Reviews

Mind Over Manner

The Complete Essays
Michel de Montaigne, translated by M. A. Screech. The Penguin Press, 1991.

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Montaigne's fierce personal and intellectual independence fused his experiences and his erudition together to generate and inform his attempts—*Essays*—at understanding the world around him. In this sense, as well as in his viewing any dogma as spurious, he is a descendant of Socrates. He is often abusively referred to as a moralist or philosopher or both. He is in fact neither, for he does not offer any coherent code or system. He is, rather, a humanist in every sense of the word, not only for rumaging about in the collected wisdom of authors such as Plutarch, Seneca, and Plato, who during his time were enjoying their proverbial rebirth, but because the object of his study was man himself. For Montaigne felt strongly that the only subject worthy of serious contemplation was the readiest one at hand, the one we could attempt (assay/*essai*) to know best: "I myself am the subject of my book."[1]

For Montaigne, the preferred method of putting the *essai* into practice was through conversation. It is in conversation that he can maintain his stance against dogma, "since opinions do not find in me a ready soil to thrust and spread their roots into" (Montaigne, 1046, III:8). The legacy of his friend, Etienne de la Boëtie, was not the subject matter of their discussions, but the paths the two men took together when they did not agree. This is not a paradox: it is, for Montaigne, a paradigm of good conversation. His metaphors convey his meaning in the chapter "On the art of conversation:" a soldier and his enemy are together when fighting; a hunter and his prey are together in the chase. Similarly, Montaigne wishes to be engaged in vigorous debate.

If current factions of Montaigne criticism agree on nothing else, a consensus has been reached on the value of treating the *Essays* in their

entirety. From the very recent and polemical architectural/mnemotic/ mythological order proposed by Daniel Martin[2] to the more conventional yet enduring study by Jean-Yves Pouilloux,[3] treating all 107 essays is agreed to be the best—in effect, the only—way of reading Montaigne. For Martin, removing even one chapter of the *Essays* would cause the entire pyramid-like structure of Montaigne's three books to come tumbling down. For Pouilloux, simply reading an anthology or a "best of" selection of essays is to forcibly reduce the scope of the author and, further, run the risk of gross and permanent misapprehension. He also condemns the habit, more widespread in France than in English-speaking countries, of severing one or several of Montaigne's phrases to have them play the role of a maxim or witticism, all too often at the expense of Montaigne's intended meaning in the larger context of his argument. For this reason, the recent publication by Penguin Books of the latest English translation of Montaigne, penned by the respected Renaissance scholar M.A. Screech, is welcome, although it is not without its problems.

The difficulties of translation were not unknown to Montaigne, as he had himself translated the *Theologia naturalis* of Raymond Sebond at the behest of his father. He divided the problem with uncharacteristic cartesian simplicity into matter and manner: "It is good to translate authors like these, where there is little to express apart from the matter. Authors much devoted to grace and elegance of language are a dangerous undertaking" (Montaigne, 490-491, II:12). Montaigne's own style—so often gracious and elegant—in fact varies greatly throughout the *Essays*, a subtlety not well reflected by the work of the author of the first English translation, John Florio. Florio's translation, often cited for the richness of its English rather than for the accuracy of its execution,[4] has been defended recently by critics who value a rendering that illustrates a close, contemporaneous reading of Montaigne's text.

Use of the Florio text also informs the study of another close reading of Montaigne by a contemporary: William Shakespeare. Although most of these studies date from early in this century, the first remarks concerning the relationship accompanied the discovery by Edward Capell in 1767 of the striking resemblance between Gonzalo's ideal of a Utopian state in Act II, Scene I of *The Tempest* and the description of the society of Montaigne's version of the *bon sauvage* taken from "Of Cannibals."[5] Following Capell's lead, George Coffin Taylor's study of 1925 explores the verbal analogies between Montaigne and Shakespeare in great detail.[6] His discussion is approached on three fronts: first, those passages in the plays traditionally dated from 1603 and after are matched with their antecedents taken from the Florio translation, published in1603. Taylor presents some eighty note-

worthy passages, including some very convincing ones, such as the following:

> Shakespeare: Is man no more than this? Consider him well.
> *King Lear* (III, iv)
>
> Montaigne: Miserable man; whom if you consider well what is he?
> (II, 12.) (Taylor, 9)

A second group of phrases present similarities somewhat less striking than the first group, and includes a table cataloging the Montaigne passages found in the plays (*Hamlet* with the most at 51). And, finally, Taylor gives us a list of no less than seven hundred and fifty words and phrases used by both Montaigne (that is to say, Florio) and Shakespeare, but never, in the case of the latter, before 1603. As Frances Yates has pointed out, about twenty of these had been used for the first time by Florio (Yates, 245).

Yates also notes that critics addressing the philosophical influence of Montaigne upon Shakespeare "attribute to it some share in the change of mood which came over Shakespeare after the turn of the century and which is exemplified in the great tragedies" (Yates, 244). According to Jacob Feis, in his book *Shakspere and Montaigne*, *Hamlet* is nothing less than an explicit reaction to the skepticism presented in the *Essays*, which are therefore the single greatest reason for this "change of mood." His position, interesting because it is so extreme, is presented thus:

> What sense of duty do Montaigne's Essays promote? What noble deed can ripen in the light of the disordered and discordant ideas they contain? All they can do is, to disturb the mind, not to clear it; to give rise to doubts, not to solve them; to nip the buds from furthering the love for mankind, they can only produce despair as to all higher aims and ideals.
>
> In 'Hamlet,' Shakspere personified many qualities of the complex character of Montaigne. Before all, he meant to draw this conclusion: that whoever approaches a high task of life with such wavering thoughts and such logical inconsistencies, must needs suffer shipwreck.[7]

A much more moderate approach is outlined by the Japanese scholar Tetsuo Anzai in his remarkable monograph, *Shakespeare and Montaigne Reconsidered*.[8] Anzai's concern, unlike that of his predecessors, is not so much the influence of Montaigne upon Shakespeare but the confluence of the authors' ideas, the intellectual resonance (his term) discernable in the writings of the two. Dividing Montaigne's *Essays* into three distinct phases,

Anzai traces a parallel development in the plays of Shakespeare from *Julius Ceasar* onward. Using Pierre Villey's well-established divisions of stoicism in the earliest essays, skepticism in the middle essays, and naturalism in the essays of the final period, Anzai first regards *Hamlet* in the context of a stoic fortitude adopted by the Danish prince to strive to attain the resolution of his situation. This differs from Feis's connection based entirely on skepticism, and, as Anzai points out, it is with the meditation of suicide and death that the play and the early essays resonate most strongly. Skepticism, specifically the "radical skepticism" of Montaigne's "An Apology for Raymond Sebond," is linked by Anzai with *King Lear:* "the old king's tragic sufferings show him the true nature of man and his position in the universe as the most helpless, most miserable, and at the same time most arrogant creature among all the inhabitants of the earth" (Anzai, 5). Finally, Anzai studies the theme of nature and natural man in the late romances and the last essays.

Anzai's conclusions do not reflect a theory of slavish dependence on the part of Shakespeare to the *Essays* of Montaigne, but rather that an exceptionally receptive Bard read and understood the former Mayor of Bordeaux's work. Receptive because he had already developed a profound taste for Plutarch (independently of Montaigne) and receptive because he was one of a handful of Europeans, including Machiavelli, Copernicus, and Montaigne, who were revising traditional views in their respective domains, views inherited from the Middle Ages. Anzai is careful not to call these figures revolutionaries, for the overturning of a tradition by itself does not justify or establish a new one. However, the intellectual milieu that produced these figures corresponds to that which produced Shakespeare, and they therefore shared in the "main current of the later Renaissance" (Anzai, 84).

Given the many studies on the subject, it is curious that only J. Churchton Collins seems to have considered the possibility that Shakespeare could have read the *Essays* in French. His *Studies in Shakespeare* contains only a footnote to that effect.[9] At any rate, given the greater consensus today that Shakespeare simply must have been extraordinarily well-educated, it is entirely probable that he could read French. Certainly so if we attribute the scenes written in French in his plays to Shakespeare himself—something we have no reason to doubt. Although not perfect French, the scene in *Henry V* that depicts Princess Katherine's first English lesson does show a strong sensitivity to language, particularly in the Princess' shocked reaction to the word "foot," through French ears so similar in sound to the verb *foutre* (a vulgar colloquialism for *faire)*—a word that cannot be used in polite (let alone royal) company even today. These studies—except for Anzai's, which

is founded on the development of Montaigne's writings—represent verbal and textual analysis conducted by comparing Florio's English to Shakespeare. If Shakespeare did indeed read French, a very complex question of influence becomes only more so—with Anzai's study pointing out the direction of future research.[10] What is beyond question is that the Florio translation was known to Shakespeare, who read it—at least some of it—very attentively.

William Engel has found that Florio was senstitive to the *Essays*' rhetorical use of artificial memory, a commonplace for a Renaissance scholar but an obscure practice today—and something no subsequent translation has considered.[11] Artificial memory is the method by which the orators of Ancient Rome were able to recall long, detailed discourses with the aid of a mental image of the face of an edifice with symmetrical features or the order of rooms in a house.[12] By associating each element of the discourse with a column, capital, or room, the orator can "see" his argument and maintain their order. He can also simultaneously consider more than one element without confusing their respective positions with regard to the whole. Daniel Martin has suggested that this manner of organization was employed by Montaigne in the composition of the *Essays,* thereby explaining the many additions to the text without the addition of a single chapter, which would have upset the already established order of the *Essays*. Florio's deliberate use of the classical quotations as textual and visual landmarks, his introduction of the image of a symmetrical edifice on the frontispiece of one of his editions, and his explanatory poem "To the Beholder," in which he refers explicitly to the "Roomes and Galleries" to be presented to the reader, all indicate his reaction to the manner in which the *Essays* were presented by their author (Engel, 46).

Tom Conley, keeping in mind the Latin backgrounds of author and translator, argues from a different, complementary perspective:

> This is what conveys the precious brutality of the *Essais;* the graphics of translation are a literal allegory at a graphic limit. Here and there they come across Florio in single words in ways they never have since the end of the sixteenth century. That this remainder scatters all over his sloppy conceits and florid turns in the 1603 rendering may be the most elegant Montaigne in English...Florio succeeds in *dispensing with* the original to the extent that both model and copy cohere as a hieroglyph.[13]

Both of these critics have chosen the Florio version over the Donald M. Frame translation that has been the stand-by for academics and general readers alike since its first publication in 1948.[14] Where Florio gives us

beautiful (but at times obscure and archaic) prose and authentic Renaissance flavor, Frame is simple, concise, and allows modern readers to concentrate easily on the matter, not the manner, of the *Essays*. The result is a very readable, if somewhat duller, Montaigne. Mention must be made, however, of the charming renderings of the classical quotations in the Frame edition (it incidentally does not print the Latin or Greek originals), which are little gems of rhymed English verse.

It is to this translation that M. A. Screech's recent version will inevitably be compared: both are single volumes, both contemporary, both by well-known Renaissance scholars. It seems upon first comparing the two that for every good solution in one there is a different passage well struck in the other—but there are differences. First, Screech's is spicier, richer in words. Words like the technical, erudite "nimbus," the colloquial "diddle," the archaic "ell," the scatalogical "squittering," and the childish "higgledy-piggledy" at times convey the requisite chattiness of *Montaigne's* French, lacking in the Frame, and at others remind us that few writers match elegance in form and content as Montaigne does. The tone of Screech's translation has, then, a wider range, the lows being lower (most noticeable and effective in the outlandish Chapter 5 of Book III, "On some lines of Virgil") and the highs higher. Screech is not just a good scholar, he is also a good writer.

Screech the scholar pays attention to the idiom of Montaigne's French, which, while not quite so difficult as that of Rabelais (Screech's academic specialty), is nonetheless rather far at times from modern French. He is the first translator, for example, to render *"Xenocrates y proceda plus rigoureusement"*[15] as "Xenocrates set about it more vigorously" (Montaigne/Screech, 826 [II:33]), certainly *le mot juste* according to the recent and much-needed *Dictionnaire du moyen français: la Renaissance,* which gives as its definition of *rigoureux: "être fermement décidé à"* ["to be firmly decided upon"].[16].One wonders how many other words we have missed in the years since the confluence of the French and English definitions of "rigorous."

An objection may be made to Screech's habit of rendering the French adjectives *divin* and *sainct* by the substantive "God." For example, Montaigne's *"en la cognoissance divine"* (Montaigne, 906 [III:8]) becomes "within the knowledge of God." (Montaigne/Screech, 1051 [III:8]). This is dangerous because it misleads the reader as to the frequency of Montaigne's choice of the specific and specifically Christian name and the much more interpretable modifier. It is, of course, perfectly justifiable to translate an adjective with a substantive, especially when it could be argued that the word "divine" has lost in the English the currency it enjoyed three centuries ago. In current idiom it is more often used in speaking of a good *mouse au*

chocolat. But for sensitive readers, increasing the frequency of the word "God" does not go unnoticed in the way a word such as "gentleman" would. The difficulty is manifested in John Weightman's review of the Screech translation for the *New York Review of Books:*

> He is more lavish with the term "God." Sometimes he uses it with apparent piety and, in one context, even goes so far as to parallel Peter's denial of Christ by apparently denying his revered Socrates, but...can one tell whether he is sincere or just sanctimonious? On the other hand, when he declares—"My professor [i.e. guide] is the authority of God's Will, which undeniably governs us and which ranks way above our vain human controversies"—God seems to become synonymous with Fortune or Chance, the inscrutable power behind the Universe.[17]

Obviously there is a problem here. If a reader questions the very presence of a word as important as "God" due to its cloudy meanings in a text, placing the word where the author did not inevitably changes the conclusions to be drawn. In the opening seven pages of "An Apology for Raymond Sebond," Montaigne uses the word *"Dieu"* eight times. In the same space, Screech has used the word "God" fourteen times.

This, in fact, should come as no surprise, for Screech's study *Montaigne and Melancholy* paints a very Catholic Montaigne.[18] This is a highly unusual view among scholars,[19] most of whom are quick to state that Montaigne was a nominal Catholic in a Catholic country that was burning Protestants at the stake. His actual religious beliefs were founded on the principle that human beings are so thoroughly insufficient to the task of understanding the notion of "God" that any attempt to do so is futile. Thus, it is better to base our conclusions on the world we can see and touch. For this same reason, humans are not adequate to judge the merits of any organized religion; however, Montaigne's expressed Catholicism is consistent with his desire not to rock the boat. "We are Christians by the same title that we are Périgordians or Germans" (Montaigne/Screech, 497 [II:12]).

And yet Screech depicts Montaigne as a firm Catholic, citing the essayist's skepticism itself as evidence:

> Montaigne throve on doubt, on uncertainty, on an endless search for truth. He was not alone in his grasp of skepticism as an intellectual tool; skepticism was in vogue among Roman Catholics as a defence against Protestants who sought to subvert them with arguments they could not answer. In such cases, the only safe reaction was to demolish reason and scholarship entirely—both theirs and yours, while clinging, by faith, to the Church alone. Christian

skepticism with Catholic Skepticism. (Screech, 3)

But as D. P. Walker has pointed out, Montaigne aims his skepticism directly at "one of the most important and common of rational arguments for the existence of God" in his "Apology for Raymond Sebond."[20] Sebond's *Theologia Naturalis*—a work translated, we recall, by Montaigne—presents the traditional Christian view that the Universe was created around and for mankind: this "anthropomorphic teleology" is attacked by Montaigne as just another example of man's excessive pride:

> Who has persuaded him that the admirable motion of the celestial vault, the eternal light of those torches rolling so proudly above his head, the fearful movements of that infinite sea, were established and have lasted so many centuries for his convenience and his service?[21]

In his chapter entitled, "The Church," Screech comments on Montaigne's use of "Roman" to identify his religion: "By insisting on his *Roman* Catholicism, Montaigne left the reader in no doubt about the identify of the Church to which he gave his unqualified allegiance" (Screech, 95). If the word "Roman" (simply part of the official name of the Church) can have such a decisive effect on the interpretation of a text, what is the effect of nearly doubling the occurance of the word "God"?

Professor Screech has certainly earned the right to his opinions regarding Montaigne's religious views, opinions which are only part of an original and valuable study of the essayist. My reservations regarding his translation center upon the manner in which he has rendered several words. But as the above discussion demonstrates, the conversation between Montaigne's original French text and Screech's English text is a lively one indeed. Montaigne writes, "I move toward the man who contradicts me: he is instructing me" (Montaigne/Screech, 1047 [III:8]). If we listen in on *this* conversation, there will be something for us to learn as well.

Notes

[1] Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays,* tras. M. A. Screech (London, 1991), lvix. All references in English to the *Essays* will refer to this edition except as noted.

[2] Daniel Martin, *L'Architecture des Essais de Montaigne: Mémoire Artificielle et Mythologie* (Paris, 1992).

[3] Jean-Yves Pouilloux, *Lire les "Essais" de Montaigne* (Paris, 1969).

[4] On the problems of Florio's translation, see Frances Yates's book *John Florio: The Life of an Italian in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge, 1934), 213-245.

[5] John M. Robertson, *Montaigne and Shakespeare and Other Essays on Cognate Questions* (1969), 31.

[6] George Coffin Taylor, *Shakespere's Debt to Montaigne* (1968).

[7] Jacob Feis, *Shakspere and Montaigne* (1884; reprint, 1970).

[8] Tetsuo Anzai, *Shakespeare and Montaigne Reconsidered* (Tokyo, 1986).

[9] J. Churchton Collins, *Studies in Shakespeare* (Westminster, 1904), 286.

[10] On the question of Shakespeare's knowledge of foreign languages, see Gary B. Goldstein's note, "Did Shakespeare Read Dante in Italian?" in the first issue of this journal.

[11] William Engel, "The Art of Memory and Montaigne's Scene of Writing," in *The Order of Montaigne's Essays*, ed. Daniel Martin (1989), 33-49.

[12] Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London, 1966).

[13] Tom Conley, "Institutionalizing Translation: On Florio's Montaigne," in *Demarcating the Disciplines* (1986), 57-58.

[14] Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (1958).

[15] Michel de Montaigne, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1962), 706 (II:33).

[16] Algirdas Julien Greimas and Teresa Mary Keane, *Dictionnaire du moyen français: la Renaissance* (Paris, 1992).

[17] John Weightman, "How Wise Was Montaigne?" *New York Review of Books*, 5 November 1992, 35. In his review, Weightman never mentions the original French text, viewing this edition as a book rather than a translation. This supports our argument that the preponderance of the word "God" has effects more far-reaching than respect for current English idiom.

[18] M. A. Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy: The Wisdom of the Essays* (1983).

[19] Patrick Henry's review of *Montaigne and Melancholy* closes with these words: "Literary, political, and religious conservatives will find it erudite, useful, and wise; their opponents will find it erudite and useful." *Comparative Literature* 37.2 (Spring 1985): 187.

[20] D. P. Walker, "The Faith of the Skeptic," *New York Review of Books*, 14 February 1985, 37.

[21] Montaigne/Frame, 328-329 (II:12). This passage is more easily isolated from the surrounding phrases than in Screech's translation.