Italian at Magdalen College, Oxford, and, under King James I, working as a private tutor to the Crown Prince and the Queen Consort. Florio's works include *First Fruits, which yield Familiar Speech*, *Merry Proverbs, Witty Sentences, and Golden Sayings*; *A Perfect Induction to the Italian and English Tongues*; *Second Fruits, to be gathered of Twelve Trees, of divers but delightsome Tastes to the Tongues of Italian and English men*; *Garden of Recreation, yielding six thousand Italian Proverbs*; an Italian–English dictionary, *A World of Words* (the second edition of which was entitled *Queen Anna's New World of Words*); and his celebrated translation of Montaigne's *Essays*.

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Books, the amass of humors,² swollen with ease,
The grief of peace, the malady of rest,
So stuff the world, fallen into this disease,
As it receives more than it can digest.
And do so overcharge, as they confound
The appetite of skill with idle store.
There being no end of words, nor any bound
Set to conceit,³ the Ocean without shore.

As if man labor’d with himself to be
As infinite in words as in intents,
And draw his manifold incertaintye
In ev’ry figure, passion represents;
That these innumerably visages,
And strange shapes of opinions and discourse
Shadowed in leaves,⁴ may be the witnesses
Rather of our defects, than of our force.
And this proud frame of our presumption,
This Babel of our skill, this Tower of wit,
Seems only checked with the confusion
Of our mistakings that dissolveth it.
And well may make us of our knowledge doubt,
Seeing what uncertainties we build upon,
To be as weak within book or without;
Or else that truth hath other shapes than one.
But yet although we labor with this store
And with the press of writings seem oppress,
And have too many books, yet want we more,
Feeling great dearth and scarceness of the best;
Which cast in choicer shapes have been produc’d,
To give the best proportions to the mind
To our confusion, and have introduc’d
The likeliest images frailty can find.
And wherein most the skill-desiring soul
Takes her delight, the best of all delight,
And where her motions evenest come to roll
About this doubtful center of the right.

Which to discover this great potentate,
This Prince Montaigne (if he be not more)
Hath more adventur’d of his own estate
Than ever man did of himself before.
And hath made such bold sallies out upon
Custom, the mighty tyrant of the earth,
In whose Seraglio of subjection
We all seem bred-up, from our tender birth;
As I admire his powers, and out of love,
Here at his gate do stand, and glad I stand
So near to him whom I do so much love,
T’applaud his happy settling in our land.
And safe transpassage by his studious care,
Who both of him and us doth merit much,
Having as sumptuously, as he is rare,
Plac’d him in the best lodging of our speech.
And made him now as free, as if born here,
And as well ours as theirs, who may be proud
That he is theirs, though he be everywhere
To have the franchise of his worth allow’d.

It being the portion of a happy pen,
Not to b’innassal’d to one monarchy,
But dwells with all the better world of men
Whose spirits are all of one community.
Whom neither Ocean, Deserts, Rocks nor Sands
Can keep from th’intertraffic of the mind,
But that it vents her treasure in all lands,
And doth a most secure commencement find.

Wrap Excellency up never so much,
In hieroglyphs, ciphers, characters,
And let her speak never so strange a speech,
Her Genius yet finds apt decipherers:
And never was she born to die obscure,
But guided by the stars of her own grace,
Makes her own fortune, and is ever sure
In man’s best bold, to hold the strongest place.

And let the critic say the worst he can,
He cannot say but that Montaigne yet,
Yields most rich pieces and extracts of man,
Though in a troubled frame confus’dly set.
Which yet b’is’ blest that he hath ever seen,
And therefore as a guest in gratefulness,
For the great good he the house yields him within
Might spare to tax th’unapt conveyances.
But this breath hurts not, for both work and frame.
Whilst England English speaks, is of that store
And that choice stuff, as that without the same
The richest library can but poor.
And they unblest who letters do profess
And have him not, whose own fate beats their want
With more sound blows than Alcibiades
Did his pedant that did Homer want.

—Sam: Daniel
1603
To the Courteous Reader
(selections)

S H A L L I apologize translation? Why, but some hold (as for their freehold) that such conversion is the subversion of universities. God hold with them and withhold them from impeach or empaire. It were an ill turn the turning of books should be the overturning of libraries. Yea, but my old fellow Nolano told me and taught publicly that from translation all science had its offspring...

Why, but scholars should have some privilege of preeminence. So have they: they only are worthy translators. Why, but the vulgar should not know all. No, they cannot for all this, nor even scholars for much more. I would both could and knew much more than either doth or can. Why, but all would not be known of all. No, nor can: much more we know not than we know; all know something, none know all. Would all know all? They must break ere they be so big. God only; men far from God...

What do the best then but glean after others’ harvest? Borrow their colors, inherit their possessions? What do they but translate? Perhaps, usurp? At least, collect? If with acknowledgement, it is well; if by stealth, it is too bad. In this, our conscience is our accuser, posterity our judge; in that, our study is our advocate, and you Readers our jury...

If the famous Ficinus were so faulty, who may hope to scape scot-free? But for him and us all let me confess, as he here censureth, and let confession make half amends that every language hath its Genius and inseparable form, without Pythagoras his Metempsychosis it can not rightly be translated. The Tuscan altiloquence, the Venus of the French, the sharp state of the Spanish, the strong significance of the Dutch cannot from here be drawn to life. The sense may keep form; the sentence is disfigured; the fineness, fitness, feattiness diminished—as much as art’s nature is short of nature’s art, a picture of a body, a shadow of a substance. Why then belike I have done Montaigne, as Terence by Menander, made of good French no good English. If I have done no worse, and it be no worse taken, it is well. As he, if no poet, yet am I no thief, since I say of whom I had it, rather to imitate his and his authors’ negligence than any backbiter’s obscure diligence...

So he, most writing of himself, and the worst rather than the best, disclaimeth all memory, authorities, or borrowing of the ancient or modern, whereas in course of his discourse he seems acquainted not only with all, but no other but authors, and could out of question like Cyrus or Caesar call any of his army by his name and condition. And I would for us all he had in this whole body done as much, as in most of that of other languages my peerless dear-dearest and never sufficiently commended friend hath done for mine and your ease and intelligence. Why then again, as Terence, I have had help. Yea, and thank them for it and think you need not be displeased by them that may please you in a better matter. Why, but Essays are but men’s school-themes pieced together—you might as well say, several texts. All is in the choice and handling. Yea, marry, but Montaigne, had he wit, it was but a French wit, ferdillant, legier, and extravagant...

And should or would any dog-toothed Critic oradder-tongued Satirist scoff or find fault that, in the course of his discourses or web of his Essays or entitling of his chapters, he holdeth a disjointed, broken, and gadding style; and that many times they answer not his titles and have no coherence together, to such I will say little, for they deserve but little. But if they list, else let them choose, I send them to the ninth chapter of the third book, folio 596, where himself preventeth their carping, and foreseeing their criticism answereth them for me at full.

Yet are there herein errors. If of matter, the author’s; if of omission, the printer’s. Him I would not amend but send him to you as I
found him; this I could not attend. But where I now find faults, let me pray and entreat you for your own sake to correct as you read, to amend as you list. But some errors are mine, and mine are by more than translation. Are they in grammar or orthography? As easy for you to right as me to be wrong. Or in construction, as misattributing him, her, or it to things alive or dead or neuter. You may soon know my meaning and if soone's8 use your mending. Or are they in some uncouth terms, as entrain, conscientsious, endear, tarnish, comport, efface, facilitate, amusing, debauching, regret, effort, emotion, and such like? If you like them not, take others more commonly set to make such likely French words familiar with our English, which well may bear them. If any be capital in sense mistaking,15 be I admonished, and they shall be recanted. Howsoever, the falseness of the French prints, the diversities of copies, editions, and volumes (some whereof have more or less than others), and I in London having followed some and in the country others; now those in folio, now those in octavo, yet in this last survey reconciled all. Therefore or blame not rashly or condemn not fondly the multitude of them set for your further ease in a table (at the end of the book) which, ere you begin to read, I entreat you to peruse.16 This Printer's wanting a diligent Corrector, my many employments, and the distance between me and my friends I should confer with may extenuate, if not excuse, even more errors.

In sum, if any think he could do better, let him try; then will he better think of what is done. Seven or eight of great wit and worth have assayed but found these Essays no attempt for French apprentices or Littletonians.17 If thus done it may please you as I wish it may, and I hope it shall, I with you shall be pleased; though not, yet still I am the same resolute.

—John Florio

The Author to the Reader

Reader, lo here a well-meaning book. It doth at the first entrance forewarn thee that in contriving the same I have proposed unto myself no other than a familiar and private end. I have no respect or consideration at all, either to thy service or to my glory: my forces are not capable of any such design. I have vowed the same to the particular commodity of my kinsfolk and friends, to the end that, losing me (which they are likely to do ere long), they may therein find some lineaments of my conditions and humours, and by that means reserve more whole, and more lively foster the knowledge and acquaintance they have had of me.

Had my intention been to forestall and purchase the world's opinion and favour, I would surely have adorned myself more quaintly, or kept a more grave and solemn march. I desire therein to be delineated in mine own genuine, simple, and ordinary fashion, without contention, art, or study; for it is myself I portray. My imperfections shall thus be read to the life, and my natural form discerned, so far forth as public reverence hath permitted me. For if my fortune had been to have lived among those nations which yet are said to live under the sweet liberty of Nature's first and uncorrupted laws, I assure thee I would most willingly have portrayed myself fully and naked.

Thus, gentle Reader, myself am the groundwork of my book; it is then no reason thou shouldest employ thy time about so frivolous and vain a subject. Therefore farewell.

From Montaigne, the first of March, 1580.