

**Volker Reinhardt, Montaigne. Philosophie in Zeiten
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This highly readable and provocative biographical account is supported and accompanied by a richly detailed voyage through the main writings – chiefly the »Essays«, but not exclusively – to bring us a Montaigne full of contrasts and contradictions across the years of his adult life and even within specific periods. We are not surprised, of course, that the man who famously stated »Mundus universus exercet histrionam« should have engaged in more or less subtle games of adjusting the appearances to fit the moment at nearly every turn. But the breadth and depth of the role-playing, and we might say, the self-fashioning on display here make for a fascinating read.

The figure of Montaigne that emerges is that of an intensely self-conscious writer, indeed, among the modern inventors of literary self-consciousness if not among the inventors of the self, whom Volker Reinhardt catches out in numerous mendacious insinuations about his background, his actions, his intentions. The dissimulation begins with the description of a unique childhood where Latin was the lingua franca. Here as elsewhere the author deconstructs the story using a combination of textual clues, ancillary evidence, and common sense.

The early family metamorphosis from Michel Eyquem to Montaigne sets the stage for an elaborately choreographed rise within the ranks of the local families of Guyenne that includes the acquisition of a castle along with a new name. Experience of the 1548 salt tax riots in Bordeaux helps convince the young patrician that such popular mass actions were futile, a sentiment that would be reinforced later as the religious wars heated up. Meanwhile during his education at the noble college, he grows to disbelieve in all dogmatisms, old or new, including the just emerging Copernican theory.

An early translation of Raymond Sebond's »Natural Theology« (»Theologia naturalis«), undertaken, Montaigne fictitiously asserts, on his father's orders, signifies curiosity about numerous dangerous claims associated with Protestant beliefs or with the view of nature as a holy book, without any assertion of responsibility for the doctrines on the part of the translator. Later, an early experience of native Americans being paraded through the streets of Bordeaux during a royal visit will inspire a celebrated essay on cultural diversity and the observer's perspective, with moments of self-reflection regarding gender relations, social status, confessional extremism, and much else.



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Friendship with Étienne de La Boétie forms part of a developing aristocratic self-image, also provoking a rapprochement with theories on the limits of monarchy. However, in the »Essay« on friendship such a pure and disinterested relationship among men is touted as surpassing more formal connections such as marriage, due in that case to the onus of responsibilities and expectations on both sides. Upon de La Boétie's tragically premature death, Montaigne does not hesitate to exploit his friend's work for his own ends, publishing an edition of the main treatises, carefully excluding the controversial »On Voluntary Servitude« with its emphasis on freedom – personal and political – and prefacing the publication with four dedicatory letters strategically framed in view of possible offers of patronage. Perhaps in part as a consolation for the premature loss of de La Boétie, Montaigne agrees to a presumably arranged marriage to Françoise de La Chassaigne, mentioned here only in passing, as indeed in Montaigne's own works.

With Montaigne's father elected as mayor of Bordeaux, by subtle manoeuvring and considerable sums of money, the family contrives to insert the still-underaged son within the local *cour des aides* of Périgueux, the most powerful judicial body in the region, and eventually within the *parlement* of Bordeaux. Strife between the strictly Catholic court and the local Protestant-leaning *parlement* quickly thrusts him into the vortex of local politics that was to inform many of the attitudes expressed in the »Essays«.

The travel journal, first published in the eighteenth century based on a now lost manuscript, is obviously far more than a straightforward record of a trip through Italy to Rome by way of Germany and Switzerland undertaken in 1580–1581. Here again, Reinhardt detects an elaborate exercise in self-reflection and analysis, beginning with the choice to write in Italian not French in order to build a distance between subject and object that becomes further developed in the third-person narrative of the first half of the writing – abandoned in the second half allegedly due to the secretary's unavailability but more probably, we are told, as a strategic fiction to explain variations in the writer's own efforts at literary experimentalism. Montaigne's decision to submit the first version of the »Essays« to the Roman book censors during the trip is explained by curiosity about reader response as well as about just how far he might be able to press the limits of orthodoxy not only by the often daring contents but by his own self-presentation, within official circles, as a well-connected beneficiary of social privilege.

While away, Montaigne is elected mayor of Bordeaux, but he takes his time in arriving, as his mind and his intentions lie elsewhere. The sense of social justice reawakens with the imposition by Henry III of excessive taxes on those least able to pay, and the consequent remonstrance by the city officials. In the same period, attempting to play mediator between Henry III and Henry of Navarre, he hosts the latter at his castle, with entertainment including a deer hunt. The moment of political responsibility



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terminates with the arrival of the plague, calling forth further reflections, in the »Essays«, on the fickleness of fortune.

Toward the end of a life rich in satisfactions and accomplishments but truncated by disease and fraught by tragedy, Montaigne settles down in the family castle, never to travel again, among a swirl of memories as well as thoughts about significance of life and death, so eloquently recorded in the »Essays«. Changes between the first (1580) and second (1588) editions published in his lifetime, carefully picked apart here, suggest hypotheses regarding intellectual and even emotional development. For instance, in 1588 there is less respect for the ancients and more for women, less confidence in the possibility of knowing the self, more estrangement from the present time and place. However, we come away with a sense of having achieved at least a somewhat better understanding of one of the most fascinatingly complex minds of the time, conveyed with sympathy and insight in this valuable book.

Frühe Neuzeit – Revolution –
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