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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

Chap. 18. Of giving the Lye.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53407](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53407)

Years old, might not so much afflict her. The Judgment she has made of my first *Essays*, being a Woman so young, and in this Age, and alone in her own Country, and the famous Vehemency wherewith she lov'd, and desired me upon the sole Esteem she had of me, before she ever saw my Face, is an Accident very worthy of Consideration. Other Virtues have little or no Credit in this Age; but Valour is become popular by our *Civil Wars*; and in this, we have Souls brave, even to Perfection, and in so great Number, that the Choice is impossible to be made. This is all of extraordinary and not common, that has hitherto arriv'd at my Knowledge.



C H A P. XVIII.

Of Giving the Lye.

WELL, but some one will say to me, *This Design of making a Man's self the Subject of his Writing were excusable in rare and famous Men, who by their Reputation had given others a Curiosity to be fully inform'd of them.* It is most true, I confess it, and know very well that a Tradesman will scarce lift his Eyes from his work to look at an ordinary Man, when they will forsake their Business and their Shops to stare at an eminent Person, when he comes to Town: It misbecomes any other to give his own Character, but such a one who has Qualities worthy of Imitation, and whose Life and Opinions may serve for Examples. *Cæsar* and *Xenophon* had whereon to found their Narrations in the Greatness of their own Performances, as a just and solid Foundation. And it were also to be wish'd, that we had the Journal Papers of *Alexander* the Great, the Commentaries that *Augustus*, *Cato*, *Sylla*, *Brutus*, and others have left of their Actions. Men love and contemplate the very Statues of such Men both in Copper and Marble.

Marble. This Remonstrance therefore is very true; but it very little concerns me:

*Non recito cuiquam, nisi amicis, idque rogatus;
Non ubi vis, coram-ve quibuslibet: In medio qui
Scripta foro recitant, sunt multi, quique lavantes*.*

I seldom do rehearse, and when I do,
'Tis to my Friends, and with Reluctance too,
Not before ev'ry one, and ev'ry where,
We have too many that Rehearers are,
In publick Bath, and open Markets too,

I do not here form a Statue to erect in the most eminent Place of a City, in the Church or any publick Place;

*Non equidem hoc studio bullatis ut mihi nugis,
Pagina turgescat:
Secreti loquimur †.*

I study not to make my Pages swell
With mighty Trifles, secret Things I tell.

'Tis for some Corner of a Library, or to entertain a Neighbour, a Kinsman, or a Friend, that has a Mind to renew his Acquaintance and Familiarity with this Image I have made of myself. Others have been encouraged to speak of themselves, because they found the Subject worthy and rich; I, on the contrary, am the holder, by reason the Subject is so poor and sterill, that I cannot be suspected of Ostentation. I judge freely of the Actions of others; I give little of my own to judge of, because they are nothing: I do not find so much Good in myself as to tell it without Blushing. What Contentment would it be to me to hear any thus relate to me the Manners, Faces, Countenances, the ordinary Words and Fortunes of my Ancestors? How attentively should I listen to it! In earnest. it would be Ill-nature to despise so much as the Pictures of our Friends and Predecessors, the Fashion of their Cloaths and Arms. I preserve my Father's Writing, his Seal, and one pecu-

* *Hor. lib. 1. Sat. 4.*

† *Perfius Sat. 5.*

liar Sword of his, and have not thrown long Staves he used to carry in his Hand out of my Closet. *Paterna vestis, & annulus, tanto charior est posteris, quanto erga parentes major affectus.* A Father's Garment and Ring is by so much dearer to his Posterity, as they had the greater Affection towards them. If my Posterity nevertheless should be of another Mind, I shall be revenged on them; for they cannot care less for me than I shall then do for them. All the Traffick that I have in this with the Publick, is, that I borrow those Utensils of their Writing which are more easy and most at Hand, and in Recompence, shall, perhaps, keep a Pound of Butter in the Market from melting in the Sun.

*Ne toga cordyllis, ne penula desit olivis,
Et laxas scembris sæpe dabo tunicas*.*

I'll furnish Plaice and Olives with a Coat,
And cover Mackrael when the Sun shines hot.

And tho' no Body should read me, have I lost my Time in entertaining myself so many idle Hours, in pleasing and useful Thoughts? In moulding this Figure upon myself, I have been so oft constrain'd to temper and compose myself in a right Posture, that the Copy is truly taken, and has in some sort form'd itself. But painting for others, I represent myself in a better Colouring than my own natural Complexion. I have no more made my Book than my Book has made me. 'Tis a Book substantial with the Author, of a peculiar Design; a Member of my Life, and whose Business is not design'd for others, as that of all other Books is. In giving myself so continual and so exact an Account of myself, have I lost any Time? For they who sometimes cursorily survey themselves only, do not so strictly examine themselves, nor penetrate so deep, as he who makes it his Business, his Study, and his whole Employment, who intends a lasting Record, with all his Fidelity, and with all his Force. The most delicious Pleasures do so digest themselves within, that they avoid leaving any Trace of

* *Mart. Catullus.*

themselves,

themselves, and avoid the Sight not only of the People, but of any Particular Man. How oft has this Meditation diverted me from troublesome Thoughts? And all that are frivolous should be reputed so. Nature has presented us with a large Faculty of entertaining ourselves alone; and oft calls us to it, to teach us, that we owe ourselves in part to Society, but chiefly and mostly to ourselves. That I may habituate my Fancy, even to meditate in some Method, and to some End, and to keep it from losing itself, and roving at random; 'tis but to give it a Body, and to book all the Thoughts that present themselves to it. I give Ear to my Whimsies, because I am to record them. It oft falls out, that being displeas'd at some Actions that Civility and Reason will not permit me openly to reprove, I do here disgorge myself without Design of Publick Instruction: And also these Poetical Lashes,

*Zon sus l'œil, zon sur le groin,
Zon sur le dos du Sagoin**,

A Jerk over the Eye, over the Snout,
Let *Sagoin* be jerk'd throughout.

imprint themselves better upon Paper, than upon the most sensible Flesh. What if I listen to Books a little more attentively than ordinary, since I watch if I can parloin any Thing that may adorn or support my own? I have not at all studied to make a Book; but I have in some sort studied because I had made it, if it be studying to scratch and pinch now one Author and then another, either by the Head or Foot; not with any Design to steal Opinions from them, but to assist, second, and fortify those I already have embrac'd. But who shall we believe in the Report he makes of himself, in so corrupt an Age? Considering there are so few, if any at all, whom we can believe, when speaking of others, where there is less Interest to Lye. The first Thing that is done in order to the Corruption of Manners, is banishing of Truth; for, as Pindar says, *to be sincerely true is the Beginning of a*

* *Marot contre Sagoin.*

great *Virtue*, and the first Article that *Plato* requires in the Government of his *Republick*. The *Truth* of these Days is not that which really is, but what every Man persuades himself; or that he is made to believe; as we generally give the Name of Money, not only to Pieces of the just Alloy, but even to the false also, if they are current and will pass. Our Nation has long been reproach'd with this Vice; for *Salvianus Massiliensis*, who liv'd in the Time of the Emperor *Valentinian*, says, *That Lying and Forswearing themselves is not a Vice in the French, but a Way of Speaking*. He that would enhance upon this Testimony, might say, *That it is not a Virtue in them*. Men form and fashion themselves to it as to an Exercise of Honour; for Dissimulation is one of the most notable Qualities of this Age: I have often consider'd whence this Custom that we so religiously observe should spring, of being more highly offended with the Reproach of a Vice so familiar to us than any other, and that it should be the highest Injury can in Words be done us, to reproach us with a Lye; and upon Examination, find, that it is natural to defend that Part that is most open, and lies exposed to the greatest Danger. It seems as if by resenting, and being mov'd at the Accusation, we in some Sort acquitted ourselves of the Fault; tho' we confess it in Effect, we condemn it in outward Appearance. May it also not be, that this Reproach seems to imply Cowardize and Meanness of Courage? Of which can there be a more manifest Sign, than to eat a Man's own Words? What, to lye against a Man's own Knowledge? Lying is a base unworthy Vice; a Vice that one of the Ancients pourtrays in the most odious Colours, when he says, *That it is to manifest a Contempt of God, and withal a Fear of Men*. It is not possible more excellently to represent the Horror, Baseness and Irregularity of it; for what can a Man imagine more hateful and contemptible than to be a Coward towards Men, and valiant against his *Maker*? Our Intelligence being by no other Way to be convey'd to one another but by speaking, who falsifies that, betrays Publick Society. 'Tis the only Way by which we

Lying an Argument of the Contempt of God.

we communicate our Thoughts and Wills; 'tis the Interpreter of the Soul, and if that deceive us, we no longer know, nor have no farther Tie upon one another. If that deceive us, it breaks all our Correspondence, and dissolves all the Ties of Government. Certain Nations of the new discover'd *Indies* (no Matter for naming them, being they are no more; for by a wonderful and unheard of Example, the Desolation of that Conquest has extended to the utter Abolition of Names, and the ancient Knowledge of Places) offer'd their Gods Human Blood, *but only such as was drawn from the Tongue and Ears, to expiate for the Sin of Lying, as well heard as pronounc'd.* The good Fellow of Greece was wont to say, *That Children were amused with Toys, and Men with Words.* As to the diverse Usage of our giving the Lye, and the Laws of Honour in that Case, and the Alterations they have receiv'd, I shall refer saying what I know of them to another Time, and shall learn, if I can, in the mean Time, at what Time the Custom took Beginning of so exactly weighing and measuring Words, and of making our Honours so interested in them; for it is easy to judge, that it was not antiently amongst the *Greeks* and *Romans*; and I have often thought it strange to see them rail at, and give one another the Lye without any farther Quarrel. Their *Laws* of Duty steer'd some other Course than ours. *Cesar* is sometimes call'd *Thief*, and sometimes *Drunkard* to his Teeth. We see the Liberty of *Invectives* they practis'd upon one another; I mean, the greatest *Chiefs* of War of both Nations, where Words are only reveng'd with Words, and never proceed to any other Quarrel.