

Montaigne: A Life. Philippe Desan.

Trans. Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. xxxv + 796 pp. \$39.95.

The fruit of careful and patient research, this new biography of Montaigne, which first appeared in French in 2014, marks a milestone in Renaissance studies. In defiance of the biographical tradition, Desan means to privilege the historicity of the *Essais* over their literariness by situating Montaigne's career as an author in relation to his ambitions and political activity. As a consequence, whereas Pierre Villey famously traced the evolution of Montaigne's thought through his successive adherence to three schools of Hellenistic philosophy—Stoicism, Skepticism, and Epicureanism—Desan traces the evolution of Montaigne's text through successive editions, each responding to a distinctive set of circumstances that this biography painstakingly reconstructs. In the process, Desan necessarily challenges conventional distinctions between public and private life in order to reveal the inextricable connection between literature and political action. Moreover, he demonstrates a salutary indifference to the emergence of the modern self that has preoccupied so many recent studies of Montaigne. Everywhere, the author lays out his goals and methods with admirable clarity, even if I cannot entirely persuade myself that all readers will want "to free themselves from an essentially literary perspective on Montaigne's life" (xxvii).

It must be noted that this massive tome is in no hurry to reach a conclusion, and we wait until chapter 6 to encounter the first edition of the *Essais* in 1580. This chapter and the following chapter, "The Call of Rome," develop over the course of 150 pages one of the key arguments of the work. In brief, Desan argues that the 1580 edition was meant to serve as a springboard for Montaigne's career in politics by demonstrating the moral and social attributes required of him to serve as a diplomat or a confidant in the service of the king. These political ambitions are confirmed by the nature and arrangement of the first essays and by their initial reception. In effect, the *Essais* are a form of speech meant to project the character of the speaker so as to gain the confidence and approval of his immediate audience. This is an eminently rhetorical reading of the essays and one that supposes on the part of Montaigne some formal training in rhetoric and some familiarity, direct or otherwise, with the doctrine of ethos expounded in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. In this sense, the political reading of Montaigne is necessarily a literary reading as well. The central focus of chapter 6 is on the "Apology for Raymond Sebond," generally understood as the main expression of Montaigne's Skepticism and therefore as his main claim to entry in the history of philosophy. Desan takes a different approach. Montaigne had undertaken, on his father's request, to translate Sebond's *Theologia Naturalis*, which he published in 1569; but by 1580, he regarded his translation as a career error that might compromise his political ambitions due to Sebond's suspected heterodoxy. Therefore, he authored an apology to neutralize this compromising association. As a result, "This famous chapter 12 of

the second book of the *Essais* of 1580 must be considered an exercise in diplomacy” (307).

This judgment smooths the transition to the subsequent chapter, which reexamines Montaigne’s trip to Italy from 1580 to 1581 in light of his failed ambition to be named French ambassador to Rome. Though conjectural, this ambition not only explains the general thrust of the 1580 *Essais* but also endows Montaigne’s itinerary and activity in Italy with a strategic coherence they would otherwise lack. Alas, the job he coveted fell to Paul de Foix, and Montaigne had to settle for his “consolation prize” (377) of mayor of Bordeaux. This disappointment presages what chapter 10 calls “The Marginalization of Montaigne,” referring both to the revisions written in the margins of the Bordeaux Copy and to Montaigne’s involuntary withdrawal from public life. Montaigne’s writing naturally changed as his political ambitions waned, and what had been intended as a sort of CV in 1580 became the work of philosophical introspection that we know today.

In sum, this new biography achieves an impressively comprehensive understanding of a major Renaissance author while relentlessly advancing a very clear and coherent thesis that must be reckoned with in future discussions of Montaigne.

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The School of Montaigne in Early Modern Europe, Volume One: The Patron-Author. Warren Boutcher.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. lxxviii + 380 pp. \$125.

The School of Montaigne in Early Modern Europe, Volume Two: The Reader-Writer. Warren Boutcher.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xxxiv + 530 pp. \$125.

Warren Boutcher’s prodigious—and prodigiously important—book is in some ways a remarkably understated project. Respectful of past critical approaches to Montaigne’s *Essais*, Boutcher argues that “the study of the text’s meanings” must be wedded to and not made distinct from “its reception” (1:xiv). Although he values the histories and methods that portray Montaigne’s writing as prefiguring “modern skepticism,” “modern self-consciousness,” and “modern recognition of Montaigne’s literary genius” (1: xiv), Boutcher offers an “alternative perspective . . . rooted in the historical study of the *diversity* of ways in which relations between patrons, authors, producers, models or objects of representation, and readers, can be described by the makers and users of verbal and literary artefacts from *sentences* to books. Study of instances of reception and survival, instead of departing from a normative modern understanding of the authored work’s meaning-in-context, could change modern understanding of what constituted a context in the period itself” (1:xv).