

*Unsettling Montaigne*. Elizabeth Guild.

Gallica 34. Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014. xii + 292 pp. \$120.

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Does Montaigne need unsettling? Isn't the author of *The Essays* the unsettled writer par excellence? Elizabeth Guild proposes that he does, not because he himself was not the subject of the unsettling, but because our reading of Montaigne has perhaps "settled" too quickly on the meaning of *The Essays*, failing to fully attest to the disruptive logic of the essayist's skeptical ways. Guild, to her credit, counters a hermeneutics of the *Essays* that seeks to contain this most unruly of works. Turning to the psychoanalytical register, she pays careful attention to the affective matter and force of Montaigne's writing practice, to the poetics and ethics of his figuration, and to a skeptical and open-ended representational economy that insists on the gap created between the thing and its (failed) representation. Guild is, of course, cognizant of the charge of anachronism, of the alleged universalism and ahistoricism of psychoanalysis. "Here," she writes, "however much store I set by psychoanalytic theories as one element in textual analysis, I draw on them only insofar as they resonate with aspects of the text and can be used in conjunction with historical analysis and attentiveness to the discourses and heuristic strategies available at the time of writing" (5). This defensive gesture perhaps concedes too much to the accusers of psychoanalysis (or poststructuralism, more generally). Anachronism is constitutive of any reading of a historically distant author, so to read Montaigne today is to read him anachronistically. To be sure, Guild is not the first to unsettle Montaigne psychoanalytically or deconstructively. But the trend in Montaigne scholarship has been moving in the other direction, away from the theoretical innovations of a couple of decades ago. So Guild's study is both welcome and much needed. After a few pages of *Unsettling Montaigne*, we are quickly reminded of the potential richness that a theoretical framework brings to Montaigne.

Anxiety, Guild argues, conditions much of Montaigne's self-writing, writing of the other, and writing for the other. Recurring figures in *Unsettling Montaigne* are the dead friend (La Boétie), the cannibal of the New World, and the reader (present and *à venir*). All three others are brought into conceptual dialogue under the notion of "eating well." This formulation is adopted from Jacques Derrida, who eloquently formulated the double bind of engaging with the other: "The moral question is thus not, nor has it ever been: should one eat or not eat . . . but since *one must* eat in any case . . . *how* for goodness sake should one *eat well* [*bien manger*]?" (Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy [1991]: 115). How then does Montaigne eat? How does his self cannibalize others? And how do we, in turn, eat Montaigne? How do we digest or make sense of him? Do we live up to the ethical demands of his work? Is unsettling an ethics of reading? According to Guild, "eating well" represents "a form of ethical ideal" (51), "a model for living well" (90) for Montaigne. This ethical ideal manifested itself first and foremost in his interpretive endeavors. Eating well entails a skepticism, an openness to difference, and a giving to the other. While Guild glosses La Boétie's last words to Montaigne — "Mon frere, mon frere, me refusez-vous doncques une place?" — she surprisingly does not link the ethics of eating well, hospitality, and the logic of the gift more explicitly to La Boétie's haunting words. Critics have long debated the meaning and impact of La Boétie's final statement, ranging from an act of betrayal — since Montaigne did not publish *De la servitude volontaire*, and thus never gave him a place — to its status as a foundational scene in which Montaigne the existential skeptic is born, a witness to the failure of La Boétie's Stoic self. Instead of giving La Boétie a physical space (for instance, by publishing his political discourse), he ostensibly ends up giving him the gift of interpretation, a gift that short-circuits — or unsettles, Guild might say — the laws of exchange and expectations. What Montaigne gives to his dead friend is the dissemination and prolonging of La Boétie's most cherished humanist ideals by way of essay, in a form that La Boétie could have never expected.

ZAHİ ZALLOUA, *Whitman College*