

‘Self-Possession and Carelessness:  
Two Versions of Liberty in Montaigne’s *Essais*’

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**Introduction**

This paper is based on certain leading elements of my recently completed PhD thesis about Montaigne, which I am currently revising for publication as a monograph. More than any other literary or philosophical work of its period, the *Essais* have come to be regarded as a landmark in the development of a distinctively modern subjectivity, positing a private, inner identity or authentic individual self, incommensurable with outward appearance and a world of artificial, compromised public roles. My work calls these existing interpretations of Montaigne’s introspective enterprise into question by drawing attention to a crucial but hitherto overlooked strand in his conception of self: his concern to secure for himself a sphere of liberty that could properly be called his own, or himself. The historical importance and interest of the *Essais* thus lie not only in Montaigne’s anticipation of later forms of autobiographical and introspective writing, but in his distinctive and highly nuanced approach to the problem of personal freedom.

Liberty, as I argue in my paper, appears in Montaigne in two contrasting but convergent guises. In the first place, freedom is construed as self-possession: to be free is to belong to oneself, instead of living at the mercy of external agents, forces and goods. In the second place, this robust language of independence intersects with a seemingly antithetical understanding of liberty as a state of carelessness – a conception that unites idleness (or leisure) with negligence (or effortlessness). Far from being incompatible with each other, these two threads of discourse are inseparably connected within a single vision of freedom as a state of self-containment and disengagement, achieved by ‘economising’ or ‘managing’ one’s will in such a way as to preserve it from both domination and perturbation.

**Bibliographical Note**

The Text of the ‘Essais’

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) is thought to have begun work on the *Essais* in 1571. Books I and II were first published in 1580:

*Essais de Messire Michel Seigneur de Montaigne, Chevalier de l’Ordre du Roy et Gentilhomme ordinaire de sa Chambre* (Bordeaux: Simon Millanges, 1580).

The 1588 edition saw the addition of a third volume and numerous insertions to the two existing books:

*Essais de Michel Seigneur de Montaigne: cinquieme edition, augmentee d'un troisieme livre et de six cens additions aux deus premiers* (Paris: Abel L'Angelier, 1588).

The margins of the 'Exemplaire de Bordeaux' (EB) – Montaigne's own working copy of the 1588 edition – contain further insertions and emendations made in his own hand in the years before his death in 1592. EB may now be consulted online:

*The Montaigne Project: Villey edition of the Essais with corresponding digital page images from the Bordeaux Copy.* The ARTFL Project / Montaigne Studies, University of Chicago.  
<http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/montaigne>

EB diverges at a number of points from the first posthumous edition prepared by Montaigne's 'fille d'alliance', Marie de Gournay, which provides the most complete version of the text:

*Les Essais de Michel Seigneur de Montaigne: edition nouvelle, trouvee apres le deceds de l'Autheur, reueuë et augmentee par luy d'un tiers plus qu'aux precedentes Impressions* (Paris: Abel L'Angelier, 1595).

Most twentieth-century editions of the *Essais* were based on EB, with the 1595 variants being judged inauthentic. In more recent years, however, a convincing case has been made for the rehabilitation of Gournay's text, leading to the publication of a major new critical edition based on the 1595 edition (this is the edition cited in my paper):

*Les Essais*, eds. Jean Balsamo, Michel Magnien and Catherine Magnien-Simonin. (Paris: Gallimard [Bibliothèque de la Pléiade], 2007).

The most reliable English translation, finally, is still

*The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford, CA: University of California Press, 1958).

Frame's version has provided the starting-point for all my translations of Montaigne into English. However, I have frequently taken the liberty of modifying Frame's text in order to reflect Montaigne's choice of language with greater accuracy. Moreover, since Frame based his translation on EB, I have supplied my own translations for those passages added to the 1595 text.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

On the problem of public engagement in the *Essais*:

Geoff Baldwin, 'Individual and Self in the Late Renaissance', *The Historical Journal* 44 (2001): 141-74.

Frédéric Brahami, "'Estre à soy": la place du politique dans les *Essais*', in Philippe Desan (ed.), *Montaigne politique* (Paris: Champion, 2006): 39-56.

Timothy Hampton, 'Difficult Engagements: Private Passion and Public Service in Montaigne's *Essais*', in Victoria Kahn, Neil Saccamano and Daniela Coli (eds.), *Politics and the Passions, 1500-1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006): 30-48.

On Montaigne's moral and political preoccupations more generally:

Biancamaria Fontana, *Montaigne's Politics: Authority and Governance in the 'Essais'* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2008).

Ullrich Langer, *Vertu du discours, discours de la vertu: Littérature et philosophie morale au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle en France* (Geneva: Droz, 1999).

David Quint, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy: Ethical and Political Themes in the 'Essais'* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1998).

Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1572-1651* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1993).

On the philosophical project of the *Essais* and its connection to notions of (intellectual) liberty:

Warren Boutcher, 'Montaigne's Legacy', in Ullrich Langer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2005): 27-52.

Pierre Force, 'Montaigne and the Coherence of Eclecticism', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70 (2009): 523-44.

Richard Scholar, *Montaigne and the Art of Free-Thinking* (Oxford: Peter Lang, forthcoming)

On the significance of Montaigne's self-portrait:

Terence Cave, 'Fragments of a Future Self: From Pascal to Montaigne', in Neil Kenny and Wes Williams (eds.), *Retrospectives: Essays in Literature, Poetics and Cultural History by Terence Cave* (Oxford: Legenda, 2009): 130-145.

George Hoffmann, 'Portrayal from Life, or to Life? The *Essais*'s Living Effigy', *French Forum* 25 (2000): 145-63.

### About the Author

Felicity Green is a Junior Research Fellow in Intellectual History at Trinity College, Cambridge. She received her BA in History, her MPhil in Political Thought and Intellectual History and her PhD (awarded July 2010) at King's College, Cambridge. In addition to revising her doctoral thesis for publication, she is currently embarking on a new project about the household (and the language of household management) in sixteenth and seventeenth-century thought. Her publications include:

'Reading Montaigne in the Twenty-First Century', *The Historical Journal* 52 (2009): 1085-1109

'Freedom and Self-Possession in Montaigne's *Essais*' in Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen (eds.), *Freedom and the Construction of Europe: New Perspectives on Religious, Philosophical and Political Controversies*, Cambridge University Press (under review)

'Montaigne and Toleration' in *Politics and Religion* (special issue on 'Toleration c.1550-1820, eds. Timothy Stanton and Jon Parkin) (in preparation)