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Ioana Manea, *Politics and Scepticism in La Mothe Le Vayer: The Two-Faced Philosopher?* Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2019. 203 pp. Text and bibliography. 58€ (pb). ISBN 9783823382836.

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Ioana Manea's *Politics and Scepticism in La Mothe Le Vayer* seeks to untangle the ambiguities and apparent contradictions inherent in the writings of seventeenth-century humanist polymath François de La Mothe Le Vayer. Although he served as a tutor for the young Louis XIV, La Mothe Le Vayer also acquired a reputation for being a libertine and embracing the subversive philosophy of Pyrrhonian skepticism. His extensive writings included both manuals for the instruction of the dauphin and skeptical dialogues about various subjects. While he openly embraced fideism, a view that privileged the reliance on faith over reason, his writings also seemed to challenge established intellectual and political authorities. Manea offers an original reading of these texts, paying attention both to his controversial writings and works "he wrote for the powerful" (p. 13).

La Mothe Le Vayer was a controversial thinker among his contemporaries, and he remains the subject of debates among modern scholars. As the preeminent historian of skepticism Richard Popkin has pointed out, La Mothe Le Vayer has been alternatively described as "the Christian sceptic" and as the "epicurean unbeliever."^[1] Disagreements about the sincerity of his fideism divide scholars into those who read him as a Christian Pyrrhonist and those who see his fideism as dissimulated and his ideas as advocating irreligion and challenging established authorities.^[2] Manea thus seeks to resolve this dichotomy and to explain how La Mothe Le Vayer "wrote in order to support or, apparently, to undermine the powerful" (p. 13).

Manea's book begins by examining La Mothe Le Vayer's writings on human knowledge and skepticism. She explains how his embrace of skepticism did not preclude him from pursuing philosophical investigations. Criticizing dogmatic thinkers for trying "to impose on the universe a regularity that is foreign to it" (p. 34), La Mothe Le Vayer noted that "the fierce disagreements" among the different philosophical systems discredited each of them (p. 34-35). It was this "juxtaposition of contradictions" that ultimately justified "the suspension of judgment or the *épokhê*" (p. 40). La Mothe Le Vayer was particularly critical of philosophers who sought to go beyond the apparent or visible nature of things and speculated about hidden causes. Nevertheless, in his view, the suspension of judgment did not preclude the possibility of "appreciating the different theories that are meant to explain the phenomena of the world" in a dispassionate and disinterested manner (p. 52).

Manea goes on to detail La Mothe Le Vayer's depictions of politicians, which are even less flattering than his descriptions of dogmatic philosophers. He insisted that rulers were not "endowed with exceptional qualities" and did not possess superior intelligence (p. 64). In fact, the skeptical courtier seemed to believe that "even the most extraordinary actions of rulers do not result from a rigorous examination of the situation, but from passions that are by definition irrational" (p. 65-66). Nor did La Mothe Le Vayer seem to think that "political science" could be established on rational foundations (p. 80). Manea explains how he applied skeptical arguments to demonstrate contradictions inherent in various theories of political power, each of "which contains its own justification" (p. 84). La Mothe Le Vayer thus noted the "vicious circle" through which "the legitimacy of the power" held by rulers "derives from the fact that they possess it and exert it" (p. 84).

Furthermore, La Mothe Le Vayer reasoned that abstract political theories had very little influence on the practice of politics. Fortune, not foresight, determined "the success or failure of political actions" (p. 87). It was only by concealing the arbitrary nature of their decisions in a cloud of mystery that political leaders managed to preserve the façade of superiority above their subjects. Thus, they made it seem as though their decisions had been carefully considered on the basis of an elaborate science of governing and hid the ways in which their practices transgressed ethical standards. This propensity to conceal the process of decision making was, in La Mothe Le Vayer's view, more broadly related to trickery and deception that have always been intrinsic to politics along with violence and the insatiable ambition of conquerors. It was this persistent deception that rendered political leaders untrustworthy.

Chapter three discusses La Mothe Le Vayer's instructions in "political science" that he articulated in *De l'instruction de Monsieur le Dauphin* (1640) (p. 96). Manea highlights the different subjects that the royal tutor recommended for the future prince. Above all, La Mothe Le Vayer stressed the pragmatic and "practical character" of politics and emphasized the fact that theoretical knowledge of the "fundamental axioms" of politics did "not necessarily guarantee the success of their application" (p. 100). Manea examines La Mothe Le Vayer's ambiguous attitude toward the doctrine of reason of state, first articulated by Giovanni Botero in *Della ragion di stato* (1589). She argues that while La Mothe Le Vayer understood that this principle was "unavoidable," he sought to minimize "its application" (p. 127), putting priority on "the preservation" rather than "the expansion" of the state (p. 132).

Manea pays particular attention to how La Mothe Le Vayer addressed the controversial issue of the relationship between church and state. She compares his views to those of his patron Cardinal Richelieu, who argued for the "pre-eminence of the secular over the sacred in all political matters," while insisting that "the final purpose of politics is religious" (p. 109). La Mothe Le Vayer likewise defended "the autonomy of the French sovereigns" with respect to the popes (p. 108), but also warned the prince against "excessive zeal" (p. 110). His proposed solutions to the religious schism in France argued for convincing "Protestants to return to the Catholic faith" rather than compelling them with force (p. 111). The discussion of religious toleration calls for a more in-depth examination of La Mothe Le Vayer's religious views that raised and continue to raise some controversy. Could his call "for the separation between the spiritual and the secular areas" have ulterior motives and reinforce the interpretation of him as a subversive thinker in religious matters (p. 115)?

The fourth chapter discusses La Mothe Le Vayer's views about the relative merits of the active life of a civic humanist who might influence political developments and the contemplative life of a philosopher. While Manea suggests that he seemed to prefer the latter, she also argues that La Mothe Le Vayer saw "scholarly leisure" as having potentially beneficial effects on the world by "disseminating knowledge that they obtain during their retirement" (p. 148-49). Another way that philosophers could influence the prince was by acting as "political advisers" who would provide the prince with "guiding principles" that emphasize "the limits of his power" and the "obligations towards his subjects" (p. 185). Manea explores the "two types of works written" by the skeptical courtier: those "about detachment from a kind of politics whose mechanisms he is not afraid of dismantling" and those that "aim at educating the future king" (p. 158). She argues that the apparent "contradiction between participation and indifference" becomes less categorical when the common features and similar passages in the two kinds of works are considered (p. 158). Manea's analysis suggests that La Mothe Le Vayer shared "the rejection of boundless royal omnipotence" (p. 166). His texts consistently urged the king to be just and prudent, stressed the duties of the monarch to his people, emphasized the importance of respecting the law, and warned that absolute power was reserved for God.

Although the book offers meticulous examinations of La Mothe Le Vayer's texts, it would benefit from articulating a clearer overarching argument about his views and their significance. While the individual chapters provide excellent close readings of La Mothe Le Vayer's texts, they sometimes seem disconnected from each other. The structure of the discussion can make it difficult to discern the forest from the trees and to make sense of the relationship between La Mothe Le Vayer's epistemological skepticism and his normative political instructions. The disjunction between the two is especially confusing when we consider La Mothe Le Vayer's views about the relativity of moral standards (discussed in chapter one) on the one hand, and his insistence on princes adhering to ethical principles in political affairs on the other. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to analyze in greater depth the category of political skepticism, which could be both conservative and subversive in nature. [3]

The book would also be strengthened by a more extensive contextual analysis. While the author provides meticulous interpretations of La Mothe Le Vayer's writings, she does not always set them in their intellectual, cultural, and social milieus. While comparing his ideas to authors like Gabriel Naudé, Cornelius Jansen, Botero, and Richelieu, Manea sometimes overlooks the skeptical tradition. Seventeenth-century France was the center for the revival of skeptical thought, and it would have been helpful to put La Mothe Le Vayer's ideas in dialogue with those of his contemporaries and near contemporaries like Michel de Montaigne, Blaise Pascal, Simon Foucher, and Pierre-Daniel Huet. Setting La Mothe Le Vayer's ideas in a broader intellectual context would shed greater light on the learned culture in which they emerged.

Manea does a great job of situating some of La Mothe Le Vayer's views in the context of seventeenth-century international politics, particularly France's conflicts with Spain. One might expect more discussion about La Mothe Le Vayer's role as courtier and how that experience shaped his ideas. After all, he witnessed the intrigues and deceptive practices of Louis XIII's and Louis XIV's courtiers firsthand. Similarly, the author could have further analyzed La Mothe Le Vayer's decision to retire from all official functions and leave the court in 1660, devoting the rest of his life to scholarly pursuits. Without such contextual grounding, his ideas can sometimes seem overly abstract and divorced from the political landscape that informed them.

Despite some of these shortcomings, *Politics and Scepticism in La Mothe Le Vayer* uncovers the complex and seemingly paradoxical ideas of a figure who should receive far more scholarly attention than he has. The book will be of interest to philosophers, intellectual historians, and literary scholars, and it is sure to continue debates about how to interpret this elusive and fascinating thinker.

NOTES

[1] Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 82.

[2] Compare, for example: Gianni Paganini, “Pyrrhonisme tout pur’ ou ‘circoncis’? La dynamique du scepticisme chez La Mothe Le Vayer” in Antony McKenna and Pierre-François Moreau (eds.), *Libertinage et philosophie au XVII^e siècle*, no. 2. (Saint-Etienne: Université de Saint-Etienne 1997), pp. 7-31; Sylvia Giocanti, “La Mothe Le Vayer: Modes de diversion sceptique,” in Antony McKenna and Pierre-François Moreau (eds.), *Libertinage et philosophie au XVII^e siècle*, no. 2. Saint-Etienne: Université de Saint-Etienne, 1997), pp. 32-48; Sylvia Giocanti, “La Mothe Le Vayer et la pratique du doute,” *La Lettre clandestine* 10 (2001): 31-42; Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, pp. 82-87; José R. Maia Neto, *Academic Skepticism in Seventeenth-Century French Philosophy: The Charronian Legacy 1601-1662* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014); Sylvia Giocanti, “François de La Mothe Le Vayer,” in Diego E. Machuca and Baron Reed (eds.), *Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 283-94.

[3] See, for example: John Christian Laursen and Gianni Paganini, eds., *Skepticism and political thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

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