

Alain Legros. *Montaigne manuscrit*.

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At the end of the essay “A Consideration upon Cicero,” Michel de Montaigne confesses that habitual addressees of his letters must learn to decipher his writing, since his pencraft is “intolerably bad.” Alain Legros is to be commended, therefore, not only for compiling the unprecedented collection of manuscripts that comprises *Montaigne manuscrit*, but moreover, for his scrupulous analysis, commentary, transcriptions, and translations of Montaigne’s self-avowedly difficult hand. Legros’s efforts, building upon the work of the numerous scholars over the last century, have made a major archive accessible to those interested in the life and work of Montaigne.

*Montaigne manuscrit* brings together an array of handwritten texts that span over forty years of the adult life of Michel de Montaigne. Legros organizes the book by genre, which also allows him to follow a loose chronology from the first *ex-libris* in 1549 to the essayist’s death in 1592. For each type of text, Legros provides detailed archival, editorial, and bibliographic information in addition to helpful framing remarks. In a turn that is at once imaginative and biographically informed, Legros also devises for each genre a different Montaigne persona. Thus, the Montaigne of the *ex-libris*, *devises*, and *ex-dono* is the Latin-speaking student *Michael Montanus*; the recent heir and estate-owner who records family affairs in the *Ephemeris historica*, or “Beuther,” becomes the *Seigneur de Montaigne*; the reporter of judicial *arrêts* is the legal professional *Michel de Montaigne*; the annotator of Terence, Lucretius, and others, is *Montaigne lecteur*; the scribe of undecipherable letters is simply *Monsieur de Montaigne*; finally, the dedicator of copies of his own books becomes our most

familiar *Montaigne auteur*. The texts themselves are presented so as to strike a balance between clarity of reading and transparency of the original text. Each is first transcribed in a detailed typographical system developed by Legros and outlined in this volume, aiming to represent evolutions in both handwriting and orthographic choices. Legros's commentary on this process — which recognizes the material and visual limits of even the best transcription and which limits his own role to “signaling” rather than “imitating” the manuscript originals — is at once thoughtful and thought-provoking. In a smaller font, Legros additionally provides either a translation (in the case of Latin, Greek, or Italian texts) or modernized French version of each text. Finally, Legros justifies in each instance his decision to attribute the text to “la main de Montaigne.” The result is a thorough — if occasionally cumbersome — presentation that requires the same kind of careful scholarly reading that has obviously gone into its production.

In his introduction and throughout the volume, Legros is careful not to overestimate the value of these autographs or their relationship to the *Essais*. He situates them squarely outside of Montaigne's *oeuvre* and cautions against reading them as “preparations” for the composition of the *Essais*. Instead, Legros invites his reader witness and analyze the evolution of Montaigne's linguistic practices outside the *Essais* — from Latin to French, from reformed to common spelling — in ways that allow us to better understand Montaigne as both biographical figure and writer. The consequence of Legros's hesitation to assign an exact status to these autographs is that we are ultimately left wondering what that status may be; yet such a lacuna serves to gesture provocatively toward new lines of scholarly inquiry that could utilize this volume as their primary material.

At several moments in the volume, Legros makes reference to the project already underway at the Université de Tours to digitize and make available online all of Montaigne's manuscript autographs in addition to books from his library. Legros notes that what he has been able to reproduce in this printed volume is only partial, and that readers must await such eventual digitization for full access to certain texts. Yet the assiduous and comprehensive nature of Legros's editorial work makes it clear that this volume will remain a valuable resource for Montaigne scholars, whatever the digital future of the handwritten texts may be.

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