



UNIVERSITÄTS-
BIBLIOTHEK
PADERBORN

Universitätsbibliothek Paderborn

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

Chap. 9. Of Liars.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53388](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53388)



C H A P. IX.

Of Liars.

THERE is not a Man living, whom it would so little become to speak of Memory as myself, for I have none at all; and do not think that the World has again another so treacherous as mine. My other Faculties are all very ordinary and mean; but in this I think myself very singular, and to such a Degree of Excellence, that (besides the Inconvenience I suffer by it, which merits something) I deserve, methinks, to be famous for it, and to have more than a common Reputation: Though, in Truth, the necessary Use of Memory considered, *Plato* had Reason when he called it a great and powerful Goddess. In my Country, when they would decypher a Man that has no Sense, they say, such a one has no Memory; and when I complain of mine, they seem not to believe I am in earnest, and presently reprove me, as though I accused myself for a Fool, not discerning the Difference betwixt Memory and Understanding; wherein they are very wide of my Intention, and do me Wrong, Experience rather daily shewing us on the contrary, that a strong Memory is commonly coupled with infirm Judgment: And they do me moreover (who am so perfect in nothing as the good Friend) at the same time a greater Wrong, in this, that they make the same Words, which accuse my Infirmity, represent me for an ingrateful Person; wherein they bring my Integrity and good Nature into Question upon the Account of my Memory, and from a natural Imperfection, unjustly derive a Defect of Conscience. He has forgot, says one, this Request, or that Promise; he no more remembers his Friends, he has forgot, to say or do, or to conceal such and such a Thing for my Sake. And truly, I am apt enough to forget many Things, but to neglect any thing my Friend has given me in Charge, I never do it. And it should be enough, methinks, that I

feel the Misery and Inconvenience of it without branding me with Malice, a Vice so much a Stranger, and so contrary to my Nature. However, I derive these Comforts from my Infirmary; first, that it is an Evil from which principally I have found Reason to correct a worse, that would easily enough have grown upon me, namely Ambition; this Defect being intolerable in those who take upon them the Negotiations of the World, an Employment of the greatest Honour and Trust among Men: Secondly, That (as several like Examples in the Progress of Nature demonstrate to us) she has fortified me in my other Faculties, proportionably as she has unfurnished me in this; I should otherwise have been apt implicitly to have reposed my Wit and Judgment upon the bare Report of other Men, without ever setting them to work upon any Inquisition whatever, had the strange Inventions and Opinions of the Authors I have read been ever present with me by the Benefit of Memory: Thirdly, That by this Means I am not so talkative, for the Magazine of the Memory is ever better furnished with Matter than that of the Invention; and had mine been faithful to me, I had e'er this deafned all my Friends with my eternal Babble, the Subjects themselves rousing and stirring up the little Faculty I have of handling and applying them, heating and extending my Discourse. 'Tis a great Imperfection, and what I have observed in several of my intimate Friends, who, as their Memories supply them with a present and entire Review of Things, derive their Narratives from so remote a Fountain, and crowd them with so many impertinent Circumstances, that though the Story be good in itself, they make a shift to spoil it; and if otherwise, you are either to curse the Strength of their Memory, or the Weakness of their Judgment: And it is a hard Thing to close up a Discourse, and to cut it short, when you are once in, and have a great deal more to say. Neither is there any Thing wherein the Force and Readiness of a Horse is so much seen, as in a round, graceful, and sudden Stop; and I see even those who are pertinent enough, who would but cannot stop short in their Career; for whilst they are seeking out a handsome Period to conclude the Sense, they talk at random, and are so perplexed and entangled in their own Eloquence, that they know not what they say. But above all, old Men, who

yet retain the Memory of Things past, and forget how often they have told them, are the most dangerous Company for this Fault; and I have known Stories from the Mouth of a Man of very great Quality, otherwise very pleasant in themselves, becoming very troublesom, by being a hundred Times repeated over and over again. The fourth Obligation I have to this infirm Memory of mine is, that by this Means I less remember the Injuries I have received; infomuch, that (as the Ancient said) I should have a *Protocol*, a Register of Injuries, or a Prompter, like *Darius*, who, that he might not forget the Offence he had received from those of *Athens*, so oft as he sat down to Dinner, ordered one of his Pages three Times to whoop in his Ear, *Sir, Remember the Athenians*: And also, the Places which I revisit, and the Books I read over again, still smile upon me with a fresh Novelty. It is not without good Reason said, That he who has not a good Memory should never take upon him the Trade of Lying. I know very well, that the *Grammarians* distinguish betwixt an *Untruth* and a *Lie*, and say, that to tell an *Untruth* is to tell a Thing that is false, but that we ourselves believe to be true; and that to *lie*, is to tell a Thing that we know in our Conscience to be utterly false and untrue; and it is of this last Sort of Liars only that I now speak. Now these do either wholly contrive and invent the Untruths they utter, or so alter and disguise a true Story, that it always ends in a Lie; and when they disguise and often alter the same Story according to their own Fancy, 'tis very hard for them at one Time or another to escape being trapp'd, by Reason that the real Truth of the Thing having first taken Possession of the Memory, and being there lodged, and imprinted by the Way of Knowledge and Science, it will be ever ready to present itself to the Imagination, and to shoulder out any Falshood of their own contriving, which cannot there have so sure and settled Footing as the other; and the Circumstances of the first true Knowledge evermore running in their Minds, will be apt to make them forget those that are illegitimate, and only forged by their own Fancy. In what they wholly invent forasmuch as there is no contrary Impression to juttle their Invention, there seems to be less Danger of Tripping; and yet even this also, by reason it is a vain Body, and without any other Foundation than Fancy only, is very apt to escape

escape the Memory, if they be not careful to make themselves very perfect in their Tale. Of which I have had very pleasant Experience, at the Expence of such as profess only to form, and accommodate their Speech to the Affair they have in Hand, or to the Humour of the Person with whom they have to do; for the Circumstances to which these Men stick not to enslave their Consciences, and their Faith being subject to several Changes, their Language must accordingly vary: From whence it happens, that of the same Thing they tell one Man, that it is this, and another, that it is that, giving it several Forms and Colours; which Men, if they once come to confer Notes, and find out the Cheat, what becomes of this fine Art? To which may be added, that they must of Necessity very often ridiculously trap themselves; for, what Memory can be sufficient to retain so many different Shapes as they have forged upon one and the same Subject? I have known many in my Time, very ambitious of the Repute of this fine Piece of Discretion; but they do not see, that if there be a Reputation of being wise, there is really no Prudence in it. In plain Truth, Lying is a hateful and an accursed Vice. We are not Men, nor have ^{any} other Tie upon one another, but our Word. If we did but discover the Horror and ill Consequences of it, we should pursue it with Fire and Sword, and more justly than other Crimes. I see that Parents commonly, and in Discretion enough, correct their Children for little innocent Faults, and torment them for wanton childish Tricks, that have neither Impression, nor tend to any Consequence: Whereas, in my Opinion, Lying only, and (what is of something a lower Form) Stomach, are the Faults which are to be severely whipped out of them, both in the Infancy and Progress of the Vices, which will otherwise grow up and increase with them; and after a Tongue has once got the Knack of Lying, 'tis not to be imagined how impossible almost it is to reclaim it. Whence it comes to pass, that we see some, who are otherwise very honest Men, so subject to this Vice. I have an honest Lad to my Taylor, who I never knew guilty of one Truth, no not when it had been to his Advantage. If *Falshood* had, like *Truth*, but one Face only, we should be upon better Terms; for we should then take the contrary to what the *Liar* says

for certain Truth; but the Reverse of *Truth* has an hundred thousand Figures, and a Field indefinite without Bound or Limit. The *Pythagoreans* make *Good* to be certain and finite, and *Evil*, infinite and uncertain; there are a thousand Ways to miss the White, there is only one to hit it. For my own Part, I have this Vice in so great Horror, that I am ~~not~~ sure I could ^{not} prevail with my Conscience to secure myself from the most manifest and extreme Danger by an impudent and solemn Lie. An ancient Father says, *That a Dog we know is better Company than a Man whose Language we do not understand**. *Ut externus non alieno sit hominis vice: As a Foreigner, to one that understands not what he says, cannot be said to supply the Place of a Man*, because he can be no Company. And how much less sociable is false Speaking than Silence? King *Francis* the first bragged, that he had, by this Means, nonplused *Francisco Taverna*, the Embassador of *Francisco Sforza*, Duke of *Milan*, a Man very famous for his Eloquence in those Days. This Gentleman had been sent to excuse his Master to his Majesty about a thing of very great Consequence; which was this: King *Francis*, to maintain evermore some Intelligence in *Italy*, out of which he had been lately driven, and particularly in the Dutchy of *Milan*, had thought it (to that End) convenient to have evermore a Gentleman on his Behalf to lye Leiger in the Court of that Duke; an Ambassador in Effect, but in outward Appearance no other than a private Person who pretended to reside there upon the single Account of his own particular Affairs; which was so carried, by reason that the Duke, much more depending upon the Emperor, especially at a time when he was in a Treaty of a Marriage with his Niece, Daughter to the King of *Denmark*, and since Dowager of *Lorraine*, could not own any Friendship or Intelligence with us, but very much to his own Prejudice. For this Commission then one *Merveille*, a *Milanois* Gentleman, and Equerry to the King, being thought very fit, he was accordingly dispatched thither with private Letters of Credence, his Instructions of Ambassador, and other Letters of Recommendation to the Duke about his own private Concerns, the better to colour

* *Plin Nat. Hist. lib. 7. cap. 1.*

the Business ; and so long continued in that Court, that the Emperor at last had some Notion of his real Employment there, and complained of it to the Duke, which was the Occasion of what followed after, as we suppose ; which was, that under Pretence of a Murther by him committed, his Trial was in two Days dispatched, and his Head in the Night struck off in Prison. Signior *Francisco* then being upon this Account come to the Court of *France*, and prepared with a long counterfeit Story to excuse a thing of so dangerous Example, (for the King had applied himself to all the Princes of *Christendom*, as well as to the Duke himself, to demand Satisfaction for this Outrage upon the Person of his Minister) had his Audience at the Morning Council ; where, after he had for the Support of his Cause, in a long premeditated Oration, laid open several plausible Justifications of the Fact, he concluded, that the Duke his Master had never looked upon this *Merveille* for other than a private Gentleman, and his own Subject, who was there only in order to his own Business, neither had he ever lived after any other Manner ; absolutely disowning that he had ever heard he was one of the King's Domestick Servants, or that his Majesty so much as knew him, so far was he from taking him for an Ambassador. When having made an End, and the King pressing him with several Objections and Demands, and sisting him on all Hands, gravelled him at last, by asking, why then the Execution was performed by Night, and as it were by Stealth ? At which the poor confounded Ambassador, the more handsomly to disingage himself, made Answer, That the Duke would have been very loth, out of Respect to his Majesty, that such an Execution should have been performed in the Face of the Sun. Any one may guess if he was not well schooled when he came home, for having so grossly tripped in the Presence of a Prince of so delicate a Nostril as King *Francis*. Pope *Julius* the Second, having sent an Ambassador to the King of *England*, to animate him against King *Francis*, the Ambassador having had his Audience, and the King, before he would give a positive Answer, insisting upon the Difficulties he found in letting on Foot so great a Preparation as would be necessary to attack so potent a King, and urging some Reasons to that Effect, the Ambassador very unseasonably replied,

That he had also himself considered the same Difficulties, and had represented as much to the Pope. From which Saying of his, so directly opposite to the Thing propounded, and the Business he came about, which was immediately to incite him to War, the King first derived Argument (which he also afterwards found to be true) that this Ambassador, in his own private Bosom, was a Friend to the *French*; of which having advertised the Pope, his Estate at his Return home was confiscate, and himself very narrowly escaped the losing of his Head.



CHAP. X.

Of quick or slow Speech.

Ont ne fut à tous toutes Graces donnees.

All Graces by All-liberal Heaven
Were never yet to all Men given.

AS we see in the Gift of Eloquence, wherein some have such a Facility and Promptness, and that which we call a *present* Wit, so easy, that they are ever ready upon all Occasions, and never to be surpriz'd: And others more heavy and slow, never venture to utter any Thing but what they have long premeditated, and taken great Care and Pains to fit and prepare. Now, as we teach young Ladies those Sports and Exercises which are most proper to set out the Grace and Beauty of those Parts wherein their chiefest Ornament and Perfection lye; so in these two Advantages of Eloquence, to which the Lawyers and Preachers of our Age seem principally to pretend. If I were worthy to advise, the slow Speaker, methinks, should be more proper for the Pulpit, and the other for the Bar; and that because the Employment of the first does naturally allow him all the Leisure he can desire to prepare himself, and besides, his Career is perform'd in an even and unintermitted Line, without Stop or Interruption; whereas, the Pleader's Business and Interest compels
him