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Sébastien Prat, *Constance et inconstance chez Montaigne*. Paris : Classiques Garnier, 2011. 503pp. Notes, bibliography, index. 49€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-0362-0

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Sébastien Prat's study is clearly written, well organized, full, and scholarly. Its topic—the tension between constancy and inconstancy—is deeply, perhaps even uniquely Montaignean; Prat's book goes some way therefore to illuminating the novelty of the *Essais* at the time of their writing, and their enduring impact on later, even modern readerships. Its opening claims are sensible and well formulated. Prat insists throughout that inconstancy is not, for Montaigne, constancy's mere antithesis; this would of course render inconstancy contradictorily permanent, i.e., paradoxically constant. Inconstancy is, thus, less of a reified concept than a flexible dynamic, to be described rather than defined, and which generates the very writing of the *Essais*. Prat follows inconstancy's Montaignean manifestations over three carefully structured sections. Throughout, the analysis intertwines contextual information—pertinent texts from antiquity, medieval theology, or Montaigne's own sixteenth century—with often brilliantly close attention to the verbal texture of Montaigne's text itself. Prat's convincing conclusions are supported by not only the sensitive analysis of the wording of individual passages, but also by close attention to the *Essais'* growth over successive editions, such as statistical data concerning for example increased citations of Cicero (p.63).

The first section deals, broadly speaking, with the “dialogue” (p. 39) between Montaigne's writing and ancient discussions of constancy and inconstancy in both ethical and epistemological frameworks. Chief amongst these are moralized stoic definitions of “philosophy” as the maintenance of a constant soul, and, in ancient skepticism, philosophical exploration of a topic leading to the peaceable acceptance of its ultimate unknowability, i.e., *ataraxia*. Prat's sustained readings of the essays, “Apologie de Raimond Sebond” (book two, chapter twelve), “De la constance” (book one, chapter twelve), and a commendably broad range of other samples, are related to and compared with succinct yet comprehensive discussions of Sextus Empiricus's *Hypotyposes/Esquisses Pyrrhoniennes* (pp. 94-98), Cicero's *Academica* (pp. 69-74) and Seneca's *Letters to Lucilus* and *De Constantia Sapientis* (pp. 126-130). These carefully contextualized readings convincingly demonstrate the justificatory kinships Montaigne observes between inconstancy and (human) “nature.” The Stoics hold inconstancy to be a “maladie de l'âme,” but Montaigne, as Prat notices, nuances this: granted, inconstancy is “un ‘vice de notre nature’” but it is not “un état contre nature” (p. 44, pp. 77-80). This insistence on inconstancy in (and as) nature informs Montaigne's cumulative and progressive critique, again, carefully demonstrated by Prat, of the skeptical ideal of *ataraxia* as a reductive suspension of judgement (pp. 99-102). In-depth, historicised analyses of the concept of fortune from antiquity to Montaigne's sixteenth century (e.g., pp. 195-99) relate Montaigne's engagements with the constancy idealized in and by ancient philosophy to his tendency to envisage and assay inconstancy cosmologically, as influenced by ideas in circulation at the time of writing. Drawing on attentive and precise readings of Louis Le Roy's *De la vicissitude ou variétés des choses dans l'univers* (pp. 183-5), the anonymous *De la constance requise aux afflictions des misères de ce temps* (pp. 185-7), Pierre de Lancre's *Tableau de l'inconstance et instabilité de toute chose* (pp. 188-92), and Justus Lipsius's *Traité de la*

*constance* (pp. 185-98), Prat argues that for Montaigne inconstancy is conceivably as metaphysical and universal a guide to conduct as constancy is for Stoics and Christians (p. 203).

Constructing this humanist constellation of ideas and positions concerning constancy and inconstancy thus enables the reader to position Montaigne's own "essaying" of such themes. In the second section, however, Prat takes inconstancy less as a conscious theme than as a founding principle of Montaignean method. The discussion of the famous passage from book 2, chapter 1 "De l'inconstance de nos actions" is a highpoint of the book (pp. 218-38). Prat notes the self-description leading up to this chapter's famous claim—"Distinguo est le plus universel membre de ma Logique"—rhetorically performs precisely the techniques of differentiation and self-refutation the term *distinguo* denotes in scholastic argument ("Honteux insolent, chaste luxurieux, bavard taciturne, laborieux delicat, ingénieux hebeté, chagrin debonaire, menteur veritable, sçavant ignorant" [cited p. 222]).[1] Prat infers: "la pensée reflexive, dont aucun homme n'est dépourvu, est toujours à saisir l'inconstance première [celle de la 'nature'] et, sans pouvoir la corriger, en lui donnant même une variété supplémentaire par les regards que l'on porte sur soi, doit reconnaître qu'elle est fondée au cœur de la subjectivité" (p. 222, n. 3).

The idea of Montaigne's writing witnessing and depicting two overlapping modes of inconstancy, one cosmological and universal, the other intimate, corporeal, psychological and phenomenological, is a *leitmotiv*; it enables Prat to analyse incisively verbal and rhetorical strategies deployed in the meditations on historiography, judgment, and (juris)prudence that are scattered through Montaigne's voluminous text. History exemplifies inconstancy for Montaigne in its textual indeterminacy: its confusion of reported, plausible, and true events (pp. 250-1), say, or its unreliability as a guide to future action (p. 251), or the unbridgeable gaps and lacunae left by even the most scrupulous historians (p. 254). The account of Montaigne's engagement with the historians of his time, especially Bodin, that emerges from this survey, and that of Montaigne's treatment of prudence in legal and professional contexts ("la sphère publique") are subtle and illuminating; in both cases, the necessary reliance on personal judgement—a presupposition held from antiquity onwards—is exposed by Montaigne's distinctive writing as just another mode and form of inconstancy.

The third section focuses on the ethical questions raised by and intertwining with such a potentially dangerously licentious mode of thinking, with special attention to "De la diversion" (book 3, chapter 4), "Du repentir" (book 3, chapter 2), "Que philosopher c'est apprendre à mourir" (book 1, chapter 20) and "De l'expérience" (book 3, chapter 13). From these impressively detailed readings emerges an understanding of magnanimousness—*grandeur de l'âme*—that illustrates powerfully Montaigne's judicious and subtle differentiations from a Stoic ethics of constant self-mastery, or an Aristotelian ethics of constant moderation. Prat's exploration of the multiple (and necessarily shifting and contradictory) treatments, guises, and articulations of inconstancy in Montaigne culminate in a new sense of the *magnitudo animi*; the "great" soul by definition constantly, subtly recalibrates the prudent, judicious, and right course of action – physically, psychologically, affectively—even as the inconstant person and the inconstant universe shift and alter in tandem with and in relation to each other:

"La *magnitudo animi* qui devait asseoir la constance est reinterprétée, retournée sur elle-même, subvertie. De la force de l'âme, de l'inflexibilité parfaitement maîtresse d'elle-même, la grandeur d'âme devient dans les *Essais*, la médiocrité. Il ne s'agit pas de ne plus sentir les affronts de la fortune, mais de composer avec eux sans s'en surprendre, car on a abandonné l'idéal d'ataraxie pour celui de la mollesse exigée par l'inconstance des situations et des hommes" (p. 481).

Prat's book clearly benefits and contributes to Montaigne studies because it clearly and comprehensively accounts for Montaignean distinctiveness, personhood and personality without resorting to anachronistic terminologies of "le moi" and "the modern subject." In this, it agrees in many ways with critical studies such as Richard Scholar's *Montaigne and the Art of Free Thinking*. [2] In its attention to judicious self-management amongst various forms of inconstancy, it is also thematically

consonant with Felicity Green's recent study *Montaigne and the Life of Freedom*.<sup>[3]</sup> It does, however, bring usefully to light a new corpus of contextual works. Methodologically the book has many strengths: it sets forward its argument with admirable coherence, logic, and rigour; an opening section demonstrates careful, even acutely self-conscious awareness of the potential methodological pitfalls of writing on Montaigne, like the problematic "recruitability" of Montaigne to various ideological or intellectual positions, or assigning to him distinctive personality "traits" (e.g., p. 21), or using and quoting from different editions which vary in their pros and cons (e.g., p. 45, note 1).

As is perhaps already evident from the summary above, the knowledge demonstrated of Montaigne's texts and contexts is impressive; the bibliography is, likewise, excellent, collating a full, rich selection of contemporary criticism. Given the length, frequency, and usefulness of the footnotes, I am grateful that they are presented on each page, rather than set at the back of the book. I did, however, find slightly debatable that Montaigne uses terms like *âme*, *raison*, *esprit*, *entendement* interchangeably ("les termes désignant les diverses facultés de l'âme sont employés les uns pour les autres", p. 51, note 1); and, given the length and detail of this otherwise fine study, an *index rerum* to join the full *index nominum*, and a list of when the various chapters by Montaigne get cited, would have been especially useful. In summary, though, and while by moments reading more like a doctoral thesis than a monograph due to its extensive citation of other scholars, this study does form a solid contribution to the field and will be useful for students of Montaigne from advanced undergraduate level upwards; I have used extracts in tutorial discussion with strong finalists to great profit. It is throughout a nuanced, subtle, and rewarding piece of work.

#### NOTES:

[1] The original citation can be found in Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. Pierre Villey and V. L. Saulnier (Paris: PUF "Quadrages," 2004), p. 335.

[2] Richard Scholar, *Montaigne and the Art of Free Thinking* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008).

[3] Felicity Green, *Montaigne and the Life of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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