

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 18

Translation by Charles Cotton (1685, Public domain) · Last updated on June 18, 2026

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

ESSAYS-2-18-20260831-212235

On Calling Out Lies

Well, but some one will say to me, this design of making a man's self the subject of his writing, were indeed excusable in rare and famous men, who by their reputation had given others a curiosity to be fully informed of them. It is most true, I confess and know very well, that a mechanic will scarce lift his eyes from his work to look at an ordinary man, whereas a man will forsake his business and his shop to stare at an eminent person when he comes into a town. It misbecomes any other to give his own character, but him who has qualities worthy of imitation, and whose life and opinions may serve for example: Caesar and Xenophon had a just and solid foundation whereon to found their narrations, the greatness of their own performances; and were to be wished that we had the journals of Alexander the Great, the commentaries that Augustus, Cato, Sylla, Brutus, and others left of their actions; of such persons men love and contemplate the very statues even in copper and marble.

This remonstrance is very true; but it very little concerns me:

*Non recito cuiquam, nisi amicis, idque coactus;
Non ubivis, coramve quibuslibet. In medio qui
Scripta foro recitant, sunt multi, quique lavantes.*

I do not here form a statue to erect in the great square of a city, in a church, or any public place:

*Non equidem hoc studeo, bullatis ut mihi nugis,
Pagina turgescat ...
Secreti loquimur.*

'tis for some corner of a library, or to entertain a neighbor, a kinsman, a friend, who has a mind to renew his acquaintance and familiarity with me in this image of myself. Others have been encouraged to speak of themselves, because they found the subject worthy and rich; I, on the contrary, am the bolder, by reason the subject is so poor and sterile that I cannot be suspected of ostentation.

I repeat my poems only to my friends, and when bound to do so; not before every one and everywhere; there are plenty of reciters in the open market-place and at the baths. • HOR., SAT., 1.4.73

I study not to make my pages swell with empty trifles; you and I are talking in private. • PERS., 5.19

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, that I cannot tell it without blushing.

What contentment would it not be to me to hear any one 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 evil nature to despise so much as the pictures of our friends and predecessors, the fashion of their clothes and arms. I preserve their writing, seal, and a particular sword they wore, and have not thrown the long staves my father used to carry in his hand, out of my closet.

Paterna vestis, et annulus, tanto charior est posteris, quanto erga parentes major affectus.

If my posterity, nevertheless, shall be of another mind, I shall be avenged on them; for they cannot care less for me than I shall then do for them. All the traffic that I have in this with the public is, that I borrow their utensils of writing, which are more easy and most at hand; and in recompense shall, peradventure, keep a pound of butter in the market from melting in the sun.

Ne toga cordyllis, ne penula desit olivis,

Et laxas scombris sæpe dabo tunicas

And though nobody should read me, have I wasted time in entertaining myself so many idle hours in so pleasing and useful thoughts? In moulding this figure upon myself, I have been so often constrained to temper and compose myself in a right posture, that the copy is truly taken, and has in some sort formed itself; painting myself for others, I represent myself in a better coloring than my own natural complexion. I have no more made my book than my book has made me: 'tis a book consubstantial with the author, of a peculiar design, a parcel of my life, and whose business is not designed for others, as that of all other books is.

In giving myself so continual and so exact an account of myself, have I lost my 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 employment, who intends a lasting record, with all his fidelity, and with all his force.

The most delicious pleasures digested within, avoid leaving any trace of themselves, and avoid the sight not only of the people, but of any other person.

How often has this work 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 often 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 to body and to record all the little thoughts that

A father's garment and ring is by so much dearer to his posterity, as there is the greater affection toward parents. • AUG., DE CIV. D., 1.13

Let tuna not lack a gown and olives an overcoat • MART., 13.1.1

And I will often be useful as wrapping for mackerel. • CATULL., 95.8

present themselves to it. I give ear to my whimsies, because I am to record them. It often falls out, that being displeased at some action that civility and reason will not permit me openly to reprove, I here disgorge myself, not without design of public instruction. And also these poetical lashes:

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

A slap on his eye, a slap on his
snout, a slap on Sagoin's back. •
MAROT, EP., FRIPELIPES VALET DE
MAROT, À SAGON; 223

imprint themselves better upon paper than upon the flesh. What if I listen to books a little more attentively than ordinary, since I watch if I can purloin anything 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 form opinions from them, but to assist, second, and fortify those I already have embraced.

But whom 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 lie. The first thing done in the corruption of manners is banishing truth; for, as Pindar says, to be true is the beginning of a great virtue, and the first article that Plato requires in the governor of his Republic. The truth of these days is not that which really is, but what every man persuades another man to believe; as we generally give the name of money not only to pieces of the dust alloy, but even to the false also, if they will pass. Our nation has long been reproached with this vice; for Salvianus of Marseilles, who lived in the time of the Emperor Valentinian, says that lying and forswearing themselves is with the French not a vice, but a way of speaking. He who would enhance this testimony, might say that it is now a virtue in them; men form and fashion themselves to it as to an exercise of honor; for dissimulation is one of the most notable qualities of this age.

I have often considered 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 with any other, and that it should be the highest insult that can in words be done us to reproach us with a lie. Upon examination, I find that it is natural most to defend the defects with which we are most tainted. It seems as if by resenting and being moved at the accusation, we in some sort acquit ourselves of the fault; though we have it in effect, we condemn it in outward appearance.

May it not also be that this reproach seems to imply cowardice and feebleness of heart? of which can there be a more manifest sign than to eat a man's own words—nay, to lie against a man's own knowledge?

Lying is a base vice; a vice that one of the ancients portrays in the most odious colors when he says, "that it is to manifest a contempt of God, and withal a fear of men." It is not possible more fully to represent the horror, baseness, and irregularity of it; for what can a man imagine more hateful and contemptible than to be a coward toward men, and valiant against his Maker? Our intelligence being by no other way communicable to one another but by a particular word, he who falsifies that betrays public

society. 'Tis the only way by which we communicate our thoughts and wills; 'tis the interpreter of the soul, and if it deceive us, we no longer know nor have further tie upon one another; if that deceive us, it breaks all our correspondence, and dissolves all the ties of government.

Certain nations of the newly discovered Indies (I need not give them names, seeing they are no more; for, by wonderful and unheard of example, the desolation of that conquest has extended to the utter abolition of names and the ancient knowledge of places) offered to 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 pronounced.

That good fellow of Greece said that children are amused with toys and men with words. As to our diverse usages of giving the lie, and the laws of honor in that case, and the alteration they have received, I defer saying what I know of them to another time, and shall learn, if I can, in the meanwhile, at what time the custom took beginning of so exactly weighing and measuring words, and of making our honor interested in them; for it is easy to judge that it was not anciently among the Romans and Greeks. And it has often seemed to me strange to see them rail at and give one another the lie without any quarrel. Their laws of duty steered some other course than ours. Caesar is sometimes called thief, and sometimes drunkard, to his teeth. We see the liberty of invective they practised upon one another, I mean the greatest chiefs of war of both nations, where words are only revenged with words, and do not proceed any farther.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Aug., De civ. D.	Augustine, <i>City of God</i>
Catull.	Catullus, <i>Poems</i>
Hor., Sat.	Horace, <i>Satires</i>
Marot, Ep.	Marot, Clément, <i>Epistres</i>
Mart.	Martial, <i>Epigrams</i>
Pers.	Persius, <i>Satires</i>