Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 3 · Chapter 4

Translation by John Florio (1603, Public domain) · Last updated on June 11, 2026

HyperEssays is a project to create a modern and accessible online edition of the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne. More information at www.hyperessays.net

FLORIO-3-4-20260618-141016

Of diverting and diversions

I was once employed in comforting of a trulie-afflicted Ladie: the greatest part of their discourses are artificiall and ceremonious.

> *Uberibus semper lachrimis, semperque paratis.*
> *In statione sua, atque expectantibus illam,*
> *Quo iubeat manare modo.*
>
> With plenteous teares; still readie in their stand,
> Expecting still their Mistresses commaund,
> How they must flowe, when they must goe.

Men doe but ill in opposing themselves against this passion; for opposition doth but incense and engage them more to sorrowe and disquietnesse: *The disease is exasperated by the jealousie of debate.* In matters of common discourse, we see, that what I have spoken without heede or care, if one come to contest with me about it, I stifflie mainetaine and mine owne; much more if it be a thing wherein I am interessed. Besides, in so dooing, you enter but rudely into your matter, whereas a Phisitions first entertainement of his pacient should be gracious, cheerefull and pleasing. *An uglie and froward Phisition wrought never any good effect.* On the contrary then, we must at first assist and smoothe their laments, and witnesse some approbation and excuse thereof. By which meanes you get credit to go on, and by an easie and insensible inclination, you fall into more firme and serious discourses, and fit for their amendment. I, who desired chieflie but to gull the assistance, that had their eyes cast on me, meant to salve their mischiefe; I verilie finde by experience, that I have but an ill and unfruitefull vaine to perswade. I present my reasons eyther too sharpe, or too drie; or too stirringlie, or too careleslie. After I had for a while applyed my selfe to hir torment, I attempted not to cure it by strong and lively reasons; either because I want them, or because I supposed I might otherwise effect my purpose the better. Nor did I cull out the severall fashions of comfort prescribed by Philosophie: That the thing lamented is not ill, as *Cleanthes:* or but a little ill, as the Peripatethicks: That to lament is neither just, nor commendable, as *Chrisippus;* Nor this of *Epicurus,* most

agreeing with my manner, to translate the conceit of ykresome into delightsome things; Nor to make a loade of all this masse, dispensing the same, as one hath occasion, as *Cicero.* But faire and softly declining our discourses, and by degrees bending them unto subjects more neare; then a little more remote, even as she more or lesse enclined to me. I unperceaveablie remooved those dolefull humours from hir; so that as long as I was with hir, so long I kept hir in cheerefull countenance,, and untroubled fashion; wherein I used diversion. Those which in the same service succeded me, found hir no whit amended: the reason was, I had not yet driven my wedge to the roote. I have peradventure else where, glaunced at some kindes of publike diversions. And the militarie customes used by *Pericles* in the Peloponensian warre, and a thousand others elsewhere, to divert or with-drawe the armie of an enemie from their owne countrie, is too frequent in histories. It was an ingenious diverting, wherewith the Lord of *Himbercourt* saved both himselfe and others in the towne of *Liege,* into which the Duke of *Burgondie,* who beleagred the same, had caused him to enter, to performe the covenants of their accorded yeelding. The inhabitants thereof, to provide for it, assembled by night, and began to mutinie against their former agreement, determining upon this advantage to set upon the Negotiators, now in their powre. Hee perceiving their intent, and noise of this shoure readie to fall upon him, and the danger his lodging was in, forth-with rushed out upon them two cittizens (whereof he had divers with him) furnished with most plausible and new offers to be propounded to their counsell; but indeed forged at that instant to serve his turne withall, and to ammuse them. These two stayed the first-approching storme, and carryed this incensed Hydra-headed-monster multitude backe to the townehouse, to heare their charge, and accordingly to determine of it. The consultation was short; when loe a second tempest came rushing on, more furiouslie inraged then the former; to whom he immediatlie dispatched foure new and semblable intercessors, with protestations, that now they were in earnest to propose and declare newe and farre more ample conditions unto them, wholie to their content and satisfaction; whereby this disordred route was againe drawen to their Conclave and Senate-house. In summe, he by such a dispensation of amusements, diverting their head-long furie, and dissipating the same with vaine and frivolous consultations, at length lulled them into so secure a sleepe, that he gained the day, which was his chiefest drift and onely aimed scope. This other storie is also of the same predicament. *Atalanta* a maide of rare surpassing beautie, and of a wondrous-strange disposition, to ridde hir selfe from the importunate pursuite of a thousand amorous sutors, who sollicited hir for mariage, prescribed this law unto them; that she would accept of him, that should equall hir in running; on condition those she should overcome might loose their lives. Some there were found, who deemed this prize worthie the hazard, and who incurred the penaltie of so cruell a match. *Hippomenes* comming to make his essay after the rest, devoutly addressed him-selfe to the devine protectresse of all amorous delights, earnestlie invoking hir assistance; who gentlie listning to his heartie prayers, furnished him with three golden Apples, and taught him how to use them. The scope of the race being plaine, according as *Hippomenes* perceived his swift-footed mistris to approch his heeles, he let fall (as at unawares) one of his Apples: the heedlesse maiden gazing and wondring at the alluring beauty of it, fayled not to turne and take it up.

Obstupuit uirgo, nitidique cupidine pomi,
Declinat cursus, aurumque uolubile tollit.

The mayde amaz'de, desiring that faire golde,
Turnes-by her course, takes it up as it rould.

The like he did (at his neede) with the second and third: untill by this degressing and diverting, the goale and advantage of the course was judged his. When Phisicions cannot purge the rheume, they divert and remoove the same unto some lesse dangerous part. I also perceive it to be the most ordinarie receite for the mindes diseases. *Abducendus etiam non nunquam animus est ad alia studia, sollicitudines curas; negotia: Loci denique mutatione, tanquam ægroti non conualescentes, sæpe curandus est: Our minde also is sometimes to be diverted to other studies, cogitations, cares and businesses: and lastly to be cured by change of place, as sicke folkes use, that otherwise cannot get health*. One makes it sildome to shock mischiefes with direct resistance: one makes it neither beare nor breake, but shunne or divert the blowe. This other lesson is too high, and over-hard. It is for them of the first rancke, meerely to stay upon the thing it selfe, to examine and judge it. It belongeth to one onely *Socrates,* to accoste and entertaine death with an undaunted ordinarie visage, to become familiar and play with it. He seeketh for no comfort out of the thing it selfe. To dye seemeth unto him a naturall and indifferent accident: thereon he wishly fixeth his sight, and thereon he resolveth without looking else-where. *Hegesias* his disciples, who with hunger starved themselves to death, incensed thereunto with the perswading discourses of his lessons; and that so thick as King *Ptolomey* forbad him any longer to entertaine his schoole with such murtherous precepts. Those considered not death in itselfe, they judge it not: This was not the limitte of their thoughts, they runne-on, and ayme at another being. Those poore creatures we see on scaffolds, fraught with an earnest to heavens-raised devotion, therein to the uttermost of their powre, employing all their sences; with their eares attentive to such instructions as preachers give them, and wringing handes heaved up to heaven; with hart-proceeding voice, uttering devoute prayers, with fervent and continuall ruth-mooving motion; doe verilie what in such an unavoidable exigent is commendable and convenient. One may well commend their religion, but not properlie their constancie. They shunne the brunt; they divert their consideration from death; as wee use to dandle and busie children, when we would launce them or let them bloud. I have seene some, who if by fortune they chanced to cast their eyes towards the dreadfull preparations of death, which were round about them, fall into trances, and with fury cast their cogitations else-where. We teach those that are to passe-over some steepie downe-fall or dreadfull abisse, to shut or turne aside their eyes. *Subrius Flauius,* being by the appointment of *Nero* to be put to death by the handes of *Niger,* both chiefe commanders in warre: when he was brought unto the place where the execution should be performed, seeing the pit *Niger* had caused to be digged for him uneven and unhandsomely made; *Nor is this pit* (quoth he to the souldyers that stoode about him) *according to the true discipline of warre:* And to *Niger,* who willed him to holde his head steddye, *I wish thou wouldest stricke as steddilye.* He guessed right; for *Nigers* arme trembling, he had dyvers blowes at him before he could strike it off. This man seemeth to have fixed his thoughtes surelye and directly on the matter. He that dyes in the fury of a battle, with weapons in

hand thinks not then on death, and neyther feeleth nor considereth the same: the heate of the fight transports him. An honest man of my acquaintaunce, falling downe in a single combat, and feeling himselfe stab'd nine or ten times by his enemy, was called unto by the by standers to call on God and remember his conscience: but he toulde me after, that albeit those voyces came unto his eares, they had no whit mooved him, and that he thought on nothing, but how to discharge and revenge himselfe. In which combatte he vanquished and slew his adversarye.

He who brought *L. Sillanus* his condemnation, did much for him; in that when he harde him answere he was prepared to dye, but not by the handes of base villaines; ranne uppon him with his souldiers to force him; against whom obstinately defending himselfe (though unarmed) with fistes and feete; he was slaine in the conflict: dispersing with a ready and rebellious choller the paynefull sence of a long and fore-prepared death; to which he was assigned. We ever thinke on somewhat else: eyther the hope of a better life doth settle and support us, or the confidence of our childrens worth; or the future glory of our name; or the avoyding of these lives mischieves; or the revenge hanging over their heads that have caused and procured our death:

Spero equidem mediis, si quid pia numina possunt,
Supplicia hausurum scopulis, et nomine Dido
Sæpe uocaturum.
Audiam, et hæc manes ueniet mihi fama sub imos.

I hope, if powers of heaven have any power,
On rockes he shalbe punisht, at that houre,
He oft on *Didos* name, shall pittilesse exclaime.
This shall I heare, and this report, shall to me in my grave resort.

Xenophon sacrificed with a crowne on his head, when one came to tell him the death of his sonne *Gryllus* in the battell of *Mantinea*. At the first hearing whereof hee cast his crowne to the ground; but finding uppon better relation how valiantly he dyed, he tooke it uppe and put it on his head agayne. *Epicurus* also at his death comforted himselfe in the eternity and worth of his writings. *Omnes clari et nobilitati labores fiunt tolerabiles. All glorious and honourable laboures are made tolerable.* And the same wound, and the same toyle (saith *Xenophon*) toucheth not a Generall of an armie, as it doth a private souldier. *Epaminondas* tooke his death much the more cheerfully, being informed that the victorie remained on his side. *Hæc sunt solatia, hæc fomenta summorum dolorum: These are the comforts, these the eases of most greevous paines.* And such other like circumstances ammuse, divert and remoove us from the consideration of the thing in it selfe. Even the arguments of Philosophie, at each clap wrest and turne the matter aside, and scarcely wipe away the scabbe thereof. The first man of the first Philosophicall schoole and superintendent of the rest, that great *Zeno,* against death, cryed out; *No evill is honourable; death is: therefore is death no evill*. Against drunkennesse; *No man entrusts his secrets to a drunkard; every one to the wise: therefore the wise will not be drunke.* Is this to hit the white? I love to see, that these principall wittes cannot ridde themselves of our company. As perfect and absolute as they would be, they still are but grosse and

simple men. *Revenge is a sweet-pleasing passion; of a great and naturall impression:* I perceive it well, albeit I have made no triall of it. To divert of late a young Prince from it, I tolde him not, he was to offer the one side of his cheeke, to him who had strooke him on the other, in regarde of charitie; nor displaide I unto him the tragicall events Poesie bestoweth upon that passion. There I left him, and strove to make him taste the beautie of a contrary image: the honour, the favour and the good-will he should acquire by gentlenesse and goodnesse: I diverted him to ambition. Behold how they deale in such cases. *If your affection in love be over-powerfull; disperse or dissipate the same,* say they; And they say true, for I have often, with profit made tryall of it: Breake it by the vertue of severall desires, of which one may bee Regent or chiefe maister, if you please; but for feare it should missuse and tyrannize you, weaken it with deviding, and protract it with diverting the same.

Cùm morosa uago singultiet inguine uena,
Coniicito humorem collectum in corpora quæque.

When raging lust excites a panting tumor,
To divers partes send that collected humor.

And looke to it in time, least it vexe you, if it have once seazed on you.

Si non prima nouis conturbes uulnera plagis,
Volgiuagáque uagus Venere ante recentia cures.

Unlesse the first woundes with new woundes you mixe,
And ranging cure the fresh with common tricks.

I was once neerely touched with a heavie displeasure, according to my complexion; and yet more just then heavie: I had peradventure lost my selfe in it, had I only relyed upon mine owne strength. Needing a vehement diversion to with-draw me from it; I did by arte and study make my selfe a Lover, whereto my age assisted mee; love discharged and diverted me from the inconvenience, which good-will and amitie had caused in me. So is it in all things else. A sharpe conceite possesseth, and a violent imagination holdeth me: I finde it a shorter course to alter and divert, then to tame and vanquishe the same: if I cannot substitute a contrary unto it, at least I present another unto it. *Change ever easeth, varietie dissolveth, and shifting dissipateth.* If I cannot buckle with it, I slip from it: and in shunning it, I stray and double from it. Shifting of place, exercise and company, I save my selfe amid the throng of other studies and ammusements, where it looseth my tracke, and so I slip away. Nature proceedeth thus, by the benefite of inconstancie: For, the time it hath bestowed on us, as a soveraigne Phisicion of our passions, chiefly obtaines his purpose that way, when fraughting our conceits with other and different affaires, it dissolveth and corrupteth that first apprehension, how forcible soever it be. A wise man seeth little lesse his friend dying at the end of five and twenty yeares, then at the beginning of the first yeare; and according to *Epicurus,* nothing lesse: for he ascribed no qualification of perplexities, eyther to the foresight or antiquitie of them. But so many other cogitations crosse this, that it languisheth, and in the end groweth

weary. To divert the inclination of vulgar reports, *Alcibiades* cut-off his faire dogs eares and taile; and so drove him into the market place; that giving this subject of prattle to the people, they might not medle with his other actiõs. I have also seen some womẽ, who to divert the opinions and cõiectures of the babling people, and to divert the fond tatling of some, did by coũterfet and dissembled affections, overshadow and cloake true affections. Amongst which I have noted some, who in dissembling and counterfeting have suffred themselves to be intrapped wittingly and in good earnest; quiting their true and originall humor for the fained: of whom I learne, that such as finde themselves well seated, are very fooles to yeelde unto that maske. The common greetings, and publike entertainements being reserved unto that set or appointed servant, beleeve there is little sufficiencie in him, if in the end he usurpe not your roome and send you unto his. This is properly to cut out and stitch up a shoe, for another to put on. *A little thing doth divert and turne us; for a small thing holds us.* We do not much respect subjects in grosse and alone: they are circumstances, or smale and superficial images that moove and touch us; and vaine rindes which rebound from subjects.

Folliculos ut nunc teretes a'state cicadæ
Linquunt.

As grasse-hoppers in summer now forsake
The round-growne sheafes, which they in time should take.

Plutarke himselfe bewailes his daughter by the fopperies of hir childehood. The remembrance of a farewell, of an action, of a particular grace, or of a last commendation, afflict us. *Cesars* goune disquieted all *Rome,* which his death had not done; The very sound of names, which gingleth in our eares, as, *Oh my poore maister;* or, *Alas my deare friend; Oh my good father;* or, *Alas my sweete daughter,* When such like repetitions pinch me, and that I looke more nearely to them, I finde them but grammaticall laments, the word and the tune wound me. Even as Preachers exclamations doe often moove their audytorie more, then their reasons; and as the pittyfull growne of a beast yerneth us, though it bee killed for our use; without poysing or entring there-whilst, into the true and massie essence of my subject

His se stimulis dolor ipse lacessit.

Griefe by these provocations,
Puts it selfe more in passions.

They are the foundations of our mourning. The obstinacy of the stone, namely in the yarde[1] hath sometimes for three or foure dayes together, so stopped my urine, and brought me so neare deathes-dore, that it had beene meere folly in mee, to hope, nay to desire, to avoyde the same, considering what cruell pangs that painefull plight did seaze me with. Oh how cunning a maister in the murthering arte, or hangmans trade was that good Emperor, who caused malefactors yardes to be fast-tide, that so he might make them dye for want of pissing. In which teares finding my selfe, I considered by how flight causes and frivolous objects, imagination nourished in me the griefe to loose my life: with what Atomes the

consequence and difficulty of this my dislodging was contrived in my minde; to what idle conceites and frivolous cogitations we give place in so waighty a case or important affaire. A Dogge, a Horse, a Hare, a Glasse, and what not? were coumpted in my losse. To others, their ambitious hopes, their purse, their learning; In my mynde as sottishlye. I view death carelessely when I behould it universally as the end of life. I overwhelme and contemne it thus in great, by retayle it spoyles and proules me. The teares of a Lacquey, the distributing of my cast sutes, the touch of a knowne hand , an ordinary consolation; doth disconsolate and entender me. So doe the plaints and of fables trouble and vex our mindes; and the wayling laments of *Dydo,* and *Ariadne* passionate even those, that beleeve them not in *Virgill,* nor in *Catullus:* It is an argument of an obstinate nature, and indurate hart, not to be mooved therewith: as for a wonder, they report of *Polemon:* who was not so much as appaled, as the biting of a Dogge, who tooke away the braune or calfe of his legge. And no wisedome goeth so farre, as by the due judgement to conceive aright the evident cause of a Sorrow and griefe, so lively and wholy that it suffer or admit noe accession by presence, when eyes and eares have their share therein: partes that cannot be agitated but by vaine accidents. Is it reason, that even artes should serve their purposes, and make their profit of our imbecility and naturall blockishnesse? An Orator (saith Rethorick) in the play of his pleading, shall be mooved at the sound of his owne voyce, and by his fayned agitations; and suffer himselfe to be cozoned by the passion he representeth: imprinting a lively and essentiall sorrow, by the jugling he acteth, to transferre it into the judges, whome of the two it concerneth lesse: As the persons hyred at our funerales, who to ayde the ceremony of mourning, make saile of their teares by measure, and of their sorrow by waight. For although they strive to act it in a borrowed forme, yet by abytuating and ordering their countenance, it is certayne they are often wholy transported into it, and entertaine the impression of a true and unfained melancholly. I assisted amongst divers others of his friends, to convay the dead corpes of the Lord of *Grammont* from the siege of *Lafere,* where he was untimely slaine, to *Soissons.* I noted that every where as we passed a long, we filled with lamentations and teares all the people we met, by the onely showe of our convoyes mourning attire; for the deceased mans name was not so much as knowne, or hard of about those quarters. *Quintilian* reporteth, to have seene Comediants so farre ingaged in a sorrowful part, that they wept after being come to their lodgings: and of himselfe, that having undertaken to moove a certaine passion in another, he had found himselfe surprised, not onely with shedding of teares, but with a palenesse of countenance, and behaviour of a man truely dejected with griefe. In a country neare our Mountaynes, the women say and unsay, weepe and laugh with one breath; as *Martin* the Priest; for, as for their lost husbands they entreate their waymentings by repetition of the good and gracefull partes they were endowed with, therewithall under one they make publike relation of those imperfections; to worke, as it were some recompence unto themselves, and transchange their pitty unto disdayne; with a much better grace then we, who when we loose a late acquaintance, strive to loade him with new and forged prayses, and to make him farre other, now that we are deprived of his sight, then he seemed to be when wee enjoyed and beheld him. As if mourning were an instructing party; or teares cleared our understanding by washing the same. I renounce from this time forward all the favourable testimonies any

man shall afforde me, not because I shall deserve them, but because I shall be dead. If one demand that fellow, what interrest he hath in such a siege; *The interrest of example (will he say) and common obedience of the Prince;* I nor looke nor pretend any benefit thereby; and of glory I know how smale a portion commeth to the share of a private man, such as I am. I have neyther passion nor quarrell in the matter; yet the next day shall you see him all changed, and chafing, boyling and blushing with rage, in his ranke of battle, ready for the assault. It is the glaring reflecting of so much steele, the flashing thundering of the Cannon, the clang of trumpers, and the ratling of Drumes, that have infused this new furye, and rankor in his swelling vaynes. A frivolous cause, will you say: How a cause? There needeth none to excite our mynde. A doating humour without body, without substance overswayeth and tosseth it uppe and downe. Let mee thinke of building Castles in *Spayne,* my imagination will forge me commodities and afford me meanes and delights wherewith my mynde is really tickled and essentially gladded. How often doe wee pester our spirits with anger or sadnesse by such shaddowes, and entangle our selves into fantasticall passions which alter both our mynde and bodye? what astonished, flearing and confused mumpes and mowes doth this dotage stirre uppe in our visages? what skippings and agitations of members and voyce? seemes it not by this man alone, that he hath false visions of a multitude of other men with whome hee dooth negotiate; or some inwarde Goblin that torments him? Enquire of your selfe, where is the object of this alteration? Is there anything but us, in nature, except subsisting nullitye over whome it hath any power? Because *Cambyses* dreamed that his brother should be King of *Persia,* he put him to death; a brother whom he loved, and ever trusted. *Aristodemus* King of the *Messenians* killed himselfe, uppon a conceite he tooke of some ill presage, by, I know not what howling of his Dogges. And King *Midas* did asmuch, beeing troubled and vexed by a certayne unpleasing dreame of his owne. It is the right way to prize ones life at the right worth of it, to forgo it for a dreame. Heare notwithstanding our minde triumph over the bodies weakenesses and misery; in that it is the pray and marke of all wrongs and alterations, to seede on and ayme at. It hath surely much reason to speake of it.

O prima infelix fingenti terra Prometheo?
Ille parum cauti pectoris egit opus.
Corpora disponens, mentem non uidit in arte?
Recta animi primum debuit esse uia.

Unhappy earth first by *Prometheus* formed,
Who of small providence a worke performed:
He framing bodyes saw in arte no minde:
The mindes way first should rightly be assign'de.

Notes

1 A Middle and Early Modern English word for *penis.*