

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 18



Translation by John Florio (1603, Public domain) · Last updated on January 5, 2024

HYPERESSIONS is a project to create a modern and accessible online edition of the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne. More information at www.hyperessays.net

FLORIO-2-18-20240215-142040

Of giving the lie

YEA BUT, will some tell me, this desseigne in a man to make himselfe a subject to write of, might be excused in rare and famous men, and who by their reputation, had bred some desire in others of their acquaintance. It is true, I confesse it, and I knowe, that a handie-crafts-man will scarcely looke of his worke, to gaze upon an ordinarie man: Whereas to see a notable great person come into a towne, he will leave both worke and shop. It ill beseemeth any man to make himselfe knowne, onely he excepted, that hath somewhat in him worthie imitation, and whose life and opinions may stand as a patterne to all. *Cæsar* and *Xenophon* have had wherewithall to ground and establish their narration, in the greatness of their deedes, as on a just and solid ground-worke. So are the Jornall bookes of *Alexander* the great, the Commentaries which *Augustus*, *Cato*, *Brutus*, *Silla* and divers others had left of their gests, greatly to bee desired. Such mens images are both beloved and studied, be they either in brasse or stone. This admonition is most true, but it concerneth me very little.

*Non recito cuiquam: nisi amicis, idque rogatus.
Non ubiuis, coramue quibuslibet. In medio qui
Scripta fore recitant sunt multi, quique lauantes.*

*My writings I reade not, but to my friends, to any,
Nor eachwhere, nor to all, nor but desir'd: yet many
In market place reade theirs,
In bathes, in barbers chaires.*

I erect not here a statue to be set up in the market place of a towne, or in a Church, or in any other publike place:

*Non equidem hoc studeo bullatis ut mihi nugis
Pagina turgescat:*

*I studie not, my written leaves should growe
Big-swolne with bubletoyes, which vaine breth's blowe.*

Secreti loquimur.

*We speake alone,
Or one to one.*

It is for the corner of a Librarie, or to ammuse a neighbour, a kinsman, or a friend of mine withall, who by this image may happily take pleasure to renew acquaintance, and to reconverse with me. Others have beene emboldned to speake of themselves, because they have found worthy and rich subject in themselves. I, contrariwise, because I have found mine so barren, and so shallow, that it cannot admit suspition of ostentation. I willingly judge of other mens actions; of mine by reason of their nullitie, I give small cause to judge. I finde not so much good in my selfe, but I may speake of it without blushing. Oh what contentment were it unto mee, to heare some body that would relate the custome, the visage, the countenance, the most usuall words, and the fortunes of my ancestors! Oh how attentively would I listen unto it! Verily it were an argument of a bad nature, to seeme to despise the very pictures of our friends and predecessors, the fashion of their garments and armes . I keepe the writing, the manuall seale, and a peculiar sword: And I reserve still in my cabinet certaine long switches or wands, which my father was wont to carry in his hand. *Paterna uestis & annulus, tanto charior est posteris, quanto erga parentes maior affectus. The fathers garment and his ring is so much more esteemed of his successors, as their affection is greater towards their progenitors.* Notwithstanding if my posteritie be of another minde, I shall have wherewith to be avenged; for they cannot make so little accompt of me, as then I shall doe of them. All the commerce I have in this with the worlde, is, that I borrow the instruments of their writing, as more speedy, and more easie: in requitall whereof I may peradventure hinder the melting of some piece of butter in the market, or a Grocer from selling an ounce of pepper.

Ne toga cordyllis, ne penula desit oliuis,

*Least fish-fry should a fit gowne want,
Least clokes should be for olives scant.*

Et laxas scombris saepe dabo tunicas.

*To long-tailed mackrels often I,
Will side-wide (paper) cotes apply.*

And if it happen, no man read me, have I lost my time, to have entertained my selfe so many idle houres, about so pleasing and profitable thoughts? In framing this pourtrraite by my selfe, I have so often beene faine to frizle and trimme mee, that so I might the better extract my selfe, that the patterne is thereby confirmed, and in some sorte formed. Drawing my selfe for others, I have drawne my selfe with purer and better colours, then were my first. I have no more made my booke, then my booke hath made me. A booke consubstantiall to his Author: Of a peculiar and fit occupation. A member of my life. Not of an occupation and end, strange and forraine; as all other bookes. Have I mis-spent my time, to have taken an accoumpt of my selfe so continually and so curiously? For those who

onely runne themselves over by fantazie, and by speech for some houre, examine not themselves so primely and exactly, nor enter they into themselves, as he doth, who makes his studie, his worke and occupation of it: Who with all his might, and with all his credit engageth himselfe to a register of continuance. The most delicious pleasures, though inwardly disgested, shunne to leave any trace of themselves; and avoide the sight, not only of the people, but of any other. How often hath this busines diverted me from tedious and yrksome cogitations? (And all frivolous-ones must be deemed tedious and yrkesome.) Nature hath endowed us with a large facultie to entertaine our selves a parte, and often calleth us unto it: To teach us, that *partly we owe our selves unto society, but in the better part unto ourselves.* To the end I may in some order and project marshall my fantasie, even to dote, and keepe it from loosing, and straggling in the aire, there is nothing so good, as to give it a body, and register so many idle imaginations as present themselves unto it. I listen to my humors, and harken to my conceits, because I must enroule them. How often, being grieved at some action, which civilitie and reason forbade me to withstand openly, have I disgorged my selfe upon them here, not without an intent of publike instruction? And yet these poetical rods,

*Zon dessus l'oeil, zon sur le groin,
Zon sur le dos du Sagoin,*

are also better imprinted upon paper, than upon the quicke flesh; What if I lend mine eares, somewhat more attentively unto books, sith I but watch if I can filch something from them, wherewith to enamelle and uphold mine? I never studied to make a booke; Yet have I somewhat studied, because I had alreadie made it (if to nibble or pinch, by the head or feete, now one Authour, and then another be in any sorte to study) but nothing at al to forme my opinions: Yea being long since formed, to assist, to second and to serve them. But *whom shall we believe speaking of himselfe, in this corrupted age?* since there are few or none, whom we may beleeve speaking of others, where there is lesse interest to lie. The first part of customs-corruption, is; the banishment of truth: For, as *Pindarus saide, to be sincerely-true, is the beginning of a great vertue;* and the first article, *Plato requireth in the Governor of his common-wealth:* Now-adayes, that is not the trueth which is true, but that which is perswaded to others. As we call mony not onely that which is true and good, but also the false; so it be currant. Our Nation is long since taxed with this vice. For *Salvianus Massiliensis* who lived in the time of *Valentinian the Emperour*, saith, that amongst French-men, to lie and forswaire is no vice, but a manner of speach. He that would endeare this Testimonie, might say, it is now rather deemed a vertue among them. Men frame and fashion themselves unto it, as to an exercise of honour; for, *dissimulation is one of the notablest qualities of this age.* Thus have I often considered, whence this custome might arise, which wee observe so religiously, that we are more sharply offended with the reproach of this vice, so ordinary in us, than with any other; and that it is the extreamest injurie, may be done us in words, to upbraid and reproch us with a lie. Therein I finde, that it is naturall, for a man to defend himselfe most from such defects as we are most tainted with. It seemeth, that if we but shew a motion of revenge, or are but moved at the accusation, we in some sort discharge our selves of the blame or

imputation; if we have it in effect, at least we condemne it in appearance. May it not also be, that this reproch seemes to enfold cowardise and faintnesse of hart? Is there anie more manifest, than for a man to eate and deny his owne Word? What? To deny his Word wittingly? To ly is a horrible-filthy vice; and which an auncient writer setteth forth very shamefully, when he saith, that *whosoever lieth, witnesseth that he contemneth God and therewithal feareth men.* It is impossible more richly to represent the horrour, the vilenesse and the disorder of it: For, *What can be imagined so vile, and base, as to be a coward towards men, and a boaster towards God?* Our intelligence being onely conducted by the way of the Worde: Who so falsifieth the same, betraiyeth publike society. It is the onely instrument, by meanes wherof our wils and thoughts are communicated: it is the interpretour of our souls: If that faile us we hold our selves no more, we enterknow one another no longer. If it deceive us, it breaketh all our commerce, and dissolveth all bonds of our policie. Certaine Nations of the new Indiaes (whose names we need not declare, because they are no more; for the desolation of this conquest hath extended it selfe to the absolute abolishing of names and ancient knowledge of Places, with a marvelous and never the like heard example) offred humane bloud unto their Gods, but no other than that which was drawne from their tongues and eares, for an expiation of the sinne of lying, as well heard as pronounced. That good-fellow-Græcian said, children were dandled with toyes, but men with wordes. Concerning the sundrie fashions of our giving the lie, and the lawes of our honour in that, and the changes they have received, I will referre to another time, to speak what I think and know of it, and if I can, I will in the meane time learne, at what time this custome tooke his beginning, so exactly to weigh and precisely to measure words, and tie our honor to them: for, it is easie to judge, that it was not anciently amongst the Romans and Græcians. And I have often thought it strange, to see them wrong and give one another the lie, and yet never enter into quarrell. The lawes of their dutie, tooke some other course than ours. *Cæsar* is often called a theefe, and sometimes a drunkard to his face. We see the libertie of their invectives, which they write one against another: I meane the greatest Chieftaines and Generalles in warre; of one and other Nation, where words are only retorted and revenged with words, and never wrested to further consequence.