

# Of Discourse

SOME, in their discourse, desire rather commendation of wit, in being able to hold all arguments, than of judgment, in discerning what is true; as if it were a praise, to know what might be said, and not, what should be thought. Some have certain common places, and themes, wherein they are good and want variety; which kind of poverty is for the most part tedious, and when it is once perceived, ridiculous. The honorablest part of talk, is to give the occasion; and again to moderate, and pass to somewhat else; for then a man leads the dance. It is good, in discourse and speech of conversation, to vary and intermingle speech of the present occasion, with arguments, tales with reasons, asking of questions, with telling of opinions, and jest with earnest: for it is a dull thing to tire, and, as we say now, to jade, any thing too far. As for jest, there be certain things, which ought to be privileged from it; namely, religion, matters of state, great persons, any man's present business of importance, and any case that deserveth pity. Yet there be some, that think their wits have been asleep, except they dart out somewhat that is piquant, and to the quick. That is a vein which would be bridled:

Parce, puer, stimulis, et fortius utere loris.

And generally, men ought to find the difference, between saltness and bitterness. Certainly, he that hath a satirical vein, as he maketh others afraid of his wit, so he had need be afraid of others' memory. He that questioneth much, shall learn much, and content much; but especially, if he apply his questions to the skill of the persons whom he asketh; for he shall give them occasion, to please themselves in speaking, and himself shall continually gather knowledge. But let his questions not be troublesome; for that is fit for a poser. And let him be sure to leave other men, their turns to speak. Nay, if there be any, that would reign and take up all the time, let him find means to take them off, and to bring others on; as musicians use to do, with those that dance too long galliards. If you dissemble, sometimes, your knowledge of that you are thought to know, you shall be thought, another time, to know that you know not. Speech of a man's self ought to be seldom, and well chosen. I knew one, was wont to say in scorn, He must needs be a wise man, he speaks so much of himself: and there is but one case, wherein a man may commend himself with good grace; and that is in commending virtue in another; especially if it be such a virtue, whereunto himself pretendeth. Speech of touch towards others, should be sparingly used; for discourse ought to be as a field, without coming home to any man. I knew two noblemen, of the west part of England, whereof the one was given to scoff, but kept ever royal cheer in his house; the other would ask, of those that had been at the other's table, Tell truly, was there never a flout or dry blow given? To which the guest would answer, Such and such a thing passed. The lord would say, I thought, he would mar a good dinner. Discretion of speech, is more than eloquence; and to speak agreeably to him, with whom we deal, is more than to speak in good words, or in good order. A good continued speech, without a good speech of interlocution, shows slowness: and a good reply or second speech, without a good settled speech, showeth shallowness and weakness. As we see in beasts, that those that are weakest in the course, are yet nimblest in the turn; as it is betwixt the greyhound and the hare. To use too many circumstances, ere one come to the matter, is wearisome; to use none at all, is blunt.