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Arlette Jouanna, *Montaigne*. Paris: Gallimard, 2017. 454 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. €24.50 (pb). ISBN 978-2070147069.

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Every book about Montaigne reveals a new version of him, or tries to. *Montaigne* by Arlette Jouanna stakes its claim early on that it is something like “pure” biography, rather than emphasizing the political, the atheist, or the amorous Montaigne (p. 15). Still, Jouanna joins other critics and biographers in refuting the old image of the writer in his tower, who, during a period of great turbulence, “watches from his window a while and then turns away to open another book.”[1] This Montaigne is dynamic and politically engaged. Jouanna, one of the foremost historians of sixteenth-century France whose major works have explored the nature of early modern state and sovereign power, shows above all how Montaigne existed within complex networks of action and allegiance. However, offering a slight corrective to the aforementioned recent emphases on the politically-engaged Montaigne, Jouanna thinks that claims of his ambition have been slightly over-egged (p. 15); she doubts that he ever wanted to be an ambassador and suggests that family duty and honour would have held Montaigne back from playing the role of an ambitious courtier (pp. 72-3). Influence and responsibility just happened to come to him, as well as being the outcome of his efforts and those of his relatives. What emerges from this approach is a persuasive account of the contingencies governing Montaigne’s life and world, as well as an exploration of his possible motivations.

The structure of the biography is both chronological and thematic. The opening section about Montaigne’s youth and family background describes Montaigne as something of a late bloomer: changes in his father’s will in 1567 (updating that of 1561) suggest that he may have become a more responsible son in this period (p. 43). There is a discussion of tensions within the Eyquem/Montaigne family—tensions that outlived Montaigne himself, and that he stoked by leaving his estate to his daughter’s oldest-born son, instead of to his brother (p. 33). Jouanna describes Montaigne’s early career as a kind of legal servitude. His subsequent desire for his own kind of freedom is a key structuring feature of the biography. She points to his meeting with Etienne de la Boëtie and his encounter with New World peoples (in travellers’ accounts and in real life, although exactly where and when is hard to pinpoint, p. 91), his father asking him to translate Sebond, and his fall from horseback, as the key events that made Montaigne Montaigne. Later chapters concern his travels in Europe, his time as Mayor of Bordeaux, and his final years as a well-known figure in the world of letters. This structure is not revealing for specialists, but Jouanna’s work is surely also intended for readers who are relatively unfamiliar with Montaigne, and/or with the French Wars of Religion, and her discussions of classic parts of the *Essais* are

well done, for instance her analysis of the slow construction of “parce que c’estoy luy, parce que c’estoy moy” (p. 87), and her association of Montaigne’s “crottesques” (his writings) with the grotesques that might frame a central painting (p. 77). She is sympathetic to Marie de Gournay in the debate about the authenticity of Montaigne’s declaration of her worthiness of his friendship in II,17 (p. 289). Jouanna’s Montaigne is typically thoughtful and anxious, but also playful: she quotes Etienne Pasquier’s comment that he loved to provoke, and describes the way he disarmed a more austere fellow *bordelais* writer, Pierre de Lancre (p. 178). The more mature Montaigne comes across as well connected in both literary and political circles, and generally successful at maintaining his delicate balancing of the roles of writer, landlord, mayor, and political negotiator.

The latter two roles are given most attention in the second half of the book. Indeed, in the chapter on Montaigne’s decision to print his work, we don’t get much about the practical process or his readers; we find much more about the political situation in which the *Essais* might make their mark. One of the most compelling elements of this biography is the narration of the civil wars, and Montaigne’s place therein, in which Jouanna describes with detail his dealings with local and national actors. Jouanna foregrounds Montaigne’s local activities and his relationship with Matignon, the moderate Catholic Lieutenant-General of Guyenne (first introduced p. 86), as well exploring his better-known associations with the courts of France and Navarre. A particularly exciting passage treats the period leading up to the death of the Duc d’Aleçon in 1583-4: Montaigne is brokering marital peace between Marguerite de Valois and Henri de Navarre, attempting to influence the latter’s mistress, the Comtesse de Guiche, and appeasing Matignon in the context of a new threat to Nérac after Navarre has taken Mont-de-Marsan: “Montaigne dut agir sur tous les fronts” (pp. 251-2). Jouanna is scathing of biographers who speculate that Montaigne might have been the lover of Diane de Foix or even Marguerite de Valois (p. 144) though this does not stop her asserting that Montaigne was probably attracted to Marie de Gournay but couldn’t act on it (pp. 290-91). In her authoritative arbitration between the likely and improbable in as-yet unprovable facts about Montaigne, most significantly Jouanna allows for the possibility that, around 1586, Montaigne could have acted as intermediary between two bitter enemies: the Duc de Guise and Henri de Navarre (pp. 268-69). She acknowledges that since Montaigne was a “simple gentilhomme” this would have been surprising, but her biography allows the reader to imagine that a combination of circumstance and special qualities made Montaigne the man to attempt an unlikely peace at a time of high tension. Still, Jouanna then cuts him down to size by reminding us that, the following year, Montaigne was miserably wandering between friends’ houses to avoid the plague in Bordeaux, while a different Montaigne (François Montaigne) was valued sufficiently to be called by Catherine de Medici to her negotiations with Navarre and Condé (p. 273). Montaigne was exceptional, and important, but at times he was not, in fact, the most important or influential Montaigne in France.

The somewhat revised Michel de Montaigne of Jouanna’s biography is ardent and vital. Jouanna reminds us that when Montaigne started writing the *Essais* he was in robust health (p. 10), and gives the impression that the younger Michel was somewhat aimless and fun-loving (p. 44); she does not hide his later physical frailty, but nor does she linger much on details of his illnesses or his melancholic disposition (though she does briefly wonder whether he was suicidal after La Boétie’s death, p. 115). The chapter on *oisiveté* is one of the most well known of the *Essais*. Jouanna’s reading of it emphasises a positive, productive gloss: Montaigne’s *oisiveté* is “la capacité de se livrer à des occupations honorables” (p. 11). Her reading of the “Apologie de Raimond Sebond” argues for its usefulness in countering dogma and zealotry (pp. 107-112). This might all be part of her ultimate argument that Montaigne should serve as a positive, even curative

influence on readers today: “La fréquentation des *Essais* est un antidote aux maux qui menacent l’indépendance intellectuelle et le plaisir de vivre” (p. 358).<sup>[2]</sup> She also criticizes depictions of Montaigne as a conservative or particularly cautious thinker, arguing that in a period of great upheaval he was more accommodating of change and new practices than many of his contemporaries (p. 298), which is a striking intervention for specialists and lay readers alike, lightly made in the space of a paragraph as part of a broader argument about Montaigne’s idea of freedom.

Overall this is an enjoyable and interesting book that skilfully marries detail and overview. Those with historical leanings might find it especially to their taste, for all that Jouanna is adamant that the literary nature of the work must be uppermost in readers’ minds (p. 15). In any case this is certainly a useful book for anyone wanting to put Montaigne in context, so that he seems at once a more and less exceptional person in his own time. Jouanna draws on a range of archival sources, Montaigne’s notes in his *Beuther*, his journal, and his letters, but the primary source is the *Essais* themselves. It might be churlish to ask a biographer to be more sceptical or probing about how factual the *Essais* might be, since they are such a clear example of life writing and rich with autobiographical detail that can be corroborated; still, although Jouanna notes the instability of the first person and the “moy” in the *Essais* (p. 136) and approvingly cites Frank Lestringant’s description of the *Essais* as “thought experiments” (p. 177), the experimental Montaigne who fantasizes and fabricates recedes somewhat in a “pure” biography.<sup>[3]</sup>

## NOTES

[1] George Hoffmann, *Montaigne’s Career* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), p. 37; see also Philippe Desan, *Montaigne: une biographie politique* (Paris: Jacob, 2014), whom Jouanna cites approvingly in a footnote, p. 366, n. 10.

[2] This is a longstanding view of Montaigne’s usefulness. Desan describes him as having been viewed as a model for the post-war West in his introduction to Hugo Friedrich’s *Montaigne*, ed. by Philippe Desan, trans. Dawn Eng (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: UCLA Press, 1991), pp. ix-xxvi.

[3] Frank Lestringant, “Montaigne, le Brésil, et l’unité du genre humain,” *Montaigne Studies* 22 (2010): p. 12.

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