

*Montaigne and Shakespeare: The Emergence of Modern Self-Consciousness.*

Robert Ellrodt.

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This book is not merely Robert Ellrodt's English translation of his own *Montaigne et Shakespeare: L'émergence de la conscience moderne* (2011), but "a rewriting, a revisiting, and a revision" of that study for anglophone readership (vii). Ellrodt has been concerned with relations between Montaigne and Shakespeare for more than forty years — and with literary representations of self-consciousness for more than sixty — so in many ways this volume serves as a synthesis of his investigations and conclusions across a distinguished scholarly career.

Subjectivity and self-consistency are Ellrodt's principal concerns. Montaigne is pivotal, since, in Ellrodt's words, "an ability to detach himself from himself at the very moment of experience, which I shall call instantaneous self-reflexivity, characterizes Montaigne's self-consciousness, and I suggest that it inaugurates a notion of subjectivity more readily associated with the modern and modernity" (4). Such a claim seems familiar enough at this point in history — and relatively uncontroversial — but Ellrodt spends the bulk of his second chapter pressing the case. Augustine, he says, takes a major step forward inasmuch as he considers his soul his own; this is "a revolution in the history of self-consciousness" (38). Indeed Ellrodt thinks it likely that Montaigne read the *Confessions*, although he never mentions them. But neither Augustine nor Petrarch approach the intensity of introspection that Ellrodt finds in Montaigne: "the forms of self-consciousness observed in the *Essays* are absent or only dimly discernible in the literature of the Western world" prior to that moment (18).

Ellrodt next turns to Shakespeare, surveying both the English literary landscape up to the 1590s and the varied manifestations of self-scrutiny in the Shakespearean imaginary. Chaucer, Gower, and Sidney taught Shakespeare nothing about self-consciousness, and even the dramatic soliloquies of Kyd and Marlowe lack attention to the quicksilver movement of human thought that Ellrodt finds central to his study. Hamlet's soliloquy at the end of act 2 ("Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!") serves as Ellrodt's star witness, but he traces the genealogy of such *pensée pensante* back through various moments in the sonnets as well as to speeches by Richard II, Falstaff, Rosalind, and Brutus. Only with Hamlet, however, do we enter "the stream of consciousness of the speaker at the very moment of experience" (85). And since a writer cannot endow fictional characters with forms of self-awareness to which he or she has no access, Hamlet emerges for Ellrodt as "the best representative of Shakespearean subjectivity" (85).

Troilus, Angelo, and Macbeth round out Ellrodt's list of Shakespearean figures who exhibit Montaignean self-consciousness; Macbeth's speeches in particular prompt the impression that we enter the mind of a man "in the very moment of self-observation" (89). But on the whole Shakespeare did not privilege such remarkable levels of introspection in his plays (91). Was his attention to self-consciousness catalyzed by reading Montaigne? Ellrodt believes that it must have been: he speaks of Shakespeare's "close acquaintance with Florio's translation of Montaigne" and notes "plausible parallels" between the *Essays* and various plays produced between 1601 and 1606 (92). Thus in the end he finds it "probable" that Shakespeare read Montaigne before writing *Hamlet* — and "certain" that Shakespeare's familiarity with the *Essays* "increased his attention to the inner life and to the necessity of self-knowledge in the period from *Hamlet* to *King Lear*" (94).

Ellrodt devotes his final chapter to skepticism. Taking aim at critics who overstate the Pyrrhonian dimensions of the *Essays* or the moral and epistemological relativism of Shakespearean drama, he argues that "stable humanistic values" (144) are repeatedly foregrounded in the works of both writers. Montaigne, after all, does not adhere to the thoroughgoing Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus; skeptical doubt manifests itself in much

looser ways in his thought. And both Montaigne and Shakespeare admire such traits as truthfulness, loyalty, and compassion, while recoiling from cruelty and imposture. A corrosive or terminal skepticism cannot therefore be attributed to either author, and indeed “wisdom” is Ellrodt’s term for the impression their writings finally leave on us: “Wisdom characterized [these authors’] practice of introspection, and the balance achieved between their attention to the inner self and their observation of the outer world” (173).

Although this is a new book, it hails from another era. Ellrodt’s reading is prodigious, but he presents his arguments within an understanding of literary history that may seem narrowly conceived from the perspective of present-day early modernists. Shakespeareans and Montaignistes will nonetheless do well to read this study — and to test their intuitions against the considered judgments of a lifelong student of Western thought and literature.

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