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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**

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Chap. 39. A Consideration upon Cicero.

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C H A P. XXXIX.

A Consideration upon Cicero.

ONE Word more by Way of Comparison, betwixt these two. There are to be gathered out of the Writings of *Cicero*, and this younger *Pliny*, (who, in my Opinion, but little resembles his Uncle in his Humour,) infinite Testimonies of a Nature boundlessly ambitious; and amongst others, this for one, that they both, in the Sight of all the World, solicit the Historians of their Time, not to forget them in their Memoirs; and Fortune, as it were in spite, has made the Vanity of those Requests live upon Record down to this Age of ours, when she has long since damned the Histories themselves to Oblivion. But this exceeds all Meanness of Spirit in Persons of such Quality, as they were, to think to derive any great and living Renown from babling and prating; even to the publishing of their private Letters to their Friends, and so withal, that though some of them were never sent, the Opportunity being lost, they nevertheless expose them to the Light with this worthy Excuse, that they were hereafter unwilling to lose their Labours, and have their Lucubrations thrown away. Was it not very well becoming two Consuls of *Rome*, Sovereign Magistrates of the Republick that commanded the World, to spend their Time in contriving quaint and elegant Missives, thence to gain the Reputation of being Criticks in their own Mother-Tongue. What could a pitiful School-master have done worse, whose Trade it was to get his Living? If the Acts of *Xenophon*, and *Cæsar*, had not far enough transcended their Eloquence, I scarce believe they would ever have taken the Pains to have writ them. They made it their Business to recommend, not their Speaking, but their Doing. And could the Perfection of Eloquence have added any Lustre proportionable to the Merit of a great Person, certainly *Scipio* and *Lælius* had never resigned the Ho-



nour of their Comedies, with all the Luxuriances and Delicacies of the *Latin Tongue*, to an *African Slave*; for that that Work was theirs, the Beauty and Excellency of it do sufficiently declare; besides, *Terence* himself confesses as much, and I should take it ill from any one that would dispossess me of that Belief. 'Tis a kind of injurious Mockery and Offence to extol a Man for Qualities misbecoming his Merit and Condition, though otherwise commendable in themselves, but such as ought not however to be his chiefest Talent: As if a Man should commend a King for being a good Painter, a good Architect, a good Marksman, or a good Runner at the Ring; Commendations that add no Honour unless mentioned altogether, and in the Train of those that are more properly applicable to him, namely, his Justice, and the Science of Governing and Conducting his People both in Peace and War. At this Rate Agriculture was an Honour to *Cyrus*, and Eloquence and the Knowledge of good Letters to *Charlemagne*. I have, in my Time, known some, who, by that Knack of Writing, having got both their Titles and Fortune, disown their Apprenticeship, purposely corrupt their Stile, and affect Ignorance in so vulgar a Quality (which also our Nation observes, to be rarely seen in very intelligent Hands) to seek a Reputation by better Qualities. The Companions to *Demosthenes* in the Embassy to *Philip*, extolling that Prince for handsom, eloquent, and a stout Drinker; *Demosthenes* reply'd, That those were Commendations more proper for a Woman, an Advocate, or a Sponge, than for a King.

*Imperet bellante prior jacentem  
Lenis in hostem\*.*

First let his Empire from his Valour flow,  
And then by Mercy on a prostrate Foe.

'Tis not his Profession to know either how to hunt, or to dance well.

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\* *Horat. Carm.*

*Orabunt*



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*Orabunt Causas alii, cœlique meatus  
Describent radio, & fulgentia sidera dicent,  
Hic regere imperio populos sciat\*.*

Let others plead at the litigious Bar,  
Describe the Spheres, point out each twinkling Star, }  
Let this Man rule a greater Art by far.

*Plutarch* says, moreover, that to appear so excellent in these less necessary Qualities, is to produce Witness against a Man's self, that he has spent his Time, and apply'd his Study ill, which ought to have been employ'd in the Acquisition of more necessary, and more useful Things; so that *Philip* King of *Macedon*, having heard the Great *Alexander* his Son, sing once at a Feast to the Wonder and Envy of the best Musicians there: Art not thou ashamed, said he to him, to sing so well? And to the same *Philip*, a Musician, with whom he was disputing about some Things concerning his Art: *Heaven forbid! Sir*, said he, *that so great a Misfortune should ever befall you, as to understand these Things better than I.* A King should be able to answer, as *Iphicrates* did the Orator, who pressed upon him in his *Invective* after this Manner: And what art thou, that thou bravest it at this Rate? Art thou a Man at Arms? Art thou an Archer? Art thou a Pike? I am none of all this; but I know how to command all these. And *Antisthenes* took it for an Argument of little Valour in *Ismenas*, that he was commended for playing excellently well upon a Flute. I know very well, that when I hear any one insist upon the Language of *Essays*, I had rather a great deal he would say nothing. 'Tis not so much to elevate the Stile, as to depress the Sense, and so much the more offensively, as they do it disgracefully, and out of the Way. I am much deceived, if many other Essayists deliver more worth nothing as to the Matter, and how well or ill soever, if any other Writer has strewed them either much more material, or thicker upon his Paper than myself. To bring the more in, I only muster up the Heads; should I

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\* *Virg. Æn. l. 6.*



annex the Sequel, I should strangely multiply these Volumes: And how many Stories have I scattered up and down in this Book, that I only touch upon, which should any one more curiously search into, they would find Matter enough to produce infinite *Essays*: Neither those Stories, nor my Allegations, do always serve simply for Example, Authority or Ornament; I do not only regard them for the Use I make of them; they carry sometimes, besides what I apply them to, the Seed of a richer and a bolder Matter, and sometimes collaterally a more delicate Sound both to me myself, who will express no more in this Place, and to others who shall happen to be of my Ear.

But returning to the speaking Virtue; I find no great Choice betwixt, not knowing to speak any thing but very ill, and not knowing to speak any thing but very well. *Non est Ornamentum virile Concinnitas* \*: *Neatness of Style, is no many Ornament*. The Sages tell us, that as to what concerns Knowledge, there is nothing but Philosophy; and to what concerns Effects, nothing but Virtue, that is generally proper to all Degrees, and to all Orders. There is something like this in these two other Philosophers, for they also promise Eternity to the Letters they write to their Friends; but 'tis after another Manner, and by accommodating themselves for a good End, to the Vanity of another; for they write to them, that if the Concern of making themselves known to future Ages, and the Thrill of Glory, do yet detain them in the Management of publick Affairs, and make them fear the Solitude and Retirement to which they would persuade them; let them never trouble themselves more about it, forasmuch as they shall have Credit enough with Posterity to assure them, that were there nothing else but the very Letters thus writ to them, those Letters will render their Names as known and famous as their own publick Actions themselves could do. And besides this Difference, these are not idle and empty Letters, that contain nothing but a fine Gingle of well-chosen Words, and fine couch'd Phrases, but rather replete and abounding with grave and learned Discourses, by which a Man may

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\* *Sen. Ep. 6.*



render himself not more eloquent, but more wise; and that instruct us not to speak, but to do well: Away with that Eloquence that so enchants us with it's Harmony, that we should more study it than Things. Unless you will allow that of *Cicero*, to be of so supreme a Perfection, as to form a complete Body of itself: And of him I shall farther add one Story we read of him to this Purpose, wherein his Nature will much more manifestly be laid open to us: He was to make an Oration in Publick, and found himself a little straitned in Time, to fit his Words to his Mouth, as he had a mind to do; when *Eros*, one of his Slaves, brought him Word, that the Audience was deferr'd 'till the next Day, at which he was so ravish'd with Joy, that he enfranchis'd him for the good News.

Upon this Subject of Letters, I will add this more to what has been already said, that it is a kind of Writing; wherein my Friends think I can do something; and I am willing to confess, I should rather have chose to publish my Whimsies that Way, than any other, had I had to whom to write; but I wanted such a settled Correspondency as I once had to attract me to it, to raise my Fancy, and maintain the rest against me. For to traffick with the Wind, as some others have done, and to forge vain Names to direct my Letters to, in a serious Subject, I could never do it but in a Dream, being a sworn Enemy to all Manner of Falsification: I should have been more diligent, and more confidently secure, had I had a judicious and indulgent Friend, to whom to address, than thus to expose myself to various Judgments of a whole People; and I am deceived, if I had not succeeded better: I have naturally a comick and familiar Stile; but it is a peculiar one, and not proper for publick Business, but like the Language I speak, too compact, irregular, abrupt, and singular; and as to Letters of Ceremony, that have no other Substance, than a fine Contexture of courteous and obliging Words, I am wholly to seek, I have neither Faculty nor Relish for those tedious Offers of Service and Affection; I am not good-natur'd to that Degree, and should not forgive myself, should I offer more than I intend, which is very remote from the present Practice; for there never was so abject and servile a *Prostitution of Tenders of Life, Soul, Devotion, Adoration, Vassal, Slave,*



*Slave*, and I cannot tell what, as now; all which Expressions are so commonly, and so indifferently posted to and fro by every one, and to every one, that when they would profess a greater and more respective Inclination upon more just Occasions, they have not wherewithal to express it: I hate all Air of Flattery to Death, which is the Cause that I naturally fall into a shy, rough, and crude Way of Speaking, that to such as do not know me, may seem a little to relish of Disdain: I honour those most to whom I shew the least Honour and Respect; and where my Soul moves with the greatest Chearfulness, I easily forget the Ceremonies of Look and Gesture; I offer myself faintly and bluntly, to them whose I effectually am, and tender myself the least to him, to whom I am the most devoted: Methinks they should read it in my Heart, and that my Expression would but injure the Love I have conceived within. To welcome, take Leave, give Thanks, accost, offer my Service, and such verbal Formalities as the Laws of our modern Civility enjoin, I know no Man so stupidly unprovided of Language as myself: And have never been employ'd in writing Letters of Favour and Recommendation, that he, in whose Behalf it was, did not think my Mediation cold and imperfect. The *Italians* are great Printers of Letters. I do believe I have at least an hundred several Volumes of them; of all which those of *Hannibal Caro* seem to me to be the best: If all the Paper I have scribbled to the Ladies, all the Time when my Hand was really prompted by my Passion, were now in Being, there might peradventure be found a Page worthy to be communicated to our young Enamorato's, that are besotted with that Fury. I always write my Letters Post, and so precipitously, that though I write an intolerable ill Hand, I rather chuse to do it myself than to employ another; for I can find none able to follow me, and never transcribe any; but have accustomed the great Ones that know me to endure my Blots and Dashes, and upon Paper without Fold or Margent. Those that cost me the most Pains, are the worst of mine; when I once begin to draw it in by Head and Shoulders, 'tis a Sign I am not there. I fall to without Premeditation or Design, the first Word begets the second, and so to the End of the Chapter.



The Letters of this Age consist more in fine Foldings and Prefaces, than Matter; where I had rather write two Letters, than close and fold up one, and always assign that Employment to some other; as also when the Business of my Letter is dispatch'd, I would with all my Heart transfer it to another Hand, to add those long Harangues, Offers, and Prayers that we place at the Bottom, and should be glad that some new Custom would discharge us of that unnecessary Trouble; as also superscribing them with a long Ribble-row of Qualities and Titles, which, for Fear of Mistakes, I have several Times given over Writing, and especially to Men of the long Robe. There are so many Innovations of Offices, that 'tis hard to place so many Titles of Honour in their proper and due Order, which also being so dearly bought, they are neither to be mistaken nor omitted without Offence. I find the same Fault likewise with charging the Fronts and Title-Pages of the Books we commit to the Press, with such a Clutter of Titles.



C H A P. XL.

*That the Relish of Goods and Evils, does, in a great Measure, depend upon the Opinion we have of them.*

**M**EN (says an ancient *Greek* Sentence) are tormented with the Opinions they have of Things, and not by the Things themselves. It would be a great Victory obtained for the Relief of our miserable human Condition, could this Proposition be established for certain and true throughout. For if Evils have no Admission into us, but by the Judgment we ourselves make of them, it should seem that it is then in our own Power to despise them, or to turn them to good. If Things surrender themselves