

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 31

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On Anger

Plutarch is admirable throughout, but especially where he judges of human actions. What fine things does he say in the comparison of Lycurgus and Numa upon the subject of our great folly in abandoning children to the care and government of their fathers? The most of our civil governments, as Aristotle says, “leave, after the manner of the Cyclopes, to every one the ordering of their wives and children, according to their own foolish and indiscreet fancy; and the Lacedaemonian and Cretan are almost the only governments that have committed the education of children to the laws. Who does not see that in a state all depends upon their nurture and bringing up? and yet they are left to the mercy of parents, let them be as foolish and ill-conditioned as they may, without any manner of discretion.”

Among other things, how often have I, as I have passed along our streets, had a good mind to get up a farce, to revenge the poor boys whom I have seen hided, knocked down, and miserably beaten by some father or mother, when in their fury and mad with rage? You shall see them come out with fire and fury sparkling in their eyes,

*rabie iecur incendente, feruntur,
Præcipites, ut saxa iugis abrupta, quibus mons
Subtrahitur, clivoque latus pendente recedit,*

(and according to Hippocrates, the most dangerous maladies are they that disfigure the countenance), with a roaring and terrible voice, very often against those that are but newly come from nurse, and there they are lamed and spoiled with blows, whilst our justice takes no cognizance of it, as if these maims and dislocations were not executed upon members of our commonwealth:

*Gratum est, quod patriæ civem populoque dedisti,
Si facis, ut patriæ sit idoneus, utilis agris,
Utilis et bellorum et pacis rebus agendis.*

There is no passion that so much transports men from their right judgment as anger. No one would demur upon punishing a judge with death who

They are headlong borne with burning fury as great stones torn from the mountains, by which the steep sides are left naked and bare.

• JUV., 6.647

It is well when to thy country and the people thou hast given a citizen, provided thou make fit for his country's service; useful to till the earth, useful in affairs of war and peace. • JUV., 14.70

should condemn a criminal on the account of his own choler; why, then, should fathers and pedagogues be any more allowed to whip and chastise children in their anger? 'Tis then no longer correction, but revenge. Chastisement is instead of physic to children; and would we endure a physician who should be animated against and enraged at his patient?

We ourselves, to do well, should never lay a hand upon our servants whilst our anger lasts. When the pulse beats, and we feel emotion in ourselves, let us defer the business; things will indeed appear otherwise to us when we are calm and cool. 'Tis passion that then commands, 'tis passion that speaks, and not we.

Faults seen through passion appear much greater to us than they really are, as bodies do when seen through a mist. He who is hungry uses meat; but he who will make use of chastisement should have neither hunger nor thirst to it.

And, moreover, chastisements that are inflicted with weight and discretion are much better received and with greater benefit by him who suffers; otherwise, he will not think himself justly condemned by a man transported with anger and fury, and will allege his master's excessive passion, his inflamed countenance, his unwonted oaths, his emotion and precipitous rashness, for his own justification:

*Ora tument ira, nigrescunt sanguine venæ,
Lumina Gorgoneo sævius igne micant.*

Suetonius reports that Caius Rabirius having been condemned by Caesar, the thing that most prevailed upon the people (to whom he had appealed) to determine the cause in his favor, was the animosity and vehemence that Caesar had manifested in that sentence.

Their faces swell, their veins grow black with rage, and their eyes sparkle with Gorgonian fire. • Ov., ARS. AM., 3.503

Saying is a different thing from doing; we are to consider the sermon apart and the preacher apart. These men lent themselves to a pretty business who in our times have attempted to shake the truth of our Church by the vices of her ministers; she extracts her testimony elsewhere; 'tis a foolish way of arguing and that would throw all things into confusion. A man whose morals are good may have false opinions, and a wicked man may preach truth, even though he believe it not himself. 'Tis doubtless a fine harmony when doing and saying go together; and I will not deny but that saying, when the actions follow, is not of greater authority and efficacy, as Eudamidas said, hearing a philosopher talk of military affairs: "These things are finely said, but he who speaks them is not to be believed for his ears have never been used to the sound of the trumpet." And Cleomenes, hearing an orator declaiming upon valor, burst out into laughter, at which the other being angry; "I should," said he to him, "do the same if it were a swallow that spoke of this subject; but if it were an eagle I should willingly hear him." I perceive, methinks, in the writings of the ancients, that he who speaks what he thinks, strikes much more home than he who only feigns. Hear Cicero speak of the love of liberty: hear Brutus speak of it, the mere written words of this man sound as if he would purchase it at the price of his life. Let Cicero, the father of eloquence, treat of the contempt of death; let Seneca do the same: the first languishingly drawls it out so you

perceive he would make you resolve upon a thing on which he is not resolved himself; he inspires you not with courage, for he himself has none; the other animates and inflames you. I never read an author, even of those who treat of virtue and of actions, that I do not curiously inquire what kind of a man he was himself.

For the Ephori at Sparta, seeing a dissolute fellow propose a wholesome advice to the people, commanded him to hold his peace, and entreated a virtuous man to attribute to himself the invention, and to propose it.

Plutarch's writings, if well understood, sufficiently bespeak their author, and so that I think I know him even into his soul; and yet I could wish that we had some fuller account of his life. And I am thus far wandered from my subject, upon the account of the obligation I have to Aulus Gellius, for having left us in writing this story of his manners, that brings me back to my subject of anger. A slave of his, a vicious, ill-conditioned fellow, but who had the precepts of philosophy often ringing in his ears, having for some offense of his been stripped by Plutarch's command, whilst he was being whipped, muttered at first, that it was without cause and that he had done nothing to deserve it; but at last falling in good earnest to exclaim against and rail at his master, he reproached him that he was no philosopher, as he had boasted himself to be: that he had often heard him say it was indecent to be angry, nay, had written a book to that purpose; and that the causing him to be so cruelly beaten, in the height of his rage, totally gave the lie to all his writings; to which Plutarch calmly and coldly answered, "How, ruffian," said he, "by what dost thou judge that I am now angry? Does either my face, my color, or my voice give any manifestation of my being moved? I do not think my eyes look fierce, that my countenance appears troubled, or that my voice is dreadful: am I red, do I foam, does any word escape my lips I ought to repent? Do I start? Do I tremble with fury? For those, I tell thee, are the true signs of anger." And so, turning to the fellow that was whipping him, "Ply on thy work," said he, "whilst this gentleman and I dispute." This is his story.

Archytas Tarentinus, returning from a war wherein he had been captain-general, found all things in his house in very great disorder, and his lands quite out of tillage, through the ill husbandry of his receiver, and having caused him to be called to him; "Go," said he, "if I were not in anger I would soundly drub your sides." Platolikewise, being highly offended with one of his slaves, gave Speusippus order to chastise him, excusing himself from doing it because he was in anger. And Carillus, a Lacedaemonian, to a Helot, who carried himself insolently toward him: "By the gods," said he, "if I was not angry, I would immediately cause thee to be put to death."

'Tis a passion that is pleased with and flatters itself. How often, being moved under a false cause, if the person offending makes a good defense and presents us with a just excuse, are we angry against truth and innocence itself? In proof of which, I remember a marvellous example of antiquity. Piso, otherwise a man of very eminent virtue, being moved against a soldier of his, for that returning alone from forage he could give him no account where he had left a companion of his, took it for granted that he had killed him, and presently condemned him to death. He was no sooner mounted upon the gibbet, but, behold, his wandering

companion arrives, at which all the army were exceedingly glad, and after many embraces of the two comrades, the hangman carried both the one and the other into Piso's presence, all those present believing it would be a great pleasure even to himself; but it proved quite contrary; for through shame and spite, his fury, which was not yet cool, redoubled; and by a subtlety which his passion suddenly suggested to him, he made three criminals for having found one innocent, and caused them all to be despatched: the first soldier, because sentence had passed upon him; the second, who had lost his way, because he was the cause of his companion's death; and the hangman, for not having obeyed the order which had been given him.

Such as have had to do with testy and obstinate women, may have experimented into what a rage it puts them to oppose silence and coldness to their fury, and that a man disdains to nourish their anger. The orator Celius was wonderfully choleric by nature; and to one who supped in his company, a man of a gentle and sweet conversation, and who, that he might not move him, approved and consented to all he said; he, impatient that his ill-humor should thus spend itself without aliment: "For the love of the gods deny me something," said he, "that we may be two." Women, in like manner, are only angry that others may be angry again, in imitation of the laws of love. Phocion, to one who interrupted his speaking by injurious and very opprobrious words, made no other return than silence, and to give him full liberty and leisure to vent his spleen; which he having accordingly done, and the storm blown over, without any mention of this disturbance, he proceeded in his discourse where he had left off before. No answer can nettle a man like such a contempt.

Of the most choleric man in France (anger is always an imperfection, but more excusable in, a soldier, for in that trade it cannot sometimes be avoided) I often say, that he is the most patient man that I know, and the most discreet in bridling his passions; which rise in him with so great violence and fury,

*magno veluti cum flamma sonore
Virgea suggeritur costis undantis aheni,
Exsultantque æstu latices, furit intus aquae vis.
Fumidus atque alte spumis exuberat amnis;
Nec iam se capit unda; volat vapor ater ad auras,*

that he must of necessity cruelly constrain himself to moderate it. And for my part, I know no passion which I could with so much violence to myself attempt to cover and conceal; I would not set wisdom at so high a price; and do not so much consider what a man does, as how much it costs him to do no worse.

Another boasted himself to me of the regularity and gentleness of his manners, which are to truth very singular; to whom I replied, that it was indeed something, especially in persons of so eminent a quality as himself, upon whom every one had their eyes, to present himself always well-tempered to the world; but that the principal thing was to make provision for within and for himself; and that it was not in my opinion very well to order his business outwardly well, and to grate himself

When with loud crackling noise, a
fire of sticks is applied to the
boiling caldron's side, by the heat
in frisky bells the liquor dances;
within the water rages, and high
the smoky fluid in foam overflows.
Nor can the wave now contain
itself; the black steam flies all
abroad. • VERG., AEN., 7.462

within, which I was afraid he did, in putting on and maintaining this mask and external appearance.

A man incorporates anger by concealing it, as Diogenes told Demosthenes, who, for fear of being seen in a tavern, withdrew himself the more retiredly into it: "The more you retire backward, the farther you enter in." I would rather advise that a man should give his servant a box of the ear a little unseasonably, than rack his fancy to present this grave and composed countenance; and had rather discover my passions than brood over them at my own expense; they grow less inventing and manifesting themselves; and 'tis much better their point should wound others without, than be turned toward ourselves within: *Omnia vitia in aperto leviora sunt: et tunc perniciosissima, quum simulata sanitate subsidunt.*

I admonish all those who have authority to be angry in my family, in the first place to manage their anger and not to lavish it upon every occasion, for that both lessens the value and hinders the effect: rash and incessant scolding runs into custom, and renders itself despised; and what you lay out upon a servant for a theft is not felt, because it is the same he has seen you a hundred times employ against him for having ill washed a glass, or set a stool out of place. Secondly, that they be not angry to no purpose, but make sure that their reprehension reach him with whom they are offended; for, ordinarily, they rail and bawl before he comes into their presence, and continue scolding an age after he is gone,

& secum petulans amentia certat.

They attack his shadow, and drive the storm in a place where no one is either chastised or concerned, but in the clamor of their voice. I likewise in quarrels condemn those who huff and vapor without an enemy: those rhodomontades should be reserved to discharge upon the offending party:

*Mugitus veluti cum prima in praelia taurus
Terrificos ciet, atque irasci in cornua tentat,
Arboris obnixus trunco, ventosque lacessit
Ictibus, et sparsa ad pugnam proludit arena.*

When I am angry, my anger is very sharp but withal very short, and as private as I can; I lose myself indeed in promptness and violence, but not in trouble; so that I throw out all sorts of injurious words at random, and without choice, and never consider pertinently to dart my language where I think it will deepest wound, for I commonly make use of no other weapon than my tongue. My servants have a better bargain of me in great occasions than in little; the little ones surprise me; and the misfortune is, that when you are once upon the precipice, 'tis no matter who gave you the push, you always go to the bottom; the fall urges, moves, and makes haste of itself. In great occasions this satisfies me, that they are so just every one expects a reasonable indignation, and then I glorify myself in deceiving their expectation; against these, I fortify and prepare myself; they disturb my head, and threaten to transport me very far, should I follow them. I can easily contain myself from entering into one of these passions, and am strong enough, when I expect them, to repel their violence, be the cause never so great; but if a passion once prepossess and seize me, it carries me away, be the cause never so small. I bargain thus

All vices are less dangerous when open to be seen, and then most pernicious when they lurk under a dissembled good nature. • SEN., EP., 56

And petulant madness contends with itself. • CLAUD., EU., 1.237

As when a bull to usher in the fight, makes dreadful bellowings, and whets his horns against the trunk of a tree; with blows he beats the air, and rehearses the fight by scattering the sand. • VERG., AEN., 12.103

with those who may contend with me when you see me moved first, let me alone, right or wrong; I'll do the same for you. The storm is only begot by a concurrence of angers, which easily spring from one another, and are not born together. Let every one have his own way, and we shall be always at peace. A profitable advice, but hard to execute. Sometimes also it falls out that I put on a seeming anger, for the better governing of my house, without any real emotion. As age renders my humors more sharp, I study to oppose them, and will, if I can, order it so, that for the future I may be so much the less peevish and hard to please, as I have more excuse and inclination to be so, although I have heretofore been reckoned among those who have the greatest patience.

A word more to conclude this argument. Aristotle says, that anger sometimes serves for arms to virtue and valor. That is probable; nevertheless, they who contradict him pleasantly answer, that 'tis a weapon of novel use, for we move all other arms, this moves us; our hand guides it not, 'tis it that guides our hand; it holds us, we hold not it.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Claud., Eu.	Claudian, <i>Against Eutropius</i>
Juv.	Juvenal, <i>Satires</i>
Ov., Ars. Am.	Ovid, <i>Ars Amatoria</i>
Sen., Ep.	Seneca, <i>Epistles</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>