he had been Captaine generall, found his house all out of order, his husbandrie all spoiled, and by the ill government of his Baily, his ground all waste and unmanured; and having called for him, said thus; *Away bad man, for if I were not angrie, I would have thee whipt for this*. *Plato* likewise, being vexed and angrie with one of his slaves, commaunded *Speusippus* to punish him, excusing himselfe, that now being angrie he would not lay hands upon him. *Charillus* the Lacedemonian, to on *Elotes*, who behaved himselfe over insolently and audaciously towards

him; *By the Gods* (said he) *if I were not now angrie, I would presently make the die.* It is a passion which pleaseth and flattereth it selfe. How many times being moved by any false suggestion, if at that instant we be presented with any lawfull defence or true excuse, doe we fall into rage against truth and innocencie it selfe? Touching this purpose, I have retained a wonderfull example of antiquitie. *Piso* in divers other respects, a man of notable vertue, being angrie, and chafing with one of his Souldiers, who returning from forage or boot-haling, could not give him an accoumpt where hee had left a fellow-Souldier of his, and thereupon concluding hee had killed or made him away, forthwith condemned him to be hanged. And being upon the gallowes readie to die; behold his companion, who had stragled abroade, comming home, whereat all the army rejoyced very much, and after many embracings and signes of joy betweene the two Souldiers, the hangman brought both unto *Piso;* all the companie hoping, it would bee a great pleasure unto him; but it fell out cleane contrarie, for through shame and spite his wrath still burning, was redoubled, and with a slie devise his passion instantly presented to his minde, he made three guiltie, forsomuch as one of them was found innocent; and caused them all three to be dispatched. The first Souldier because he was alreadie condemned; the second, which had stragled abroade, by reason he was the cause of his fellowes death; and the hangman, for that he had not fulfilled his Generalles commaundement. Those who have to deale with froward and skittish women have no doubt seene what rage they wil fall into, if when they are most angrie and chafing, a man be silent and patient, and disdaine to foster their anger and wrath, *Celius* the Orator was by nature exceeding fretfull and cholerike. To one who was with him at supper, a man of a milde and gentle conversation, and who because he would not move him, seemed to approve what ever he said, and yeelde to him in every thing; as unable to endure his peevishnes should so passe without some nourishment, burst out into a rage, and said unto him. *For the love of God deny me something, that we may be two.* So women are never angrie, but to the end a man should againe be angrie with them, therein imitating the lawes of Love. *Phocion* to a man who troubled his discourse with brawling and skolding at him, in most injurious manner, did nothing else but holde his peace and given him what leasure hee would to vent his choller; which done, without taking any notice of it, began his discourse againe where hee had left it off. *There is no reply so sharpe, as such silent contempt.* Of the most chollerike and teastie man of *France* (which is ever an imperfection, but more excusable in a military man; for it must needes be graunted, there are in that profession some men who cannot well avoyde it) I ever say, hee is the pacientest man I knowe to bridle his choller; it mooveth and trannsporteth him with such furie and violence,

magno ueluti cùm flamma sonore
Uirgea suggeritur costis undantis aheni,
Exultántque æstu latices, furit intus aquaï
Fumidus atque altè spumis exuberat amnis,
Nec iam se capit unda, uolat uapor ater ad auras,

As when a fagot flame with hurring sounds
Under the ribbes of boyling cauldron lies,
The water swelles with heate beyond the bounds,

Whence steeming streames raging and foming rise,
Water out-runn's it selfe, blacke vapors flye to skies.

that he must cruely enforce himselfe to moderate the same. And for my part, I know no passion I were able to smother with such temper and abide with such resolution. I would not set wisedome at so high a rate. I respect not so much what he doth, as how much it costs him not to doe worse. Another boasted in my presence, of his behaviours order and mildenesse, which in truth is singular: I told him, that indeede it was much, namely in men of so eminent qualitie, as himselfe was: On whom all eyes are fixed, alwayes to shew himselfe in a good temper: but that the chiefest point consisted in providing inwardly and for himselfe; and that in mine opinion, it was no wise mans parte, inwardly to fret: which, to maintaine that marke and formall outward apparance, I feared hee did. *Choller is incorporated by concealing and smothering the same,* as *Diogenes* said to *Demosthenes,* who fearing to be seene in a Taverne, withdrew himselfe into the same: The more thou recoilest backe, the further thou goest into it. I woulde rather perswade a man, though somewhat out of season, to give his boy a whirret on the eare, then to dissemble this wise, sterne or severe countenance, to vex and fret his minde. And I would rather make shew of my passions, then smother them to my cost: which being vented and exprest, become more languishing and weake: Better it is to let it's point worke outwardly, then bend it against our selves. *Omnia uitia in aperto leuiora sunt: & tunc perniciosissima, quum simulata sanitate subsidunt. All vices are then lesse perillous when they lie open to be seene, but then most pernicious, when they lurke under counterfeited soundnesse.* I ever warne those of my houshold, who by their offices-authoritie may sometimes have occasion to be angry, first to husband their anger; then not to employ it upon every slight cause; for that empeacheth the effect and worth of it. Rash and ordinary brawling is converted to a custome, and that's the reason each man contemnes it: That which you employ against a servant for any theeving, is not perceived, because it is the same he hath sundry times seene you use against him, if hee have not washt a glasse well or misplaced a stoole. Secondly, that they be not angry in vaine, but ever have regard their chiding come to his eares with whom they are offended: for, commonly some will brawle before hee come in their presence, and chide a good while after he is gone,

& secum petulans amentia certat.

Madnesse makes with it selfe a fray,
Which fondly doth the wanton play.

and wreake their anger against his shadow, and make the storme fall where no man is either chastised or interressed, but with the rumour of their voice, and sometimes with such as cannot doe withall. I likewise blame those who being angry, will brave and mutinie when the partie with whome they are offended is not by. These *Rodomantados* must be employed on such as feare them.

Mugitus ueluti cùm prima in prælia taurus
Terrificos ciet, atque irasci in cornua tentat,

Arboris obnixus trunco, uentósque lacessit
Ictibus, & sparsa ad pugnam proludit arena.

As when a furious Bull to his first combate mooves
His terror-breeding lowes, his horne to anger prooves,
Striving against a trees trunke, and the winde with strokes,
His preface made to fight with scattered sand, provokes.

When I chance to be angry, it is in the earnestest maner that may be, but yet as briefly and as secretly, as is possible. I loose my selfe in hastinesse and violence, but not in trouble: So that, let me spend all maner of injurious wordes at random and without all heede, and never respect to place my points pertinently, and where they may doe most hurt: For commonly I employ nothing but my tongue. My boyes scape better cheape in great matters, then in small trifles. Slight occasions surprise me; and the michiefe is, that after you are once falne into the pit, it is no matter who thrusts you in, you never cease till you come to the bottome. The fall presseth, hasteneth, mooveth and furthereth it selfe. In great occasions I am pleased, that they are so just, that every body expects a reasonable anger to insue. I glorify my selfe to deceive their expectation. Against these I bandy and prepare my selfe; they make me summon up my wits, and threaten to carry me very farre, if I would follow them. I easily keepe my selfe from falling into them, and if I stay for them, I am strong enough to reject the impulsion of this passion, what violent cause soever it hath. But if it seize upon and once preoccupate me, what vaine cause soever it hath, it doth cleane transport me: I condition thus with those that may contest with me; when you perceve me to be first angry, be it right or wrong, let me hold-on my course, I wil do the like to you, when ever it shall come to my lot. The rage is not engendred but by the concurrencie of cholers, which are easily produced one of another, and are not borne at one instant. Let us allow every man his course, so shall we ever be in peace. Oh profitable prescription, but of an hard execution! I shall some time seeme to be angry for the order and direction of my house, without any just emotion. According as my age yeeldeth my humors more sharpe or peevish, so doe I endevour to oppose my selfe against them, and if I can I will hereafter enforce my selfe to be lesse froward and not so teastie, as I shall have more excuse and inclination to be so; although I have heretofore beene in their number that are least. A word more to conclude this Chapter: *Aristotle* saith, *Choller doth sometimes serve as armes unto Vertue and Valour.* It is very likely: notwithstanding such as gainesay him, answer pleasantly, it is a weapon of a new fashion and strange use: For we moove other weapons, but this mooveth us: our hand doth not guide it, but it directeth our hand; it holdeth us, and we hold not it.