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Montaigne's Essays

In Three Books. With Notes and Quotations. And an Account of The Author's Life ; With a short Character of the Author and Translator, by the late Marquis of Halifax; With the Addition of A Complete Table to each Volume

Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de

London, 1743

A Vindication of Montaigne's Essays.

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A
VINDICATION
OF
Montaigne's ESSAYS.



THE Effays of *Michael de Montaigne* are justly ranked amongst Miscellaneous Books: For they are on various Subjects, without Order and Connexion; and the very Body of the Discourses has still a greater Variety. This Sort of Confusion does not however hinder People of all Qualities to extol these Effays above all the Books that ever they read, and they make them their chief Study. They think that other Miscellanies of ancient and modern Books are nothing but an unnecessary Heap of Quotations, whereas we find in this Authorities to the Purpose, intermix'd with the Author's own Thoughts; which being bold and extraordinary, are very effectual to cure Men of their Weakness and Vanity, and induce them to seek Virtue and Felicity by lawful Means. But because every Body is not of this Opinion, we must take Notice here of what is said against, and in Favour of these Effays, to know what we should believe of 'em; and this is the more necessary, because one meets with frequent Opportunities to talk of this Author, his Book being almost in the Hands of all People.

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The Enemies of *Montaigne* tell us, That his Book is so far from inspiring his Readers with the Love of Virtue, that on the contrary, some of his Discourses being stuff'd with free and licentious Words, they teach them some Vices of which they were ignorant, or else are the Occasion that they take a Pleasure in speaking thereof, and at last induce them to fall into the same. That his Discourses upon several Effects of Nature are rather fit to divert his Thoughts from true Religion, than to convince them of the Truth of it, and are altogether unbecoming a Christian Philosopher. That notwithstanding his Propositions and Assertions are for the most Part weak and false, yet they are very dangerous for several Persons who either want Learning, or have too great a Bias for Libertinism. That besides an indifferent Knowledge of practical Morals and History, which *Montaigne* had acquired in reading *Seneca* and *Plutarch*, having convers'd with few other Books, as he owns himself, he had hardly a Tincture of other Sciences and Arts, even not of the Theory of Moral Philosophy. That he was as ignorant in other Parts of Philosophy, as Physick, Metaphysick, and Logick; which does sufficiently appear by his wrong Inferences on several Things. That he understood very little what we call Humanity, or *Belles Lettres*, as one may see by his unpolite Stile, and the Confusion of his Discourses, which shew him a very ill Grammarian, and a bad Rhetorician; and as he talks positively, and boldly as the most learned Men, *Scaliger* was us'd to stile him a bold Ignorant. These angry Gentlemen do likewise pretend, that what is most admir'd in *Montaigne* is stolen from some ancient Authors, and that if those Quotations and the little Stories he tells us about his Temper and Inclinations were taken out of his Book, the rest would be very little or nothing at all.

This is the Substance of the most material Objections made against *Montaigne*; not to mention here several Authors, who have purposely written against his Opinions, as Mr. *De Silbon* in his Book of the Immortality of the Soul, wherein he confutes what *Montaigne* has alledg'd to prove that Brutes are capable of thinking. *Chanet*, in his Treatise of the Operations of the Understanding, quotes *Montaigne's* Essays, as a Work wherein Judgment had no Share, because, says he, every judicious Man loves Order,

der, and there is nothing but Confusion in that whole Book.

Having thus impartially related what is urg'd against *Montaigne*, we proceed now to mention what is said in his Vindication. And we might here, in the first Place, make use of the long Preface Madamoiselle *de Gournay* has prefix'd to the *French Folio Edition* of his *Essays*, 1652, wherein she does not only give a full Answer to all the Objectinos made, or that can be made against *Montaigne*, but also talks of him as of a Man whose Works have reviv'd Truth in his Age, and which therefore she calls *the Quintessence of Philosophy, the Hellebore of Man's Folly, the Setter at Liberty of the Understanding, and the Judicial Throne of Reason*. But we do not think fit to insist upon her Evidence, for notwithstanding the solid Arguments her Opinion is grounded upon, she may be suspected to be blindfolded with the passionate Love she had for her excellent Father: And besides, we have so many great Men to produce in Favour of *Montaigne*, that we may without any Prejudice to his Cause, wave the Evidence of Madamoiselle *de Gournay*. These will tell you, that if he has handled any Matters with an uncommon Freedom, this is an Effect of his generous Temper, which was free from any base Compliance; and as to his Love for Virtue, and his Religion, they appeal to his very Book itself, whereby that Truth will appear, if the Passages alledg'd to prove the contrary are examin'd without Partiality, and not by themselves, but according to the Connexion they have with what precedes or follows.

Stephen Pasquier, that sincere Writer, deals more fairly with *Montaigne* than *Silbon*, *Balzac*, or any other of his Opposers, for he does not conceal his Faults, nor pass by what may be said to extenuate or excuse them. '*Montaigne*, says he, in one of his Letters, has several Chapters, whereof the Body is no ways answerable to the Head, witness these following, *The History of Spurina; of the Resemblance of Children to their Parents; of the Verses of Virgil; of Coaches; of lame People; of Vanity, and Physiognomy*. These are incoherent Things, wherein the Author runs from one Subject to another, without any Order or Connexion. But after all, we must take of *Montaigne* what is good, and not look upon his Titles,

but into his Discourses, for possibly he design'd to laugh at himself, others, and human Capacity, flighting thus the Rules and servile Laws of Authors.

I shall add on this Point, that notwithstanding several of his Discourses do contain quite different Things from what is promis'd in the Titles, as *Pasquier* has observ'd, yet it does not always happen so; and when he has done it, methinks, it is rather through Affectation than Inadvertency, to shew that he did not intend to make a regular Work. This does likewise appear, by the odd, or rather fantastical Connexion of his Discourses, wherein from one Matter he makes long Digressions upon several others. No doubt but he thought that one might take the same Liberty in his Meditations, as is assum'd in common Conversations, in which, tho' there be but two or three Interlocutors, 'tis observ'd that there is such a Variety in their Discourses, that if they were set down in Writing, it would appear that by Digressions they are run away from their first Subject, and that the last Part of their Conversation is very little answerable to the first. This I verily believe was his true Intention, that he might present the World with a free and original Work; for neither *Chanet* nor any other of his Adversaries will be able to convince the World, that this proceeded from want of Judgment in a Man of such Parts as they are oblig'd to own in *Montaigne*.

He design'd also sometimes to conceal his Design in his Titles; as for Instance, in his third Book, when having spent almost a whole Chapter against Physicians, it is most likely that his Intention was to conceal it by intitling the same, *Of the Resemblance of Children to their Parents*. For this gives him an Opportunity to tell us, that he was afflicted with the Gravel as his Father was, and to discourse of the Cure of several Distempers, and at the same time of the Uncertainty of Physick, or rather of the Ignorance of Physicians; from whence I conclude, that in this whole Chapter, and several others, there is rather a refin'd Art, than Ignorance. It has also been objected against him, that he talks of no Body else in his Writings, as if he intended to propose himself as a necessary Pattern to the rest of Mankind, tho' what he says of himself is for the most part odd and fantastical. To this I answer, that any Man may be an Example to others, either for doing Good, or eschewing
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ing Evil; and that *Montaigne* does not pretend that what he says of himself should be taken for any other thing than really it is, having a sufficient Knowledge of all human Frailties, and of his own in particular.

'Tis somewhat surprizing that *Montaigne* should be blamed for quoting ancient Authors, when his Quotations are made *à propos*, that is, for confirming or illustrating what he says, seeing *Plutarch* and several other excellent Authors have taken the same Liberty; and if it be objected, that the Quotations in *Plutarch* are taken from Greek Authors, and consequently are in the same Language as his, whereas *Montaigne* has stuffed his *French* Book with Greek, Latin, and Italian Verses; I answer that this is trifling, for if *Montaigne* found nothing in his own Language worthy of being cited, or else if he thought that ancient or foreign Writers had better treated the Matter he speaks of, Pray by what Law is he forbidden to make use of their Authority? I own, that in some Places, he has translated some Passages of ancient Authors into *French*, and has so dextrously incorporated them into his Work, that he has in some Manner made them his own; but where is the great Crime in this, especially seeing he has a World of Thoughts of his own, which are more sublime and excellent, than what he has alledged from others?

Balzac, in his *XIX Entretien*, reflects upon his Language, though at the same time he excuses it. 'He lived,' says he, in the Reign of the Family of *Valois*, and was a *Gascoign* by Birth, and therefore it is impossible, but his Language must have something of the Vice common to his Age and Country. However, we must own, that his Soul was eloquent, and that he expressed his Thoughts in bold masculine Expressions, and that his Stile had some Beauties above what we could have expected from his Age. I'll say no more on this Head, and I know that it would be a sort of a Miracle, that a Person could politely speak *French* in the Barbary of *Quercy* and *Perigord*. Should a Man, beset with bad Examples, and deprived of good ones, have Courage and Strength enough to defend himself alone against a whole Nation, against his own Wife, Relations, and Friends, who are as many Enemies to the Purity of the *French* Tongue? The Court was likewise as corrupted as the Country, so that it was then
 lawful

' lawful to fail, there being then no settled Rules for our
 ' Language; and those Faults, which are more ancient
 ' than the Laws themselves, are doubtless innocent. I
 ' conclude, says he in another Place, that I have a great
 ' Veneration for him, and that in my Opinion he is
 ' comparable to those Ancients whom we call *Maximos*
 ' *Ingenio, Arte rudes, &c.*

What *Balzac* says, in relation to the Court of *France* in
 the Days of *Montaigne*, is true enough, and very much
 to the Purpose; but observe here the Vanity and Malice
 of that Hypercritic, who must reflect upon *Montaigne's*
 Country; as if it were impossible that any Body born in
Perigord or *Quercy*, should write *French* as politely as he
 who was born within a Day's Journey from *Montaigne*. I
 know *Balzac* has written more politely than *Montaigne*,
 and that the *French* Tongue is much indebted to him;
 but he whose Excellency was chiefly in the Connexion
 of Words, must not for all that pretend to set up for a
 Judge of the Thoughts of *Montaigne*, as he rashly ven-
 tured upon in his XVIII and XIX *Entretien*.

'Tis true, *Montaigne* has some provincial Expressions,
 but they are few in Number; and it is to be observed, that
 several Words of his which were at first excepted against,
 have been since adopted by the best Writers, this being
 the Privilege of great Authors to introduce new Words.
 The *French* Word *enjouë* (*merry*) has not been always
 in Use, though it is now in the Mouths of all the learn-
 ed and polite People, and *Montaigne* was the first Author
 that I know of who made Use of it; and so they are
 obliged to him for this Word, which does not only sig-
 nify a merry Man, but likewise expresses the very Effects
 of Mirth in his Face, and chiefly upon his Cheek (*jouës*.)

Those who tell us that *Scaliger* was used to call him a
 bold *Ignorant*, do certainly a greater Injury to *Scaliger*
 than to *Montaigne*; for the Reputation of that great Man
 will never so far bias Mankind, as to make them be-
 lieve, that the Author of a Book, wherein there is so
 much Learning, should be an ignorant Fellow. *Scaliger*
 was a better Judge, and as this is not to be found in any
 one of his Works, I think one may venture to say, that
 this Calumny was contrived by some of his envious Ene-
 mies, who having not Strength enough to encounter him,
 made

made use of this Artifice to run down his Merit with that great Name.

Monfieur *de Plaffac*, a great Admirer of *Montaigne*, corrected his Chapter of the *Vanity of Words* into modern *French*; but as he owns it himself, it was no more *Montaigne's*, whose Similies and proverbial Expressions have a greater Strength, than the nice Politeness of the modern *French* Language; and, besides, *Montaigne's* Discourse is every where full of Sentences and solid Reason, which do not always admit that smooth but empty Way of Writing, so much in Vogue in *France*.

I do not however design to defend *Montaigne* in every thing; far from it, I blame his Freedom in several Places, and I cannot abide, that after having discoursed of the exemplary Life of a holy Man, he should immediately talk as he does of Cuckoldom and Privy-Parts, and other Things of this Nature, which, though perhaps tolerable in another Place, cannot be suffered in this; and I wish he had left out these Things, that Ladies might not be put to the Blush, when his *Essays* are found in their Libraries, and that they might improve themselves by reading this excellent Book, without putting their Modesty to any Torment, as they must needs do when they come to these Places.

As for the rest, there is hardly any human Book extant so fit as this to teach Men what they are, and lead them insensibly to a reasonable Observation of the most secret Springs of their Actions; and therefore it ought to be the *manuale* of all Gentlemen, his uncommon Way of teaching, winning People to the Practice of Virtue, as much as other Books fright them away from it, by the dogmatical and imperious Way which they assume.

Thus we have answered all the material Objections made against *Montaigne*; for I think the other Trifles, which are objected against him, do not deserve to be taken Notice of, and I wonder that the Author of the *Search after Truth* should spend his Time upon them, in a Manner so unbecoming his Character. He tells us, after *Balzac* and some others, that *Montaigne's* Vanity and Pride are not suitable to an Author and Philosopher; that it was ridiculous and useless to keep a Page having hardly 6000 Livres a Year, and more ridiculous still to have so often mentioned it in his

Writings:

Writings: But I may answer, that it was very common in his time for Gentlemen of noble Extraction to keep a Page, to shew their Quality, though their Estate could hardly afford them to keep a Footman, and that the 6000 Livres a Year were then more than 20000 now-a-days. It was likewise very much unbecoming the Gravity of our famous *Searcher after Truth*, to rail at *Montaigne* because he kept a Clerk, when he was Counsellor in the Parliament of *Bordeaux*, for *Montaigne* having exercised that noble Employment but for a short Time, in his Youth he had no Occasion to mention it, and who shall believe, that he has concealed it out of Vanity, he who in the Opinion of *Malebranche* himself, talks of his Imperfections and Vices with too great a Freedom? It is likewise very ungenerous and ungentleman-like to take Notice, that he did not very well succeed in his Mayoralty of *Bordeaux*; the Times he lived in were very troublesome, and supposing he committed some Error, which they saw without any Proof, what is that to the Merit of his Book? *Balzac* introduces a Gentleman speaking thus to an Admirer of *Montaigne*. 'You may praise your Author, if you will, more than our *Cicero*, but I cannot fancy that a Man who governed all the World, was not at least equal to a Person, who did not know how to govern *Bordeaux*.' This may very well pass for a Jest; but is it a rational Way of confuting an Author, to have Recourse to personal Reflections, or some Incidents relating to his private Person or Quality? This is so mean, that I cannot fancy *Balzac* could be guilty of it, and I wholly impute it to those who have published after his Death, some loose Discourses on several Subjects, which they have intitled his *Entretiens*.

Notwithstanding these Objections, *Montaigne* always had and is like to have Admirers, as long as Sense and Reason have any Credit in the World. *Justus Lipsius* calls him the *French Thales*, and *Mexeray* the Christian *Seneca*, and the incomparable *Thuanus* had made an Eulogy of him, which being very short, I shall transcribe it here:

'*Michael de Montaigne*, Chevalier, was born in *Perigord*, in a Castle which had the Name of his Family. He was made Counsellor in the Parliament of *Bordeaux* with *Stephen de la Boetie*, with whom he contracted so great a Friendship, that that dear Friend was even after his

Death

Death the Object of his Respect and Veneration. *Montaigne* was extraordinary *Free and Sincere*, as Posterity will see by his *Essays*, for so he has intitled that immortal Monument of his Genius.

While he was at *Venice*, he was elected Mayor of *Bordeaux*, which Place was bestowed only upon Persons of the first Quality, and even the Governors of the Province thought it was an Honour for them. The *Mareschal de Matignon*, who commanded the King's Forces in that Province during the Troubles of the State, had such an Esteem for him, that he communicated unto him the most important Affairs, and admitted him into his Council. As I had a Correspondence with him while I was in his Country, and since at Court, the Conformity of our Studies and Inclinations united us most intimately. He died at *Montaigne* in the 60th Year of his Age.

This Testimony of *Thuanus* is sufficient to justify the Memory of our Author, for No-body will believe that a Man of that Integrity would have been so great a Friend with so vicious a Man as *Malbranche* has represented *Montaigne*. I shall therefore conclude this Discourse with a very remarkable Circumstance mentioned by *Thuanus* in his own Life, *Lib. 3.* which shews that *Montaigne* was beloved by the greatest Princes in his Time, and honoured with their Confidence. While the States of the Kingdom, says he, were sitting at *Blis*, *Montaigne* and I were discoursing of the Division between the King of *Navarre* and the Duke of *Guise*; whereupon he told me that he knew the most secret Thoughts of those Princes, as having been employed to compose their Differences, and that he was persuaded, that neither of them was of the Religion he professed. That the King of *Navarre* would have willingly embraced the Religion of his Predecessors, if he had not feared that his Party would abandon him, and that the Duke of *Guise* would have declared himself for the Confession of *Augsburg*, which the Cardinal of *Lorrain* his Uncle had inspired him with, if he could have done it without any Prejudice to his Interests.

I thought this Circumstance was not unworthy of being placed here; but I must beg the Reader's Pardon for having been so long, which must be attributed to the Respect I

have for the Memory of that excellent Author. I designed to shew the Reason why *Montaigne* meets with a more favourable Entertainment in *England* than in his native Country, but having been already too long, I shall content myself to observe, that an Author who talks freely of every thing, is not suitable to the Temper of a servile Nation that has lost all Sense of Liberty.

Monfieur *La Bruyere*, in his celebrated Book of the *Characters and Manners of the Age*, gives another Reason why some People condemn *Montaigne*. 'Two Writers, ' says he, (meaning *La Mothe le Vayer* and *Malebranche*) ' have condemned *Montaigne*: I know that Author may ' be justly blamed in some Things, but neither of them ' will allow him to have any thing valuable. One of ' them thinks too little to taste such an Author, who ' thinks a great deal; and the other thinks too subtilly ' to be pleased with what is natural.' This, I believe, ' is the general Character of *Montaigne's* Enemies.



ESSAYS