

Philippe Desan, ed. *Dieu à notre commerce et société: Montaigne et la théologie*.

Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance 444. Geneva: Librairie Droz S.A., 2008. 312 pp. index. append. €65.27. ISBN: 978-2-600-01245-4.

This new volume represents the latest testimony to the indefatigable efforts of Philippe Desan, professor of French at the University of Chicago, editor of the journal *Montaigne Studies*, and director of the *Dictionnaire de Michel de Montaigne*, to promote the interdisciplinary study of the work of the French Renaissance author Michel de Montaigne. The volume collects nineteen talks, all in French, originally delivered at a colloquium held in Paris in March 2007, with a brief introduction and an *index nominum*. The topic of the volume represents a persistent interest in Montaigne studies and follows in the tradition of the special issue that the *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Montaigne* devoted to “La question de Dieu” in 1993.

Since Montaigne explicitly disavows any competence in theology, the contributors are at pains to justify their theme, and nearly everyone reminds us that Montaigne made his literary debut as the translator of a work of theology. The majority of the articles focus intensely and repetitively on a few key texts: the essay “Des prières” (1.56), the “Apologie de Raimond Sebond” (2.12), and Montaigne’s own French translation of Sebond’s *Theologia naturalis* first published in 1569 and reissued in 1581 under the title of *La Theologie naturelle*. Consequently, those contributors who venture beyond this limited corpus are to be congratulated, including Bernard Sève for his reading of 1.27 and Jean-Robert Armogathe for his discussion of Montaigne’s treatment of Julian the Apostate (2.19).

The general tendency of this volume is to ascribe to theology a purely instrumental role in Montaigne’s work. As a prime example, Desan’s article situates Montaigne’s translation and apology of Raymond Sebond in the context of his

shifting social and political ambitions during roughly the last twenty-five years of his life. For Desan, the “Apologie” is Montaigne’s apology for having undertaken in the 1560s a theological project that seemed by the 1580s to be a political liability. Desan’s approach can be compared to Jean Balsamo’s emphasis on Montaigne’s identity as a gentleman. For Balsamo, Montaigne published his translation of Sebond as part of a social strategy that he announces in the dedicatory epistle to his father, which bears the date of his father’s death on 18 June 1568 and which thus announces the son’s succession to the family estate. Other contributors assign a similarly subordinate role to theology, not in relation to Montaigne’s career but in relation to his intellectual and aesthetic priorities. Inverting the commonplace notion *philosophia theologiae ancilla*, Sève argues that theology is ancillary to philosophy in the *Essays*. Jan Miernowski gives us an example when he shows how Montaigne raises a theological question, divine omnipotence, in order to criticize the presumption of human language and especially the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction. Similarly, Emmanuel Faye strives to show that Montaigne chooses philosophy over theology precisely in that essay, “Des prières,” where people usually look for Montaigne’s theology. Alain Legros follows two biblical motifs in the *Essays*, the hand of God and the word of God, and concludes that their frequency does not make Montaigne a theologian. Rather, they are part of the “mosaic” (69) of the *Essays*, which is a good way to cut theology down to the size of a pebble. Both Frédéric Brahami (45) and Paul Mathias (269) speak of the “evacuation of theology” from the *Essays*. Against this tendency, Philip Hendrick affirms, through a comparison of Sebond’s text and Montaigne’s translation, the French author’s familiarity with “the essential elements of theology” (133) as well as his unimpeachable orthodoxy. The most eccentric contribution, in terms of the general tenor of the volume, is Olivier Millet’s stylistic analysis of Sebond’s Latin prose, which he undertakes in order both to rehabilitate Sebond against the enduring bias of humanism and to show what is lost in Montaigne’s translation. Reversing the priorities of his fellow contributors, Millet seems to prefer theology to Montaigne.

In general, the studies collected here take an extremely cautious approach to the powerfully anti-Christian potential of Montaigne’s writing. It is high time that someone took up the challenge of Giuliano Gliozzi’s 1987 essay “Gli Apostoli nel Nuovo Mondo” in which the Italian historian deftly shows, against a broad canvass of early modern ethnology, how Montaigne’s “Apologie” initiated a devastating critique of Christian revelation. It is a little embarrassing for modern scholars still to be afraid of the anti-Christian import of the *Essays*.

Given the haste with which these papers were brought to print, a significant number of errors have infiltrated the volume, of which I can only offer the briefest sample. One contributor refers to the essay “De l’exercicement” and even offers a learned etymology of this imaginary title. Another gets the title wrong of Jean Bodin’s *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* and for good measure repeats the exact same sentence in consecutive paragraphs, something that always annoys me when it occurs in a term paper. Finally, when we read on page 199, in the transcription of the report of the Roman censors, the phrase “Magis magnos

clericos non sunt magis magnos serpentes” instead of “sapientes,” we are eager to know who deserves the credit for this inspired error, the Renaissance censor or the modern editor?

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