

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 17

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On Fear

^a *Obstipui, steteruntque comæ, et uox faucibus hæsit.*

I was stunned. My hair stood on end and my voice stuck in my throat. • VERG., *AEN.*, 2.774

^a I AM NOT a good naturalist (as they call it) and do not really know how fear acts upon us. But it is undeniably a strange emotion. Doctors say that none can so easily throw off balance our judgment. And, yes, I have seen many people driven mad by fear. Even in the steadiest minds it certainly causes terrible confusion while it lasts. Never mind the common folks for whom it conjures up visions of either relatives risen from the grave, wrapped in their shroud, or werewolves, spirits, and monsters. But even among soldiers, in whom it should find less room, how often has it turned a flock of sheep into a squadron in armor? Reeds and canes into knights and lancers? Our friends into foes? Our white cross into their red?¹

^a When Sir Charles of Bourbon took Rome,² a standard-bearer standing watch in San Pietro was so frightened when he heard the sound of the alarm for the first time that he ran outside, flag in hand, through a hole in the ruins. He thought he was rushing back into town when he was heading straight for the enemy. When he finally saw Bourbon's troops closing ranks to face him, thinking this was the launch of an attack by those in the city, the ensign realized his mistake. He turned around and went back in through the same hole he had used to venture out more than three hundred paces into the open. Captain Julle's ensign was not so lucky when the Count of Buren and the lord of Le Rœulx took Saint-Pol from us.³ So frightened was he that he rushed out, flag and all, through a loophole, only to be torn to pieces by the assailants. And who can forget, at the same siege, the fear that gripped, seized, and froze the heart of one gentleman so completely that he collapsed, dead, at the breach, without a scratch on him?

^b This same fury will sometimes move a multitude. In one of Germanicus's encounters with the Germans, fear drove two large regiments in opposite directions, one heading for the position the other was abandoning, and vice versa.

ª At times it can strap wings to our heels, as it did for those first two. Or it can nail our feet to the ground and immobilize them. Like Emperor Theophilus who, in the battle he lost against the Hagarenes,⁴ grew so stunned and paralyzed that he was unable to flee. º *Adeo paupor etiam auxilia formidat.* Manuel, one of his army's most important officers, finally caught and shook him, as if to wake him from deep slumber, and told him: "I will kill you if you don't follow me. Better you lost your life than you empire should you be captured."

Even help scares fear. • CURT., HIST., 3.11

« Fear gives a final demonstration of its power when, for its own benefit, it gives us back all the courage it stole from our duty and our honor. In the first fair battle the Romans lost against Hannibal, under Consul Sempronius, close to ten thousand infantrymen, in the grip of fear and with nowhere for their cowardice to take them, threw themselves at the bulk of the enemy. They broke through it, in an impressive effort and a great slaughter of Carthaginians, paying for a shameful retreat a price as high as that of a glorious victory. Fear is what I fear most.

« No other experience is more bitter.

« Is there a harsher and more appropriate feeling for what Pompey's allies felt aboard his ship when they witnessed that horrible massacre?⁵ Some say that the fear of Egyptian sails closing in on them put an end to it, and that they could only think about pressing the sailors to row them to safety. Once in Tyre and free from fear, their thoughts turned back to what they had just lost. They gave in to the tears and wails which this other, stronger emotion had interrupted.⁶

« *Tum paupor sapientiam omnem mihi ex animo expectorat.*

Then fear expels all wisdom from my soul. • CIC., TUSC., 4.19

« Those who will have taken a good beating in a battle, bloodied and wounded still, you can have them back charging the next day. But those who developed a real fear of the enemy, you will not so much as make them look at the front line. Those who live with an intense fear of being dispossessed, exiled, or taken, feel a constant anguish. They lose their appetite and their sleep. Whereas the poor, the banished, and the serfs often live as happily as the rest. And all of those who, exhausted by the stings of fear, jumped, or hanged or drowned themselves, have shown us that it is even more burdensome and unbearable than death.

« The Greeks knew of another kind which is beyond the scope of our discussion. They said that it had no apparent cause and that it came from some heavenly impulse. Whole groups of people could be affected by it, whole armies too. Such was the one that caused the awesome devastation of Carthage: Nothing but screams and frightened voices could be heard. Its inhabitants could be seen leaving their houses, as if the alarm had been sounded, charging, wounding, and killing each other like enemies come to take their town.⁷ It was nothing but confusion and rage until, by their prayers and sacrifices, they appeased the gods' wrath. This is what they called "panic terrors."⁸

NOTES

- 1 In the sixteenth century, the white cross of Saint Michael became a symbol of the French army. The red cross, the Cross of Burgundy, was that of the Habsburgs and Spain.
- 2 In May 1527
- 3 In June 1537
- 4 Hagarenes, *descendants of Hagar*, is a term used in early Christian and Byzantine literature for Muslims, primarily of Arab origin.
- 5 On September 28, 48 BCE, three assassins boarded Pompey's ship and stabbed and decapitated him. His wife and his son were on board with him.
- 6 This whole paragraph is missing from Montaigne's annotated copy serving as the basis for the complete *Essays*. It was presumably written on a separate sheet, now lost, or included in a copy of the same notes, from which Marie de Gournay, Montaigne's first editor, prepared her edition.
- 7 This episode about Carthage evokes similar scenes of urban fratricide Montaigne would have been well aware of: the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre when, on the night of August 23rd, 1572, a Catholic mob took to the streets of Paris to kill thousands of Protestants.
- 8 *Panic* derives from Greek πανικός (*panikos*) meaning of *Pan*. The god Pan was thought to be capable of inducing states of great confusion and fright.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Curt., Hist.	Quintus Curtius Rufus, <i>Histories of Alexander the Great</i>
Du Bellay, Mem.	Du Bellay, Martin, <i>Mémoires</i>
Livy	Livy, <i>History of Rome</i>
Tac., Ann.	Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>
Zon., EH.	Zonaras, Joannes, <i>Extracts of History</i>