

# dianoesis

Vol 15 (2024)

Leadership: charisma, power, and freedom



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doi: [10.12681/dia.38165](https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38165)

## "Parce que c'estoit luy": On Michel de Montaigne's Ontic Disruption of Sexual Taxonomies and the Individuality of Lovers

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### **Abstract:**

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) contended that "Nature has committed herself not to make any other thing that was not different." On this assumption, the diversity and variability of sexuality instantiates the principle of Nature's continuous *branloire* and gives the lie to the regnant scheme of binary sexual distribution. As a result of Montaigne's Heraclitean approach of reality, the hypostatized categories of man and woman subtending the sexual bipartition of humanity become the internalized poles of the male/female opposition that configure the uniquely nuanced sexuality of the individual. Against this backdrop, Montaigne's love of Étienne de la Boétie (1530-1563) emerges as the supersedure of the age-old distinction between same-sex and other-sex configurations. Signally, womanizing Montaigne gave a tense response to the question as to why he loved La Boétie: "Because it was he."

**Keywords:** androgyny; bisexuality; binary sexuality; friendship; homosexuality; human form; individuality; sexual love; sexual diversity and variability; transsexuality; strategies of power

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

William Shakespeare: *Hamlet*.  
(Shakespeare, 1996, p. 226 [5, 1, 174-175])

1. In the possibly most resolute praise of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) by a contemporary author, literary critic Harold Bloom (1930-2019) contended that Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) "is the mind of our age, as Montaigne was the mind of Shakespeare's" (Bloom, 1994, p. 375). Emblematizing the inquisitive thrust of their respective times, Montaigne and Freud created encompassing bodies of work passionately concerned with all things sexual. Despite sharing concurrent interests, however, the two authors uphold antipodal conceptions of how sexuality deploys its differences. Aside from the contrasting sexual epistemes available to them and the differing theo-political settings in which they lived, Montaigne and Freud advanced very different conceptions of humanity's sexed condition. This dissent becomes especially patent in the way they confronted the chasm that structures the binary differentiation of the sexes. It was their varying preparedness to scrutinize and question the allegedly immemorial template of two mutually exclusive sexes that appears to be at the origin of their profound divergences on sexual matters.

2. While Montaigne and Freud acknowledged the feeble epistemic foundations of sexual binarity, this awareness led to contradictory conclusions. Like Montaigne, Freud left no doubt about the questionable groundwork supporting the dichotomous separation of the sexes, although he embraced, for apparently heuristic or propaedeutic reasons, its generalized societal validity. By 1920, Freud had already admitted in *Über die Psychogenese eines Falles von weiblicher Homosexualität* (On the Psychogenesis of a Case of Female Homosexuality) the insufficient psychoanalytical grasp of the man/woman binary. As he conceded, psychoanalysis is not capable of explaining the essence of what is called "male" and

"female," and thus has to suffice itself with adopting both concepts in the conventional or biological sense as the basis of its work (see Freud, 1980b, p. 280).<sup>1</sup> Openly acknowledging that his approach of sexual difference was merely commonsensical, Freud recurred in *Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse* (New Continuation of the Lectures on the Introduction to Psychoanalysis) (1933) to the routine assumption that

"male and female is the first distinction that you make when you meet another human being, and you are accustomed to making this distinction with unquestioned certainty" (Freud, 1980a, p. 545).<sup>2</sup>

3. At the antipodes of Freud's attempt to find an anchorage for sexual binarity that would consolidate the Oedipal project of psychoanalysis, the defining move in Montaigne's approach of sexuality was to question and leave behind the male/female disjunction that had purportedly determined humanity's self-understanding since times immemorial. Accordingly, Montaigne disseminated throughout his oeuvre doubts about the tenability of the dichotomous model of sexuality, and even raised the discomfiting claim that the *male/female* differentiation emerged from a unique, non-dichotomous source in nature predating the pervasive influence of culture and society. Indicatively, Montaigne's overall démarche as regards sexual difference did not rely on a deductive procedure, but on the cumulation of empirical evidence that de-naturalized the man/woman binomial by pointing to the irreducible complexity and diversity of the existing sexual complexions. Following his design to destabilize the sexual dichotomy of old, Montaigne collected cases of non-normative sexualities from the fields of Classical mythology, Renaissance travel reports, European history and the nascent natural

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<sup>1</sup> The original German wording of Freud's key passage reads: "Aber das Wesen dessen, was man im konventionellen oder im biologischen Sinne 'männlich' und 'weiblich' nennt, kann die Psychoanalyse nicht aufklären, sie übernimmt die beiden Begriffe und legt sie ihren Arbeiten zugrunde."

<sup>2</sup> "Männlich oder weiblich ist die erste Unterscheidung, die Sie machen, wenn Sie mit einem anderen menschlichen Wesen zusammentreffen, und Sie sind gewöhnt, diese Unterscheidung mit unbedenklicher Sicherheit zu machen."

sciences, all of which were meant to confirm, in the last resort, his core ontic axiom that "Nature has committed herself not to make any other thing that was not different" (III, 13, 1065).<sup>3</sup>

4. Unwittingly marking a contrast to Montaigne's turn of mind, Freud assumed that the observation and study of living nature could assist modern science in providing the empirically based conception of the man/woman dichotomy it lacked. Therewith, Freud was patently ignoring the fact that Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) generalization of human hermaphroditism foreshadowed the universalization of sexual intermediariness propounded since 1896 by Magnus Hirschfeld's (1868-1935) nascent sexology.<sup>4</sup> Having overlooked the nature-based arguments by his two prominent contemporaries, it could hardly be expected that Freud would pay attention to the non-binary approach of sexuality adumbrated three centuries earlier by Michel de Montaigne. In this connection, it is well to consider that the French thinker viewed himself as one of the *naturalists* of his time, as he unequivocally maintains in a passage of his essay titled "De la physionomie" (Of physiognomy): "We naturalists judge that the honor of invention is greater and incomparably preferable to the honor of quotation" (III, 12, 1056).<sup>5</sup> Accordantly, Montaigne's *Essais* and his *Journal de Voyage en Italie par la*

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<sup>3</sup> "Nature s'est obligée à ne rien faire autre, qui ne fust dissemblable." All citations from Montaigne's *Essais* are according to the Villey / Saulnier edition: Montaigne, 2021. In this instance, "III, 13, 1065" remits to: Third Book, Essay 13, page 1065. Quotes from Montaigne's one-page preamble to the *Essays* are referenced thus: "Au lecteur, 3." Montaigne's quotations in English translation are included in the main text. The corresponding quotations in the French original are generally appended in footnotes. With minor exceptions, Donald Frame's translation of Montaigne's works has been followed (Montaigne, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Around 1838, Charles Darwin's noted in his *Notebooks*: "Every man & woman is hermaphrodite [...]" (Darwin, 1987, p. 384 [Notebook D (1838), No. 162]).<sup>4</sup> Many years later, in a letter to Scottish geologist Charles Lyell (1797-1845) of January 10, 1860, Darwin came back to the issue: "*Our ancestor* was an animal which [...] undoubtedly was an hermaphrodite! Here is a pleasant genealogy for mankind.—" (Darwin, 1993, p. 28 / Letter 2647; emphasis in original). As regards Darwin's and Hirschfeld's overarching stance of human sexual difference, see: Bauer, 2010; Bauer, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> "Nous autres naturalistes estimons qu'il y aie grande et incomparable preference de l'honneur de l'invention à l'honneur de l'allegation"

*Suisse et l'Allemagne* (literally: Journal of travel to Italy through Switzerland and Germany) provide evidence of his consistent shift away from the cultural ubiquitousness of the disjunctive conception of sexuality. It is thus unsurprising that, true to his empirical naturalism, Montaigne elaborated in *Journal* and in the *Essais* on a well attested occurrence that later medical terminology could have depicted as an unintentionally induced, spontaneous instance of transsexuality.

5. The initial entries of *Journal de voyage*, which were written down by an amanuensis, cover the stretch of the trip as Montaigne and his fellow travelers were still on French territory. One of the entries in this portion, depicts the case of Marie Germain, a young girl who, years earlier, had generated in herself male sexual organs while making large strides (see Montaigne, 1992, pp. 6-7, 325). The event was initially referred to in the entry on Montaigne's visit to the city of Vitry-le-François. Eight years later, however, the passage was incorporated with modifications in the first book of the *Essais*, which include the indication that such female-to-male transmogrifications were "frequent" (I, 21, 99)<sup>6</sup> among the girls of the region. In accordance with his overall design to de-naturalize sexual binarity, Montaigne downplays the striking occurrence of sex changes by suggesting their relative foreseeability within the order of nature. What Montaigne considered an empirically ascertainable change of an individual's sexuality as confirmed by ecclesiastical and medical authorities, eventually found in the *Essais* a quasi-mythological correlate in the figure of Tiresias, the blind Apollonian seer of Thebes. As the foremost transsexual personage of Greek legendary history, he was transformed into a woman by the goddess Hera for a period of seven years. According to a passage Montaigne adduces from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Tiresias "had been a man as well as a woman" (III, 5, 854),<sup>7</sup> thus successively experiencing the carnality of male and female love. Conspicuously, a further passage in the *Essais* dispenses with the element of temporal succession altogether, positing the simultaneity of the two sexes in the

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<sup>6</sup> "frequent"

<sup>7</sup> "avoit esté tantost homme, tantost femme"

ancient seer. For Montaigne, the occurrence appears to become less astounding against the backdrop of his reference to a far away country in which human beings "are all androgynes" (II, 12, 525).<sup>8</sup>

6. Within Montaigne's corpus, the counter-exemplarity of Marie Germain's sexual transmogrification signals the beginning of his empirically focused detachment from the dichotomous scheme of sexual distribution. In this context, the phenomenon of transsexuality is not associated with monstrosities, miracles, or performances of the devil. Rather, it is meant as a demonstration *ad oculos* that even the alleged fixity of the sexual hiatus stands under the aegis of nature's universal Becoming. The theoretical scope and relevance of the issue is suggested in the *Essais*'s version of the original report, when Montaigne attempts to provide an etiological explanation of Marie Germain's sexual transformation by invoking the natural powers of the human imagination. As Montaigne contends, in order to avoid the recidivism of phantasmal obsessions among certain females caused by their lack of a penis, the desiring imagination proceeds "by incorporating, once and for all, the masculine member *in* [such] *girls*" (I, 21, 99; emphasis added).<sup>9</sup> Since, on Montaigne's assumptions, the "infinite power of nature" (I, 27, 180)<sup>10</sup> harbors a limitless arsenal of unrealized possibilities, the imagination chooses one that could substitute Marie Germain's phantasmal penile fixation by the carnal reality of a penis and testicles.<sup>11</sup> Even if this explicatory attempt may appear to be exaggeratedly fanciful to contemporary tastes, it shows how far Montaigne would go in order to remain within the limits of nature's causality as regards the human sexual order.

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<sup>8</sup> "sont tous androgynes"

<sup>9</sup> "d'incorporer, une fois pour toutes, cette virile partie aux filles"

<sup>10</sup> "infinie puissance de nature"

<sup>11</sup> Montaigne's line of argument regarding the imagination's role in choosing an alternative to the usual paths of nature is based, in the last resort, on his conception of a fundamental correspondance between microcosm and macrocosm: "der Mensch soll und kann durch Entfaltung aller seiner ihm innewohnenden Kräfte die unendliche Fülle seines eigenen Wesens erreichen, die der Fülle und dem Gefüge des Makrokosmos entspricht" (Friedrich, 1967, p. 31).

7. While *Journal* seems to consider the case of Marie Germain as an extraordinary event, this is not Montaigne's final word on the issue. At first, the figure of Marie Germain suggests an unheard-of breach of the static male/female chasm, as it points to the vital dimension in which the alleged immutability of the sexual opposites is transformed into the beginning and end of a genital transmogrification. What Montaigne termed nature's unceasing *branloire* dissolves the schematic separation of the sexes that pervades culture, allowing for the transformation of femaleness into maleness within the same human individual. The apparent exceptionality of the event begins to evanesce when mention is made of similar occurrences among girls in the area. In principle, the broadening scope of the transsexual phenomenon converges with Antiquity's acknowledgement of the human potentialities that subtend Tiresias' transsexual status. By going beyond the ambit of ascertainable biographical realities to that of semi-mythological lore, Montaigne reinforces the anthropological impact of transsexuality in cultural history as a path toward the philosophical scrutiny and rejection of sexual binarity.

8. Montaigne considered that the main weakness of the regnant distributive scheme of sexuality resides in the nature-averted hiatus that disjoints its two alternatives. Thus, countering the male/female binary, Montaigne begins by ascertaining nature's *branloire* at the heart of the separating line between Marie Germain's sexes. Consequently, *her* initial female sexuality is left behind to make room for the new stasis of *his* male condition. A parenthetical change thus transmogrifies one permanent sexual configuration into another, in a way that excludes sexual changeability once the *telos* of the transformation is achieved: Marie Germain overcomes *her* femininity once and for all in order to become a man *tout court*, that is, without any tangible, anatomical/physiological traces of *his* past sexual becoming. Being a man purports for Marie Germain attempting the impossible elision of the omnipresent sexual *branloire* from the horizon of his attained masculinity. While not directly tackling the unnaturalness of this elision, Montaigne envisaged the possibility of avoiding final sexual closures when suggesting that the man/woman



disjunction is basically the result of cultural arbitrariness. Lastly, Montaigne's path toward the determination of the individual's sexuality supplants the man/woman disjunction by the conjunction in all factually existing humans of male/female components. Strangely enough, this internalization of the sexual polarity resonates with Montaigne's make-believe reference to androgynes in faraway regions of the earth.

9. Montaigne could not have seriously challenged the biblically anchored notion of sexual binarity without becoming the victim of persecution by the Catholic church's Holy Inquisition. To avoid the inconvenience, he wittingly framed the surmised implication that human beings are androgynes not within the context of European history and civilization, but in a distant, phantasmagoric world which included nations where people lacked heads or featured their eyes and mouths on their chests (see II, 12, 525). Needless to say, Montaigne readily shared strategies of geographical and/or temporal defamiliarization that were often displayed in literary or pictorial figurations of utopian or kakotopian content since the times of visionary painter Hieronymous Bosch (c. 1450-1516) (see Jacobs, 2000; Koldewey, 2001). Therewith, Montaigne sought to disguise contentions that would have been unavowable in the philosophical or essayistic framework of the texts he published. As Montaigne decided to outline his ingenious dismantlement of the disjunctive model of sexual distribution toward the end of the essay "Sur des vers de Virgile" (On some verses of Virgil), he had good reasons for framing it in what he self-derogatively termed a "notable commentary, which has escaped from me in a flow of babble" (III, 5, 897).<sup>12</sup> Montaigne was thus disowning the critical scope of his own statements, despite the groundbreaking consequences they would imply if taken seriously. It is well to remind that Charles Darwin's contention to the effect that all men and women are hermaphrodite was made public without hazard for the author nearly three centuries after Montaigne's speculations on the universal nature of human androgyny.

10. Against the backdrop of his overarching aim to de-naturalize (and de-sanctify) the cleavage that time-honored

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<sup>12</sup> "notable commentaire, qui m'est echappé d'un flux de caquet"

traditions have erected between individuals trained to regard themselves as being either *men* or *women*, Montaigne's *flow of babble* emerged as a self-derogatory hint at the way universal Becoming introduces diversity and complexity in the alleged binarity of the sexual. Although an umbrella concept corresponding to *sexuality* was not available to Montaigne, and despite the limited analytical tools he had at his disposal, Montaigne became an attentive describer of the societal imbrications and configurations that derive from the biological set-up of the sexed individual. Accordingly, the *Essais* as well as *Journal de voyage* includes remarks on non-normative sexual orientations, such as male and female homosexuality (see Montaigne, 1992, pp. 118 & 6), pederasty ("licence Grecque") (see I, 28, 187-188), sexual relationships between humans and animals (see II, 12, 472), and even necrophilia (see III, 5, 882). Montaigne's design in this context was not merely to arouse curiosity, but to convey the consequences of Nature's commitment to the promotion of differences among all the sexual emergences it brings about (see III, 13, 1065). It hardly needs stressing that the spectrum of sexual variability Montaigne uncovered became the backbone of his critique targeting the sexual binomial as the basis of Christianity's reductive view of man.

11. Despite his rejection of Christianity's anthropological fixations, Montaigne carefully avoided discussing scholastic speculations on man, adducing that, as regards theology, "I understand nothing" (II, 12, 440).<sup>13</sup> This assertion was obviously only a pretext for not touching on issues directly dependent on the Church's magisterial authority. In truth, though, Montaigne was intimately cognizant of Roman-Catholic dogmatic teachings, as he had undertaken in younger years the painstaking task of translating into French the *Liber creaturarum* (1434-1436), an encyclopedic treatise by early fifteenth-century Catalan philosopher and theologian Raymond Sebond. With his translation, Montaigne was responding to his father's wish to read in French Sebond's voluminous work, which in time became better known as *Theologia naturalis* (see Sebond, 2022b). For someone so

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<sup>13</sup> "qui n'y sçay rien"

deeply interested in issues of sexual difference as Montaigne was, the book proved to be a copious source of information about the Catholic conception of the "First Man" and his role in Christian *Heilsgeschichte*. At its core, Sebond's treatise advanced the idea that man is, with regard to the corporeal and spiritual perfection of his original condition, "the true and living image of God" (Sebond, 2022a, p. 291).<sup>14</sup> With the progress of time, however, as the evil spirit seduced the first woman, and she, in her turn, "our common father" (Sebond, 2022a, p. 556),<sup>15</sup> he lost his unsullied creational mark. While he had initially acquired his soul and body from God, in post-lapsarian times human beings received their stained bodies from the fallen first man, and only their souls without mediation from the Creator (see Sebond, 2022a, p. 291).

12. In his theological compendium, Sebond briefly mentions several spinous issues touching on humanity's paradisiacal existence, but circumvents dealing with them in depth, possibly to avoid incurring in conflict with the magisterium of the Church. On the subterfuge that "it would take too long to deal here" with such issues (Sebond, 2022a, p. 535),<sup>16</sup> Sebond eludes discussions that could potentially destabilize the coherence of his own theological stance. Thus, while generally assuming that "every man, inasmuch as he is man, bears in him the image of his creator" (Sebond, 2022a, p. 292)<sup>17</sup> and that the male/female hiatus belongs to the divinely intended order of creation, Sebond effectively excludes from the horizon of his elucidations the question as to whether the godly paradigm encompasses the man/woman pattern of sexual differentiation. Sebond's implicit answer would appear to be in the negative, if one considers his masculinist references to the sex/gender marks of the trinitarian God: The *Father* generates a being that is "just the same" (Sebond, 2022a, p. 161)<sup>18</sup> as himself, namely the male *Son*, and even the *Spirit*, the third in the godly group, assumes a preeminently phallic

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<sup>14</sup> "la vraye et vive image de Dieu"

<sup>15</sup> "nostre commun pere"

<sup>16</sup> "il seroit trop long de traicter icy"

<sup>17</sup> "tout homme, entant qu'il est homme, porte en soy l'image de son createur"

<sup>18</sup> "toute pareille"

function as impregnator of a virgin that gives birth to the God Incarnate. Montaigne, whose book translation was basically an act of love for his aging father (see II, 12, 439), never went on to examine the fundamental mysteries of the trinity and incarnation. Such a demanding task, he deemed, was assuredly beyond his scholarly competence and interests.<sup>19</sup>

13. The masculinist ideology that subtends the theology of the Trinity and that Sebond took over from Church tradition led to the prioritization of the First Man over the First Woman, even when it came to the corporeal transmission of the consequences of the initial sin: it was "our first father" (Sebond, 2022a, p.748),<sup>20</sup> who became the "author of the first offense and of our original blemish" (Sebond, 2022a, p. 541).<sup>21</sup> The preeminent role of the male human being concerning the etiology of humanity's flawed condition is a continuation of the Trinity's quintessential masculinism within the creational ambit *sub signo peccati*. The implicit outcome of Sebond's exaltation of maleness even in its sinfulness, however, did not hinder his antifeminist propensity to declare that, despite Adam's culpable primacy, it was the First Woman who sinned the most, and therefore "the measure of the punishment of the woman was, without comparison, greater and almost double" (Sebond, 2022a, p. 542).<sup>22</sup> Notwithstanding the often periphrastic nature of Montaigne's translation of *Liber creaturarum*, it was not the place for him to hint at his critical views on Sebond's anthropological premises, especially those concerning sexual difference and the etiology of sin. In the *Essais* themselves, however, there are passages that clearly counter Sebond's principle of the universal scope of the original punishment that derives from the premise that "we all

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<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding his general reluctance to engage in theological issues, Montaigne eventually wrote the long essay "Apologie de Raymond Sebond" between 1575 and 1576, where he attempted to sidestep matters accessible only through divine revelation.

<sup>20</sup> "nostre premier pere"

<sup>21</sup> "auteur de l'offense premiere et de nostre originelle macule"

<sup>22</sup> "la mesure de la peine [est] sans comparaison plus grande et quasi double en la femme"

proceed, without doubt, from the same stem and universal father" (Sebond, 2022a, p. 541).<sup>23</sup>

14. The topos of the phallic privilege governing the post-lapsariangenealogy of man as well as the topos of nudity depicted in the Book of Genesis played central roles in Sebond's reconstruction of biblical ur-history. Both issues left traces in Montaigne's thought, inasmuch as he was intent on critiquing and surpassing them. Thus, in the already mentioned Virgil essay, Montaigne suggests a purely naturalistic, non-theological pattern of sexual origin according to which the emergence of the male and the female excludes the burdens of chronological or axiological asymmetries. A comparable hermeneutic shift is ascertainable when Montaigne tackles with the issue of nudity. In chapter 274 of *Théologie naturelle*, Sebond explains that "stripped and deprived from his natural embellishment that was his wellbeing, he [our first father] found himself naked and forced to borrow alien clothes" (Sebond, 2022a, p. 647).<sup>24</sup> As Sebond further details: "He shed his own and ordinary attire, to disguise and adorn himself shamefully and indecently" (Sebond, 2022a, p. 647).<sup>25</sup> While Adam's nakedness is conceived of by Sebond as a passage from his lost natural bliss to the attempt to cover up his degradation, Montaigne's de-theologized grasp of nudity does not presuppose a paradise lost nor a guilt-laden search for its ever-inadequate replacement. Rather, being "completely naked" (Au lecteur, 3)<sup>26</sup> constitutes from the start of the *Essais* a desirable and actualizable condition that has been perverted by the norm of the so-called public reverence society imposes on its members. Signally, Montaigne prolongs his comparative, relativizing gaze on the uses and conventions of nudity in the essay "Des cannibales" (Of cannibals), where the savage nations are depicted as being "quite close to their original naivety"<sup>27</sup> (I,

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<sup>23</sup> "nous sommes sans doute tous partis d'une mesme tige et d'un general pere"

<sup>24</sup> "desvestu et despouillé de son natural ornament qui estoit le bien estre, il [nostre premier pere] se trouva nud et pressé d'emprunter des accoustremens estrangers"

<sup>25</sup> "Il quicta son habillement propre et ordinaire, pour se travestir et bigarrer indignement et indecemment"

<sup>26</sup> "tout nud"

<sup>27</sup> "fort voisines de leur naifveté originelle"

31, 206) and governed by natural laws, which have been "very little bastardized by our own" (I, 31, 206).<sup>28</sup>

15. For Montaigne, wearing "no clothing" (I, 31, 206)<sup>29</sup> or waging war "totally naked" (I, 31, 208)<sup>30</sup> were tokens of the fulfilling unadornment he missed in the culture in which he was raised. In a striking move toward disidentifying himself from the civilizational patterns of his ascendancy and surroundings, Montaigne remarks with regard to the cannibals: "We can thus call them barbarians, in view of the rules of reason, but not in view of us, who surpass them in all kinds of barbarity" (I, 31, 210).<sup>31</sup> In the context of these elaborations, however, Montaigne does not attribute to the cannibals a conception of sexual difference that could serve as corrective to the dichotomous paradigm. On the contrary, Montaigne regards them as a masculinity-centered society, whose elders suffice themselves with preaching to the people "valor against the enemies and friendship toward their wives" (I, 31, 208).<sup>32</sup> Montaigne comes back to the issue shortly after,<sup>33</sup> but has nothing to say about their lack of a sexual conception that would correspond to what he intimates toward the end of the Virgil essay. As regards the issue of costumes in general, however, the "Apologie de Raimond Sebond" (Apology for Raymond Sebond), aside from briefly mentioning the case of the Cannibals (see II, 12, 541 & 581), remarks that "we see in this world an infinite difference and variety due solely to the distance in place" (II, 12, 525)<sup>34</sup> and that "in these new lands that our fathers have discovered [...] everything is different" (II, 12, 525).<sup>35</sup> On the issue of alternative forms of

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<sup>28</sup> "fort peu abastardies par les nostres"

<sup>29</sup> "nuls vestemens"

<sup>30</sup> "tous nuds"

<sup>31</sup> "Nous les pouvons donq bien appeller barbares, eu esgard aux regles de la raison, mais non pas eu esgard à nous, qui les surpassons en toute sorte de barbarie"

<sup>32</sup> "la vaillance contre les ennemies et l'amitié à leurs femmes"

<sup>33</sup> Montaigne underscores that the Cannibals' ethical science is based on "resoluteness in war and affection for their wives" / "la resolution à la guerre et affection à leurs femmes" (I, 31, 208).

<sup>34</sup> "Nous voyons en ce monde une infinie difference et varieté pour la seule distance des lieux"

<sup>35</sup> "en ces nouvelles terres que nos peres ont decouvert [...] tout y est divers"

corporeal sexuality, Montaigne, relying on the authority of Plinius and Herodotus, points to universal androgyny (see II, 12, 525) and other sexual configurations that are as astounding as the transmogrifications of Tiresias.

16. Montaigne's focus on non-normative forms of sexuality, his lack of interest in scrutinizing in depth the dogmatic fundamentals of the religion to which he publicly adhered, and his marked curiosity for non-European civilizational processes indexed areas of potential conflict with the self-understanding of sixteenth century Roman Catholicism. This notwithstanding, he unequivocally declared in the essay "Des prières" (Of prayers) that it is "the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church, in which I die and in which I was born" (I, 56, 318).<sup>36</sup> Accordant with his confessional stance, Montaigne was a staunch supporter of the maintenance of the traditional *modus vivendi*. In an age of religious wars, he feared that any attempt to question and destabilize the socio-political consensus would bring about disastrous consequences. In this regard, the early essay titled "De la coustume et de ne changer aisément une loy reçeüe" (Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law) points out at first: "it seems to me that all peculiar and out-of-the-way fashions come rather from folly and ambitious affectation than from reason" (I, 23, 118).<sup>37</sup> In the immediate continuation of the sentence, however, the essay depicts the attitude of the prototypical sage in a way that is consonant with Montaigne's own personal stance:

"the wise man should withdraw his soul within, out of the crowd, and keep it in freedom and power to judge things freely; but as for externals, he should wholly follow the accepted fashions and forms" (I, 23, 118).<sup>38</sup>

17. Throughout Montaigne's life, his public signs of piety reflected his irreproachable conformity to the uses and laws of Catholic France. His remarks on religious orthopraxis,

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<sup>36</sup> "l'Eglise catholique, apostolique et Romaine, en laquelle je meurs et en laquelle je suis nay"

<sup>37</sup> "il me semble que toutes façons escartées et particulieres partent plustost de folie ou d'affectation ambitieuse, que de vraye raison"

<sup>38</sup> " le sage doit au dedans retirer son ame de la presse, et la tenir en liberté et puissance des juger librement des choses; mais, quant au dehors, qu'il doit suivre entierement les façons et formes receues"

however, betray a constant concern about demarcating a private sphere, where he could scrutinize and eventually reject those same laws he so meticulously observed. Keeping in mind the wide gap between his public and private postures is of the essence when assessing the subtly formulated views Montaigne interspersed in his oeuvre that contradicted Catholic officialdom. As regards matters of sexual behavior, Montaigne could easily pretend a degree of conformity to Church teachings. It was more difficult however to disguise his actual contentions when discussing the ontological underpinnings of his sexual anthropology or his attempt to overcome the biblically sanctioned scheme of male/female distribution. Phrases like "The world is but a perennial movement [branloire]" (III, 2, 804)<sup>39</sup> or "Stability itself is nothing but a more languid motion" (III, 2, 805)<sup>40</sup> reflect his thoroughly Heraclitean stance as opposed to the creational ontology of Roman Catholicism and its sanction of the binomial sexual order. Against this backdrop, it becomes apparent that the episodic "flow of babble" mentioned in the Virgil essay was meant to mollify the discomfiting consequences of his attempt to dissolve the societal validity of the hiatus between man and woman.

18. Despite his occasional deployment of strategies of disguise, Montaigne straightforwardly articulated his principled rejection of Christianity's self-understanding when contending that "We have no communication with Being" (II, 12, 601).<sup>41</sup> In its consequence, Montaigne's critical premise signaled his dismissal of the claims raised by the Christian revelation. Considering his uncompromising standpoint, it strikes as an understatement when, in his *Essais sur les Essais*, Nouveau Roman author and art critic Michel Butor (1926-2016) suggested that Montaigne "never really had at heart" the Christian faith (Butor, 1968, p. 134).<sup>42</sup> In this regard, German Romanist scholar Hugo Friedrich (1904-1978) was more to the point when outrightly asserting that Montaigne had not been a Christian (Friedrich, 1967, p. 270; see also Conche, 2011, pp.

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<sup>39</sup> "Le monde n'est qu'une branloire perenne"

<sup>40</sup> "La constance mesme n'est autre chose qu'un branle plus languissant"

<sup>41</sup> "Nous n'avons aulcune communication à l'estre"

<sup>42</sup> "n'avait jamais eue vraiment à cœur"



129-141). Nevertheless, Friedrich deemed apposite to nuance his assertion by conceding that the thinker's "own distance to Christianity" (Friedrich, 1967, p. 275)<sup>43</sup> resulted from his approach of faith "as a theoretically assessed possibility, which was no more a transformative force" (Friedrich, 1967, p. 102).<sup>44</sup> More attuned to Montaigne's fundamental religious critique, French structural anthropologist and philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) appraised his formulation concerning the lack of communication with Being as "possibly the strongest that one can read in the whole of philosophy" (Lévi-Strauss, 1991, pp. 284).<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss remarked that, as regards Montaigne's thought in general, "Western philosophy often overlooks its radical intention (it could have been better understood by the Far East)" (Lévi-Strauss, 1991, p. 286; see Bakewell, 2011, pp. 37-38; Comte-Sponville, 2020, pp. 615-622).<sup>46</sup>

19. On the assumption that Montaigne had rebuffed any *theoretical* accommodation with the premises and pretensions of the Christian religion, Lévi-Strauss propounded an interpretation of his oeuvre that undermined the cogency of the one advanced by British Renaissance scholar and Anglican cleric Michael Andrew Screech (1926-2018). The author of a widely read translation of the *Essais* (see Montaigne, 1991), Screech stroke a more conciliatory tone in his approach of Montaigne's attitude toward Christianity. Besides admitting that "Montaigne firmly limits his natural philosophy to the sublunary matters, restricting them therefore to the world of constant flux," Screech aimed at "showing how consonant with Christian doctrine Montaigne's concern with perennial flux can be" (Screech, 1991, p. 82, note 1). Screech's heuristic assumptions certainly facilitated his literary and historical scrutiny of the *Melancholy* leitmotiv in the *Essais*, but they failed to offer any reasons for suggesting that, in Montaigne's worldview, there are cosmic ambits that escape the

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<sup>43</sup> "seine eigene Ferne zum Christentum"

<sup>44</sup> "als eine theoretisch gewürdigte Chance, aber nicht mehr als verwandelnde Kraft"

<sup>45</sup> "la plus forte peut-être qu'on puisse lire dans toute la philosophie"

<sup>46</sup> "la philosophie occidentale méconnaît souvent l'intention radicale (elle eût été mieux comprise par l'Extrême Orient)"

pervasiveness of Becoming. Moreover, Screech appears to have overlooked that, from a strictly Montaignean perspective, supernatural revelation does not supersede or supplant the "science [...] of the in-science [ignorance]" (III, 12, 1057),<sup>47</sup> the gnoseological position embraced by the thinker in accordance to his ontic realization of universal *branloire*. In this context, truth does not emerge as the possession of an accepted heavenly gift, but as the pursuit of an endless quest for knowledge.

20. Montaigne's adherence to Roman Catholicism was not an issue of personal acceptance of ultimate truths, but of mere obedience to the Church's established power. Within the theopolitical framework of a Church that expected from him at least nominal submissiveness to her magisterial authority, Montaigne sought to accommodate the freedom of thought he was unwilling to relinquish. Accordingly, he readily paid lip service to Catholic dogma, and at the same time excused himself from discussing its claims by alleging incompetence in theological matters. In the public eye, Montaigne remained his life long an obedient believer subjected to the religious and civil authority of his time, although he was actually denying this authority the right to constrain in any way the freedom of his private thoughts.<sup>48</sup> In accordance with his outspoken "disgust with innovation, regardless of the countenance it may adopt" (I, 23, 119),<sup>49</sup> Montaigne willingly praised the virtues of Christian civil obedience, declaring that

"The Christian religion has all the marks of the outmost justice and utility, but none more apparent than the precise recommendation of obedience to the magistrate and maintenance of the government" (I, 23, 120).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> "science [...] de l'inscience"

<sup>48</sup> The issue was soon to become a cornerstone of the Enlightenment's nascent political philosophy envisaged, among others, by Baruch de Spinoza (see, for instance, Yovel, 1992, pp. 151-152).

<sup>49</sup> "degousté de la nouvelleté, quelque visage qu'elle porte"

<sup>50</sup> "La religion Chrestienne a toutes les marques d'extreme justice et utilité; mais nulle plus apparente, que l'exacte recommandation de l'obéissance du Magistrat, et manutention des polices"

These asseverations, however, did not hinder Montaigne from invoking the magisterial authority of the Church to underpin an understanding of credal adherence that would allow for its principled dismantlement within the strict limits of the individual's privacy.

21. As regards the religious obedience due to the established authorities, the essay "De l'art de conferer" (On the art of discussion) written between 1585 and 1588 points out with enviable clarity and mordant irony:

"What I myself adore in kings is the crowd of their adorers. All deference and submission is due to them, except that of our understanding. My reason is not trained to bend and bow, it is my knees" (III, 8, 935).<sup>51</sup>

The crucial distinction the passage lays out resonates with the stance Montaigne attributes to his *frère d'alliance* Étienne de La Boétie (1530-1563) in the essay "De l'amitié" (On friendship) published in 1580. As Montaigne underscores, La Boétie, despite advocating complete liberty of thought for the individual, acknowledged the need "to obey and submit most religiously to the laws under which he was born" (I, 28, 194).<sup>52</sup> At first sight, it would appear that Montaigne shared La Boétie's view that the decisive criterium for determining one's obedient allegiance is the place of birth. Montaigne himself, however, eventually questions and relativizes this norm in the name of a higher sapiential stance. In this context, Montaigne adduces Socrates' paradigmatic answer to the question as to where he came from:

"He replied not 'Athens,' but 'The world.' He, whose imagination was fuller and more extensive, embraced the universe as his city" (I, 26, 157).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "Ce que j'adore moy-mesmes aus Roys, c'est la foule de leurs adorateurs. Toute inclination et soubmission leur est deuë [aus Roys], sauf celle de l'entendement. Ma raison n'est pas duite à se courber et flechir, ce sont mes genoux"

<sup>52</sup> "d'obeyr et de se soubmettre tres-religieusement aux loix sous lesquelles il estoit nay"

<sup>53</sup> "Il ne repondit pas: D'Athenes; mais: Du monde. Luy, qui avoit son imagination plus plaine et plus estanduë, embrassoit l'univers comme sa ville"

22. Socrates' retort to the query about his birth and provenance implies a critical shift from the particularism of customs to the universality of reason. As a citizen of the world, the Socrates evoked by Montaigne undermines the significance of geographic origination by drawing attention to the individual's cosmic anchorage. By so doing, Socrates resets the issue of insightful rationality not only independently of the subject's private inwardness but also beyond the exteriority of the established powers. Leaving behind the tacit acquiescence to the parochialism of power, Socrates pleads for reinstating the universality of *physis* (nature), which the many *nomoi* (laws) often pretend to supersede. From Montaigne's perspective, Socrates, whom he once apostrophized as "such a holy image of the human form" (III, 12, 1054)<sup>54</sup>, emerges as the universal hero of cosmic Becoming, which—as the negation of the statism of Being—becomes the source of sagacious lucidity. Regardless of the advantages that Montaigne, as *homo politicus*, may have attributed to the permanence of the societal reality, as a philosopher, he could not dispense with the insight into the quintessential mutability of every form of order. It is thus not by chance that Montaigne rigorously upheld and respected the laws and customs of his country of birth, but at the same time consistently directed his anthropological gaze to the theoretical untenability of their universalization.<sup>55</sup>

23. Montaigne's thought is constellated by a fundamental tension between the awareness of the all-too human need for fixed points of orientation and reference and the grasp of inescapable Becoming. Considering the strife between the desire for life-preserving permanence and the inescapable factuality of *branloire*, Montaigne scrutinized the alleged constancies upheld by metaphysical worldviews, religious soteriologies and the politics of power maintenance, pointing to their paradoxical foundation in the absent perpetuity they crave after. This recurring anamnesis of the lacking grounding

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<sup>54</sup> "une si sainte image de l'humaine forme"

<sup>55</sup> In his elaborations on "Critique et éloge de la coutume," included in his volume *Montaigne. Des règles pour l'esprit*, Bernard Séve has pertinently pointed out in this regard: "D'une certaine façon, toute coutume est une bizarrerie fixée. Cette bizarrerie fixée protège l'esprit à la fois contre toutes les autres bizarreries qu'il pourrait rencontrer ou inventer, et contre la tentation d'aller errant d'une bizarrerie à l'autre" (Séve, 2007, p.187).

was an admonishment to his reading audience, but also a self-critical corrective of the tendency to forget that time dents from within one's dearest beliefs and persuasions. It was thus a testimony to his philosophical lucidity to confront the ill-founded transtemporal claims of the religion to which he adhered. Since Protestantism had no better means than Catholicism for coping with the challenges posed by the universal *panta rhei*, clear-sighted Montaigne had no reason to abandon the societal faith in which he had been raised and which he viewed as the one in which he wanted to die. Montaigne deemed that by acknowledging the factual religious authority regnant in his country of birth he was entitled to uphold privately, and thus without hypocrisy, a worldview that sapped at their core the metaphysical premises on which Catholicism based the universality of its soteriological claims.

24. Since Montaigne's Catholicism was a matter of conformity to his fatherland's established power, there appears to be no contradiction between his external religious practice and the dissenting ontic views he disseminated throughout his writings for those capable and willing to read him attentively. Against the backdrop of France's troubled sixteenth century, it was significant that he affirmed without subterfuge his Catholicism (see I, 56, 318), especially if one considers that his was "a religiously divided family" (Frame, 1994, p. 35). While the inimical relationships between Catholicism and Protestantism determined the spiritual landscape where Montaigne had to position himself, both options were commensurable in the sense that they shared the notion that personal salvation was attainable by becoming a baptized Christian. Despite their principled convergence on this issue, the two concurring forms of Christianity presented themselves as being mutually exclusive alternatives when it came to the effective configuration of the path to salvation they offered. This rift marked the religious history of Montaigne's maternal family, although it was not the one, which, in spite of its visibility, had the strongest impact on his self-understanding. Montaigne's mother, who was a devout Catholic, had to accept the conversion to Protestantism of two of her children, Thomas (1534-1602) and Jeanne (1536-1597) (Millet, 2018, p.1566). Beyond experiencing first-hand the internal strife between two

basically comparable forms of Christian appurtenance, Antoinette de Montaigne embodied the mostly hidden presence of Jewishness in a self-declared Christian family.

25. Rejecting the Paulinian spiritualization of Jewish contents that allowed for the universalistic claims of the nascent Church, mainstream Judaism in the Christian era continued to maintain as one of its constitutive tenets the notion of "carnal election" (see Wyschogrod, 1983, pp. 175-177; Bauer, 1990, pp. 330-341). Unlike the patrilineal conception of Jewish descent upheld by the Karaite form of Judaism, Rabbinical Judaism assumes the Jewishness of a child if born from a Jewish mother, regardless of the religious affiliation or beliefs of the father.<sup>56</sup> Against this backdrop, the often discussed question among present-day Montaigne scholars as to whether Montaigne could be considered a Jew in the strict sense of the word, is hinged on the halachic status (as defined by the Jewish Oral Law) of the mother. While deciding this critical issue at the present stage of Montaignean studies would be premature, the broader question concerning the influence of Judaism on Montaigne's self-understanding and worldview by way of his maternal family's ascertainable *converso/Marrano* (or, in Catalanian: *chueta*) ascendancy appears to be gaining momentum within Jewish cultural studies. This notwithstanding, twentieth century scholars have at times not only denied the Jewish descent of Montaigne's mother, or at least her awareness of having such an ascendancy, but have also overlooked Montaigne's early societal and pedagogical exposure to the Jewish/Marrano milieu of Bordeaux and Southern France. It is thus unsurprising that hardly any attention has been paid to the Jewish scope of Montaigne's moving testimony concerning Étienne de La Boétie's deathbed reversion to the faith of the Jewish Patriarchs.

26. Albert Thibaudet (1874-1936), a prominent early twentieth century Montaigne scholar and the co-editor of his

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<sup>56</sup> For an authoritative statement on Karaite patrilineality, see the brief chapter "Who is a Jew? Matrilineal or Patrilineal?" published in *The Karaite Korner*: [https://www.karaite-korner.org/karaite\\_faq.shtml](https://www.karaite-korner.org/karaite_faq.shtml). The *English Wikipedia* offers an informative entry on "Matrilineality in Judaism" from a historical perspective: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matrilineality\\_in\\_Judaism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matrilineality_in_Judaism).

*Œuvres complètes* issued in the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade*, noticeably remarked that "the drop of Jewish blood"<sup>57</sup> recognizable in "the mobilism of Montaigne"<sup>58</sup> was also manifest in the work of Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and Marcel Proust (1871-1922) (Thibaudet, 1963, p. 18). Despite its biologicistic undertone and its condescending use of "drop" (*goutte*) in reference to the *converso* history of Montaigne's maternal family, Thibaudet's observation has the merit of foreshadowing the pronounced interest in Montaigne's Jewish roots in later decades. Perhaps more importantly, his remarks appear to hint at the link between Montaigne's intellectual mobility and the central notion of *branloire* that determined his ontological outlook (see, for instance, I, 20, 95 & III, 2, 804). Thibaudet's aperçus contributed to ensuring for Montaigne a place in Jewish intellectual history along with other towering figures, who, despite their Christian assimilation, safeguarded a clear awareness of their Jewishness. Given Thibaudet's considerations, it is not totally surprising that Montaigne's contacts with Jews and his outspoken interest in Jewish customs and ritual life—evinced, for instance, in his *Journal de voyage* (Montaigne, 1992, pp. 62, 102-103, 104, 120, 215, 288)—have nurtured speculations about a presumed crypto-Jewishness he may have shared with Marranos of previous generations, including those in his own maternal lineage.

27. Not seldom, Montaigne scholars have discussed his general approach of Judaism, while circumventing the issue of his personal bonds with Jews, a religious group generally despised by his contemporaries on both sides of the sixteenth-century religious wars. This avoidance strategy eventually proved to be untenable as non-Jewish scholars became increasingly aware of the Iberic-*marrano* ascendancy of Montaigne's mother, Antoinette de Montaigne, née de Louppes (ca. 1510-1601) (see Frame, 1984, pp. 16-17; 21-23). This realization, which might have sound outlandish at first, acquired some degree of plausibility upon considering Montaigne's social closeness to Marranos throughout his life. The epitome of this proximity was the fact that, as noted by

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<sup>57</sup> "la goutte de sang juif"

<sup>58</sup> "le mobilisme de Montaigne"

Donald Frame (1911-1991), Montaigne's foremost twentieth century biographer and translator (Montaigne, 2003), the French thinker became in 1583 "the godfather of a namesake, Michel, born six days earlier to two Marranos of Portuguese descent, Diogo and Guiomar (Leao) Dacosta" (Frame, 1984, p. 17). This kind of religious involvement on the part of Montaigne is significant, especially if one considers that, in the first book of the *Essais*, he pointed out to the fact that, to avoid being expelled from Portugal, "some [Jews] made a show of changing religion" (I, 14, 53).<sup>59</sup> As Montaigne further underscored, most Portuguese regarded these Christian proselytes with suspicion, as they were unsure about "their faith, or that of their race [i.e., descendants], even today, a hundred years later" (I, 14, 54).<sup>60</sup> Although this larval anti-Semitic attitude was possibly also ascertainable in Montaigne's own Catholic environment, it appears to have had no incidence on his personal approach of Jews and New Christians. This is hardly surprising, given the Marrano origins of his mother, to whom he had, it must be said, a relationship that cannot be considered cordial (see Frame, 1984, pp. 25; 27-28).

28. Contravening the views of some contemporary historians, present-day French Renaissance scholars generally accept the premise of Montaigne's Jewish descent, which Donald Frame had advanced on the basis of extensive research work carried out by Jewish historian Cecil Roth (1899-1970), "the leading authority" on the family of Montaigne's mother (Frame, 1984, p. 333; see Roth, 1937-1938). The question, however, as to whether Montaigne himself was cognizant of his Israelite ascendancy continues to be debated. Even among scholars who consider that Montaigne was aware of his Jewishness, the issue has been raised as to whether his presumed Jewish self-understanding had an incidence on his oeuvre. In this connection, a thought-provoking entry on "Juifs/Judaïsme" included in the *Dictionnaire Montaigne* and penned by Daniel Ménager refers to a "deranging coincidence" (Ménager, 2018, p. 1020)<sup>61</sup> uncovered by Sophie Jama in her 2001 book on *L'Histoire juive de Montaigne* (see Jama, 2001,

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<sup>59</sup> "aucuns [Juifs] firent contenance de changer de religion"

<sup>60</sup> "la foi desquels, ou de leur race, encores aujourd'hui cent ans apres"

<sup>61</sup> "coïncidence troublante"



pp. 21-27). As Ménager resumes Jama's arguments in this regard, the preamble of the *Essais* was dated on March 1, 1580, the exact date of the celebration of Purim, the 14 of Adar, according to the Hebrew calendar. As a commemoration of the story of Esther, who obtains the pardon of those condemned by the Persian monarch Ahasuerus, Purim is not only a feast of hope, but a kind of Jewish carnival during which children wear masks. Since, as Jama suggests, these masks could be interpreted as a reference to the hidden identity of the *Marranos*, the date chosen by Montaigne could be a hint to the mask he had to wear to both conceal and intimate his true cultural and religious belonging.<sup>62</sup> Hoping that a deeper study of the *Essais* will offer in the future irrefutable signs of Montaigne's Jewish outlook, Ménager underscores the need to focus on what the Montaignean commentatorial style may owe to the tradition of the Jewish *Midrash* (Ménager, 2018, p. 1020; see Adler, 1963, pp. 40-44).

29. In the period between the publication of Frame's volume and that of Ménager's dictionary entry, Madelaine Lazard issued a Montaigne biography in which she contends that "the Jewish origins of the de Louppes family are highly probable" (Lazard, 1992, p. 43).<sup>63</sup> Contrasting with Lazard's detailed elaborations on the issue, Arlette Jouanna asserted in her 2017 biography that "nothing attests in the author of the *Essais* to the consciousness of a possible Israelite ascendancy" (Jouanna, 2017, p. 24).<sup>64</sup> Against the backdrop of these conflicting views, Daniel Ménager's mention of a possible connection between Montaigne and the Jewish textual heritage of post-biblical times

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<sup>62</sup> As regards the rôle of masks in Jewish/Marrano intellectual history, see the excellent chapter "Marranos in Mask and a World without Transcendence: Rojas and *La Celestina*" in Yirmiyahu Yovel's book *Spinoza and Other Heretics* (Yovel, 1992, pp. 85-127). Although the first volume of Yovel's work is mainly focused on Spinoza and the seventeenth century Jewish Amsterdam, the mentioned chapter deals with *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* (better known as *La Celestina*), a work published in 1499 and attributed to Fernando de Rojas (ca. 1465/1473-1541), a descendent of Jews converted to Christianity (on this issue, see also Infantes, 2010, pp. 11-103). As the title of Yovel's chapter conveys, Rojas' work confronted issues that were also crucial to Montaigne's worldview.

<sup>63</sup> "les origines juives de la famille de Louppes sont fort probables"

<sup>64</sup> "rien [...] n'atteste chez l'auteur des *Essais* la conscience d'une éventuelle ascendance israélite"

is significant. Tackling the thorny issue of Montaigne's presumed indebtedness to parts of the Oral Law, however, presupposes clarifying the question as to how someone like Montaigne, who, if at all, only had a very limited access to the original Jewish sources, could have been influenced by the literary form and/or intellectual contents of those texts. As Ménager admits, the research work concerning a possible impact of the Midrashic sources on Montaigne is, "at this point, only at its beginning" (Ménager, 2018, p. 1020).<sup>65</sup> Since no definitive answers can be expected for the time being, it is apposite to at least recall some ascertainable biographical facts that could contribute to a better societal contextualization of the matter. The perhaps most consequential of these facts was Montaigne's exposure at a young age to the *marrano* and New Christian intellectual subculture, which had been historically shaped by strategies of disguise as a means of survival (see Yovel, 1992, pp. 114-115).

30. The seven-year-old Montaigne initiated his formal education in 1540 at the Collège de Guyenne, an enlightened institution that included in its curriculum optional Hebrew courses (Ford, 2018, p. 339) and was run, at least in part, by Portuguese New Christians (Jama, 2001, pp. 88-90; Nakam, 2002, p. 64). Signally, Donald Frame mentions among the many Iberic Marranos, who decided to settle in Bordeaux, "André de Gouvéa, Principal of the Collège de Guyenne, and his colleagues Fernandès Dacosta, Jehan Gelida, Mathieu and Jean da Costa" (Frame, 1984, p. 20). Comparable cultural influences appear to have been at work during Montaigne's higher education. As generally assumed, he pursued law studies between 1548 and 1550, possibly at the University of Toulouse. In any case, Montaigne was closely associated with the intellectual atmosphere of the southern French city (Frame, 1984, p. 44). Toulouse, where his maternal family had settled toward the end of the fifteenth century and where his mother was born (see Frame, 1984, p. 23), eventually became a "center of New Christian ferment and heterodoxy" (Goitein, 2007, vol. 14, p. 453). The cultural mark of the city was at least in part the result of decades-long efforts by prominent Portuguese Jews and *conversos* to make accessible in their new homeland

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<sup>65</sup> "pour l'instant, n'en est qu'à ses débuts"

the rich Talmudic and Kabbalistic heritage they had brought along with them. In view of Tolouse's lively atmosphere of intercultural exchange, the chances are that, as Daniel Ménager has suggested, the Midrash possibly influenced Montaigne's commentarial form of composition, thereby implicitly bringing up the question as to whether a simultaneous reception of specifically Jewish contents and patterns of thought also took place.

31. For Montaigne, his encounter with Étienne de La Boétie became a watershed moment in his erotic life. In his *Testament* of 1563, the year of his passing, he epitomized the younger Montaigne as "his intimate brother and inviolable friend" (La Boétie, 1892, p. 428).<sup>66</sup> Acknowledging the significance of their bond, French Renaissance scholar Géralde Nakam pointed out that "there is no subject matter in French literature that would be more illustrious, and less well-known than the friendship of Montaigne and La Boétie" (Nakam, 1993, p. 118).<sup>67</sup> As regards the religious self-identification of the latter, Sophie Jama has argued that it is impossible to ascertain whether La Boétie was a Jew at heart, a New-Christian or a Marrano: "We know very little about La Boétie to tell who he really was" (Jama, 2001, p. 133).<sup>68</sup> Although more information on the religious background of La Boétie and his family would certainly be desirable, there is evidence that in his deathbed he conveyed his desire to dissociate himself from Catholicism and die "under the faith and religion" of Moses (Montaigne, 1985c, p. 1358).<sup>69</sup> Jewish medical historian and ophthalmologist Harry Friedenwald (1864-1950) saw in his utterances the proof of La Boétie's astounding reversion to the Mosaic faith. As the American scholar pointedly contended, La Boétie's pronouncement "is clearly the confession of a Marrano or secret Jew" (Friedenwald, 1940, p. 145). Considering that Montaigne cites La Boétie's words in a long letter addressed to his father, a version of which he eventually published,

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<sup>66</sup> "son intime frère et inviolable amy"

<sup>67</sup> "Il n'y a pas, dans la littérature française, de sujet plus illustre, et moins bien connu, que l'amitié de Montaigne et de La Boétie"

<sup>68</sup> "Nous savons trop peu de chose sur La Boétie pour dire ce qu'il en fut vraiment"

<sup>69</sup> "sous la foy & religion"

Friedenwald underscored that the document's "very minute details, without any comment [...], suggest the deep interest and sympathy of both the father and the son and their recognition of its significance" (Friedenwald, 1940, p. 145; see Nakam, 1993, p. 240; Nakam, 2002, p. 99; Jama, 2001, p. 133).

32. Friedenwald's contention regarding La Boétie's return to Judaism is noteworthy for its unequivocal argumentation and the textual evidence adduced in its support. It is regretful, however, that more recent research on La Boétie and the Montaigne/La Boétie friendship has hardly assessed the stance Friedenwald so forcefully articulates. In Jean-Michel Delacomptée's commentary to Montaigne's letter, for instance, no mention is made of the scope and import of the Jewish issue in La Boétie's final pronouncements (see Delacomptée, 2012, p. 58). Similarly, in one of the few book-length biographies of La Boétie, French Renaissance historian Anne-Marie Cocula—following in this point the lead of Donald Frame (see Frame, 1984, pp. 76-80)—offers no discussion of the historiographical perplexities related to La Boétie's abjuration of Christianity and his final embracement of the faith of Israel (see Cocula, 1995, pp. 140-142). Although Géralde Nakam in her 1993 volume on Montaigne explicitly remits to Friedenwald's take on La Boétie's religious reversion (Nakam, 1993, p. 240), she does not discuss the consequences of the agonizing man's intent to die as a Jew after spending his life as a Catholic. While Nakam forgoes analyzing the impact of La Boétie's resolve on Montaigne, Sophie Jama in her 2001 book on Montaigne offers no definitive answer to the question concerning La Boétie's religious appurtenance. Interestingly enough, the unqualified terms *Jewish* or *Christian* are not among the alternatives Jama considers. Instead, she appears to ponder about the appropriateness of designations like *Jew at heart*, *New-Christian*, or the derogatively connoted *Marrano*.

33. The chances are that Sophie Jama could have avoided in 2001 her conceptual irresoluteness concerning La Boétie's religious stance, had she scrutinized Montaigne's *Lettre à son père sur la mort d'Étienne de La Boétie* in light of Friedenwald's 1940 contention that the prematurely deceased had been a "secret Jew" (Friedenwald, 1940, p. 145), a phrase that avoids the pejorative connotation resulting from the

semantic association of the word *marrano* with pigs. In principle, the Jewishness Friedenwald attributes to the gravely ill La Boétie appears to be that of a *baal tshuva* (repentant), whose reversion—not conversion—to Judaism presupposes the gift of having been born a Jew. In the last resort, the halachic concept appears to be the most appropriate to designate La Boétie's final religious stance as documented by Montaigne's *Lettre à son père*. The semantic scope of the Rabbinical term certainly assumes the factuality of a Jewish birth and could imply some degree of Jewish socialization. Thus, when dealing with La Boétie's mention of the historical tradition that began with Moses and eventually reached the shores of France, Sophie Jama drew attention to the parallelism between the historico-religious outline advanced by La Boétie and the genealogical take on the transmission of the Oral Law in the first chapter of the Mishna treatise titled *Pirkei avot*, "Teachings of the Fathers" (see Jama, 2001, p. 133).

34. The significance of the parallel to which Jama refers becomes more evident if one considers La Boétie's other declarations cited in the published excerpt of the letter Montaigne wrote to his father.<sup>70</sup> Therein, Montaigne details that La Boétie, after hearing Mass, addressed the following words to the priest and those present in his chambers:

"[...] I declare that as I have been baptized, as I have lived, so I want to die in the faith and religion which Moses first planted in Egypt, which the Patriarchs then received in Judea, and which, from hand to hand, in the progress of time, has been brought to France" (Montaigne, 1985c, p. 1358).<sup>71</sup>

The words pronounced by La Boétie after the Christian rituals had been performed are noteworthy on several

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<sup>70</sup> The complete title of the extract reads: "Extraict d'une lettre que Monsieur le Conseiller de MONTAIGNE escrit à Monseigneur de MONTAIGNE son père, concernant quelques particularités qu'il remarqua en la maladie & mort de feu Monsieur de La BOÉTIE" (see Delacomptée, 2012, pp. 18, 20).

<sup>71</sup> "[...] Je proteste, que comme j'ay esté baptizé, ay vescu, ainsi veux-je mourir sous la foy & religion que Moyse planta premierement en Ægypte: que le Peres receurent depuis en Judee, & qui de main en main par succession de temps a esté apportee en France."

accounts. The citation clearly distinguishes between how La Boétie had lived and how he wants to die. As a severely ill Catholic that had confessed his sins and attended Mass, La Boétie reminds his reduced audience that he had once received the sacrament of baptism from the Church whose representative was present at his bedside. But he also conveys that his past Christian allegiance was at odds with the "faith and religion" under which he wanted to die and from which all Christian references appear to be lacking. Instead of invoking the authority of Christ, the Church founders, or the *sucessio apostolica*, La Boétie refers to the tradition that was initiated by Moses, continued by the Patriarchs, and brought to France by those transmitting the Jewish heritage through the centuries. These three fundamental layers of transmission correspond, in Sophie Jama's view, to the pattern of historical reception of the Oral Law as depicted in *Pirkei avot*.<sup>72</sup>

35. It goes without saying that La Boétie's words concerning his return to the religion of Moses constitute a consequential corrective to the commonplace assumptions about his Catholic appurtenance. For the sake of clarity, however, it should be noted that a few pages earlier, La Boétie professed his Catholic faith without mentioning his design to revert to Judaism. Indeed, in the context of his initial bid to call for a priest, La Boétie declared:

"Having set my estate in order, now I must think of my conscience. I am a Christian, I am a Catholic; as such I have lived, as such do I intend to end my life. Let a priest be sent for, for I will not fail in this last duty of a Christian" (Montaigne, 1985c, pp. 1352-1353).<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Sophie Jama writes: "[...] cette ultime profession de foi de La Boétie ressemble à ce passage essentiel des Maximes des Pères (I,1) du Talmud où l'on peut lire que 'Moïse a reçu la Loi sur le Sinaï et l'a transmise à Josué. Josué l'a transmise aux anciens, et les anciens aux prophètes; et ceux-ci à leur tour l'ont transmise aux membres de la Grande Assemblée [...]" (Jama, 2001, 133).

<sup>73</sup> "Ayant mis ordre à mes biens, encores me faut il penser à ma conscience. Je suis Chrestian, je suis Catholique: tel ay vescu, tel suis-je deliberé de clorre ma vie. Qu'on me face venir un prestre, car je ne veux faillir á ce dernier devoir d'un Chrestien"

While in this passage La Boétie asks for a priest that would perform the Church's rites for the dying, the more elaborate depiction of the scene referred to earlier (see Montaigne, 1985c, p. 1358) details what he told the priest as he was done with his ritual intervention and was about to leave. What could be prematurely interpreted as a Gentile finale portraying La Boétie clinging to the spiritual comforts of the Church, was, in truth, just the preamble of a forceful recantation of his lifelong Christian adherence for the sake of his allegiance to his Mosaic origins. Considering that Montaigne most probably ignored or repressed relevant details concerning La Boétie's life and ascendancy that could throw a shadow of doubt on his idealizing portrayal of the deceased friend, it is all the more striking that Montaigne offers definitive insights into La Boétie's ultimate Jewish reversion, although he was certainly aware that by making it public, he was not furthering the reception of his friend's ideas and poetic work in the Christian world.<sup>74</sup>

36. Of the two passages relating to what La Boétie told the priest in his bed chamber, the second one mentioned in Montaigne's letter reflects more accurately the intense seriousness of the circumstances. It hints at La Boétie's religious self-understanding in a way that counters the image of Catholic fidelity he had projected throughout his life. The depiction of La Boétie's final embracement of the *successio Judaica* has the aura of reliable accuracy, as it remits to the covenantal role of the Mosaic Torah that has been passed on "from hand to hand" (Montaigne, 1985c, p. 1358).<sup>75</sup> By mentioning La Boétie's religious reversion, Montaigne was performing a courageous act of piety to the memory of the

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<sup>74</sup> The focus on La Boétie's reversion to Judaism in the present context should not mislead to the assumption that recantations of Catholicism were a seldom phenomenon among Marranos or New-Christians. The sociological scope of the issue within the West-European Sephardic communities is reflected in the halachic discussions on the "forced apostates" who accepted baptism in exchange for remaining alive (see אנוסים ('Anusim), (5734 / 1974)). As regards the secrecy surrounding the lives of the Crypto-Jews—as the Marranos have also been called—and its repercussions even in the present, see: Gilitz, 2002, especially pp. 35-96.

<sup>75</sup> "de main en main"

friend who had recanted Christianity in order to reclaim his birthright as a Jew. Bearing witness to these unusual occurrences in a private letter that was eventually published with minor revisions (see Montaigne, 1985a, p. 1718 [*Lettres*, p. 1347, note 1]), was something Montaigne could not have taken lightly. Well aware of the import of transmitting the Jewish heritage, Montaigne handed down to posterity the defining verities of La Boétie's religious belonging without seeking to explain or justify. Considering the backdrop of his maternal family history, it is regrettable, however, that Montaigne's personal involvement in conveying the contentious issue of La Boétie's Jewishness has hardly received scholarly attention. Indicatively, neither Donald Frame (see Frame, 1984, pp. 76-80) nor La Boétie's biographer Anne-Marie Cucula (see Cucula, 1995, pp. 140-142) raised the issue in their respective discussions of the final hours of Montaigne's *frère d'alliance*.

37. Regardless of the theological and historical categories deployed for designating the outcome of La Boétie's religious trajectory, his deathbed declarations and their transmission to posterity allow to infer a lively and diverse social field of intellectual interaction among the Christianized heirs of Jewish scholarship and traditions. Provided that they would not explicitly question the Christian doxa, baptized Jews and their descendants were tolerated by State and Church. Notwithstanding the ever-present risk of being persecuted and murdered, these Christian proselytes not seldom discussed alternative conceptions of salvation history out of the sources of post-biblical Judaism, which influenced the *converso* subculture that obviously shaped La Boétie's religious awareness. Against this backdrop, it could be expected that Talmudic patterns of thought had an impact on how Jews coped with the challenges of their exilic existence, as suggested by La Boétie's creative appropriation of *Pirkei avot*. The chances are that this path of influence also left its traces in Montaigne's reconceptualization of sexual difference toward the end of his Virgil essay. On this assumption, it is worthwhile considering whether the theoretical thrust of Montaigne's "flow of babble" was actually foreshadowed in the Midrashic



reference to the notion of human androgyny enunciated by Rabbi Yirmiyah ben Elazar:

אמר רבי ירמיה בן אלעזר בשעה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא את אדם הראשון, אנדרוגינוס :  
בראו, הָדָא הוּא דְכְתִיב

זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בְרָא (Genesis Rabbah, 8, 1)

"Rabbi Yirmiyah ben Elazar declared: In the hour when the Holy One, blessed be He, created the first human, He created him as an androgynous, as it is said, 'male and female He created them.'"

38. The ascertainment of conceptual or structural correspondences between two texts does not necessarily imply the existence of genealogical nexus between them. However, given the disruptive relevance of the two passages under discussion, it would appear that their affinity was more than mere historical coincidence or convergence. Rabbi Yirmiyah's teaching on the androgyny of the first human being is part of a collection of ancient homiletical-rabbinical interpretations of the *Book of Genesis* called *Genesis Rabbah* (ca. 300-500 C.E.). Signally, the passage quoted above deploys the Hebrew transliteration (אנדרוגינוס) of the Greek word for androgynous: ἀνδρόγυνος. This non-mainstream, but authoritative understanding of creational Adam as an androgyne appears to have been echoed in Kabbalistic interpretations of *Genesis* 1: 27, which underscored the double-sex nature of the divine "image" (צֶלֶם) that served as model for the Creation of the First Human Being (see Ginsburg, 1920, pp. 91-92; 114-118; Idel, 2005, pp. 59-63; Sameth, 2020). It is thus safe to assume that the scope of influence of Rabbi Yirmiyah's conception of androgynous Adam went far beyond the circles of Talmudic scholars and their students. Its critical edge against traditional patterns of strict dichotomic sexuality certainly found an empathetic reception in Kabbalist circles, which eventually became paths of transmission for speculative Jewish contents concerning the sexuality of prelapsarian Adam. Although it cannot be excluded that Montaigne came in contact with Rabbi Yirmiyah's disruptive conception of Adamic androgyny

through intermediaries, it should not be overlooked that he nowhere referenced Jewish textual sources in support of his own dissenting sexual views.

39. At this point, it is apposite to examine more closely Montaigne's complex take on sexual difference. In accordance with his overarching postulate concerning the pervasiveness of *branloire*, Montaigne sought to overcome the fixity of the man/woman paradigm prevalent throughout cultures and regarded by the Catholic Church as the only sexual-distributive scheme corresponding to biblical revelation. Montaigne's critical stance effectively undermined not only the sexual binarity propagated by the Christian worldview, but also the mutually exclusive constructs of other-sex and same-sex sexualities. Moreover, having renounced advocating any specific template for the conjunction of the sexes, Montaigne sufficed himself with countering the reductive perception of sexual diversity and variability, which cultures have enforced as a means to achieve their socio-political aims. As a consequence of having observed and assessed existing sexual forms that unequivocally escape the binary pattern, Montaigne sought to dissipate the delusion of stable sexual-categorical subsumptions at odds with the universal transmutability that frames and sustains the ciscendent aims of history. Montaigne's axiom concerning the impossible identity between the simplest of separate things obviously maintained its validity when considering beings with the complexity of humans. This line of argument, which has at times been associated with Montaigne's nominalist proclivities, allows to envision the sexed individual as a unique emergence in the continuous deployments of Nature that supersedes the socio-cultural consolidation of categorial sexual groups. As already suggested, uncovering the ontic vacuity of such subsumptions is the result of the awareness that no two distinct sexed individuals could share the same categorial identity.

40. From Montaigne's perspective, the all-pervasive principle of *branloire* becomes especially manifest when the corporeal roots of sexuality give rise to deviant or monstrous forms that falsify the phantasmal idea of a permanently fixed sexual order. The notion of two mutually exclusive and stable sexes exemplifies the mirage of sexual constancy, which, in

Montaigne's view, constitutes a societally sanctioned paradigm without any factual reality to support it. Moreover, the insufficiencies of the postulatory male/female combinatory, on which all known forms of civilization rely, become apparent as soon as a suppletory ambit of same-sex (i.e., male/male or female/female) sexualities is acknowledged, which, lacking reproductive perspectives, are generally excluded from the map of desirable sexual conjunctions enabling collective survival. Although Montaigne mentions in *Journal de voyage* the execution of several same-sex dissidents, he abstains from critiquing the legally sanctioned practice, which, on principle, contravenes the ascertainable sexual variation and diversity throughout nature. Having established the general axiom of uniquely configured sexual constitutions escaping categorial subsumption, Montaigne opts for leaving it to the reader to reject the prevalent incapacity of civil and ecclesiastical authorities to accommodate all the existing variations of sexuality within the order of the body politic. As Montaigne observed first-hand, these same authorities generally welcomed and supported the heterosexual services of prostitutes in establishments specifically designed for that purpose (see, for instance, Montaigne, 1992, pp. 93-94; 126; 187; III, 13, 1086-1087).

41. Instead of affirming the purportedly self-evident binarity of the sexes that Church and civil law sanction, Montaigne raises the claim that "males and females are cast in the same mold"<sup>76</sup> and that "except for education and custom, the difference [of the sexes] is not great" (III, 5, 897).<sup>77</sup> Therewith, Montaigne was propounding his controversial conception that the disjunction of the sexes results primarily from the derivative causalities of history and culture. Given his discombobulating assumptions, it is not surprising that Montaigne sought to sidestep the reactions of the unthinking, but mighty powers that be by recurring to the probed means of self-deprecating sarcasm. Had the Inquisition's watchdogs become aware of the actual theoretical scope of Montaigne's brief elaborations on a radical alternative to the dichotomous scheme of sexual distribution, the horrors it would have been

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<sup>76</sup> "les masles et femelles sont jettez en mesme moule"

<sup>77</sup> "sauf l'institution et l'usage, la difference n'y est pas grande"

capable of perpetrating against him would be hardly imaginable. It is thus a testimony to his clear-sightedness concerning the theo-political realities of his time that Montaigne wryly de-potentiated his own critical conception of a common male/female *moule* by depicting it within the framework of what he designated as a "flow of babble" (III, 5, 897).<sup>78</sup> Far from being "impetuous and harmful" (III, 5, 897),<sup>79</sup> his subtending conception of sexuality's *branloire* will eventually evince itself as the *clef de voûte* of his sexual thought.

42. Montaigne exposes the man/woman disjunction as a form of sexual dogmatism whose historical repetitiveness is incapable of hiding its ill epistemic foundations. The alternative Montaigne envisages is not a corrective suppletion of the number of sexes beyond the sexual disjunction, but an open-end model that rebuffs any attempt to reduce any two sexed individuals to an identical category. Notwithstanding their every-day practical value, categorial schemes and subsumptions of sexuality reflect the arbitrary criteria chosen by cultures to obnubilate the perception of the ongoing proliferation of sexualities. Against this backdrop, Montaigne's brief elaborations on the sexual *moule* dispels the notion of sexual difference as a separating line between human groups in order to advance the idea of a uniquely nuanced modulation of the male/female polarity within each human individual. On these assumptions, the notion of "human form," which Montaigne deploys in critical junctions of his thought (see *Au lecteur*, 3; III, 12, 1054), is neither masculine nor feminine, as it encodes the whole range of sexual variability that every individual actualizes differently. True to his skeptical turn of mind, Montaigne does not replace one sexual dogmatism by another, but dissolves all of them within the framework of an ontic quest toward radically individualized sexualities. Interrupted only by the temporal finitude of the inquirer, this type of critical move has been pertinently depicted by Marcel Conche as the defining mark of Montaigne's thought:

"The search is all he [Montaigne] aspires to achieve. Not taking over and possessing. Now, searching the true

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<sup>78</sup> "flux de caquet"

<sup>79</sup> "impetueux [...] et nuisible"

always means to doubt, not being certain of anything, never ceasing to question. One is satisfied in philosophy only by exhaustion or stupidity" (Conche. 2015, p. 75).<sup>80</sup>

43. While Montaigne acknowledged in principle the need to move away from finite sexual formations, he had to comply in daily life with the demands of a society organized around the male/female dichotomy and its inherent power asymmetry. Within this societal framework, Montaigne differentiates the passion of male/female love (in form of short-lived relations or marriage) from the spiritual passion that can connect, in his view, two men, but not two women. Notwithstanding his firm rebuttal of the asymmetric relations between older penetrating pederasts and younger penetrated youths (see III, 28, 187-188), the way Montaigne conceptualizes other-sex love does not escape the quandaries of asymmetric power relations. By opposing heterosexual love's "corporeal end, subject to satiety" (I, 28, 186)<sup>81</sup> to the continuous spiritual enjoyment that results from "the convergence of desires" (I, 28, 186)<sup>82</sup> of two male friends, Montaigne admits the need for an axiological order of the erotic passions that subordinates the inherently "fleeting affections"<sup>83</sup> between a man and a woman to the potential perfection of male/male friendship. Accordingly, Montaigne maintains that his friendship with the prematurely deceased Étienne de La Boétie was beyond comparison with the erotic bond with the women in his life: "the first keeping its course in proud and lofty flight and disdainfully watching the other making its way far, far beneath it" (I, 28, 186).<sup>84</sup> As to the cause of the disparity between the two love alternatives, Montaigne points out that

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<sup>80</sup> "La quête est tout ce à quoi il [Montaigne] prétend. Non la prise et la possession. Or quêter le vrai signifie toujours douter, n'être assuré de rien, ne jamais cesser d'interroger. On ne se contente en philosophie que par fatigue ou bêtise."

<sup>81</sup> "fin corporelle et sujete à sacieté."

<sup>82</sup> "la convenance des volontez"

<sup>83</sup> "affections volages"

<sup>84</sup> "la premiere maintenant sa route d'un vol hautain et superbe, et regardant desdaigneusement cette cy passer ses pointes bien loing au dessoubs d'elle"

"the ordinary capacity of women is inadequate for that community and fellowship which is the nurse of this sacred bond [of friendship]; nor does their soul seem firm enough to endure the strain of so tight and durable a knot" (I, 28, 186).<sup>85</sup>

44. Montaigne's unflattering assessment of women in general takes into account their function as paramours and mistresses in their unsteady relations to men. But it also considers their role as wives within the institution of marriage, which, in his view, is "a bargain to which only the entrance is free [...], a bargain ordinarily made for other ends" (I, 28, 186).<sup>86</sup> Notwithstanding his critique of pecuniary-driven marital arrangements which wives hardly had any means to revoke, Montaigne seemed not to have had second thoughts about the quotidian relegation of women in a male-dominated society. On the assumption that male/female love cannot envisage a form of intimacy beyond sensual/sexual fulfilment, Montaigne suggests that a man could only find the reciprocity of friendship in relationships with other men. Moreover, given the subordinate role of women in heterosexual love, they can only counterbalance the progressive fading of passion in marital life by acquiescing to the growing predominance of their husbands in conjugal affairs. Clearly stressing the male privilege, Montaigne affirms the right of men to enrich their lives through male friendships, but does not even consider the possibility that women could aspire to engage in friendship with other women and thus escape the supremacist claims of the male paradigm. In principle, Montaigne seems to unrealistically expect from women that they undo their subordination to men and relinquish the sexual volatility it provokes before entering the bond of friendship with individuals which society has regarded until now as being either male or female.

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<sup>85</sup> "la suffisance ordinaire de femmes n'est pas pour répondre à cette conférence et communication, nourrisse de cette sainte couture; ny leur ame ne semble assez ferme pour soustenir l'estreinte d'un noed si pressé et si durable"

<sup>86</sup> "un marché qui n'a que l'entrée libre [...] marché qui ordinairement se fait à autres fins"

45. Contrasting with the exalted traits he assigns to male/male friendship, Montaigne configured his own heterosexual relationships following criteria very different from those he assumed decent women should follow when relating to men. In his writing, nothing suggests that he lived up to other-sex behavioral standards as demanding as those he thought women would have to conform to in order to escape the subserviency of their condition. Given the unquestioned preponderancy of the male in the society in which Montaigne lived, there was no need for him to change anything in his other-sex conduct to be worthy of engaging in a bond of friendship with La Boétie. As already mentioned, their first encounter took place in 1559 (see Magnien, 2018, p. 1030), as La Boétie, Montaigne's senior by two and a third years, had already "married, settled, [and become] an accomplished writer" (Frame, 1984, p. 69).<sup>87</sup> As the *Essais* convey in this regard, the friendship between the two men did not hinder them from engaging in numerous heterosexual love affairs:

"Under this perfect friendship [with La Boétie], those fleeting affections [for women] once found a place in me, not to speak of him, who confesses only too many of them in his verses" (I, 28, 186).<sup>88</sup>

Moreover, it appears that in the worldview of the two friends, the husband's marital infidelities were deemed compatible with the patriarchal subordination in which legitimate wives were held. Even for Montaigne, however, it would have been beyond the bounds of civil decency to question the societal unacceptability of female marital unfaithfulness.

46. The marital and extramarital mores by which La Boétie and Montaigne abided were widely shared by the gentilshommes of Late Renaissance France. Montaigne,

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<sup>87</sup> In the last edition of the *Essais* issued in his lifetime, Montaigne was careful to underscore that, by the time he and La Boétie met, "we were both grown men" / "nous estions tous deux hommes faits" (I, 28, 188).

<sup>88</sup> "Sous cette parfaicte amitié ces affections volages ont autrefois trouvé place chez moy, affin que je ne parle de luy, qui n'en confesse que trop par ces [ses] vers"

however, was an exception among them, inasmuch as he possessed the intellectual audacity to posit a this-worldly erotic order according to which male-male friendship replaced male-female love on the apex of the passional hierarchy. This substitution did not result from the rejection of coital, procreative intimacy on the part of Montaigne, but rather from the axiological preeminence he assigned to the immanent teleology of friendship. In Montaigne's understanding of the male/male bond, the body is not considered an idealized springboard for attaining a Platonic or Christian-transcendental finality, but the condition for experiencing the friend's presence as a source of immediate enjoyment. Male/male friendship is thus no amatory ersatz practice, but a reality in its own that surpasses other forms of erotic engagement. Montaigne's axiological subordination of other-sex sexuality is reflected in a telling passage of his 1585/1588 essay titled "De trois commerces" (Of three kinds of association):

"[...] out of scorn I did not addict myself much to venal and public intimacies. I wanted to make the pleasure keener by difficulty, by desire, and by a certain glory" (III, 3, 826).<sup>89</sup>

47. Montaigne's conception of the social order delineated in his early essay on friendship organizes sexual difference in a way that not only discriminates against the female condition but also rules out the realization of the male's sexual potentials in non-heteronormative contexts. Since the "holy bond" of friendship is meant to provide solely "spiritual" enjoyment (I, 28, 186),<sup>90</sup> it excludes sexual relations between the males it unites. This precision notwithstanding, Montaigne readily acknowledged its physical dimensions of friendship, but underscored that they do not explain the occurrence of the bond itself and that consequently Étienne de la Boétie's "superficial ugliness" (III, 12, 1057)<sup>91</sup> was not an impediment

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<sup>89</sup> " je ne me suis guere adonné aux accointances venales et publiques: j'ay voulu esguiser ce plaisir par la difficulté, par le desir et par quelque gloire"

<sup>90</sup> "sainte couture" / "spirituelle"

<sup>91</sup> "laideur superficielle"



to their amical intimacy. Contrasting it to carnal intimacy, Montaigne highlights that, when passion fades in a relation to a woman, there is nothing left that could be prolonged into a higher form of relationship. Since Montaigne's relation to La Boétie dispensed from the start with the distractions associated to the fulfilment of sexual drives, their friendship cannot be considered a sublimated prolongation of a carnal nexus. Not by chance, Swiss literary theorist and medical psychiatrist Jean Starobinski (1920-2019) depicted the specificity of Montaigne's love for his friend using the expression "commerce spirituel (homosexuel)" ((homosexual) spiritual commerce) (Starobinski, 1982, p. 242).

48. Considering Montaigne's disparaging comments on the incapacity of women to relate to men as friends, it is apposite to note that he relativizes his own assertions when hinting at the dimension of historical futurity of male/female relations. As though seeking to avoid an essentialist stance on women in contradiction with his overarching Heraclitean premises, Montaigne underscores that "this sex *in no instance has yet succeeded* in attaining it [i.e. friendship]" (I, 28,187; emphasis added).<sup>92</sup> His nuanced formulation appears to admit the possibility of a very different outcome at odds with the historical evidence dominant to the present day. This conceivable alternative notwithstanding, Montaigne underscores in the following clause that the old schools of thought were consensually opposed to acknowledging the female aptitude for friendship. Despite this historical reference, however, Montaigne appears not to rule out that women could, on principle, overcome the limitations of their condition by confronting the challenges posed by friendship. Thus, he seems at times to favor the dissolution of sex-specific cultural paradigms in accordance with his Ockhamist-inspired premise that sexed individuals resist categorial subsumptions (see Friedrich, 1967, p. 126; Todorov, 2001, p. 21). In light of this radical claim, even the initial opposition between male/female love and male/male friendship appears to lose, in the last resort, its *raison d'être*.

49. The principled egalitarianism of uniquely sexed individuals is at odds with the ancient, but in modern times

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<sup>92</sup> "ce sexe par nul exemple n'y est encore peu arriver"

still enforceable subordination of women to men prescribed by Paulinian theology. The supersedure of the historical subjugation of women is thus initiated by Montaigne's anthropological postulate of one and the same *moule* for males and females regardless of the eventual differential asymmetries that have emerged in the course of human evolution.<sup>93</sup> Given that the axiological cogency of the initial mold remains impervious to the imponderabilia of historical circumstances, it fosters the acknowledgement and maintenance of the natural variability of sexuality as a consequence of the axiomatic non-identity of any two sexed individuals. In this context, the *branloire* of nature evinces itself as a critical corrective to the sexual and erotic closures, which women have imposed upon themselves to avoid complying with the demanding task of radical individuation that friendship calls for. Since the variability of sexuality is endless, its constriction to the male/female binary (or any other finite pattern of sexual distribution for that matter) lastly purports undoing the Montaignean "human form" that subtends the realization of the individual's sexual uniqueness.<sup>94</sup> By critically dissolving the limits imposed on sexual variability by all known cultures, the *human form* enables friendship between sexually de-categorized individuals seeking no other finality to their relationship than their mutual rejoicement. Despite the idealistic-sounding claim of this assertion, the autotely of amical love remits to its biographical and historical rootage in Montaigne's relationship with Étienne de La Boétie.

50. Since the practicalities of culture can only provisionally repress the unremitting *branloire* of nature, Montaigne's

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<sup>93</sup> Among the few authors who have hinted at the scope and import of Montaigne's contention regarding the sexual *moule* (see III, 5, 897) is semiologist and historian of ideas Tzvetan Todorov (1939-2017). Elaborating on the issue, Todorov points out in *Le Jardin imparfait*: "Il y a un potentiel révolutionnaire dans ces phrases, que Montaigne n'exploite pas; il n'y affirme pas moins l'universalité humaine" (Todorov, 1998, p. 239).

<sup>94</sup> Given that "each man bears the entire form of the human condition" / "chaque homme porte la forme entière de l'humaine condition" (III, 2, 805), Tzvetan Todorov eventually concludes: "Telle est la leçon de Montaigne: tout homme est un individu inimitable, et pourtant chacun porte en lui l'empreinte de la condition humaine dans son entier" (Todorov, 2001, p. 42).

critique of amatory categorial constrictions was meant to facilitate the transition to the love of friendship as an encounter of two ineffable individuals. This is what Montaigne envisages in the 1580 essay "De l'amitié" (Of friendship), when he details with regard to La Boétie: "If someone presses me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed" (I, 28, 188).<sup>95</sup> This sentence, which introduces one of the most often quoted passages written by Montaigne, is immediately followed by a terse depiction of the compositional method deployed in the *Essais*: "I add, but I do not correct" (III, 9, 963).<sup>96</sup> In accordance with his remark on the impossibility to explain his love for La Boétie, Montaigne eventually appended in the Bordeaux edition of the *Essais* issued in 1588 a handwritten precision: "except by answering: Because it was he" (I, 28, 188).<sup>97</sup> In a later date, Montaigne made a further addition, which effectively closes his individualizing line of argument: "because it was I" (I, 28, 188).<sup>98</sup> Considering these assertions, it is unsurprising that the man/manly love between the two friends has raised questions about the nature of the physical, but apparently non-sexual component of their relationship. While the depth of their intimacy is clearly suggested in the *Essais*, Montaigne's letter to his father on La Boétie's agony conveys a sense of spiritual finality that has no parallel in his other writings.

51. Montaigne appears to have reckoned with the fact that, of all those present in La Boétie's deathbed chamber, he would be the only one capable of transmitting to posterity his friend's decision to die as a Jew. Montaigne's depiction of the circumstances surrounding La Boétie's religious reversion and death is all the more significant as the *Essais* generally avoid suggesting any personal identification of their author with the history of the Jewish people. While Montaigne "seems consistently sympathetic toward the Jews" (Frame, 1984, p. 17), he did not reclaim for himself the theological forms of permanence and continuity that underpinned La Boétie's

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<sup>95</sup> "Si on me presse de dire pouquoy je l'aymois, je sens que cela ne se peut exprimer"

<sup>96</sup> "J'adjouste, mais je ne corrige pas"

<sup>97</sup> "qu'en respondant: Par ce que c'estoit luy"

<sup>98</sup> "par ce que c'estoit moy"

understanding of Jewish redemption. The dissent between the two friends as regards their approach of the Mosaic religion became manifest only after La Boétie's deathbed declarations, which proved to be the cornerstone of Montaigne's attempt to preserve his memory. Despite their differences, La Boétie regarded Montaigne as his "inviolable friend" (La Boétie, 1892, p. 428).<sup>99</sup> Montaigne, on his side, mentions at first that a friendship like theirs occurs "once in three centuries" (I, 28, 184),<sup>100</sup> but then, focusing on its uniqueness, affirms that it "has no other model than itself, and can be compared only with itself" (I, 28, 189).<sup>101</sup> In view of the quasi-fusional bond between Montaigne and La Boétie, legitimate questions have repeatedly been raised in the recent past as to whether their intimacy translated in same-sex activities and, if so, how these should be limned and assessed.<sup>102</sup>

52. As to the role that homosexuality may have played in the relation between Montaigne and La Boétie, Michel Magnian has fittingly argued that

"in the absence of binding hints, far away from the present trends of the transatlantic critique, the greatest circumspection is required regarding the question of eventual homosexual relations between the two men" (Magnian, 2018, p. 1035).<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> "inviolable amy"

<sup>100</sup> "une fois en trois siècles"

<sup>101</sup> "n'a point d'autre idée que d'elle mesme, et ne se peut rapporter qu'à soy."

<sup>102</sup> In early sexology, Montaigne was seldom perceived as homosexual. Furthermore, his reconceptualization of sexual difference was ignored. Magnus Hirschfeld does not mention him in his list of famous homosexuals belonging to the Western post-classical period, which is included in his 1914 volume on *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* (see Hirschfeld, 1984, pp. 649-673). In English, the historically significant *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* from 1990 comprises an entry on Montaigne depicting him as "a forerunner of modern, age-symmetrical, androphile homosexuality" (Wayne, 1990, p. 832). The encyclopedic volume *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* features no entry on the French writer (see Summers, 1997).

<sup>103</sup> "en l'absence d'indices dirimants, loin des dérives actuelles de la critique d'outre-Atlantique, la plus grande circonspection s'impose [sur la] question d'éventuelles relations homosexuelles entre les deux hommes"

In Magnian's view, Montaigne evinces at most "une homosexualité de structure" (a homosexuality of structure) (Magnian, 2018, p. 1035), but certainly not a factual one. His assessment thus converges with that of Jean Starobinski, who decades earlier had characterized Montaigne's relation to La Boétie's as a spiritual (homosexual) commerce as opposed to a "liaison charnelle (hétérosexuelle)" (carnal (heterosexual) relation) (Starobinski, 1982, p. 242). Given the lack of evidence that would allow to envisage bolder conclusions, the two scholars sufficed themselves with attributing to Montaigne a homosexuality that remained "structural" or "spiritual." Moreover, considering that no conclusive proves in favor of homosexual acts could be invoked, Renaissance scholar M. A. Screech concluded that "Montaigne's love for La Boétie was in no way physical" (Screech, 1991, p. 53) and that "[t]here is not the slightest hint that the body played any part at all in the genesis or course of their love" (Screech, 1991, p. 54).<sup>104</sup>

53. Despite their efforts to attain conceptual clarity about Montaigne's erotic life, the three scholars failed to analyze the link between Montaigne's views on the pervasive variability and diversity of sexuality and his self-reflective aperçus into the complexity and uniqueness of his own sexual complexion. Since sexual difference, on Montaigne's assumptions, cannot be adequately approached by merely distinguishing sexual groups with shared commonalities, but by grasping the singularly nuanced configuration of the sexual polarity inherent in the individual, the actual reason as to why Montaigne loved La Boétie ultimately escapes categorizations. Against this backdrop, the trite and commonplace query about Montaigne's and La Boétie's sexual self-understanding is eventually cancelled and surpassed in the ambit of the factually unutterable. It would be however misleading to assume at this point that the two friends shared similar onto-theological

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<sup>104</sup> Since it is hard to imagine what a fleshless erotic love would be, Screech's assertions were possibly not meant to exclude the carnal condition of the same-sex love between the two men, but the thought of their engaging in sexual activity. In this regard, it is well to note, however, that Montaigne's acknowledgement that La Boétie was ugly (see III, 12, 1057) in no way contradicts the principled possibility of sexual activity between the two friends, especially in view of the pronounced homosocial components in Montaigne's psychic life.

strategies for approaching the real. Despite their indebtedness to the *marrano* heritage, their personal religious positions do not appear to have been compatible.<sup>105</sup> Nothing in Montaigne's biography and oeuvre could be analogized with the "I declare" that introduces La Boétie's deathbed statements on his reversion to Judaism. Montaigne's private disengagement from Christianity did not translate in a desire to embrace historical Judaism.

54. Montaigne's public Catholic observance being in the main a matter of theo-political obedience to the laws of the land in which he lived, he seldom felt the need to mention Jesus or the Apostle Paul in his writings (see Leake, 1981, pp. 660 & 936). It is striking, however, that, among the fifty-seven quotations he instructed to have painted on the tight space provided by the beams and joists of his library's ceiling, a dozen of them were Latin sentences taken from the Book Kohelet (Ecclesiast) (see Montaigne, 1985b, pp. 1419-1427, sentence number 1, 2, 4, 7, 13, 21, 23, 29, 33, 35, 40 42; Legros, 2000, pp. 425-430). From this set of quotes, the thirty-third sentence in the Pléiade edition (and the thirtieth in Legros' volume) cites the well-known last words of the second verse in the initial chapter of the Book Kohelet (Liber ecclesiastes) as reproduced in the Vulgata: "Per omnia vanitas." The first "Biblia ladinada" (Ferrara, 1553), which was primarily intended for reverted Iberic Marranos and had a wide circulation among them even in France, renders the second verse of the original Hebrew text as follows: "Nada de nada, dixo Koheleth, nada de nada, el todo nada" (*Biblia de Ferrara*, 1996, p. 1264). Due to their pithiness, the Latin phrase and its Ladino rendition facilitate grasping the scope of the forty-second sentence inscribed on the beams of Montaigne's library. Although Montaigne referenced it as "Eccl., XI," it has no strict correspondence in the Book Kohelet (Ecclesiast) or in the Book Jesus Sirach (Ecclesiasticus). The sentence appears to be rather a periphrastic rendition of the initial *vanitas* leitmotiv, especially if one considers its asseveration that, from all the

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<sup>105</sup> Unlike the case of La Boétie, Montaigne's cautious distancing from Christianity was not motivated by any pro-Judaic fervor, but rather by his Hellenic proclivities, reflected in his 113 mentions of Socrates (see Leake, 1981, p. 1177) and 197 mentions of Plato (see Leake, 1981, pp. 972-973).

works of Creation, non is least known to man than what is left behind by the passage of a breeze: "Ex tot Dei operibus nihilum magis cuiquam homini incognitum quam venti vestigium" (Montaigne, 1985b, p. 1424). What can be considered Montaigne's explanatory rendering of the Kohelet leitmotif points to his discomfiting realization that the most insignificant and least perceptible of created things emblemizes the all-encompassing nothingness of everything.

55. The quasi absence of being that remains when winds subside can be viewed as Montaigne's core metaphor for conveying the de-ontologizing intent of his oeuvre. Reflecting this decisive line of thought, the first book of the *Essais* maintains that "We embrace everything, but we clasp only wind" (I, 31, 203).<sup>106</sup> The same connecting thread surfaces in the second book, when Montaigne avers: "We have nothing but wind and smoke for our portion" (II, 12, 489).<sup>107</sup> These assertions are not merely literary digressions of Montaigne's prolific mind. Rather, they highlight what Claude Lévi-Strauss considered Montaigne's most critical lesson: In the absence of communication with Being (see II, 12, 601), man has no way of overcoming the lack of permanence that inheres in himself and in his surrounding world. Given the ubiquitousness of Becoming, nothingness dents from within any form of quiddity man may arrogate to himself. Not assuming make-believe roles played within a universal fake order, the enlightened and self-effacing sage that has left his traces in Montaigne's oeuvre realizes that nothingness subtends his own existence. He thus emerges as the "fool of the farce" (III, 9, 1001),<sup>108</sup> or, in Géralde Nakam's terse phrasing, as a "tightrope walker dancing over the abyss" (Nakam, 2002, p. 192).<sup>109</sup> Against the backdrop of this spectacle, Montaigne was unable to embrace the premises of biblical creationism and soteriology. But he felt free to appropriate the *vanitas* leitmotif and the sapiential text of the Torah it introduces. Not unlike Montaigne, Kohelet advanced the gist of a lucid wisdom vis-à-vis the encroaching edges of nothingness.

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<sup>106</sup> "Nous embrassons tout, mais nous n'étreignons que du vent"

<sup>107</sup> "Nous n'avons que du vent et de la fumée en partage"

<sup>108</sup> "badin de la farce"

<sup>109</sup> "Funambule dansant sur le vide"

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