

Estienne de La Boétie. *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*.

Ed. James B. Atkinson. Trans. James B. Atkinson and David Sices. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2012. xlviii + 46 pp. \$7.95. ISBN: 978-1-60384-839-8.

The sixteenth-century *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* remains one of the most enigmatic tracts in the history of political thought. While its author offers a straightforward, impassioned denunciation of tyranny, his failure to distinguish consistently between monarchy and tyranny leaves it unclear whether he allows for the possibility of legitimate monarchical government, or regards all nonrepublican government as illegitimate. Equally ambiguous is his remedy for tyranny. While his contention, early on in the *Discourse*, that in order to free themselves, it suffices that people simply refuse to obey a tyrant, won the tract the admiration of such advocates of nonviolent resistance as Thoreau and Tolstoy — although it is hard to see how such passivity could suffice to overthrow a truly ruthless ruler — the author's later praise of a series of classical tyrannicides (such as Harmodius and Brutus) compels one to doubt his commitment to nonviolence.

No less mysterious are questions concerning the *Discourse's* date of composition and its authorship. It is attributed to the sixteenth-century Bordeaux judicial official Etienne de la Boétie (1530–63) solely on the testimony of Michel de Montaigne, who after offering a lengthy account of the close friendship that the two men supposedly enjoyed in his essay “Of Friendship,” promises to make the *Discourse* the centerpiece of his *Essays* by reproducing it in the following (central) chapter of book 1 — only to renege on the promise at the end of “Of Friendship” on the ground that the work had been “brought to light . . . with evil intent, by those who seek to disturb and change the state of our government without worrying whether they will improve it.” Montaigne is apparently referring to the anonymous publication of the *Discourse* by a Huguenot editor in 1577 — three years before the first edition of the *Essays* appeared — as well as the previous publication of a fragment by the Protestants in 1574. But if Montaigne had truly changed his mind about including the *Discourse* in the *Essays*, why did he retain his original promise to do so, instead of suppressing it? Why associate his friend's name with the *Discourse*?

Why did he alter his account of the author's age? And why substitute for the *Discourse* in *Essays* 1.29 "29 Sonnets of Etienne de la Boétie" — only to remove them from the final edition of the *Essays* with the enigmatic remark "these verses may be seen elsewhere"? Finally, how can a revolutionary tract like the *Discourse* have been composed by the same man identified by Montaigne as the author of the *Memoir on the Edict of January, 1562*, which advocated a policy of rather severe repression toward the Huguenots — albeit in combination with reforms in the Church?

The foregoing issues, along with certain seeming anachronisms in the *Discourse* (such as a reference to Ronsard's *Franciade*, which did not appear until 1572) form part of the reasons that have led some scholars, beginning with the great Montaignist Arthur Armaingaud, and including more recently Daniel Martin and the present reviewer, to doubt Montaigne's entire account of the tract, and to suspect that its real author was Montaigne himself. (See the essays by Martin, Régine Reynolds-Cornell, and me in my 1998 book *Freedom over Servitude*.) Unfortunately, the editor of this otherwise quite valuable translation of the *Discourse*, James B. Atkinson, never mentions most of these issues in his lengthy introductory essay. The translation, by Atkinson and David Sices, is based on the best French edition, prepared by Malcolm Smith and Michel Magnien. Atkinson and Sices offer a generous selection of notes, indicating many of the text's classical sources and identifying sometimes-obscure classical personages. Their translation combines the virtues of faithfulness to the sense of the text with readability in English. And it comes with a useful, brief bibliography.

Because of its publication in an inexpensive paperback edition, this new translation should be of value not only to English-speaking scholars of political theory, but also as a text to be assigned in classes on early modern political thought. It is regrettable only that editor didn't make more of an effort to familiarize his audience with the book's mysteries.

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