

Montaigne and the Lives of the Philosophers: Life Writing and Transversality in the Essais. Alison Calhoun.

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This book is a study of Montaigne's mobilization of both the authorial strategies of Plutarch and the content of Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* for the purposes of composing a transverse self and a transverse morality. When Calhoun argues that Montaigne uses the lives of the philosophers to construct and express his transverse self and transverse morality, this seems to mean that his self and morality are the products of the fusions that he effects by crossing paths with the diverse ways of life of those philosophers chronicled by Diogenes Laertius. The results of such

intersections are a patchwork self and a nonprescriptive morality, both of which Montaigne communicates indirectly through the lives and life experiences he relates to readers in his *Essais*.

In chapter 1 Calhoun shows how in his *Parallel Lives* Plutarch presents his moral judgments indirectly by comparing and contrasting the lives of others. This indirect mode of communicating his judgments invites readers to exercise their own judgment, while the authorial strategy of comparison — with its emphasis on variety and diversity — problematizes the notion of moral exemplarity. Montaigne appropriates these authorial goals and strategies from Plutarch as he develops his own nonprescriptive form of moral writing. Chapter 2 is a discussion of how Montaigne draws from Diogenes Laertius's reports on the lives of the philosophers in order to show that very rarely did the philosophers manage to make their words and deeds consistent. By reminding his readers of these failures, Montaigne further undermines the tradition of exemplarity and makes a case for lowering our standards for virtue and wisdom.

In chapter 3, Calhoun argues that Montaigne's skepticism was a product of both his life experience and his reading of ancient texts, including the work of Sextus Empiricus and especially Diogenes Laertius's "Life of Pyrrho" (98). Chapter 4 contains reflections on Montaigne's study of the deaths of the philosophers and his experience of the death of his dear friend Étienne La Boétie. The fifth and final chapter traces the literary afterlife of the *Essais* and shows how, despite Montaigne's best efforts to challenge the notion of moral exemplarity, some early modern editors included a "Life of Montaigne" in their editions of his *Essais*, thereby betraying his intentions and presenting Montaigne himself as a moral exemplar.

While interpreting Montaigne's project vis-à-vis the genre of "lives" is both novel and fruitful, one wishes that Calhoun would expound a bit more on some of the main topics treated in the book. For example, Calhoun devotes only a few sentences in the introduction to unpacking the meaning of "transversality" (8–9), a term she uses to characterize Montaigne's self, his morality, his relationships with the lives of the philosophers, his self-portrait, and some of his assertions. More discussion of the content of the concept would help readers to appreciate more fully the significance of such characterizations. Given the lack of attention usually paid to Diogenes Laertius in treatments of Montaigne's skepticism, the priority that Calhoun gives to Diogenes Laertius's "Life of Pyrrho" in the development of Montaigne's skeptical thought is another topic that could be discussed at greater length. Situating it in the context of a more detailed elucidation of Montaigne's skepticism would be instructive. Finally, there is Montaigne's moral philosophy. In this vein, Calhoun writes of Montaigne as "demonstrating that morals are relative" (39) and of "his project of promoting moral relativism" (149). Yet she also writes that Montaigne "was not so skeptical as to rule out the possibility of moral writing altogether" (26). He makes judgments regarding "true virtue" and what it is to live "a good life" (71), and develops a "new kind of moral philosophy with a significant aversion to dogmatism" (75). These last three claims suggest that Montaigne makes tentative judgments about moral truth. But then what of

his relativism? This is not to say that the five claims just cited are necessarily incompatible, but simply that here again, while Calhoun's account is both interesting and provocative, one would like to see it more fully developed.

CHRISTOPHER EDELMAN, *University of the Incarnate Word*