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Richard Scholar, *Montaigne and the Art of Free-Thinking*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010. x + 229 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$51.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-906165-21-5.

Review by Zachary S. Schiffman, Northeastern Illinois University.

Despite his surname, Richard Scholar wears his considerable learning lightly in this elegant introduction to Montaigne's *Essais*, an introduction of interest to seasoned as well as green readers of the text. He begins with an inspired hook that parallels the "lives" of Don Quixote de la Mancha and Michel de Montaigne, both country gentlemen overly fond of reading. Whereas books spurred Don Quixote to seek adventure in the world, they encouraged Montaigne to stay at home, seeking adventure in the mind. This hook serves to introduce the subject of "free-thinking," but it also epitomizes Scholar's lightness of touch, if only because he doesn't sound out all its resonances but rather allows them to reverberate on their own, drawing the reader into the art Montaigne sought to embody.

This lightness of touch is essential, given the approach Scholar has chosen. At first glance, the pairing of Montaigne with the subject of free-thinking seems altogether too obvious, given the latter term's association with the *libertinage* of the seventeenth century, a movement rooted in the skepticism Montaigne had popularized. But for Scholar, free-thinking denotes something more than a historical phenomenon. To relegate this art to the past is most profoundly to deny it, not only by regarding it as a (perhaps quaint) "school of thought" but more so by willingly donning the intellectual blinders it seeks to remove, blinders that threaten to limit the *Essais* to the status of a historical document. In this regard, Scholar scrupulously avoids reducing Montaigne to his context, be it ancient or modern—he is no more a Stoic, a Pyrrhonian, or an Epicurian than he is a precursor of Enlightenment. He is very much a man of his age, but his quest, like Don Quixote's, is for an elusive ideal, one that is not so much timeless as context-free or, in Scholar's more subtle and supple usage, "anti-authoritarian."

Of course, every text exists in a context. Before leaping from one to the other, however, we must make an effort to secure the actual literary remains; and in the case of the *Essais*, this effort leads us down a rabbit hole. The first edition of 1580, in two books, was followed by the two-book 1582 edition (with mostly minor changes to the original), the vastly expanded three-book 1588 edition, and the posthumous edition of 1595 (with major additions to all three books); interspersed between these editions were several others with very minor changes. Clearly, Montaigne regarded the *Essais* as an on-going project, but (when all is said and done) is the volume we hold in our hands "the" *Essais*?

Until the early twentieth century, the posthumous 1595 version (edited by Montaigne's literary executrix Marie de Gournay and the poet Pierre de Brach) was regarded as the definitive text, even though it underwent successive changes during Marie de Gournay's lifetime. In the early twentieth century, however, the 1595 edition was superseded by the five-volume *Édition municipale* of Fortunat Strowski, François Gêbelin, and Pierre Villey, which was based on the "Bordeaux copy," a copy of the 1588 edition with extensive additions in Montaigne's own hand. Marie de Gournay had employed this copy—or, more precisely, a copy of this copy—when preparing her posthumous edition of 1595. One might think the Bordeaux copy the last word, as it were, on the text, but its margins were trimmed by an overzealous early-modern bookbinder, and we must rely on the 1595 edition to reconstruct the truncated marginalia. My own personal edition to the *Essais*, the 1962 Pléiade edition of Albert

Thibaudet and Maurice Rat, is based on the Bordeaux copy, with lacunae filled in from the 1595 edition. Unfortunately, in at least one instance, Marie de Gournay may have altered the order of Montaigne's chapters, as well as changed his spelling and punctuation; although modern critical editions have restored the order of the chapters to reflect Montaigne's (presumed) intentions, they have mostly retained Marie de Gournay's orthography and punctuation. In his 1998 Imprimerie nationale edition, however, André Tournon revised the standard version of the text, restoring the extensive changes Montaigne had made to orthography and punctuation in the Bordeaux copy. The changes in punctuation result in a dramatically different reading of the *Essais*--more clipped and segmented than Montaigne's garrulous reputation would suggest--and the changes in orthography, especially the capitalization of key terms and ideas, alters the substance as well as the style of the text. But even Tournon made concessions to the modern reader that purists might object to, and both the 1595 edition and the *Édition municipale* still retain their scholarly adherents, rendering the search for an "authentic" text inconclusive.

The instability of the text complicates any attempt to establish a context, especially when one considers that this context itself necessarily derives from a reading of other texts whose provenance may be even more opaque than that of the *Essais*, a "work" blessed by greater good fortune than most (heedless bookbinders notwithstanding). I have gone out of my way here to underscore a point about the relation between text and context to which Scholar is extraordinarily sensitive (though he makes it in an entirely different way), a point that shapes his whole approach to Montaigne's art of critical thinking. The *Essais* do not so much "exemplify" or "represent" this art as put it to the test; they are (to borrow an expression from Charles Taylor) "radically reflexive"; they force the reader to think about thinking, and in so doing, they create a special space, bounded at either extreme by what Scholar terms "freedom" and "constraint" (pp. 11-12). He identifies Montaigne's intellectual freedom with an anti-authoritarian cast of mind, but he acknowledges that, for Montaigne, intellectual freedom depends upon constraints--habits, customs, laws, beliefs--without which it cannot function. Free thinking is the mind's art of navigating between these rocks, upon which it can too easily founder, with freedom becoming license and constraint narrow-mindedness. One can best understand this art not by reducing it to its historical context but by following its actual course in the *Essais*.

Scholar begins his analysis of the text, disarmingly enough, with Montaigne's preface, "To the Reader." Here Montaigne epitomizes the art of free thinking when he openly and unconventionally declares, "I am myself the matter of my book," while regretting that the custom of wearing clothes constrains him from presenting himself entirely naked. Such is the difficulty of navigating between freedom and constraint, though, that one preface--one pitch to the reader--won't suffice to explain this art, so Montaigne reiterates it in the prefaces, apostrophes, and dedications that recur throughout the first two books, literary moves that serve to reintroduce the reader to an art that is itself open-ended, that circles back upon itself again and again. Especially noteworthy is Scholar's analysis of the early chapter, "Of idleness" (1.8), which constitutes for all practical purposes a second preface. Here Montaigne regrets that in the freedom of retirement, his mind has taken license, like a runaway horse that he now seeks to constrain by putting its fantasies into writing (*les mettre en roule*), hoping thereby to make his mind "ashamed of itself." The necessity of registering his thoughts suggests (as Scholar duly notes) that Montaigne regards his mind as having a mind of its own, which he will pursue endlessly, bridle in hand.

The famous chapter "Of the education of children" (1.26) addresses the art of free thinking directly, not only by enunciating it as a principle but (as always) by embodying it. Scholar begins his analysis of this chapter with an extended discussion of the term "free thinking" and its relation to the term "context." The almost instinctive identification of free thinking with early modern *libertinage* indicates that "The history of free thinking is always a contextual history" (p. 45), and Scholar elaborates no fewer than six interrelated contexts for the traditional history of free thinking. Most of these, however, refer to a post-

Tridentine struggle between science and religion, between faith and reason, which did not fully engage Montaigne. To properly understand his place in the history of free thinking, Scholar concludes, "we need to keep turning to the text [of the *Essais*] itself, to the twists and turns of its sentences" (p. 52). By unraveling the skein of Montaigne's argument in "Of the education of children," Scholar reveals how free thinking emerges as the interplay of three elements: (1) one's freedom to reject the authority of one's teachers; (2) one's practice of doubting as a means of searching for truth; and (3) one's reliance in this search on the words and ideas of others, which one internalizes and makes one's own. Lest this chapter itself become an authoritative pronouncement on education, Montaigne writes with such beguiling self-deprecation that the reader naturally discounts his authority while internalizing his words.

From "Of the education of children" Scholar moves on to consider another famous chapter, "Of Democritus and Heraclitus" (1.50), where Montaigne explores what he means by "essaying" his judgment. Although Scholar's textual itinerary is predictable, his approach to this well-worn theme is entirely fresh. He begins by carefully establishing that the chapter "Of Democritus and Heraclitus" is less "an essay"—a notion that smacks too much of our modern usage of the term—than a textual space where essaying occurs, a space where Montaigne engages in innumerable, free-wheeling "thought experiments" (p. 72). Scholar emphasizes the open-ended nature of these experiments by examining the history of the text of the *Essais*, which Montaigne progressively expanded and glossed, resulting in the three major editions of 1580, 1588, and 1595. Rather than end his historical account of the text here, however, Scholar goes on to consider the various editions based upon the Bordeaux copy, and the debates between adherents to the different modern editions of the text, by way of illustrating how the text itself remains as open-ended as the process of thinking it encourages.

In an ironically entitled chapter, "Two Cheers for Free-Thinking," Scholar moves on (predictably) to consider the "Apology for Raymond Sebond," with (again) unpredictable results. The most interesting part of Scholar's analysis turns on his reading of an apostrophe, where Montaigne addresses a warning to "the princess"—presumably Margaret of Valois—about the double-edged nature of the skeptical arguments he is about to deploy. Scholar reveals how the course of the argument in this apostrophe follows an S-shaped curve, as Montaigne swings sharply from embracing skeptical methods, to rejecting them as dangerous, to accepting them with caution. The movement of thought within this apostrophe mirrors the "sinuous" movement of the chapter as a whole, where Montaigne reveals himself, not so much as a skeptic, but as someone willing to use the methods of skepticism in a prolonged search for truth, as someone who combines a sense of freedom and constraint. This "fine balance," as Scholar terms it, is difficult to achieve. Although Montaigne portrays himself as an Everyman, his art is not for everyone. Hence it gets only two cheers.

From the "Apology," which sits at the center of the *Essais* as a whole, Scholar moves on to consider the central chapter of Book Two, "Of freedom of conscience" (2.19), whose symbolic position is further accentuated by its title, the only chapter title in the text to employ the word *liberté*. Scholar's analysis of this chapter reveals it as Montaigne's invitation to the reader to "attempt to think with freedom about freedom of conscience" (p. 114). This exercise turns on the reader's ability to consider Montaigne's judgments and come to his or her own conclusions, in an open and free essaying that constitutes the true nature of friendship. Free-thinking thus lies at the heart of an ideal association that extends between Montaigne and his contemporaries, between himself and past figures, and between himself and future readers, whose earnest and honest engagement he welcomes.

Scholar's argument culminates in his penultimate chapter, "Of Keeping Your Freedom Alive," which channels Montaigne's spirit in both form and substance. Here Scholar begins by analyzing "Of husbanding your will" (3.10), where Montaigne shows how he has kept his judgment free in a partisan age of religious/civil war. Just as Montaigne extols freedom of judgment by means of examples both

ancient and modern, so too Scholar moves back and forth through time with a Montaignian ease. He segues from Montaigne's assessment of the legendary hero, Marcus Manlius, who defended the Rome's Capitol Hill against the Gauls, to Montaigne's actual visit to Rome in 1581, where he encountered the censors of the Index of Prohibited Books. Although they had some bones to pick with the 1580 edition of the *Essais*, they declined to make specific recommendations, deferring (fittingly enough) to Montaigne's judgment. And this he exercised, in the few places where he actually addressed their objections, by showing how the art of free-thinking dwells between freedom and constraint. In these exercises of his judgment, Montaigne remained exquisitely aware that "his present is the past of the future in which he hopes to be read" (p. 178), and this observation brings Scholar back to the chapter at hand ("Of husbanding your will") and Montaigne's clever use of pronouns, in which he contrasts "them"—the narrow-minded—against "us," those who still read Montaigne in the spirit in which he wrote, namely, the would-be Sancho Panzas ready to accompany him on his quest.

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