

“JE SUIS MOY-MESMES LA MATIERE DE MON LIVRE”:
SEXUAL AMBIGUITIES AND FRIENDSHIP IN MONTAIGNE’S *ESSAIS*

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ABSTRACT

EMILY R. CRANFORD: “Je suis moy-mesmes la matière de mon livre”: Sexual Ambiguities and Friendship in Montaigne’s *Essais*
(Under the direction of Hassan Melehy)

While ambiguity’s ultimate role is to create “infinis *Essais*” in the minds of Montaigne’s readers, gender, sexuality and friendship play decisive roles in the significance of this ambiguity. Montaigne’s oscillation between misogyny and feminism is manifested in the female voice and female persona that the essayist establishes for himself. His exploration of friendship with men and women offers the reader a plethora of contradictions, problematizations, destabilization and uncertainty; “De l’amitié” is at the same time an homage to and mourning for Etienne de La Boétie. Montaigne makes his readers consider love between men in ways they most certainly had not before. He recreates the ancients’ debate about love between men, thus continuing their contemplation of homosexuality to an infinity that is atemporal. Montaigne’s friendship with Marie de Gournay enables her to multiply the meaning of his *Essais* with a feminist objective, thereby problematizing the misogynistic passages in Montaigne’s *Essais*.

To LJW and PNB, to MDD and CJL, as close to *amitiez parfaites* as I'll get

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“La peinture . . . se cherche à travers les siècles et ne s’achève jamais” writes Simone de Beauvoir in *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*. She continues,

[U]n tableau où seraient résolus tous les problèmes picturaux est proprement inconcevable ; mais c’est ce mouvement vers sa propre réalité qui est la peinture elle-même ; il n’est pas le vain déplacement d’une meule tournant à vide ; il se concrétise sur chaque toile comme une existence absolue. L’art, la science ne se constituent pas malgré l’échec, mais à travers lui ; ce qui n’empêche pas qu’il y ait des vérités et des erreurs, des chefs-d’œuvre et des navets, selon que la découverte, le tableau, ont su ou non gagner l’adhésion des consciences humaines (181).

Just as in Beauvoir’s work art evolves through multiplicity, existence is ambiguous and thus meaning never fixed, Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais* develop through multiplicity in meaning. Their very nature is ambiguous, and the meaning that readers find is never fixed. In fact, the essay as genre is Montaignian in origin; and the author’s work is none other than a collection of “tries” or attempts at finding truth while producing paths of contemplation for his readers. Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais* are an effort at exploring and understanding humanity in general, especially through the personal experiences of the author; at the same time the essayist’s primary goal is to illuminate the minds of his readers so that through them his considerations will multiply into infinite essays. Indeed, Montaigne avers in his first essay, “Par divers moyens on arrive à pareille fin,”(I.1) "Certes, c’est un subject merueilleusement vain, *divers* et ondoyant, que l’homme. Il est malaisé d’y fonder jugement *constant et uniforme*" (I.1.4 emphasis mine ERC). George Saintsbury finds that “there is

hardly any writer in whom the human comedy is treated with such completeness as it is in Montaigne . . . there are few parts of life on which he does not touch, if only to show the eternal contrast and antithesis which dominate it” (37).

The ambiguity of human nature, which consequently requires an ambiguous discourse, is of supreme importance in Montaigne’s *Essais*. While the essayist discusses diverse and countless examples of the ambiguities of man’s existence, he avers that the ultimate ambiguity of human existence is that “philosopher, c’est apprendre à mourir . . . c’est que toute la sagesse et discours du monde se resoult en fin à ce point, de nous apprendre à ne craindre point à la mort”; indeed it is as Beauvoir cites that “le continuel ouvrage de notre vie, c’est bastir la mort” (I.20.81, Beauvoir 11). Montaigne expresses ambiguous sentiments towards both women and sexuality; his discourse on friendship employs ambiguity in order to illuminate the minds of his readers. In fact, Montaigne’s goal in writing is “produir[e] infinis *Essais*” (I.28.282).

“Produira infinis *Essais*”:
The role of ambiguity and meaning in the *Essais*

In Montaigne’s work, meaning is not wholly included in the text; the author’s intention is to illuminate the reader’s mind rather than to give simply his own opinion of a certain subject. Through a proliferation of anecdotes and examples, through numerous citations in Latin and classical Greek¹, and above all through the ambiguity of his style and

¹ There are in fact very few citations in Greek, which Montaigne always follows with a French translation.

syntax,² Montaigne creates a veritable multiplicity of possible paths for his reader's mind and imagination. Thus, the act of reading the *Essais* requires a certain work for the reader; indeed, the author's citations interrupt Montaigne's prose, and the reader's mind is momentarily preoccupied with a point of view other than the author's. While Montaigne's contemporaries (who knew Latin) change from thinking in French to thinking or reading in Latin, modern readers must consult translations; this break is conducive to their contemplation of different, opposing points of view. The reader must penetrate the text and plunge into it – a superficial reading of the *Essais* is impossible. In this way Montaigne reinforces his concept of one's writing as female subject and the act of reading by a male object.³ Reading the *Essais* is consequently an act of masculine sexuality; the male reader enters and penetrates the text in order to spark his imagination. Thus, not only is Montaigne's text like his offspring; the very act of its being read is a sexual act between a male reader and female text whose offspring is the reader's resulting interpretation, opinion and thought. And even though the author of the *Essais* says, "Je sçay bien, quand j'oy quelqu'un qui s'arreste au langage des *Essais*, que j'aymeroy mieux qu'il s'en teust," it is evident that Montaigne means something other than it would seem (I.40.303). In effect, it is not that Montaigne does not appreciate the penetration of writing; it is that he does not want close analysis to stop the reader in his interpretation and response to the text. The truth in

² Kirsti Sellevold adeptly illustrates the ways in which certain expressions of doubt in the *Essais* ("J'aime ces mots qui moderent et amolissent la temerité de nos propositions : A l'avanture [peut-être], Aucunement, On dict, Quelque, Je pense et semblables") set an ambiguous tone: "Puisque les expressions qui nous intéressent sont des marqueurs de la présence du locuteur dans l'énoncé, elles sont en fait susceptibles de donner accès au cœur même du projet des *Essais*, tel qu'il se définit dans l'avis *Au lecteur* : « je suis moy mesme la matiere de mon livre ». . . . Cette démarche interprétative focalise plus précisément sur les aspects du texte qui établissent les rapports entre le locuteur et les opinions ou matériaux de son texte. . . . Il s'agit donc d'une manière de lire (ou d'interpréter) qui permettrait en fait de capter la pluralité des perspectives dont est constitué le texte des *Essais* et offrirait, partant, une chance de ne pas réduire la complexité de ce texte qui ne cesse, aujourd'hui encore, d'intriguer " (18, 25).

³ See chapter 2 for further discussion of text and reader as gendered.

and the goal of Montaigne's writing, as the author knows well, is not always found in his words alone.

The way in which Montaigne expresses himself, through ambiguity or at least uncertainty that sparks the reader's intellect and imagination, is of utmost importance; in fact, his rather long discussion of the impossibility of publishing his thoughts in the form of letters emphasizes how very much the author values and judges all writing, especially his own.⁴ Montaigne is sensitive to style, diction, syntax and the use of citation – according to him, the beauty and utility of a work are derived from its ability to employ these elements in order to produce readers' considerations and questions. In fact, Montaigne esteems the reader's capacity to appreciate poetry much more highly than the poet's prowess in writing it:

Voicy merveille : nous avons bien plus de poëtes, que de juges et interpretes de poësie. Il est plus aisé de la faire, que de la cognoistre. . . . Mais la bonne, l'excessive, la divine [poésie] est au-dessus des regles et da la raison. . . . [La poésie] ne pratique point nostre jugement ; *elle le ravit et ravage. La fureur qui espoinçonne celuy qui la scait penetrer* Dès ma premiere enfance, la poësie a eu cela, de me *transpercer et transporter* (I.37.283-4 emphasis mine ERC).

In this way Montaigne reverses gender positions by having poetry, whose gender is female, taking an active role in what seems to be a sexual act between her and her reader – Montaigne. He then problematizes this gender role reversal by positioning the reader in the role of penetrator.⁵ She ravages him and produces a sort of uncontrollable passion in the reader who knows how to penetrate her – as woman (whose sexuality is overpowering) has on man.⁶

⁴ See "Consideration sur Ciceron" (I.40).

⁵ See chapter 3 for further discussion on gender and sexual penetration.

⁶ Chapter 2 examines female sexuality and Montaigne's complex and ambivalent sentiments towards it.

Montaigne's style employs many means of sparking the reader's imagination. First, his citations (which often have little to no relevance to the subject he is discussing) give the reader a different point of departure for contemplation than Montaigne's words and thoughts alone; they lead the reader to consider well the essay's subject. In fact, Montaigne believes that an analysis of his own text that focuses on diction rather than entire meaning:

N'est pas tant eslever les mots, comme c'est deprimer le sens . . . ny mes allegations ne servent pas tousjours simplement d'exemple, d'autorité ou d'ornement. Je ne les regarde pas seulement par l'usage que j'en tire. Elles portent souvent, hors de mon propos, la semence d'une matiere plus riche et plus hardie, et sonnent à gauche un ton plus delicat, et pour moy qui n'en veux exprimer d'avantage, et pour ceux qui rencontreront mon air (I.40.303).

Double meanings create ambiguity in Montaigne's text as well; more than simply a multiplicity of meanings, Montaigne's double meanings are even sometimes contradictory. He establishes ambiguity first in the inconsistency of clear meaning, and also in the possibility of a double interpretation of sentences due to the duplicitous meaning of a single word. For example, in "De l'institution des enfans" (I.26) Montaigne flatters Madame Diane de Foix, Contesse de Gurson, to whom this essay is formally addressed: "Vous estes trop genereuse pour commencer autrement que par un masle" (I.26.158). *Genereuse* has two Latin stems and three different meanings for Montaigne: *generosus* or of noble origin,⁷ and *genus* or origin⁸. In addition, *generosus* can also mean producing well, specifically of plants.⁹ The essayist's use of "masle" reinforces the natural implication of woman's fertility. If *genereuse* is read as noble, Montaigne's statement means that her noble class will provide a male heir; however, if *genereuse* is read as fertile, the statement implies that her firstborn

⁷ Le Grand Robert de la langue française provides : « de bonne extraction, de bonne race. »

⁸ Le Grand Robert de la langue française provides : « origine, extraction, race. »

⁹ Cassel Latin dictionary

child will be male because of her innate fertility. The meaning of the statement is thus significantly altered; double meaning thus functions as a means to uncertainty in the text as both meanings exist as possibilities. In addition, the concepts of nature (fertile reading) and nurture (noble reading) are antithetical notions; in this way the ambiguity surrounding meaning is further complicated. This passage also illustrates the woman's role in reproduction and a recognition of a feminine function in producing masculinity, thereby reinforcing the significance of two isolated, gendered and sexed poles.

Even while describing his own style and his inability to compose letters does the author of the *Essais* play with double and dual interpretations. Thus, "Comme j'ayme mieux composer deux letters que d'en clorre et plier une" could mean that the author is not satisfied with a single (version of his) writing; however, it could also be a reflection on Montaigne's tendency to write more than to do anything else, for he adds, "et resigne tousjours cette commission à quelque autre" (I.40.305). It is also evident that complexities and ambivalence dominate the feelings and opinions of the author, which he explores in "Comme nous pleurons et rions d'une mesme chose" (I.38). Here Montaigne's ambivalence to friendships with women is undeniable, as is the author's capacity to feel two opposing sentiments at the same time:

Il faut considerer comme nos ames se trouvent souvent agitées de diverses passions . . . en nos ames, bien qu'il y ait divers mouvemens qui l'agitent, si faut-il qu'il y en ait un à qui le champ demeure. Mais ce n'est pas avec si entier avantage que, pour la volubilité et souplesse de nostre ame, les plus foibles par occasion ne regaignent encor la place et ne facent une courte charge à leur tour . . . *Qui, pour me voir une mine tantost froide, tantost amoureuse envers ma femme, estime que l'une ou l'autre soit feinte, il est un sot* (I.38.286 emphasis mine ERC).

Montaigne's representation of human existence as ambiguous thus gives function to the essayist's use of ambiguity in his text; the diversity of humanity is what allows the diversity

of his readers' interpretations of the *Essais*. Because Montaigne's work "generates signification by means of the reader's own body, . . . it grounds signification in the lived body of the reader" (Cottrell 4). The effect of such a meaning is nothing short of a multiplicity of significance. The essay leads to a certain ambiguity, towards infinite meanings and signification. Throughout his collection of essays Montaigne creates textual ambiguity of a sexual nature; he uses ambiguity in the expression of his sentiments for women, love and friendship.

"Il y a naturellement de la brigue et riote entre elles et nous"¹⁰:
Women in the *Essais*

Women as subject in the *Essais* are much more diverse and problematic than men or even humanity as subject. From his first essay, Montaigne establishes an opposition between what is masculine and what is feminine; the masculine and the feminine are characterized by opposing attributes and actions, which the author problematizes more often than not. In fact, Montaigne oscillates between depicting misogynistic representations of women and expressing stereotypically feminine characteristics, with a female voice and in a feminine style. Though many critics aver that Montaigne is either a misogynist or a feminist, it is in effect impossible that such distinct categories can fully situate woman in Montaigne's work:

By posing the woman question in terms of the conventional dichotomy of "Montaigne: misogyne ou féministe?" we set ourselves up for, at best, oversimplified answers, and at times, distortions of the text. If anything can be said with certainty about women and Montaigne, it is that they remain on all fronts--personal, textual, and paratextual--complex, potentially overpowering forces, defined by their paradoxically anarchic creative potential; they are supreme disturbers, albeit seeming maintainers, of the status quo (Polachek 3).

¹⁰ III.5.854

By evoking the anarchic creative potential of women, Montaigne thus links women to the body, to sexuality, to inconstancy and to the imagination, a force that according to the author inspires uncontrollable passions in man so that they are rendered powerless.¹¹ Montaigne depicts woman at times as a dupe, ruined by her weaknesses: “*malotruë* qu’elle soit, qui ne pense estre bien aymable,” sometimes as a reproducer:

Comme nous voyons des terres oysives, si elles sont grasses et fertiles, foisonner en cent mille sortes d’herbes sauvages et inutiles, et que pour les tenir en office, il les faut assubjectir et employer à certaines semences, pour nostre service ; et comme nous voyons que les femmes produisent bien *toutes seules* des amas et pieces de chair informes » (III.3.825, I.8.69).

Montaigne is in fact referring to Aristotle’s and Plutarch’s conception of women’s menstrual fluid, which needs male sperm in order to bring about conception. Indeed, Villey notes that the first part of this passage is in fact an approximation of Aristotle’s writing, and that it was Montaigne who added “et comme nous voyons que les femmes produisent bien toutes seules des amas et pieces de chair informes.” In this way, Montaigne follows a patriarchal tradition while admitting to the positive function of female sexuality. Ambiguity thus exists in that it is necessary that the child have contact with “une autre semence,” that man “les bride et contreigne” in order for the child to be “bon” (I.8.69). If not, the product of woman is by nature “dans le vague champ des imaginations”; however, it is important to note that these “amas et pieces de chair” are a figure for Montaigne’s idle thoughts, the result of which is the *Essais* (I.8.69). Montaigne ties women to the earth and to nature while at the same time giving form to their production – his thoughts and his writing. In this way Montaigne expresses a reversal of Plato’s form as perfection and matter as base, as well as reversing the Aristotelian matter-female and form-male paradigm. It is clear, however, that the

¹¹ Chapter 2 further explores the way in which Montaigne problematizes this misogynistic conception of women by describing its social benefits in reproduction.

reproductive capacity of woman is not only questioned, for it is tied to the imagination and all that is opposed to reason and utility. According to the author of the *Essais*, there is a need for a masculine “semence” so that woman’s production, or the child, is worthy and useful; however, Montaigne problematizes this misogynistic point of view by his tendency to align himself with the feminine, especially concerning his own writing

CHAPTER II

“JE SUIS MOY-MESMES LA MATIERE DE MON LIVRE”¹²: MONTAIGNE’S FEMALE PERSONA

It is impossible to deny Montaigne’s misogynistic tendencies, for they are frequent and severe; yet, Montaigne is also undeniably capable of feminist thought, for he demonstrates comprehension of woman’s unfortunate plight in society and often identifies with stereotypically feminine characteristics. Polachek avers that it is difficult to place Montaigne in either the realm of misogyny or the realm of feminism because of a rhetorical tradition

in which praise and/or defamation of women is embedded, and which Montaigne naturally inherited. Most evidently in issues related to sexuality, Montaigne gives voice to the commonplaces of misogynist literature, but by lodging them in a relational structure which allows equal time to male shortcomings, and by replacing *dispositio* by the technique of *embrouilleure*, he problematizes woman's position more than he resolves it (4).

Indeed, Montaigne’s countless, often contradictory anecdotes and his acknowledgement of male shortcomings create an incredible ambiguity surrounding sexuality and the role of woman; however, even more remarkable is the fact that Montaigne develops a female persona from which his female voice emerges. In this way, the fact that Montaigne expresses an often misogynistic point of view through a feminine discourse further multiplies the *Essais*’s ambiguity, especially within the context of female sexuality. Montaigne depicts female sexuality in terms of extraordinary concupiscence; she is much more adroit in sexual

¹² I.0.3

acts than man, which manifests a certain pain and even rage on Montaigne's part. He complains of woman's discontent for male sexual incompetence;¹³ however, he complicates his wrath for female sexual prowess by considering his rage unjust:

Il y a naturellement de la brigue et riotte entre [les femmes] et nous ; le plus estroit consentement que nous ayons avec elles, encores est-il tumultuaire et tempesteux. A l'advis de nostre autheur, nous les traictons inconsiderément en cecy : apres que nous avons congneu qu'elles sont, sans comparaison, plus capables et ardenes aux efforts de l'amour que nous (III.5.854).

It is unclear whether female sexuality is natural or created by society in Montaigne's mind, for he cites two possibilities in "Sur des vers de Virgile" (III.5): "quel doit estre l'appetit et la concupiscence feminine, puisque leur raison, leur reformation et leur vertu se taille à ce pris . . . C'est donc folie d'essayer à brider aux femmes un desir qui leur est si cuysant et si naturel" (III.5.855-6). The second possibility is the nurture argument: "Nous les dressons des l'enfance aux entremises de l'amour : leur grace, leur atiffeure, leur science, leur parole, toute leur instruction ne regarde qu'à ce but" (III.5.866). It is quite possible, however, that Montaigne does not distinguish between female sexuality as a product of nature or nurture because the author of the *Essais* problematizes the notion of nature throughout the work. In fact, Montaigne depicts nature as a creation of society through reversal and comparison:¹⁴ "Nous appelons contre nature ce qui advient contre la coustume" followed by "L'accoustumance est une seconde nature et non moins puissante" (III.10.1010, II.30.713 cited by Panichi 710).

¹³ See "Sur des vers de Virgile": "Qui peut attendre, le lendemain, sans mourir de honte, le disdain de ces beaux yeux consens de sa lâcheté de impertinence, *Ses regards silencieux pourtant adressaient des reproches*, il n'a jamais senty le contentement et la fierté de les leur avoir battus et ternis par le vigoureux exercice d'une nuit officieuse et active. Quand j'en ay veu quelqu'une s'ennuyer de moy, je n'en ay point incontinent accusé sa legereté . . ." (III.5.887).

¹⁴ Desan avers that "le présupposé selon lequel le « naturel » est souvent « artificiel » et l'universalisme de la loi sur lequel elle se base est une « mauvaise » universalité, universalité prisonnière d'une conception dogmatique de la verité" (710).

Montaigne's concept of female sexuality is rooted in women's inherent knowledge of love. Constance Jordan remarks that women's "superiority in this respect inverts a customary hierarchy; in love, men are 'children' compared to women, women are 'adults' compared to men" (69). The author of the *Essais* complicates his reversal by placing women's knowledge of love with that of young boys, thus re-reversing the hierarchy of sexuality and power: "Seroit-ce ce que dict Platon, qu'elles ayent esté garçons desbauche autresfois?" (III.5.857). Woman's excessive sexuality manifests itself in Montaigne's anecdote about Emperor Proclus and Empress Messalina;¹⁵ though both of them are libertines, Montaigne discusses and analyses Messalina's sexual escapades and insatiable lust while merely mentioning Proclus's libertinage. He finds, however, that Messalina's unacceptable and incredible sexual conduct is her husband's fault for letting her act in such a manner. Indeed, it seems that the cuckold is ultimately as lowly a position as the licentious female, though perhaps guiltier:

Serions nous pas moins coqus si nous craignons moins de l'estre, suyvant la complexion des femmes, car la deffence les incite et convie ? Quelle meilleure interpretation trouverions nous au faict de Messalina ? Elle fit au commencement son mary coqu à cachetes, comme il se faict ; mais, conduisant ses parties trop aisément, par la stupidité en luy, elle desdaigna soudain cet usage. La voyla à faire l'amour à la descouverte, advouer des serviteurs, les entretenir et les favoriser à la veue d'un chacun. Elle vouloit qu'il s'en ressentie. *Cet animal* ne se pouvant esveiller pour tout cela, et luy rendant ses plaisirs mols et fades par cette trop lache facilité par laquelle il sembloit qu'il les autorisat et legitimat, que fit elle ? Semble il pas qu'elle s'acheminast à devenir chaste par la nonchallance de son mary, ou qu'elle cerchast un autre mary qui luy esguisast l'appetit par sa jalousie, et qui, en luy insistant, l'incitast ? (III.5.871-2 emphasis mine ERC).

Montaigne renders his depiction of the cuckold more complex later in the essay, for he counsels the cuckold not to feel diminished by the infidelity of his wife: "Je sçay çant

¹⁵ Montaigne cites Juvénal's *Satires* (trans. Villey): "Brûlante encore de volupté, elle se retira épuisée, mais non assouvie" (III.5.854).

honestes homes coqus, honnestement et peu indecemment. Un gallant home en est plaint, non pas desestimé Chacun de vous a faict quelqu'un coqu: or nature est toute en pareilles, en compensation et vicissitude" (III.5.870 cited in Jordan 72). In this way Montaigne represents infidelity as part of man's naturally and inevitably ambiguous existence. Furthermore, he depicts female sexuality in the Messalina anecdote as animalistic, which participates in Montaigne's representation of it as an "animal furieux" that goes mad if unsatisfied: "un animal glouton et avide, auquel si on refuse aliments il forcene . . . et soufflant sa rage en leurs corps . . . arreste la respiration causant mille sorte de maux" (III.5.859 cited in Jordan 68). So it seems that female concupiscence is natural and that wives thus need to be controlled by their husbands; however, this misogynistic discourse is further complicated by Montaigne's following citation: "Il faut, dit Aristote, toucher sa femme prudemment et severement, de peur qu'en la chatouillant trop lascivement le plaisir la face sortir hors des gons de raison" (III.5.850). As Montaigne employs citations that both support and contradict his previous commentary, it is unclear whether or not the author agrees with this sentiment. Jordan clearly establishes the multiple contradictions and dualities found in the question of controlling women's desire:

Because they are so much at the mercy of desire, women need to be controlled by the laws ("decretz") of men. This imposition creates the first of Montaigne's paradoxes: however much such control dampens passion, in a more important sense it also inflames it. But – the second paradox – the extent to which women obey the laws of men is the extent to which men are made desirous of them Hence two further paradoxes: to get optimal sexual satisfaction, women must submit to male control of their sexuality; and the control of sexuality is finally the promotion of sexuality (70-1).

Herein lies Montaigne's need for ambiguity in order to understand female sexuality that benefits society; the essayist must thus question female sexuality's origin. Is woman a desiring creature by nature, or is she inherently submissive? Is female sexuality a natural

force or a social construct (or both)? Montaigne expresses particular ambivalence here because he finds that woman's role is to submit herself to man; and this role is defined by nature:

De vray, selon la loy que nature leur donne, ce n'est pas proprement à elle de vouloir et desirer ; leur rolle est souffrir, obeir, consentir : c'est pourquoy nature leur a donnéé une perpetuelle capacité ; à nous rare et incertain ; elles ont tousjours leur heure, afin qu'elles soyent tousjours prestes à la nostre : *Nées pour le role passif* (III.5.884).

Indeed, this passage conflicts with other passages in which Montaigne represents female sexuality as animalistic, crazy and chaotic. How does one explain such a contradiction? Does Montaigne believe that women have destroyed a natural law by desiring – or has society created women to act in this way? It is most probable that Montaigne is unable himself to resolve this question, in this way his unanswered question creates another ambiguous element of his text. Moreover, Jordan notes that this passage reverses Montaigne's earlier concept of female creative force as anarchic: "what used to be a potentially catastrophic female sexual energy, dislodging the womb and jeopardizing the civil order of states and empires, is now a potency characterized by compliance to the will of the male" (74). Even more ambiguity surrounds Montaigne's concept of woman's behavior; he recounts humorously the way in which women resolve their submissive role and "cette naturelle violence de leur desir" with the playful lines "Sers ton mary comme ton maistre, / Et t'en garde comme d'un traistre" (III.5.857, 853).

Furthermore, Montaigne takes part in a misogynistic discourse by identifying woman with her physical beauty, which he emphasizes as her defining characteristic: "le monde n'a rien de plus beau; c'est à elles d'honorer les arts et de farder le fard. Que leur faut-il, que vivre aymées et honorées?" (III.3.822). He thus emphasizes their obligation to concern

themselves with appearance and embellishment; according to him, “elles se contenteront de faire valoir leurs propres et naturelles richesses,” that is to say, appearance rather than intellect (III.3.822). It is evident that in this context the social value of woman lies in her ability to be pleasing, admired, loved and honored by men; and this fact constrains her despite the fact that it is “le vray avantage des dames que la beauté. Elle est si leur que la nostre, quoy qu’elle desire des traicts un peu autres, n’est en son point que confuse la leur, puerile et imberbe” (III.3.826-7). It seems that despite such sentiments Montaigne acknowledges a female prowess and efficacy, and not only in her better-formed beauty than puerile male beauty. In fact, Montaigne advises women to study “à porter humainement l’inconstance d’un serviteur, la rudesse d’un mary et l’importunité des ans et des rides” (III.3.823). The reader notes that even though this phrase centers women’s happiness and fortune in ephemeral beauty, the author of the *Essais* is aware of the unfortunate events that women may undergo. It is telling that the first two unfortunate occurrences that Montaigne mentions concern male infidelity and offensiveness towards women; and even more telling that it is her lover and her husband, the two men who know her most intimately and to whom she is dependent, who are guilty of such transgressions. Despite his acknowledgement of a certain intellectual capacity in women, Montaigne more often emphasizes women’s *incapacity*, especially concerning intelligence and friendship: “les discours, la prudence et les offices d’amitié se trouvent mieux chez les hommes : pourtant gouvernent-ils les affaires du monde” (III.3.827).

"J'ayme d'une particuliere inclination"¹⁶:
Montaigne's alliances with women

Montaigne's alliances with women are more than anything subtle, disguised and uncertain. Indeed, the author of the *Essais* has a proclivity for approaching the feminine only indirectly; most often it is Montaigne's questioning or denying an aforementioned misogynistic passage that links him with woman – his alliance lies in his questioning an established tenet of patriarchy or misogynistic representation of woman. The most striking of such bonds with women involves the subtlest of means – omission. The source of "Des cannibales" is (among other cosmographies of the time) Jean de Léry's *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil*; and while certain passages in Montaigne's essay are almost verbatim reproductions of Léry's accounts:

Après avoir long temps bien traité leurs prisonniers, et de toutes les commoditez dont ils se peuvent aviser, celui qui en est le maistre, fait une grande assemblée de ses cognoissans; il attache une corde à l'un des bras du prisonnier, par le bout de laquelle il le tient, esloigné de quelques pas, de peur d'en estre offence, et donne au plus cher de ses amis l'autre bras à tenir de mesme ; et eux deux, en presence de toute l'assemblée, l'assomment à coups d'espée. Cela fait, ils le rostissent et en mangent en commun et en envoient des lopins à ceux de leurs amis qui sont absens. Ce n'est pas, comme on pense, pour s'en nourrir . . . c'est pour représenter une extreme vengeance (I.31.238).

Montaigne's text omits an important element of Léry's analysis of the Amerindians' cannibalism – the savage women's appetite for human flesh, especially that of their husbands. Montaigne's first omission includes Léry's mention of Tupi women being presented to prisoners as their wives,¹⁷ his animalistic representation of the Amerindian

¹⁶ I.26.146

¹⁷ Also, noteworthy patriarchal and misogynistic elements in the following passage are 1) men are not given to women prisoners and more importantly 2) Léry mentions women as offerings secondarily to the offering of meat; it would seem that a European observer (and cosmologist) would find the custom of

woman and most importantly, a commentary on the specifically female proclivity for human flesh:

Incontinent doncques que [les prisonniers] sont arrivez, ils sont non seulement nourris des meilleures viandes qu'on peut trouver, mais aussi on baille des femmes aux hommes (et non des maris aux femmes), mesmes celuy qui aura un prisonnier ne faisant point difficulté de luy bailler sa fille ou sa soeur en mariage, celle qu'il retiendra, en le bien traittant, luy administrera toutes ses necessitez . . . levant lors sa massue de bois avec les deux mains, donne du rondeau qui est au bout de si grande force sur la teste du pauvre prisonnier . . . Or si tost que le prisonnier aura esté ainsi assommé, s'il avoit une femme . . . elle se mettant aupres du corps fera quelque petit deuil : je di nommément petit deuil, car suyvant vrayment ce qu'on dit que fait le Crocodile : assavoir que ayant tué un homme il pleure aupres avant que de le manger, aussi *apres que ceste femme aura fait ses tels quels regrets et jetté quelques feintes larmes sur son mari mort, si elle peut ce sera la premiere qui en mangera* (Léry 354, 360-1 emphasis mine ERC).

Léry's text depicts the Amerindian woman within a misogynistic framework, for these women not only feign mourning (and thus represent woman's capacity for deceit) but more importantly take pleasure in the taste of human flesh. Their anthropophagy is an unpardonable sin, unlike the Toupinambi's cannibalism. Both Léry and Montaigne justify this cannibalism as an act of vengeance; the savages have eaten only their enemies for centuries, and they show valor through vengeance for their ancestors and through their bravery in the face of death. Their cannibalism is not a taste for human flesh but rather an obligation, an act of war, one that is considerably noble in their culture – and whose nobility and virtue Montaigne reveres:

Ils ne demandent à leurs prisonniers autre rançon que la confession et reconnoissance d'estre vaincus ; mais il ne s'en trouve pas un, en tout un siècle, qui n'ayme mieux la mort que de relascher, ny par contenance, ny de parole un seul point d'une grandeur de courage invincible . . . c'est en ce seul point que consiste la vraye victoire : *Il n'y a de victoire que celle qui force l'ennemi à s'avouer vaincu* (I.31.240-1).

giving one's sister or daughter to one's prisoner striking enough to mention it before the custom of feeding one's prisoner well.

An appetite for human flesh is thus clearly reprehensible to Léry; however, it seems that this ethnologist misinterprets the savage woman's desire to eat her husband. Is it not entirely possible that for a woman who has been given as a source of physical comfort and pleasure (and ultimately torture as the prisoner appreciates the rich life he must sacrifice for virtue), the act of cannibalism takes on a secondary vengeance and thus signification? It seems even that such a vengeance is more acceptable than that of the Tupi in general; for hers is particular and immediate, while theirs is a mere custom based on the supposition that the prisoner in question had previously eaten their ancestors.

Why would Montaigne omit this part of Léry's account, as it is both fascinating and wrought with complexities? Is Montaigne's omission a means of allying with women by denying the relevance of Léry's misogynistic representation of the Amerindian woman? An even more remarkable absence is that of the "vieilles cannibales," who take pleasure in their cannibalism precisely because of their taste for it, for Léry pays considerable attention to them:

Cela fait les autres femmes, et principalement les vieilles (lesquelles plus convoiteuses de manger de la chair humaine que les jeunes sollicitent incessamment tous ceux qui ont des prisonniers de les faire vistement ainsi despescher) se presentans avec de l'eau chaude qu'elles ont toute preste, frottent et eschaudent . . . le corps mort . . . Les vieilles femmes (*lesquelles, comme j'ay dit, appetent merueilleusement de manger de la chair humaine*) estans toutes assemblées pour recueillir la grasse que degoutte le long des bastons de ces grandes et hautes grilles de bois, exhortans les hommes de faire en sorte qu'elles ayent tousjours de telle viande : et *en leschans leurs doigts disent, Yguatou, c'est à dire, il est bon* (361-4 emphasis mine ERC).

More than barbarous, this act signifies (to Léry's Renaissance audience) the influence of evil in old ladies; that is to say, an old woman's cannibalism is a sign of witchcraft, from which

the savage are not at all exempt.¹⁸ Lestringant explains the significance of such a representation:

À vrai dire, le mauvais Cannibale n'est pas seulement extérieur au groupe des bons anthropophages, ce qui permettrait de l'isoler aisément. Il se rencontre aussi en son sein. A preuve les vieilles femmes qui . . . lèchent avec une avidité gourmande les montants de bois de boucan où la graisse a coulé. Léry, en accord avec les magistrats les plus impitoyables de son temps, est un chaud partisan de la chasse aux sorcières, par-deçà comme par-delà . . . Dans une addition de 1585 au chapitre de la religion des sauvages, il cite en bonne part la *Démonomanie* de Jean Bodin, ce manuel d'inquisition en matière de sorcellerie, et n'hésite pas à déclarer que les femmes brésiliennes et les sorcières de chez nous sont « conduites d'un mesme esprit de Satan » (127-8).

It is thus quite possible that Montaigne allies himself with women by omitting such a misogynistic representation of old women as witches, for he firmly denies the existence of witchcraft. In “Des boyteux” (III.11) he denies that witchcraft is anything but chimerical hallucinations; indeed, he addresses Jean Bodin’s *Démonomanie* and Pierre Massé’s *L’Imposture du diable* in this essay as well. Accusations of witchcraft were an excellent means by which certain men denigrated aspects of woman that they could not understand; and as old women are associated with wise women who know and practice such feminine arts of herbal remedy and midwifery (whose powers frightened men who consequently used the witch-hunt as a means of stripping women of power), the old woman type is often associated with evil in patriarchal thought. The belief in witchcraft is one mask of patriarchal thought, and thus this omission could be read as a rejection of this power structure. Whether Montaigne’s omission of women cannibals is a result of his alliance with women or simply a means of precluding complications in one point that he intends to make clearly (that the Wars

¹⁸ Indeed, Bucher affirms that the old Toupi woman is “un avatar brésilien de la sorcière en Europe” (cited in Lestringant 420). Indeed, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is based on Montaigne, Léry and accounts of the Virginia colony.

of Religion are more barbaric than the Tupis' cannibalism), his denial of witchcraft is not only humanitarian and noble but also a special consideration to women.

Similarly, Montaigne expresses his feminine inclinations under the veil of misogyny in "De trois commerces," (III.3) for he denies women all intellectual capacity. According to him they ought not spend their time studying but rather making themselves more beautiful. If a woman expresses an interest in something intellectual, it is better that it be poetry, history or natural science. Montaigne supposes that these studies are more similar to women than other, more masculine studies because poetry is "un art folle et subtil, desguisé ; parlier, tout en plaisir, tout en montre, comme elles [women]" and because the study of natural philosophy can teach women "à porter humainement l'inconstance d'un serviteur, la rudesse d'un mary et l'importunité des ans et des rides" (III.3.823). It is noteworthy that Montaigne's reasons for women's proclivity for poetry and natural philosophy seem to represent contradictory notions of women. In spite of these misogynistic undertones, throughout the *Essais* Montaigne problematizes the link between women, poetry, history and philosophy by proclaiming similar intellectual proclivities himself: "L'histoire, c'est plus mon gibier,¹⁹ ou la poesie, que j'aime d'une particuliere inclination" as well as "Dès ma première enfance, la poesie a eu cela, de me transpercer et transporter" (I.26.146; I.37.284). In this way Montaigne begins to create an alliance with woman and femininity; his female persona develops voice through the author's own discourse concerning writing and its analysis.

Indeed, there exist in the *Essais* certain rapprochements and connections to women; for example, Montaigne seems to understand the unfortunate state that society has dealt

¹⁹ Marie de Gournay problematizes Montaigne's association of women with poetry by averring that "Mon gibier n'est pas la poésie; je poursuis quelque chose de plus solide" in a letter to Juste Lipse 25 April 1593 (cited in Courcelles 221).

womankind. One must insist that the author finds woman's incapacity a natural state,²⁰ despite the inopportune (and artificially constructed) state in which humanity places women: "Les femmes n'ont pas tort du tout quand elles refusent les reigles de vie qui sont introduites au monde, d'autant que ce sont les hommes qui les ont faictes sans elles" (III.5.854). A possible reading of this statement interprets the concepts of sex and gender as artificial constructs in Montaigne's mind; even if this is not the case, his understanding of women's complaints against a society that constricts them demonstrates well how much the author of the *Essais* aligns himself with women.

Montaigne plays with the conceived notion of women's submission to men in "Par divers moyens on arrive à pareille fin." Though he discusses the enormous difference between the feminine and masculine ways of persuading someone to whom one is subjugated, he admits that each of these means is just as efficacious as the other. Montaigne offers two different paths to persuasion – one that gives itself over to commiseration and female softness, and another that gives itself to virtue and to masculine vigor:

Rompre son coeur à la *commiseration*, c'est effect de la *facilité*, *débonnairété et mollesse*, d'où il advient que les natures plus *foibles*, comme celles des *femmes*. . . y sont plus sujettes," mais "se rendre à la seule reverence de la sainte image de *la vertu*, que c'est l'effect d'une ame *forte et imployable* ayant en affection et en honneur *une vigueur masle et obstinée* (I.1.40 emphasis mine ERC).

It is clear that virtue lies within the realm of men; however, Montaigne problematizes this distinction by averring that these two means of persuasion are equally efficacious: "Toutefois ès ames moins genereuses, l'estonnement et l'admiration peuvent faire naistre un pareil effet" (I.1.40). In addition, Robert Cottrell notes that the first "Je" of the *Essais* identifies with a feminine type of submission: "J'ay une merveilleuse *lacheté* vers la *misericorde* et la

²⁰ See discussion of the problematic of nature in Montaigne's work and of its consequences p. 3 above.

mansuetude. Tant qu'à mon avis, je serois pour *me rendre* plus naturellement à la *compassion* qu'à l'estimation » (I.1.8 emphasis mine ERC). More than identification with so-called feminine attributes and actions, this statement evokes the power and efficacy of a feminine softness in lieu of masculine vigor. In addition, Cottrell avers that Montaigne aligns himself with his female readers in the five essays that address women specifically; his feminine voice supplicates female ears:

Situating in the margins of literary tradition, [certain essays] chose to address not male but female readers who, because they too were situated in the margins of patriarchal discourse, might be expected to view *singularity and difference* with particular understanding In the essays addressed to women, Montaigne, pitching his voice in the register of singularity, fashioned what would be *his own distinctive discourse*, which is characterized by a moment that, like woman herself, is "*follastre et subtil, déguisé; parlier, tout en plaisir, tout en montre*" (74 emphasis mine ERC).

Montaigne's discourse is indeed "déguisé" and surely "subtil"; his alliances with women take the form of either subtle reversals and questionings of misogynistic representations of women or textual omission. While Montaigne attributes these adjectives to woman, it is even more telling that women writers often employ subtle styles and disguised subversions as means of expression.²¹ These subtle writing techniques create a considerable femininity in Montaigne's style; further exploration of misogynistic writing in a decidedly feminine style and discourse offers even more ambiguity to Montaigne's *Essais*.

²¹ Consider Maryse Condé's use of a Creolized French rather than standard French in *Traversée de la Mangrove*, Hélène Cixous's use of "vélo" as metaphor for "vagin" in *Les rêveries de la femme sauvage: scènes primitives*, H.D.'s use of her poetry as a palimpsest (that is, new writing over old writing) in *Trilogy*, even Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiography (*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*) in the form of five stories about different women whose legacies have influenced her identity.

“Parlier, tout en plaisir, tout en montre”²²;
Montaigne’s feminine discourse

In “De la praesumption” (II.17) Montaigne creates a sexual syntax that is rooted in gendered attributes as well as (in)capacities: “Il y a bien *au dessus de nous*, vers les montagnes, un Gascon, que je trouve singulierement beau, *sec, bref, signifiant*, et à la verité, *un langage masle et militaire* plus qu’autre que j’entende” (II.17.639 emphasis mine ERC). By contrasting the characteristics of this male Gascon with his Bordeaux dialect, Montaigne equates his language and means of expression with the female, though the author does not mention it explicitly. Cottrell notes the role of mechanics of diacriticality in naming the “other” language female:

By inscribing the terms Gascon: French, high: low, and male: female into a homogeneous "geometrical" structure, the text establishes equivalency between high and male on the one hand, and low and female on the other. Montaigne himself seems to have felt the pull of diacriticality, for in the 1580 edition of the *Essais* the sentence in which Gascon is called a male language is followed by a sentence that ascribes female identity to a language that is contrasted to it, in this case the Latin he learned as a child (86).

Indeed, Montaigne adds that Latin “m’a esté donné pour *maternel*, j’ay perdu par desaccoustumence la promptitude d’en pouvoir servir à parler” (II.17.639). Montaigne reverses the association of Latin with the father – it is “la langue des Saint pères,” of the Church, and of the Ancients – indeed, his father, though responsible for the essayist’s learning Latin, did not know it at all. Montaigne’s word choice clearly denotes femininity in the Latin language, which is linked to inefficacious maternity. The inferiority of supposed female languages is rooted not only in the language’s physically low status²³ but also in Montaigne’s inability to use it fully as a means of expression. He emphasizes such analogies

²² III.3.823

²³ Cottrell notes that Montaigne uses spatiality to contrast his southern Bordeaux dialect with that of Gascon, which is “au-dessus de nous” (II.17.639).

between language and sex/gender by attributing gendered characteristics to language; the masculine Gascon is “autant *nerveux, puissant et pertinent*, comme le François est *gratieus, delicat et abandon*” (II.17.639 emphasis mine ERC). Though Montaigne denigrates his own French and his maternal Latin, he nevertheless creates a formidable link between his verbal expression and femininity.

Additionally, it is telling that Montaigne should equate himself with the female in “De la presumption,” for Cottrell notes that in this essay Montaigne “disengages himself from anterior texts and begins to fashion a Self that is sited at some distance from tradition” (87). Not only must his identification with the female take part in the development of this Self, but also his newly-formed self representation is subversive by virtue of having distanced itself from traditional modes of thought. A feminization of this Self is for all of these reasons inevitable. Montaigne’s establishment of a female persona in fact begins from the first of the *Essais*, in which he “sets up an opposition between male and female, an opposition it then proceeds to problematize. In its unfolding, I.1 effects a slippage between male and female that replicates (or . . . presages) the kind of cross-gender identification we observed in “De la presumption” (87).

Because Robert Cottrell proposes that the *Essais* are subject and its reader is Other,²⁴ because Montaigne associates the subject with the female and the other with the male, and finally because the text’s purpose is to move, to persuade and to seduce its male reader, Cottrell affirms that the *Essais*’ very intentions are feminine: “In the tradition in which the

²⁴ “The relationship between *ceux* and *nous* is one of power: the textual subject, concealing for the moment its unshaped ‘I’ behind the plural form of the first-person pronoun ‘*nous*,’ finds itself dependent on omnipotent Others, who, by virtue of the ‘laws’ of grammar are necessarily aligned with men (the masculine pronouns *ils*, *ceux*) Because *ils* and *ceux* are aligned with men, the weak and dependent *nous* that are pitted against ‘them,’ tend, diacritically, to be aligned with women. The alignment of men with the powerful and women with the weak corresponds, moreover, to an alignment that is a structural feature in social institutions and cultural practices” (Cottrell 87)

Montaignan text is located, woman is associated with seduction . . . sophistry and the art of persuasion" (89). Montaigne further complicates this association between gender and reading through *his own* reading of the *Essais*, the result of which is its 1582, 1587 and 1588 editions. The author's rereading of his works and his collaboration with Marie de Gournay for the 1595 edition of the *Essais* thus creates a dual male/female identity for Montaigne.²⁵ One must of course consider Montaigne's renowned confession, "Je suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre"; as Montaigne's writing allies itself with the feminine, its subject or "matière" must in addition be feminine (I.0.3). The French word "matière" derives from the Latin "mater" or mother, the source of all things material and consequently linked with physicality.²⁶ By identifying his person with the material and the maternal Montaigne reinforces the femininity and corporality of the *Essais*. The ambiguity that Montaigne establishes through his oscillations between misogyny and feminism further complicates and multiplies the question of women in his text. Montaigne's female voice and persona work to destabilize and shock the reader, thus creating the opportunity for even modern readers of Montaigne to consider femininity and masculinity in ways that continue to challenge gender and sexual norms.

²⁵ See chapter 4 for further discussion of Marie de Gournay's influence in the republications of the *Essais*.

²⁶ See discussion of women's "amas et pieces de chair informes" above.

CHAPTER III

“PARCE QUE C’ESTOIT LUY, PARCE QUE C’ESTOIT MOY”²⁷: MEN, FRIENDSHIP AND ÉTIENNE DE LA BOÉTIE

It is evident that friendship is an important subject for Montaigne; not only does he devote an essay to friendship between men, but the pleasure and pain with which he considers his personal experience with Etienne de La Boétie are striking. The author of the *Essais* believes himself to have “duit et affriandé des jeunesse à [cette] amitié seule et parfaite,” which is grounded in the mind/spirit rather than the body (III.3.827). There exists an opposition between physical love and spiritual friendship in Montaigne’s mind, and “si l’une ou l’autre des deux beautez devoit necessairement y faillir, [il] eusse choisi de quitter plustost la spirituelle” (III.3.826). While Montaigne is hardly ambiguous about friendship and physical love with women in the text, textual ambiguity manifests itself in the nature of the relationship between Montaigne and La Boétie.

Montaigne believes friendship to be a male space/realm, almost entirely exclusive of women; he denies (albeit regretfully) all possibility of a heterosexual love relationship in which there exists as much physical love as friendship. He thus opens “De l’amitié” (I.28) with an exploration of both women’s incapacity for friendship as well as homosexuality in antiquity, all the while integrating poetic descriptions of his perfect relationship with La Boétie into the essay. First, Montaigne avers that women’s souls are too weak and too inconsistent to be capable of supporting the “désir d’une conception spirituelle par

²⁷ I.28.188

l'entremise d'une spirituelle beauté" (I.28.187). As for love between men and women, Montaigne seems to wish sincerely that this relationship be as much spiritual as physical; he goes so far as to declare that if it were possible, this heterosexual love relationship would be more sublime even than his friendship with La Boétie:

La suffisance ordinaire des femmes n'est pas pour répondre à cette conférence et communication, nourrisse de cette sainte couture ; ny leur ame ne semble assez ferme pour soustenir l'extreint d'un nœud si pressé et si durable. Et certes, sans cela, s'il se pouvoit dresser une telle accointance, libre et volontaire, où non seulement les ames eussent cette entière jouissance, mais encores où les corps eussent part à l'alliance, où l'homme fust engagé tout entier, il est certain que l'amitié en seroit plus pleine et plus comble (I.28.186).

Until this point in the essay, physical love is possible thus between men and women, while a deeper and more spiritual friendship is possible only between men; and while Montaigne would prefer that love and friendship coexist in heterosexual relationships, it is impossible. The author continues by introducing the concept of homoeroticism in the essay – first as an ersatz heterosexual love relationship that is equally physical and spiritual, then as a customary practice during antiquity. While Montaigne clearly states that this “licence Grecque est justement abhorrée par nos moeurs,” he continues by recounting countless examples of relationships between men and boys during antiquity, almost explicitly alluding to a sexual love that existed between them (I.28.187). These allusions work to create a certain sexual ambiguity concerning the author, who furthers the ambiguity surrounding his sexual orientation through an extreme subtlety of diction and syntax. Further, Montaigne integrates long passages concerning his friendship with La Boétie into the essay; these discourses are found curiously after either a passage about marriage or a homosexual relationship. In addition, Montaigne's descriptions strongly resemble what one would

associate with a discourse of love or passion; it is undeniable that this “amitié” of which he speaks more closely resembles love than friendship:

En l’amitié dequoy je parle, [nos âmes] se meslent et confondent l’une en l’autre, d’un melange si universel, qu’elles effacent et ne retrouvent plus la couture qui les a jointes. Si on me presse de dire pourquoy je l’aymois, je sens que cela ne se peut exprimer, qu’en respondant : « *Par ce que c’estoit luy ; par ce que c’estoit moi C’est je ne sçay quelle quinte essence de tout ce meslange, qui, ayant saisi toute ma volonté, l’amena se plonger et se perdre dans la sienne ; qui, ayant saisi toute sa volonté, l’amena se plonger et se perdre dans la mienne, d’une faim, d’une concurrence pareille. Je dis perdre, à la vérité, ne nous reservant rien qui nous fut propre, ny qui fut ou sien, ou mien* (1.28.189 emphasis mine ERC).

Montaigne thus establishes the reciprocity and equality of his relationship with Etienne de La Boétie, all the while complicating this reciprocity by feminizing their relationship.

Montaigne’s best explanation for why he *loved* his friend is because it was he, because it was I; and if this syntax weren’t enough to demonstrate their reciprocity, Magnien notes that early additions of the *Essais* included only “par ce que c’estoit luy.” In this way, Montaigne’s adding “par ce que c’estoit moy” transforms the somewhat unequal relationship between the deceased and his mourner into a relationship of equals, Montaigne’s ideal:

On a passé donc de l’unicité fusionnelle (le « luy » perdu) au duel, à l’équilibre d’une relation pair à pair, où chacun des deux amis compte autant que l’autre. Comme si l’exaltation d’une amitié rendue sublime par la parfaite réciprocité des affections, mimée par la symétrie enfin établie de la formule sublime, avait tendu avec le temps à remplacer la déploration du défunt (Magnien 554).

In addition, Montaigne examines their reciprocity in the context of the men’s plunging and losing themselves in each other; and while being seized and losing oneself are “feminine” actions because of the passivity, the act of plunging into the other evokes a certain masculinity associated with penetration.²⁸ Thus, Montaigne examines the reciprocity of

²⁸ Foucault examines the act of penetration as masculine in antiquity: “Mais le verbe [aphrodisiazein] peut aussi être employé avec sa valeur active; dans ce cas, il se rapporte de façon particulière au rôle dit

being at once active (masculine) and passive (feminine) in his friendship with La Boétie.

Within this passage is also a sense of self-abandonment on the part of Montaigne that consequently feminized the essayist further; however, throughout “De l’amitié” Montaigne must retain a male persona and male voice because he denies women any part of such a sublime friendship.

While Montaigne most often expresses his own experiences, sentiments and thoughts before applying them to others and to humanity as a whole throughout the *Essais*, the role of Montaigne’s personal experience with La Boétie is paramount in “De l’amitié.” He distinguishes their ideal friendship from “amitez ordinaires;” and though it is not uncommon for the author of the *Essais* to distinguish himself from others, here the distinction is of utmost import because of its uniqueness and perfection (I.28.190). Their rapport is a “quint essence,” a whole, an ideal. In fact, in La Boétie’s *Poemata* he expresses sentiments regarding their friendship that are strikingly similar to Montaigne’s expression in “De l’amitié,” and this passage reflects well the reciprocity in their relationship:

Une bonne partie des gens avisés, généralement peu crédules, n’ont foi en une amitié que si les années l’ont éprouvée et expérimentée dans sa lutte contre les formes diverses du sort. Nous, pourtant, une amitié nous unit depuis un peu plus d’un an, et qui néanmoins n’a rien épargné pour arriver à la perfection Et il n’y aurait pas de sage, si chagrin soit-il, qui, nous connaissant tous deux, et nos goûts et nos caractères, mènerait une enquête sur la durée de notre liaison, et n’applaudirait avec bienveillance à une si forte amitié. N’ayons crainte non plus qu’une postérité jalouse refuse de placer nos noms, pour peu que les destins le permettent, parmi ceux des amis illustres (*Poemata XX*, v.1-11 ; *OCLB* 226 cited in Magnien 550).

« masculin » dans le rapport sexuel, et à la fonction « active » définie par la pénétration. Et inversement, on peut l’employer dans sa forme passive ; il désigne alors l’autre rôle dans la conjonction sexuelle : le rôle « passif » du partenaire-objet. Ce rôle, c’est celui que la nature a réservé aux femmes – Aristote parle de l’âge auquel les jeunes filles deviennent susceptibles d’*aphrodisiasthēnai* ; c’est celui qui peut être imposé par la violence à quelqu’un qui se trouve réduit à être l’objet du plaisir de l’autre ; c’est aussi le rôle accepté par le garçon ou par l’homme qui se laisse pénétrer par son partenaire – l’auteur de *Problèmes* s’interroge ainsi sur la raison pour laquelle certains hommes prennent plaisir à l’*aphrodisiazeisthai*” (*L’usage des plaisirs* 55-6).

It is clear that Montaigne's essay "De l'amitié" employs intertextuality in order to depict as perfectly as the author is able his friendship with La Boétie; his sources include texts of antiquity that La Boétie used or translated, whose prefaces Montaigne himself wrote. In addition, Montaigne alludes to (though indirectly) texts pertaining to the Socratic-Platonic doctrine of love; in this way "De l'amitié" serves the double function of homage to the man Montaigne loved and of a continuation of antiquity's exploration of the morality of pleasure within the context of the love of boys. Secondly, the *Essais* are the product of Montaigne's mourning; they are at the same time Montaigne's effort at the perfect expression of his friendship with La Boétie and the creation or offspring of this friendship.

"Un'ame à la vieille marque"²⁹:

Antiquity, intertextuality and homosexuality in "De l'amitié"

There is no question of the sincerity with which Montaigne expresses the profoundness of his friendship with Etienne de La Boétie. In fact, it seems that this relationship is the most important of Montaigne's life; however, he plays with his readers regarding the nature of their relationship and his sexual orientation. The author of the *Essais* purposefully creates ambiguity within "De l'amitié" and explicitly renders the nature of the men's relationship uncertain and ambiguous. For example, it seems far too coincidental that Montaigne inserts details of his personal relationship just before or after discourses on marriage and sex as well as allusions to Greek practices of pederasty. He even admits that he loved La Boétie; indeed, the essayist describes the pain that he endured after the death of his other half as incredibly harsh. Montaigne spent his mourning isolated in the library of his

²⁹ II.17.659

tower, most probably considering and evaluating his veritable love for this man; and the product of his contemplation is without a doubt the *Essais* and specifically “De l’amitié.” By rendering this essay so ambiguous, Montaigne requires that his readers ask themselves similar questions about homosexuality – this is quite exceptional because while the concept of men loving men was not unknown during the Renaissance, no term existed with which to name it. Thus, Montaigne not only expresses the inexpressible, but he makes his readers consider the intricacies and politics of love between men – four centuries before it acquired a term: homosexuality.³⁰ Montaigne’s readers would have to consider the morality of male love, not to mention how and why pederasty is distinguished from reciprocal love between equals.

One must note that the *concept* of homosexuality is even further complicated in Montaigne’s work because of its links with antiquity; indeed, not only is antiquity an important source for Montaigne’s thought and citations, but he and La Boétie seem to esteem antiquity’s concept of male friendship. Magnien notes that “Il semble donc bien y avoir eu, chez La Boétie, ces pièces le prouvent, une volonté de recréer avec M. *une amitié construite sur le canon antique*, fondée sur des échanges intellectuels” (551 emphasis mine ERC). In fact, as Montaigne’s formative education consisted for the most part of antiquity’s texts,³¹ it is not surprising that the majority of his references or citations within the *Essais* are of Latin or Greek origin. Personages of antiquity serve as Montaigne’s models for justice, morality, nobility and leadership. Cato the Younger “fut véritablement un patron que nature choisit

³⁰ Badinter notes that “homosexuality” is a twentieth century term. Its common usage indeed began in the twentieth century, though Krafft-Ebing first employed it in German in 1886; it appeared via its translations in French (1891) and in English (1892).

³¹ McKinley notes that “la connaissance de l’Antiquité fait partie de l’héritage paternel de M. tout jeune, il a rencontré les Anciens en latin, grâce à l’initiative pédagogique de son père” (37).

pour montrer jusques où l'humaine vertu et fermeté pouvoit atteindre"; all three of his "plus excellens hommes" (II.36) are men of antiquity : Alexander, Homer and Epaminondas (I.37.231). In this way,

C'est le deuil qui lie les Anciens au père dans l'esprit de M. : « Ils sont trespassez. Si est bien mon pere, aussi entierement qu'eux ». Leur absence l'afflige et lui impose une obligation Tel pour les Anciens que pour le père, « je ne laisse pas d'embrasser et practiquer la memoire, l'amitié et société, d'une parfaite union et tres-vive » (III.9.996). Le moyen de ses devoirs et le produit de sa piété filiale, c'est son livre. Les anciens habitent chaque page, ou peu s'en faut. M. y pratique et perpétue leur mémoire (McKinley *Anciens* 37).

Antiquity is especially consequential in Montaigne's relationship with La Boétie; Montaigne names La Boétie "un'ame à la vieille marque," and both writers allude to antiquity when describing their friendship (II.17.659). The concept of male friendship in antiquity is, however, very much questioned and above all complicated in Montaigne's "De l'amitié." First, while "L'Antiquité, gréco-latine surtout, apparaît comme un inépuisable réservoir de témoignages et d'exemples, une sorte de registre-mémoire de l'humanité, susceptible de guider comportements, réflexion et création"; Montaigne, though, "« captive aysément [s]es creances sous l'autorité des opinions anciennes » s'étonn[e] . . . de ne rencontrer dans toute la littérature antique aucun texte adapté à son amitié pour Etienne de La Boétie" (McKinley *Anciens* 48). Indeed, Montaigne's essay is an homage to antiquity in that he attempts to recreate within the minds of his readers the dialogues of antiquity concerning love between men. In this way, ambiguity's role as the point of departure for readers' thought and questioning functions in "De l'amitié" as a somewhat indirect allusion to the ancient Greek dialogues' continual questioning of love between men.³² Montaigne also takes antiquity's

³² Foucault argues that while the love of boys was free, Greek thinkers nevertheless questioned the nature of the power structures and the ethics of pleasure, the manifestation of which is countless dialogues on the subject: "Il semble que cette pratique, pourtant admise, pourtant courante, était entourée d'appréciations

source of truth (male love) rather than his contemporaries' true love in women. Foucault describes a shift in the philosophical inquiry into true love and access to truth – that is, from the love of boys to the love of women. With the Greeks, ties between access to the truth and sexual austerity developed through the contemplation of the love of boys. In fact, the Socratic-Platonic doctrine was an influential source for thinkers until the Renaissance, especially to Plutarch, one of Montaigne's most frequently cited writers³³. Thus, Montaigne's rejection of true love and understanding with women reflects a point of view that challenges his contemporaries' point of view, his appropriation of antiquity's point of view reflects the author's misogynistic stance.

The concept of love between men in antiquity is more crucially complicated within the context, however, of “cette licence grecque justement abhorée par nos moeurs” (I.28.187). This ambiguous nomenclature reflects the complexity, complication, and ambivalence in Montaigne's concept of love between men. While one could interpret this freedom or license as all love between men, it is evident that Montaigne is in fact alluding to the Greek practice of pederasty or love of boys. Not only do all of Montaigne's allusions to this license constitute a relationship that had developed from one of pederasty, but it is also true, as Foucault signals, that only this specific love between men was truly free or accepted in Greece:

L'usage des plaisirs dans le rapport avec les garçons a été, pour la pensée grecque, un thème d'inquiétude. Ce qui est paradoxal dans une société qui passe pour avoir « toléré » ce que nous appelons l' « homosexualité ». Mais peut-être n'est-il guère prudent d'utiliser ici ces deux termes. En fait, la notion d'homosexualité est bien peu adéquate pour recouvrir une expérience,

divers et qu'elle était traversée par un jeu de valorisations et de dévalorisations assez complexes pour rendre difficilement déchiffrable la orale qui la régissait. Et de cette complexité, on avait alors une claire conscience" (*L'usage des plaisirs* 211).

³³ Also of import is Ficino's commentary on the *Symposium*, which was in Montaigne's library.

des formes de valorisation et un système de découpage si différents du nôtre. Les Grecs n'opposaient pas, comme deux choix exclusifs, comme deux types de comportements radicalement différents, l'amour de son propre sexe et celui de l'autre. Les lignes de partage ne suivaient pas une telle frontière. Ce qui opposait un homme tempérant et maître de lui-même à celui qui s'adonnait aux plaisirs était, du point de vue de la morale, beaucoup plus important que ce qui distinguait entre elles les catégories de plaisirs auxquelles on pouvait se consacrer le plus volontiers. Avoir des mœurs relâchées, c'était ne savoir résister ni aux femmes ni aux garçons, sans que ceci soit plus grave que cela (*L'usage des plaisirs* 207).

Indeed, it seems that Montaigne's ambiguous allusion to love between men is the first point in the essay that requires his readers to consider the love of men differently; his readers must provide its nomenclature, and the essayist's later examples and considerations certainly lead one to consider this Greek license the love of boys rather than the love between male equals. It seems that his ambiguity thus reflects not only his inability to name adequately his concept of homosexuality but also an effort to force his readers to consider this concept with similar uncertainty. Schachter astutely notes that in the Villey edition of the *Essais*

Un alinéa sépare la phrase de la discussion précédente, où il s'agit des rapports entre les hommes et les femmes, donnant l'impression qu'elle inaugure la réflexion suivante [cette licence . . .], qui porte sur la pédérastie grecque. En fait, la discussion sur la pédérastie fut ajoutée après l'édition de 1588 tandis que la condamnation de la licence grecque fut présente dès l'édition de 1580. Si l'on consulte les éditions antérieures à celle de 1595 éditée par Marie Gournay, on trouve que le refus acheva une méditation sur la possibilité d'une amitié qui pourrait engager et le corps et l'esprit (475).

It is approximately this equally spiritual and physical love relationship that modern readers of Montaigne would equate with homosexuality in contrast to the ancient Greek practice of loving boys; as further evidence clearly demonstrates, Montaigne's meditation on his friendship with La Boétie is an attempt to evoke a concept of homosexuality for which there existed no textual precedence at the time.

Montaigne did rely heavily upon ancient texts concerning love between men; and while they do not address Montaigne's ideal relationship between men, it is evident that in these texts Montaigne finds a questioning and problemization of love between men that developed more and more through time. Inherent in the question of male love between equals during the Renaissance is the question of what physical acts are admissible between men; because antiquity's practice of pederasty necessitated a sexual hierarchy, there was no distinction between the condemnation of sex between equals and sex between the powerful and the subjugated. While Greeks questioned excess in sex acts and the reversal of roles rather than questioning the nature of specific sex acts,³⁴ most esteemed pederasty because of its benefits while tending to condemn physical love between men who are equals. In this way, the ambiguities in ancient texts allow Montaigne to develop their thoughts while at the same time making Montaigne's effort to conceive of a sexual relationship between male equals much more complex. Schachter aptly distinguishes pederasty and love between equals in Montaigne's essay; however, his claim that the author never discusses this second love rejects the role of La Boétie's friendship in Montaigne's essay:

Les termes de l'invocation de la « licence Grecque » suggèrent fortement qu'il s'agisse d'un rapport pédérastique, donc hiérarchique, plutôt que d'un rapport « homosexuel », donc vraiment semblablement égalitaire. Le long allongement sur la pédérastie semble soutenir cette explication. Pour ce qui est de ces rapports supposés égalitaires, M. n'en dit strictement rien dans

³⁴ "Mais il faut relever que, dans la pratique des plaisirs sexuels, on distingue clairement deux rôles et deux pôles, comme on peut les distinguer aussi dans la fonction génératrice ; ce sont deux valeurs de position – celle du sujet et celle de l'objet, celle de l'agent et celle du patient : comme le dit Aristote, « la femelle en tant que femelle est bien un élément passif, et le mâle en tant que mâle un élément actif ». Alors que l'expérience de la « chair » sera considérée comme une expérience commune aux hommes et aux femmes, même si elle ne prend pas chez elles la même forme que chez eux, alors que la « sexualité » sera marquée par la grande césure entre sexualité masculine et féminine, les *aphrodisia* sont pensés comme une activité impliquant deux acteurs, avec chacun son rôle et sa fonction – celui qui exerce l'activité et celui sur qui elle s'exerce Se maintenir dans son rôle ou l'abandonner, être sujet de l'activité ou en être l'objet, passer du côté de ceux qui la subissent, alors qu'on est un homme, ou rester du côté de ceux qui l'exercent, c'est là la seconde grande variable, avec celle de la « quantité d'activité » qui donne prise à l'appréciation morale. L'excès et la passivité sont, pour un homme, les deux formes majeures de l'immoralité dans la pratique des *aphrodisia*" (*L'usage des plaisirs* 56-7).

les *Essais*, soit parce qu'il ne le veut pas, soit parce qu'il ne le peut pas – il est bien possible que l'idée même ait été anachronique (475).

I would contend that the possibility of this idea's being anachronistic precludes Montaigne's ability to name it; the author thus invokes his concept of homosexuality through descriptions of his perfect friendship with Etienne de La Boétie. The perfect and quintessential "amitié" of which Montaigne speaks is none other than his expression for modernity's concept of homosexuality (that is, love between men who are equal and reciprocate).³⁵ Like Colette's "hermaphrodisme mentale" in *Le pur et l'impur*, Montaigne's "amitié" represents a kind of pre-logism, for the relationship that these terms represent simply does not exist (in its fully acknowledged form) until the twentieth century.

Because ambiguity veils Montaigne's distinction between pederasty and homosexuality, the reader must continually question the nature of both love relationships between men. Indeed, Montaigne oscillates between a proclivity for his ideal physical and spiritual friendship between men and uncertainty for the ethical and moral consequences of male homosexual acts:

M. condamne la pédérastie comme mode inégalitaire de relation où l'enfant est soumis à l'autorité d'un homme mûr, mais pas l'homosexualité en tant que telle ; il ne dit rien alors, ni pour, ni contre la relation amoureuse entre deux « hommes faits », et ce type de relation, s'il était condamné par l'Eglise était, comme dans l'antiquité, chose courante à la Renaissance (Magnien 552).

Despite his contradictions, Montaigne never ceases to insist upon the love that existed between himself and La Boétie. Montaigne even uses conventional elements of love stories to complicate the distinction between male friendship and love. In fact, as Charpentier notes, the essay on friendship is in actuality a description of love:

³⁵ Despite the fact that there exists some debate about identification as either "top" or "bottom" within the homosexual rapport.

Dans l'essai entièrement dédié au souvenir de La Boétie, maint passage suggère l'amour : les conditions romanesques de la rencontre, « par hasard en une grande feste et compagnie de ville » [,] circonstance obligée de nombreux récits amoureux : le bal de Cendrillon, celui du roi dans *La Princesse de Clèves*, *Le Bal du comte d'Orgel* . . . ; leur longue connaissance indirecte antérieure (« Nous nous cherchions avant que de nous estre fus » -- encore *La Princesse de Clèves* ; « Nous nous embrassions par noz noms » -- où peut-être encore apparaît quelque chose du corps ; I.28.188) (Charpentier 30).

In this way Montaigne indirectly evokes a physicality and sexuality that convention would associate with love relationships. Montaigne's inclusion of La Boétie in his essay "De la physionomie" (III.12) is another example of the way in which the essayist indirectly inserts physicality into their friendship: "lorsqu'on lit la description que donne M. de sa relation avec La Boétie, on ne peut ignorer qu'il s'agit bien d'amour. Un amour sans sexe, sans corps peut-être, « peut-être » car on voit quand même la physionomie de La Boétie surgir inopinément au chapitre de ce nom (III.12.1057)" (Charpentier 30). Montaigne's indirect allusions to the possibility of a sexual relationship between these men is not a contraction of the author's dismissal of "cette licence grecque"; for while Montaigne avers that Renaissance society's morality condemns pederasty, he neither specifies the grounds of such condemnation nor implicates himself in it. Thus, while it is evident that Montaigne has ambivalent feelings for love between men, his objection to pederasty is the inequality that exists within such a relationship.

While Montaigne rejects pederasty, he does employ the concept of commerce inherent in this relationship to invoke further the possibility of sex in his relationship with La Boétie. Foucault establishes the element of commerce, of giving and receiving in the Greek practice of pederasty:

Le rapport sexuel avec le garçon demande donc, de la part de chacun des deux partenaires, des conduites particulières. Conséquence du fait que le garçon ne peut s'identifier au rôle qu'il a à jouer, il devra refuser, résister, fuir,

se dérober ; il faudra aussi qu'il mette au consentement, si en fin de compte il l'accorde, des conditions concernant celui à qui il cède (sa valeur, son statut, sa vertu) et le bénéfice qu'il peut en attendre (bénéfice plutôt honteux s'il ne s'agit que d'argent, mais honorable s'il s'agit de l'apprentissage du métier d'homme, des appuis sociaux pour l'avenir, ou d'une amitié durable). Et justement, ce sont des bienfaits de ce genre que l'amant doit pouvoir fournir, en plus des cadeaux plus statutaires qu'il convient de faire (et dont l'importance et la valeur varient avec la condition des partenaires). De sorte que l'acte sexuel, dans la relation entre un homme et un garçon, doit être pris dans un jeu de refus, d'esquives et de fuite qui tend à le reporter aussi loin que possible, mais aussi dans un processus d'échanges qui fixe quand et à quelles conditions il est convenable qu'il se produise (*L'usage des plaisirs* 246-7).

This aspect of Greek pederasty must have been known to Montaigne, for it is discussed and debated in several ancient texts concerning the love of boys. There is an undeniable resemblance between this relationship between boy and master (whose goal, notably, is the formation of a perfect friendship between equals later in life) and Montaigne's admission that "l'amitié est une relation économique paradoxale : donner procure une plus grande joie au donateur que ne procure la réception du don à l'autre ; celui qui reçoit oblige celui qui donne, car il lui prête une occasion à l'ami « d'effectuer en son endroit ce qu'il désire le plus »" (I.28.189). In this way, Montaigne upholds the moral justification of pederasty in love between men without requiring the hierarchy that was essential to the Greeks. Indeed, by attributing a social, interpersonal meaning to the concept of commerce Montaigne textually establishes a new meaning to the term:

Durant le Moyen-Age, ce terme se rapportait explicitement aux opérations marchandes Le dictionnaire Wartburg signale un glissement sémantique qui s'effectua vers 1540, le nom « commerce » exprimant aussi, à partir de ce moment, des relations sociales. Ce dernier sens devint usuel à la fin du XVIe siècle. C'est probablement chez M. que ce glissement sémantique est le plus visible ; l'auteur des *Essais* fait effectivement un usage fréquent et systématique de ce mot entre 1572 et 1592, principalement pour désigner des rapports sociaux et intellectuels. Il renforce et cristallise le sens nouveau du mot en acceptant sa connotation économique qu'il applique maintenant aux rapports humains, ces derniers devenant partie intégrante du système de l'échange » (Desan *Commerce* 185).

In terms of the question of homosexuality, however, Montaigne's social appropriation of "commerce" works to justify physicality within relationships between friends; more importantly, it can be read also as a justification for finding pleasure in homosexual acts.

From antiquity to the present, the question of pleasure is a complicated one, for many find it difficult to reconcile man's pleasure in being loved (penetrated) and his ability to remain a "man."³⁶ That is, there is a certain feminization that occurs in a man who is treated as a woman in sexual acts. Plato, one of Montaigne's preferred writers and thinkers and one of the essayist's indirect sources for "De l'amitié," avers that "de celui qui cède aux plaisirs et ne peut résister, tout le monde blâmera la mollesse" and "chez celui qui cherche à imiter la femme, tout le monde réprouvera l'image trop ressemblante qu'il en deviant" (cited in Foucault 245). Badinter notes that the patriarchal concept of virility and masculinity requires distancing oneself as much as possible from the female, the manifestation of which is the penetration of the other, of the female. The denial of the masculine and the appropriation of anything feminine is thus a crime against masculinity, the manifestation of which is being penetrated and deriving pleasure from this penetration. Montaigne's appropriation of commerce in friendship is thus quite revolutionary, as it allows for there to be the hint of sexuality within their friendship without compromising the friends' masculinity.

Just as the ambiguity that is found in "De l'amitié" functions specifically to force readers to consider the natures and politics of love between men, intertextuality functions

³⁶ Foucault notes that "le jeune homme « accorde ses faveurs », par un mouvement qui consent à un désir et à la demande de l'autre, mais qui n'est pas de même nature. C'est une réponse ; ce n'est pas le partage d'une sensation. Le garçon n'a pas à être titulaire d'un plaisir physique ; il n'a même pas exactement à prendre plaisir au plaisir de l'homme ; il a, s'il cède quand il faut, c'est-à-dire sans trop de précipitation, ni trop de mauvaise grâce, à ressentir un contentement à donner du plaisir à l'autre" (*L'usage des plaisirs* 246).

here beyond its usual role as a point of departure for readers' thought, for "infinis *Essais*." Montaigne specifically mentions Plutarch and Xenophon in this essay, and consequently considers the two authors as sources. Montaigne's use of Xenophon and Plutarch is especially interesting because it also refers to La Boétie's translation of their works, the prefaces to which Montaigne himself wrote.³⁷ In this way Montaigne's references to Plutarch and Xenophon reflect a double intertextuality that also implicates La Boétie in the author's description of historical love between men. Magnien notes further that the way in which Montaigne evokes La Boétie in the essay associates the two men with antiquity:

Alors que les *Essais* présentent plus d'une quinzaine d'évocations de cette « ame à la vieille marque » (II.17.659), ou d'allusions à elle, on remarquera qu'ils nous livrent en définitive fort peu de précisions sur le quotidien de cette relation Comme si tout ce qui concernait La Boétie était nimbé *dans l'ouate d'un temps suspendu, arraché à l'Histoire pour s'inscrire dans le temps mythique des amitiés aussi immatérielles qu'éternelles* (554 emphasis mine ERC).

While Montaigne does not specifically mention either Plato or St. Augustine in "De l'amitié," it is evident that he was familiar with their writing, for he mentions them elsewhere in the *Essais*;³⁸ in fact, St. Augustine draws his thoughts in part from a philosophic tradition whose source is Platonic thought,³⁹ and whose search for truth lies in the search for divinity.

³⁷ *Mesnagerie de Xenophon* and *Regles de mariage de Plutarque*

³⁸ Socrates, who openly discussed his fondness for Greek youths, and Plato are indeed influential voices in the *Essais*, as McKinley notes: "Socrate est présenté dès les premiers essais du Livre I, mais il domine à la fin, surtout dans les deux derniers essais, « De la phisionomie » et « De l'experience ». Dans ces dernières années, M. a poursuivi ce que H. Friedrich appelle « un commerce fécond » avec Platon. C'est Platon qu'il évoque dans son éloge lyrique de la poésie dans l' « Apologie de Raimond Sebond » : « Platon n'est qu'un poète descousu » (II.12.537) ; et encore dans « De la vanité » quand il chante la beauté du style vagabond" (38).

³⁹ McKinley insists that "Par sa méfiance de la raison et son insistance sur le mystère de Dieu, saint Augustin s'inscrit dans une tradition qui remonte à Platon et qui trouve son expression chrétienne dans certaines images des épîtres de saint Paul D'après ces auteurs, la vérité divine est hors de la portée de l'intelligence humaine, mais Dieu éveille dans ses créatures un désir de le connaître et leur donne des moyens terrestres qui les incitent à s'approcher de la perfection divine" (72).

Another important link between St. Augustine and Plato as Montaignian sources is the fact that while Montaigne denies having read Augustine's *Confessions*, there is evidence elsewhere that this denial serves another function – that of indirect intertextuality:

Le silence des *Essais* sur les *Confessions* de saint Augustin a troublé maints lecteurs de ces deux ouvrages introspectifs. Tout semble indiquer que M. n'a pas lu l'autobiographie de saint Augustin Puisque plusieurs éditions des *Confessions* étaient disponibles, y compris celle d'Erasme, et le livre était bien connu des écrivains contemporains de M., il est difficile d'accepter l'opinion générale sinon officielle que M. ne l'a pas lu. G. Mathieu-Castellani met en question cette conclusion, rappelant « le double geste de marquage et masquage » qui caractérise *le jeu intertextuel des auteurs humanistes et qui incite le lecteur à reconnaître un texte évoqué de façon oblique et à « déplumer »* (II.10.408) l'auteur qui l'occulte. M. recommande cette stratégie aux élèves, et *il se vante de la pratiquer avec un plaisir parfois malin. De nombreux exemples de passages où M. masque ses emprunts ainsi qu'une série d'« échos » possibles des Confessions Plus convaincants encore sont les deux « poèmes » à la parfaite amitié et les récits de deuil à la mort de l'ami* (1.28 ; Conf IV.4-9) (*Augustin* 73 emphasis mine ERC).

It is thus unquestionable that Montaigne's intertextual game involves indirect allusions to other works within "De l'amitié"; in fact, this game consists more of an evocation of the other text through imitation. In this way, St. Augustine sets the precedent for Montaigne's allusions to works of antiquity only indirectly; this essay is really an homage to the Platonic concept of homosexuality for which Montaigne has no nomenclature. Langer astutely argues the Platonic concept of two parts of a unity coming together to form a whole, a perfection: "L'amitié *propter honestum*, « honnête », est à préférer à celles *propter utile* ou *propter delectabile*, motivées par l'intérêt ou le plaisir. Dans l'amitié « honnête » on aime l'ami pour lui-même L'ami devient comme un autre soi-même M. parle ainsi du « grand miracle de se doubler » (I.28.191). C'est ce qui explique la rareté extrême du véritable ami, lorsqu'on lui compare les amitiés ordinaires" (29). It is also evident that Montaigne has read Plato's writing concerning love, for in "De l'oisiveté" he uses the

Platonic metaphor for hermeneutic austerity, the horse and driver.⁴⁰ In addition, Montaigne's insistence that his *amitié* is a higher form of love than love with women or even other friendships echoes Xenophon's and Pausanias's differentiation:

L'Uranius, le céleste – s'adresse exclusivement aux garçons. Mais la distinction n'est pas faite entre un amour hétérosexuel et un amour homosexuel ; Pausanias trace la ligne de partage entre l' « amour qu'éprouvent les hommes de basse espèce » -- il a pour objet aussi bien les femmes que les garçons, il ne vise qu'à l'acte lui-même (*to diaprattesthai*), et il s'accomplit au hasard – et l'amour plus ancien, plus noble et plus raisonnable qui s'attache à ce qui peut avoir le plus de vigueur et d'intelligence, et là il ne peut s'agir, évidemment, que du sexe masculin (*L'usage des plaisirs* 209).

It is important to note that Montaigne's idea of homosexuality as a means to true love and perfection reflects almost entirely the ancients' concepts and consideration of love between men; both constructions of the politics of sexuality are created for men by men. Indeed, "malgré le statut « inimitable » des Anciens, M. ne renonce pas à les imiter, et il ne cesse pas de les fréquenter Les Anciens sont ses interlocuteurs aussi bien que ses modèles" (*Anciens* 38).

While Montaigne's essay is an evocation of ancient texts considering love between men, he never introduces the idea of love between women. While Montaigne's other references to homosexuality aim at exploring humanity and its diversity, the author only ever mentions lesbianism once, and in the *Journal de voyage*.⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, the anecdote ends

⁴⁰ "Cette forme héautocratique est développée suivant plusieurs modèles : ainsi chez Platon, celui de l'attelage avec son cocher" (*L'usage des plaisirs* 82).

⁴¹"Près du début du texte, tel qu'il nous est parvenu, le secrétaire de M. récite une « histoire memorable » à propos d'un troupeau de « sept ou huit filles [...] [qui] complotèrent [...] de se vestir en masles et continuer ainsi leur vie par le monde » (*JV* 6). Le *Journal* ne nous apprend la suite de l'histoire que pour un de ces individus. Mary, « jeune homme bien conditionné », épousa une femme « et vécut quatre ou cinq mois avec elle avec son consentement ». La fin de l'histoire est moins fortunée. Après avoir été reconnu par une ancienne connaissance, « elle », et il faut remarquer le changement de genre ici, « avoit esté condamnée à estre pendue : *ce qu'elle disoit aimer mieux souffrir que de se remettre en estat de fille* » (*ibid*). La motivation pour sa punition, le fait qu' « [e]lle fut pendue pour des inventions illicites à supplir

horribly for Marie, and Montaigne's silence with regard to the young woman's trespassers reflects quite a contradiction. While the author's refusal to condemn a hate act against a lesbian reflects a certain misogyny, it is even more telling that his silence resembles a lack of concern entirely for the plight of female homosexuals (which is in keeping with the masculine writing of antiquity). Clearly Montaigne's ideal homosexual love is one exclusively between men due to the spiritual perfection it entails; unfortunately, his insistence upon the divine quality of his friendship with La Boétie is possible only within the realm of the written. Indeed, Montaigne's goal of inspiring thought and development in the minds of his readers reflects the inexpressibility of his *amitié*. In this way, Montaigne aims to continue to develop the concept of homosexuality that began with the ancients. The goal of "infinis *Essais*" is thus the expansion of thought about homosexuality:

Ce n'est rien que foiblesse particuliere qui nous faict contenter de ce que d'autres ou que nous-mesmes avons trouvé en cette chasse de cognoissance, [...] Il y a tousjours place pour un suyvant, ouy et pour nous mesmes, et route par ailleurs. Il n'y a point de fin en nos inquisitions ; notre fin est en l'autre monde [...]. Nos opinions s'entent les unes sur les autres. La premiere sert de tige à la seconde, la seconde à la tierce (III.13.1068-9) (cited in *Anciens* 38).

"Luy seul jouyssoit de ma vraye image, et l'emporta. C'est pourquoy je me deschiffre moy-mesme"⁴²:

The role of mourning in the act of writing the *Essais*

It is precisely the quintessence of Montaigne's and La Boétie's friendship that requires its written expression in lieu of experience for Montaigne; it seems, however, that

au defaut de son sexe (*ibid*), démontre que son « crime » était moins d'avoir couché avec une autre femme que d'avoir prétendu aux privilèges masculins. Que nous la désignons lesbienne ou transsexuelle, tribade ou autre chose, le destin de Mary nous rappelle la violence avec laquelle la Renaissance pouvait corriger ses anomalies sexuelles. Ceux qui attendent que M. censure cette brutalité seront déçus" (Schacter 474).

⁴² III.9.977 cited in Magnien 553.

the nature of their true love is inexpressible even for the writers of antiquity: “Car les discours mesmes que l’antiquité nous a laissé sur ce subject, me semblent lâches au pris du sentiment que j’en ay. Et, en ce poinct, les effects surpassent les preceptes mesmes de la philosophie” (I.28.192). Indeed, the inexpressible nature of their relationship requires a certain ambiguity and intertextuality on Montaigne’s part. For this reason, Montaigne seems to oscillate between themes of pederasty, evocations of a more Platonic concept of true love, and his own experiences.

In “De trois commerces” Montaigne searches for truth through three different means – women, friendship with men, and books. In his search for true love and compatibility, Montaigne rejects women by their very nature; he is forced to find another vessel to truth than his friendship with La Boétie, but only because of his early death. Montaigne’s search for truth through male friendship is quite a rupture with Renaissance thought, which sought relationships with women as a means to truth (i.e. true love). It is also an alignment with antiquity, for the ancients first sought male friendship as a means to truth, as Foucault illustrates:

Dans les cultures chrétienne et moderne, ces mêmes questions – de la vérité, de l’amour et du plaisir – seront rapportées beaucoup plus volontiers aux éléments constitutifs de la relation entre homme et femme : les thèmes de la virginité, des noces spirituelles, de l’âme-épouse marqueront très tôt le déplacement effectué à partir d’un passage essentiellement masculin – habité par l’eraste et l’éromème – vers un autre, marqué par les figures de la féminité et du rapport entre les deux sexes (*L’usage des plaisirs* 251-2).

Montaigne’s last means for truth and compatibility is therefore books, specifically his essay “De l’amitié.” The physical manifestation of Montaigne’s quest for truth through books is without a doubt the author’s seclusion in his tower library, where he wrote the *Essais*. More specifically, the essay “De l’amitié” is the closest experience of perfect, complete and true

love as Montaigne is able to evoke; this experience exists on quite a few levels, both textual and biographical. First, as Desan avers, every commerce needs a marketplace, a locus for the exchange, and “De l’amitié” is the locus of Montaigne’s commerce through books, of his friendship with La Boétie:

Le commerce nécessite la mise en place et le balisage d’un lieu d’échange, d’un marché. . . . En effet, si le commerce amoureux renvoie au boudoir et la tour forme l’espace privilégié de la lecture et de l’écriture, le lieu de l’amitié fait toujours défaut dans les *Essais*. Cet espace n’a d’existence que littéraire et forme pour cette raison la quête de l’écriture montaignienne. Le glissement de plus en plus fréquent du commerce de l’amitié vers le commerce des femmes est également symptomatique d’une difficulté liée à l’impossibilité de trouver un espace ferme réservé au commerce de l’amitié dans les *Essais*. La déclaration « ces vers se voient ailleurs » (I.29.196) qui rejette les écrits de La Boétie hors des *Essais* fait écho aux complications rencontrées par M. pour trouver l’espace nécessaire à ce commerce (185).

If the *Essais*, and specifically “De l’amitié,” are the locus of Montaigne’s commerce with books and with La Boétie, a certain physicality emerges that allows the divine friendship an earthly manifestation. Thus also emerges the erotics of writing that seems to have already existed in this rapport, for the friends’ writings were the primary source of attraction between them. Though Montaigne is most often quite ambiguous and even contradictory concerning details of his friendship with Etienne de La Boétie, readers do find textual evidence that may lead them to discern certain elements of their relationship. For example, Montaigne cites Cicero in “De l’amitié” when discussing Stoic love: “l’amour est la tentative d’obtenir l’amitié d’une personne qui nous attire par sa beauté” (I.28.236). It is equally possible that the author agrees or disagrees with this statement; and while this ambiguity does not help the reader to discover the truth, it works as a point of departure for the reader’s consideration of love, physicality and homosexuality. If Montaigne does believe in a Stoic concept of love, it is doubtful that their relationship is also physical – the two men

esteemed and admired one another for years before meeting. Indeed, it was after having read one another's writing that the two authors became intrigued by one another; it is telling that Montaigne esteems writing as the most sublime form of expression. Thus the source of their "amitié" is not physical but rather spiritual; moreover, the essayist provides examples of intellectual attraction rather than physical attraction between himself and La Boétie.⁴³ There is no evidence thus that Montaigne was or was not homosexual. In the end his sexual orientation and the nature of their relationship are of little importance; what is paramount is the way in which Montaigne creates and employs ambiguity in the essay on male friendship – and the effect of such ambiguity within the minds of his readers.

Montaigne's effacement of the twenty-ninth essay in his collection, "Vingt et neuf sonnets d'Estienne de La Boétie," and his failure to publish La Boétie's *Servitude volontaire* are of particular interest; though to this day it remains unknown to all but Montaigne himself, the reason for which the author removed his friend's poetry could very well illuminate the nature of their friendship. As Montaigne believes that the Huguenots' publication of *Servitude volontaire* skewed the text's meaning, one would assume that the essayist would want to redeem his friend by making his original text accessible. Many critics think that Montaigne's mourning aimed at protecting his dear friend from libel, and it is quite probable that he wished to keep La Boétie's scathing critique of monarchy silent:

Montaigne retracted his plan for framing the Discours after it became associated with Protestant monarchomach theory by inclusion in Simon Goulart's *Memoires de l'Etat de France*. Montaigne didn't want to . . . perpetuate La Boétie's reputation as an advocate of tyrannicide. In fact, the conclusion of "De l'amitié" is an effort to exculpate the friend of any suspicion of disloyalty (MacPhail 181).

⁴³ One must consider, however, that for Montaigne the acts of reading and writing are also physical endeavors. See discussion of penetration, gender and the reading process above.

I disagree and find it much more probable that Montaigne, who removed La Boétie's sonnets from his *Essais* just before his own death, still felt torn by the death of his friend and could no longer experience even the smallest pleasure or happiness. In fact, the essayist clearly states his pain as well as his decision to act in such a manner while mourning:

Depuis le jour que je le perdy . . . je ne fay que trainer languissant ; et les plaisirs memes qui s'offrent à moy, au lieu de me consoler, me redoublent le regret de sa perte. Nous estions à moitié de tout ; il me semble que je luy desrobe sa part, « Et j'ai décidé que je ne devais plus prendre aucun plaisir, tant que je n'ai plus celui qui partageait ma vie » (I.28.191).

If this is indeed the case, it is likely that Montaigne decided that La Boétie's writing, which gave him countless pleasures (and is what attracted the men to one another in the beginning), should no longer be accessible to everyone else. It seems in fact that Montaigne's bizarre effacement of the sonnets could have been his reaction to a certain verse from the sixth of these twenty-nine sonnets:

Amour tout à un coup de cent douleurs me point
Et puis lon m'advertit que je ne crie point
Si vain je ne suis pas que mon mal j'agrandisse
A force de parler : *s'on m'en peult exempter*
Je quitte les sonnets, je quitte le chanter ;
*Qui me deffend le deuil, celui là me guerisse.*⁴⁴

While it is clear that La Boétie was most likely not referring to such an action on Montaigne's part, readers of Montaigne cannot deny the essayist's proclivity for word play and hidden intertextuality. Montaigne could have interpreted these lines as the poet's aversion to mourning his friend or lover. This friend would heal him by mourning the poet's death instead; and if the poet wanted to be liberated of his writing, Montaigne's removal of the sonnets would seem in order. Also implicit in these lines is a link between writing and mourning: as Montaigne liberates La Boétie from his writing and from mourning, he also

⁴⁴ Edition Garnier Frères I.28.234 emphasis mine ERC.

takes on the work of mourning and writes the *Essais* as the product and result of it. Indeed, “la passion de M., d’amitié et de tristesse, lui a bien ravi quelque autonomie, mais elle a poussé le navire, elle a déclenché l’écriture des *Essais*, sans véritablement lui ôter sa liberté” (Charpentier 31). In this way, Montaigne’s commerce with books and writing becomes a place and work of mourning through which Montaigne is finally able to express and to experience the quintessence of his friendship with La Boétie. The *Essais* also express Montaigne’s great loss through this effacement of La Boétie’s love poetry; the absence of twenty-nine sonnets, what would be the work’s central essay, is a sublime (through a textual form) manifestation of the loss of his other half.

“De l’amitié” is thus an homage to the ancients and to Etienne de La Boétie. Montaigne finishes “De l’amitié” by once again evoking the memory of La Boétie : “Mais oyons parler un peu parler ce garçon de seize ans” (I.28.194). It is at approximately this age that he wrote *Servitude volontaire*; thus, that which seems to be a rupture in the text in fact links Montaigne’s own mourning with an allusion to the writing of the man with whom he shared this “amitié superbe et parfaite.” La Boétie’s presence is undeniable in “De l’amitié,” and in this sense it is the sublime conjoining and unity of these two men; impossible in reality, this union is in fact their creation, their child.⁴⁵ The textual presence of La Boétie is underlined by the way in which Montaigne evoked his presence in the tower library during the *Essais*’s conception; he had two plaques engraved and mounted as if to keep his friend’s memory and companionship while he wrote “De l’amitié”:

Accablé d’avoir perdu ce si cher soutien de sa vie, le plus doux, le plus délicat, le plus attachant des amis, l’homme le plus savant, le plus charmant et le plus parfait qu’ait vu notre génération, jusqu’à ce qu’il conçoive le désir qu’un monument exceptionnel soit élevé à la mémoire de leur mutuelle affection et de la reconnaissance qui les liait l’un à l’autre, Michel de M.,

⁴⁵ This concept is an evocation of Socrates’ notion of books as children of the mind.

lorsqu'il a pu donner corps [à ce projet ou à ce désir], [a érigé ou a dédié à son ami] ce meuble savant et privilégié qui fait ses délices.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Cited in Magnien 553.

CHAPTER IV

“UN ACCIDENT DE TRES-DIGNE CONSIDERATION”⁴⁷: WOMEN, FRIENDSHIP AND MARIE LE JARS DE GOURNAY

While in “De l’amitié” Montaigne avers that true friendship can only exist between men, in “Sur des vers de Virgile” he allows a certain rapport approximating friendship between man and wife:

Ung bon mariage, s’il en est, refuse la compaignie et conditions de l’amour. Il tache à représenter celles de l’amitié. C’est une douce société de vie, pleine de constance, de fiance et d’un nombre infiny d’utiles et solides offices et obligations mutuelles. Aucune femme qui en savoure le goust, « Celle qui au flambeau de l’hymen a été unie à celui qu’elle aimait, » ne voudrait tenir lieu de maitresse et d’amy de son marie (III.5.852).

If the only means to friendship between men and women is the marital relationship for Montaigne, there is thus an inherent contradiction in his friendship with Marie de Gournay, whom he names his “fille d’alliance” (II.17.661). Indeed, while it is women’s insufficient mental capacity that precludes a friendship that is based upon spirituality rather than physicality, Montaigne’s friendship with Marie represents an immense break with his habitudes, for their relationship is based entirely upon their intelligence and shared intellectual interests – namely the *Essais*. Montaigne’s description of their attraction evokes the attraction between himself and La Boétie, for like them she esteemed the author “avant m’avoir veu” (II.17.662). Just as La Boétie’s *Servitude volontaire* was the origin of Montaigne’s and his “amitié parfaite”, the *Essais* are the origin of Marie’s and his friendship.

⁴⁷ II.8.662

In this way she replaces La Boétie for Montaigne; in fact, she takes Montaigne's (former) role in their friendship, for not only does she esteem the writing of her friend but she also goes through a similar mourning after the death of the essayist. In her 1595 preface to the *Essais* Marie explicitly evokes the La Boétie-Montaigne relationship in comparison to her friendship with him: "Il [M.] ne m'a duré que quatre ans, non plus qu'à luy La Boétie. Seroit ce que la fortune par pitié des autres hommes eust limité telles amitez à ce terme, afin que le mespris d'une fruition si courte les gardast de s'engager aux douleurs qu'il faut souffrir de la privation?" (cited in Magnien 549). Like Montaigne's writing of the *Essais*, Marie's editorial work is a mourning for her friend. She thus takes on Montaigne's identity, and this identity within the father is of great import in her writing.⁴⁸

Montaigne presents this young woman as more perfect than women could ever become because of her precocious ability to interpret and to understand his work, as a passage from the 1595 edition of the *Essais* demonstrates:

J'ay pris plaisir à publier en plusieurs lieux l'esperance que j'ay de Marie de Gournay le Jars, ma fille d'alliance : et certes aymée de moy beaucoup plus que paternellement, et enveloppée en ma retraite et solitude, comme l'une des meilleures parties de mon propre estre. Je ne regarde plus qu'elle au monde. Si l'adolescence peut donner presage, cette ame sera quelque jour capable des plus belles choses, et entre autres de *la perfection de cette tres-sainte amitié où nous ne lisons point que son sexe ait peu monter encores* : la sincereté et la solidité de ses mœurs y sont desjà bastantes, son affection vers moy plus que surabondante, et telle en somme qu'il n'y a rien à souhaiter, sinon que l'apprehension qu'elle a de ma fin, par les cinquante et cinq ans ausquels elle m'a rencontré, la travaillast moins cruellement. *Le jugement qu'elle fit des premiers Essais, et femme, et en ce siecle, et si jeun, et seule en son quartier, et la vehemence fameuse dont elle m'ayma et me desira long temps* sur la seule estime qu'elle en print de moy, *avant m'avoir veu*, c'est un accident de tres-digne consideration (II.17.661-2 cited in Kritzman 162-3 emphasis mine ERC).

⁴⁸ See p. 60 below.

While there is some question as to the authorship of this passage, the friendship that united the two is unquestionable. Indeed, Marie's first encounter with the *Essais* stimulated her to such an extent that she had to take a sedative to calm herself: "On estoit prest à me donner de l'hellebore lors que comme ils me furent fortuitement mis en main au sortir de l'enfance, ils me transsissoient d'admiration" ("Préface de Marie de Gournay" 24 cited in Kritzman 171-2). While many critics have misinterpreted the young woman's intellectual desire for the work of Montaigne as a sexual desire for the author, it is ultimately Marie de Gournay's love and admiration for the *Essais* that catalyzes her plotting from the first to make herself the "fille d'alliance" of this great writer.⁴⁹ Indeed, because Montaigne denies the possibility of true friendship between relations such as brothers and children, his appropriation of Marie de Gournay as his "fille d'alliance" is of great significance. Kritzman astutely observes that "in a way, mothers and natural children appear to disappoint Montaigne to such an extent that what he discovers in the surrogate child relationship is described as potentially superior to the child he has biologically fathered; the 'invention' of the surrogate daughter functions as an anticipatory omen of the joys the future will bestow upon his literary legacy" (163). In this way Montaigne allows for a truer friendship with this young woman precisely because they have no filial bonds – and this choice is indeed important for the woman writer.

Marie le Jars de Gournay was no ordinary Renaissance woman; not only was she a writer, she remained unmarried, was uninterested in her appearance and supported herself through her writing. Indeed, she challenged numerous social and gender norms of the Renaissance and fearlessly advocated women's equality and her right to autonomy. As Patricia Cholokian demonstrates, Marie de Gournay

⁴⁹ See Cholokian's "Reading the Daughter's Desire"

was an iconoclast: earning money by writing, and neglecting what a woman should never neglect – her personal appearance She insisted on living independently in Paris, and refused to accept hospitality from family friends. Of course, it was unheard of for a single woman to live alone, let alone support herself by writing . . . she rejected the roles assigned to women of her class and tried to become self-sufficient in order to support herself as a writer (*Economics* 150-54).

Marie de Gournay, though not the first French feminist, was not only outspoken as a writer of feminist discourse but also an active and unpopular participant in intellectual life during the Renaissance. Her works *Egalité des hommes et des femmes*, *Grief des dames* and *Apologie pour celle qui escrit* received quite harsh criticism from men and women alike; indeed, it is probable that her poverty, virginity and lack of physical beauty were conducive to the severity of her enemies. In addition, Marie's adamant participation in Parisian intellectual life was quite an advancement for women within the social and intellectual sphere:

Il n'est guère pertinent de séparer celle qui plaide en faveur de l'égale dignité des sexes et celle qui mène combat pour la métaphore; il importe à Marie de faire la preuve de l'égalité en acte, en prenant parti comme chacun dans les débats littéraires de l'époque. Montrant par là qu'aucun domaine n'est étranger à la moitié de l'humanité, à la « moitié du monde » (Mathieu-Castellani 207-8).

Marie de Gournay's defense of women is contrary to many of Montaigne's misogynistic stances, especially her complaints that women are not allowed an education equal to men's. While Marie was more outspoken after Montaigne's death in 1592, it is more than probable that the essayist was aware of his surrogate daughter's feminist tendencies, especially if he read her *Proumenoir*. One wonders whether Montaigne, if he had been alive, would have rejected or participated in the misogynistic backlash towards Marie. Whatever the case, Montaigne respected Marie's intelligence and interpretative prowess; unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not reject her simply because of her gender.

“Il n’y a si chétif,” writes Marie de Gournay in her 1595 preface to the *Essais*, “qui me r’embarre avec solomne approbation de la compagnie assistante, par un sourire, un hochet, ou quelque plaisanterie, quand il aura dit: C’est une femme qui parle” (cited in Courcelles 217). She was indeed mocked because of her poverty, her gender and her candor; in one play she is a crazy, aging virgin who lost a tooth while on stage. In *La Furieuse Manomachie ou Le Cartel*⁵⁰ her character is harshly silenced with its final line, “Ne contestez pas, taisez-vous, vieille folle” (cited in Courcelles 225). Particularly malicious was Malherbe’s followers’ trickery, for it mocked her female agency:

Marie croit qu’elle écrit ce texte [*Copie de la vie de la demoiselle de Gournay*] pour un chanoine anglais à qui le roi aurait demandé « d’historier tous les hommes et toutes les femmes de notre Siècle qui avaient servi les Muses », mais en réalité il s’agit d’une « malice » de trois courtisans appartenant à la « bande de Malherbe » et déterminés à la tourner en dérision. La farce tourne en fin de compte à l’avantage de la victime. Marie publie ce texte pour la première fois dans ses *Avis* de 1641 (Courcelles 223).

It is clear that Marie de Gournay’s primary concern after the publication of the *Essais* is to be respected and read as a female writer despite her gender and social stature; in this way, her friendship with Montaigne can be interpreted as a means to a certain end – authority. Her relationship as daughter, secretary and editor are a means of identification with Montaigne; and if the essayist is indeed the author of the passage describing Marie as “certes aymée de moy beaucoup plus que paternellement, et enveloppée en ma retraite et solitude, comme l’une des meilleures parties de mon propre estre,” then his appropriation of her denies her any identity outside of the margins of his own. As Cholokian astutely observes, “instead of recognizing the female other as different, the father identifies her only to disidentify her as an imperfect copy of the same” (*Economics* 164). It is possible, however, that Marie herself is in fact the author of this statement; for it appeared in the posthumous 1595 edition for which

⁵⁰ Satirical comedy in verse published in 1634, authorship unknown.

the notes the two took concerning changes to the *Essais* are lost. If Marie wrote the passage and inserted it into the work, her agency is further problematized as a self-negating appropriation of male identity. Cholokian continues by averring that if Marie is the author, she “now becomes an authorizing force entitling herself to speak. She engages in a pseudo process of individuation whose dualism is subverted by the writing of a family history which identifies the female voice with the likeness of the father” (*Economics* 166). Whatever the authorship of this passage, Marie’s influence as posthumous editor of the *Essais* is as complicated as the young woman’s friendship with Montaigne. Indeed, while her influence brings about a feminist transformation of Montaigne’s text; her editorial work, her preface to the *Essais*, her writings about poetry and her *Proumenoir de Monsieur de Montaigne* all work to rewrite Montaigne’s misogynistic tendencies.

“Se blesser à escient, pour donner foy à leur parole”⁵¹:
Feminism, transformation and correction

Marie de Gournay worked as a sort of secretary for Montaigne in the years leading up to his death in 1592; together they discussed the content of the *Essais*, and Marie used the notes from the 1588 edition of the work as her text for the posthumous edition of 1595. Montaigne esteemed her comprehension of his work, and the young woman took her knowledge of the *Essais* and their author as a means of authority as editor; she is “la première à comprendre l’importance de la lecture philologique dans l’édition et l’interprétation des *Essais*” (Dotoli 117). In fact in 1633 she received full intellectual propriety of the work because of this knowledge:

⁵¹ I.14.60

Et faisons tres-expresses deffences à tous autres Imprimeurs et Libraires d'entreprendre d'imprimer ledit Œuvre, sans le gré & consentement de ladite exposante, & sans s'adresser à elle pour prendre advis & adveu de la coppie & methode qu'ils doivent choisir, pour faire sur icelle ladite impression, & s'obliger à elle d'y mettre bon ordre & bons correcteurs, pour eviter aux inconveniens & fautes qui peuvent ruiner de sa part rendre cet office gratuitement au public, & ausdits Imprimeurs quand ils l'en requerront, & sans obliger à aucune charge que de suivre les anciens & meilleurs exemplaires, lesquels elle leur fournira (cited in Desan *Travail* 99).

This “privilege” expresses Marie de Gournay’s wish to retain the text’s authenticity as much as possible; indeed, she and the *Essais*’s publishers were in constant debate because they wanted to change the text in order to make it accessible to seventeenth-century readers. Marie thus struggled to find a medium between the text’s authenticity and availability. One of the major debates regarded translating Montaigne’s citations for those readers who could not read Latin. As she fully understood Montaigne’s goal to illuminate his readers’ minds in order to create “infinis *Essais*,” she also understood that the context of these citations was important: “bien avant la critique à venir, Mlle de Gournay comprend le rapport des *Essais* avec les autres livres, surtout ceux des Anciens” (Dotoli 120). For this reason the young woman identified and translated all of Montaigne’s citations; however, this sacrifice was also a means of differentiation for Marie, for she placed her translations at the end of each chapter, thereby claiming authorship. Her break from the written dependence as editor is the first of Gournay’s separations from the father; as Desan astutely notes, “Gournay considère son travail éditorial comme un appendice au livre des *Essais* et préfère placer ses traductions soit à la fin des chapitres (comme dans l’édition de 1635) soit tout simplement à la fin des trois livres (comme dans l’édition de 1625)” (*Travail* 95-6). In addition, as editor and possible author of the debated passage concerning herself, Marie represents woman’s role as both primary and secondary within the *Essais*; indeed,

What emerges is the representation of a female subject who is both primary and secondary to textual production, one who is both central and marginal to the engendering of the text. In a way the figure of Marie de Gournay emerges as an authorizing agent; the excluded female presence alluded to in the the preface of 1595 comes to be regarded as the condition of both the enabling and disabling factors in representing her identity By becoming Montaigne's double she permits herself to engage in rhetorical transvestism that manifests itself as a hermeneutic fetishism in terms of its relationship with the master's text (Kritzman 168-70).

Marie de Gournay thus creates ambiguity concerning the authorship of the *Essais* as well as her gender as a writer; for while identifying with Montaigne gives authority to her agency, she is at the same time speaking through a male author. Even more complex is thus attributing a gender to the essayist's voice; for if Gournay and Montaigne are coauthors of a text whose voice is female the feminine nature of the text is thereby exemplified.

While the concept of co-authorship does complicate the role of gender and sexuality in the writing of the *Essais*, it is important to consider that authorship in the Renaissance was not the same concept as modern authorship, in which one attributes writing to a single author. Rather, authorship in the Renaissance often included collaborations, and any collaboration that may have occurred is understood as part of the author's own writing. Thus, to his contemporaries Montaigne is indeed the author of the Marie de Gournay passage. As an indisputable part of the text published under Montaigne's name, this passage is (no matter who wrote it) thus his own writing. In this way, the Montaignian text problematizes its own frequent misogynistic elements by allowing women within the male realm of friendship.

Marie de Gournay's presence as editor and as subject in the *Essais* further complicates the text through her identity as a *young* woman in contrast to Montaigne. She first appears in the *Essais* as an anonymous young girl from Picardie who stabs her arm repeatedly in order to prove her constancy: "J'ay veu une fille, pour tesmoigner l'ardeur de

ses promesses, et aussi sa constance, se donner du poinçon qu'elle portoit en son poil, quatre ou cinq bons coups dans le bras, qui lui faisoient craquetter la peau et la saignoient bien en bon escient" (I.14.60 cited in Kritzman 173). For Montaigne young Marie serves as an example of one who chooses to "se blesser à escient, pour donner foy à leur parole" (I.14.60 cited in Kritzman 173). In addition, Marie calls attention to her own youth first through her 1595 preface and secondly by averring that this (supposedly embarrassing) preface was the result of her youth, her madness and her loss. Indeed, she was highly criticized for the content of this preface in which she defends Montaigne and his text, further inscribing her identity within the shadow of the father. Her preface does serve as a means of authority and an expression of her prowess for criticism. In this way Marie's role as editor elevates the young woman to a similar status as her friend the author; "cette apologie hyperbolique des *Essais* est, en effet, une analyse précise des nouveautés qu'ils contiennent. Deux ames semblables, celle de l'auteur et celle du critique, unies par l'amitié, se retrouvent dans cette sorte d'épître dédicatoire" (Dotoli 125). Though it would seem that Marie's removal of her original preface from the *Essais* is an act of regret for what she had written, she in fact affirms her writing and makes a break with Montaigne's paternal authority by publishing it separately. Kritzman avers that this refusal of the privileged identity of paternal omnipotence is a means to agency, and that her childhood act of violence parallels the adult woman's act towards authorial liberation:

This figure of the wound or representation of martyrdom, traditionally viewed as a metaphoric means of transcendence, is portrayed here by a narrative representing the literal violence done to the female body. . . It is not simply about violence inflicted on a female body destined for marriage, but rather it represents the passage of violence through language itself . . . as an attempt to ascribe to a literary performance an oppositional tone replacing the pleasure of her prefatory statements by a new introduction that paradoxically gives voice to what was formerly silent . . . No longer described as "un

semblable” who bore witness to the exemplarity of his writing, her word now begins to emerge from the wound inflicted on the representation of the paternal body, the literary *corpus* of which now only the ashes remain and from which the surrogate daughter can no longer rekindle her originary desire in the name of the father (174-6).

Marie de Gournay’s effacement of her original preface is thus her first major step towards agency; her ironical silence and omission are a metaphor for her stripping of an appropriated masculine (non)identity, an avowal of her own identity as woman writer.

“Rien n’est sot ny ridicule, apres la pauvreté,” writes Gournay in *Apologie pour celle qui escrit* “comme d’estre clair-voyant et sçavant : combien plus d’estre clair-voyante et sçavante, ou d’avoir simplement, ainsi que moy, désiré de se rendre telle ? Parmy nostre vulgaire, on fagotte à fantaisie l’image des femmes lettrées” (cited in Cholakian *Reading* 506). To be a woman writer in the Renaissance meant overcoming gender barriers without a doubt; however, first she must have the means for such a pastime. To write during the Renaissance was above all a luxury open only to those who did not need to support themselves, as Montaigne’s “De l’oisiveté” exemplifies; writing was not a question of profit but of luxury, and to make a living from writing was quite revolutionary. It is in this setting that Marie de Gournay writes for her pleasure, for her cause and for her living; and it is in her *Apologie* that she “shows that it is not women’s nature, but their situation that is responsible for their exclusion” from male-dominated intellectualism of the Renaissance (*Economics* 149). Indeed, the question of women writers during the Renaissance involved both gender and social issues; and Marie recognized the metaphor of woman’s rejection of the sewing needle as one that imbued her situation.⁵² Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani shows that

⁵² In *L’Egalité des hommes et des femmes* Gournay uses this such metaphor : “Que dis-je? Il ne suffit pas à quelques gens de leur [aux femmes] préférer le sexe masculine, s’ils ne les confinaient encore d’un arrêt irréfragable et nécessaire à la quenouille, oui même à la quenouille seule” (113 cited in Mathieu-Castellani 197).

A la Renaissance, la problématique de l'écriture féminine s'articule autour d'un dilemme, *filer ou écrire*, qui résume l'alternative *la quenouille ou la lyre* ; ces emblèmes du ménage et de l'activité littéraire, purs produits d'une figure de synecdoque, fixent un réseau d'oppositions paradigmatiques entre le féminin et le masculin, que chaque sexe ne saurait bouleverser sans perdre son identité (198).

In this way, Marie de Gournay and indeed all women writers of her time refuted not only gendered rules of the Renaissance household (in which woman's role was productive and included providing for the family's needs) but also social rules concerning gender (because she has entered into the men's public and intellectual spheres).

Marie emphasizes gendered language in her texts as an expression of her complaints against women's subordination to men, just as Montaigne emphasized gendered language in order to create ambiguity within his text; and in this way she exceeds her author's text. Cathleen Bauschatz argues that she examines

the puzzling relationship between gender and language for [a] woman writer working in almost completely male territory. While she never treats the subject directly, it reveals itself in criticisms of her enemies (many of them female), in response to attacks on herself as a woman writer, and finally in pungent imagery, which frequently personifies poetry and language (feminine nouns in French) as women. . . . Marie de Gournay redefines poetic theory in her gendered images of poetry, as a feminist enterprise, but one clearly tied to the "Anciens" rather than to the "Modernes" (*Gendered images* 252-5).

One of the most vivid of Marie's gendered images concerns "la langue" and its abuse by her contemporaries; she follows Montaigne by upholding the ancients while simultaneously engendering social meaning in averring that her contemporaries "eussent donné [à la Langue] le coup de pied par le ventre pour la faire avorter" (cited in Bauschatz *Gendered images* 256). The graphic nature of her image evokes Montaigne's often graphic images, all the while implicating the female body in a certain violence. As Bauschatz argues, "she feels the 'coup de pied dans le ventre' as a male theorist could not have done. She also emphasizes

the precarious nature of the linguistic process in the analogy with gestation, and focuses on the generative role of the female in this process” (*Gendered images* 256).

Lastly, Marie de Gournay’s *Proumenoir de Monsieur de Montaigne* and her *Apologie* work to contest patriarchal conceptions of women writers; and in promoting the rights of women within the context of Montaigne Marie rewrites many of his misogynistic claims in the *Essais*. She composed the *Proumenoir* after having discussed Plutarch’s depiction of love with Montaigne while he was staying with her family. Her declared intention is to write a story that she had told him during their walk, and in a letter enclosed with the manuscript she avers that she wishes Montaigne to correct her style. Dominique de Courcelles avers that Marie’s claim is problematized by the very genre of her *Proumenoir*, for in his *Essais* Montaigne disdains such sentimental and puerile stories. Indeed, she emphasizes the didactic function of her *Proumenoir*, arguing “l’utilité d’avertir les Dames de se tenir en garde” against men’s seductions; in this way both the form and content of her work challenge Montaigne’s misogynistic ideas about the education of women. It is possible that the essayist did not ever read his *Proumenoir*, for he never returned her manuscript with corrections; it was found in his library after his death. Is Montaigne’s silence a total rejection of Marie’s writing or rather incomprehension of the young woman’s irony? Courcelles claims that “Marie, en dédiant à Montaigne sa première œuvre qui se rapproche d’un roman de chevalerie, mais consiste plutôt en un roman discourant, veut s’imposer dans le jeu paternel la lucidité ironique des *Essais*. Montaigne comprend-il que Marie se voue désormais à l’ambiguïté, à la raillerie, à la malice, au rire des autres et au sien ?” (222-3). One must thus ask whether Marie truly wanted Montaigne to correct her manuscript, or if sending the author her text was a means to attain paternal authority for her work that questions societal norms.

What, then, is the daughter's real desire? I contend that while Marie de Gournay adored the *Essais*, her desire is not that Montaigne correct her but that she correct Montaigne. While she truly feels affection for Montaigne, Marie plays with notions of friendship. First equating herself with Montaigne through their friendship then refuting his patriarchal view that friendship can exist only between men, Marie legitimizes friendship between men and women. Her defense of women writers in the *Apologie pour celle qui escrit* not only defends all women writers, but her defense of all women is proof that true friendship can exist between women:

Montaigne believed that women lacked souls firm enough to sustain perfect friendship. Yet, [Cholakian] would argue, Gournay's text encodes a refutation of his point of view. As Domna Stanton has pointed out, *celle qui escrit* has a double meaning: it can refer to "the female writer of this particular text," but it can also refer to "everywoman who writes." Read in this way, Gournay's *Apologie* is not just the story of one poor woman, who was abandoned by those who overlooked her virtue for a "bowl of soup." It is a defense composed on behalf of all women who write. Such a move suggests a solidarity among women that may yet prove Montaigne wrong (*Economics* 158).

In addition to Marie's influence in the transformation of Montaigne's *Essais*, her own writing (especially the *Proumenoir* and *Apologie*) can arguably correct Montaigne's misogynistic tendencies. In "De la vanité" (II.9) however, Montaigne avers that "j'adjouste mais je ne corrige pas;" thus Marie's influence and additions to the *Essais* should not be read as corrections within the text. Rather, this statement allows for a transformation of the text from misogynistic at parts to feminist in other parts. Such a contradiction between the misogynistic exclusion of women from friendship and the (as I read it) feminist avowal of friendship with Marie de Gornay thus questions and complicates friendship with women. The text's admission of women into the male realm of friendship in the 1595 edition furthers

the text's sexual ambiguity and problematizes even more Montaigne's oscillations between misogyny and feminism.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Meaning is not found in its entirety within Montaigne's text. Through double meanings, double interpretations, contradictions, gendered language, intertextuality and the ambiguity that they create, Montaigne's *Essais* provides the beginning of a path of thought for his readers. Textual ambiguity functions as a reflection of humanity's diversity within the essayist's exploration of human existence. While ambiguity's ultimate role is to create "infinis *Essais*" in the minds of Montaigne's readers, it is evident that gender, sexuality and friendship play decisive roles in the significance of this ambiguity. Montaigne's oscillation between misogyny and feminism is manifested in the female voice and female persona that the essayist establishes for himself. His own misogynistic and feminist tendencies are thus problematized by the author's female persona.

Montaigne's exploration of friendship with men and women offer the reader a plethora of contradictions, problematizations, destabilization and uncertainty; his essay "De l'amitié" is at the same time an homage to and mourning for Etienne de La Boétie, his dearest friend. From his personal experience to his consideration of humanity's idiosyncrasies, Montaigne's representation of his friendship with another man creates ambiguity regarding their sexual orientation. In this way Montaigne plays with his readers, making them consider love between men in ways they most certainly had not before. He recreates the ancients' debate about love between men, thus continuing their contemplation

of homosexuality to an infinity that is atemporal. The essayist also engages in an erotics of writing that allows him to experience fully the sublimity of his friendship with La Boétie.

Montaigne's exploration of friendship with women is much more limited than the perfect friendship he explores with men, yet it is even more complicated and contradictory. Despite the fact that he denies women the capacity for true friendship, he names Marie le Jars de Gournay his "fille d'alliance" and shares with her a friendship based on similar intellectual aptitudes and interests. Once again the text's authorship is threatened with sexual ambiguity when Marie takes the role of the *Essais*' editor – an act wholly reminiscent of Montaigne's writing his oeuvre while mourning his other half. Marie, one of France's early feminist writers, advocates women's equality and education while evoking Montaigne's authority. In this way, his friendship with Marie enables her to multiply the meaning of his *Essais* with a feminist objective; thereby challenging and thus problematizing the misogynistic passages in Montaigne's *Essais*.

While many critics of Montaigne either deny Marie de Gournay's prowess or authenticity as Montaigne's friend, others focus on the question of sexuality between Montaigne, Marie de Gournay and Etienne de La Boétie. Most criticism of the *Essais* has been somewhat conservative and exclusive to women, and Bauschatz notes that

Montaigne's *Essais* can be used as a point of departure for considering reception in defining the gender of genre [T]he essay has been considered primarily a male genre, particularly as first developed by Montaigne, who used it to paint a portrait of himself and to describe his own masculinity. Literary critics have also viewed the essay as addressed to males, readers who would be like Montaigne himself, and who would themselves be able to replicate the masculine self-portrait (*Gender* 27-28).

This study has shown that not only are Montaigne's self-portrait and voice feminine rather than masculine, but that women play a significant role within the text of Montaigne's *Essais*

and outside the text as active readers and transformers. Montaigne challenges notions of gender and sexuality in a way that continues to spark infinite essays in the minds of his modern readers, which is why woman is quite possibly the ideal reader of the *Essais*.

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